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The Yanomamis: Portrait of a People in Crisis

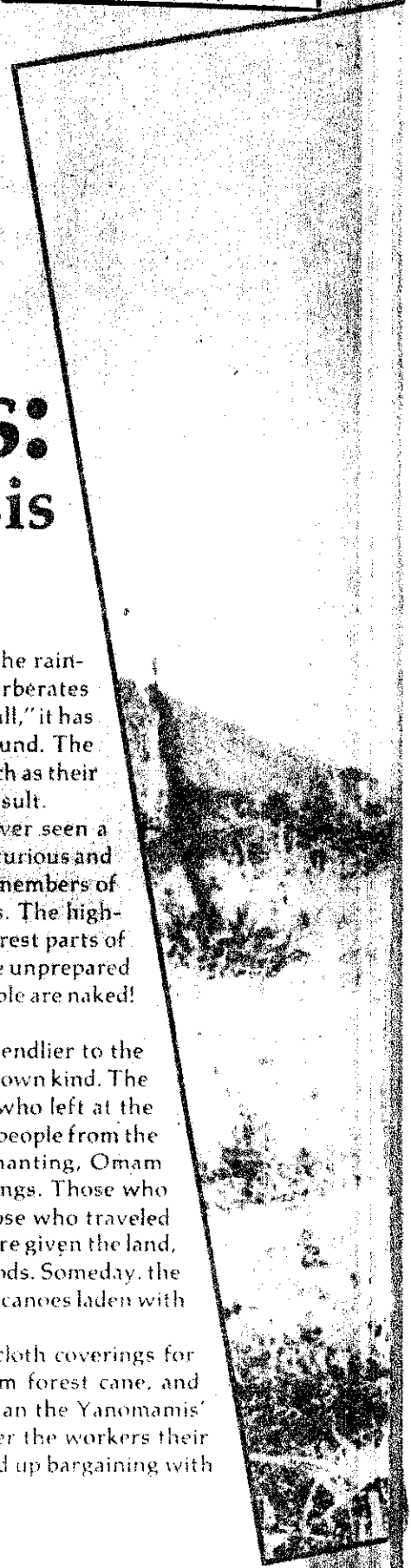
By Shelly Kellman

It is 1973. The Brazilian government is cutting through the rain-forest, the Amazon jungle. The whine of chain saws reverberates through the dense tangle of trees and vines: "the green wall," it has been called. Trees fall 150 feet with a slashing, tearing sound. The animals flee; exotic birds nervously retreat from branch to branch as their nests fall, too, and are crushed. Some species will perish as a result.

And there are people here as well—most of whom have never seen a human being unlike themselves. They emerge into the clearing curious and unafraid, naked and unashamed. They are Yanomami Indians, members of the largest known culturally intact native tribe in the Americas. The highway workers, mostly illiterate peasants recruited from the poorest parts of the country with the promise of good wages for "easy" work, are unprepared for this encounter. They gape and shout in Portuguese: "You people are naked! Are you crazy?"

The tribespeople are not so surprised: ironically, they are friendlier to the light-skinned intruders than they would be to strangers of their own kind. The roadworkers, they think, must be the long-gone "foreigners" who left at the time of Creation. The hero Omam, their legend says, created all people from the foam of the rapids. Sitting on a rock by the river one day, chanting, Omam scooped up handfuls of foam and shaped them into human beings. Those who settled in the surrounding territory became the Yanomami; those who traveled downriver, far away, became the foreigners. The Yanomami were given the land, the forest, and the animals, and the foreigners other kinds of goods. Someday, the legend said, the foreigners would return, coming up the river in canoes laden with goods for their Yanomami relatives.

And goods these newcomers have in abundance: elaborate cloth coverings for their bodies, knives that gleam unlike any knife ever cut from forest cane, and similarly gleaming cooking pots—much lighter and stronger than the Yanomamis' own clay vessels. Eagerly, the Indians initiate a trade: they offer the workers their harvest of bananas, yams, and manioc. Eventually, they will end up bargaining with their culture and with their very lives.





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During the ensuing two years, from 1973 to 1975, hundreds of Yanomamis would die as a result of their friendly curiosity and the Brazilian government's indifference. The government had known of the Yanomamis' presence in the area, and the locations of their villages, for many years prior to the highway project, and it had seen the devastating effects on many other tribes of sudden, uncontrolled contact with outsiders. Missionaries and anthropologists who had been working in the area since the early 1960s had already submitted five proposals for creating a protected Yanomami reserve or park, as provided by Brazilian law. Yet the government did not prepare the highway workers to meet the indigenous people, nor even screen the workers for health problems. Dysentery, influenza, measles, and the complications of the common cold were fatal to the Yanomami, who had developed no immunities to these ailments. Tuberculosis, malaria, and onchocerciasis ("river blindness," an African import) also swept through the area.

In one river valley, fifty percent of the people fell victim to the highway plagues, and the survivors inhabited a shattered world. Many tribespeople developed a consuming fascination with the road, becoming nomads who hitchhiked from construction site to construction site, begging or trading their labor for food and goods. The remnants of entire villages left their *malocas* (communal houses) to live in roadside shacks, their fields abandoned, their traditional routines of planting, harvesting, and feasting seemingly forgotten. Gone too were a rich mythology and the once-central healing arts of shamanism. In July 1975 Brazilian anthropologist Alcida Ramos observed despairingly in her field diary that the roadside Indians seemed to be a people in shell shock: "None of them," she wrote, "is willing to admit that he/she knows his language enough to teach us. They play deaf, dumb, uninterested . . . They have no basketry, no hammocks of their own; all of them wear something [western]—from rags to real clothes . . . If they stay around here, and if they survive physically, they'll become the most desperate beggars of the whole country!"

Today, the majority of Yanomamis have escaped the fate Ramos predicted, thanks largely to the efforts of anthropologists like him, and missionaries. These groups, with a little cooperation and sometimes

active interference from FUNAI (the Brazilian Indian agency), have carried out large-scale vaccination programs, cared for the sick, attracted native people deeper into the forest (away from the road), and have continuously tried to mediate between the Yanomami and the intrusions of resource "development." It is probably due to the efforts of these intervenors that the tribe remains to this day our hemisphere's largest known culturally intact indigenous group, with 20,000 members inhabiting more than 25 million acres in and around the Parima Mountains on the Brazilian-Venezuelan border.

The tribe's future remains nonetheless uncertain: the Yanomamis are caught in a tug-of-war between the call for human rights and cultural diversity, and the relentless push of industry to dig up, process, reshape, commoditize and monetize every cubic inch of the planet. Moreover, the threat to their land is ultimately a threat to the entire world, and a more immediate one than most people realize. According to Britain's Alan Grainger and other "tree experts," the net loss of just 1-2 percent more of the world's tree cover may render the planet unable to reprocess enough oxygen to support human life. "The fate of the [Brazilian] Indians," writes British journalist Norman Lewis "cannot be separated from the fate of the trees." And the fate of the trees is central to the fate of all humanity.

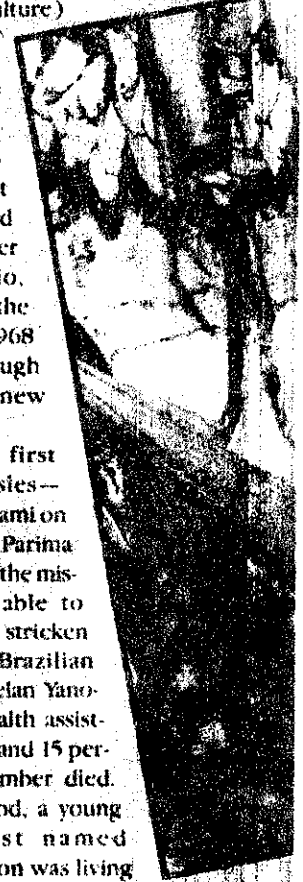
A Waning Way of Life

In a very real sense, the Yanomami represent the last chance for survival of Brazilian Indians. Since the Europeans landed in 1500, the native population has been reduced from an estimated 6 million to, at most, 240,000 today. Dozens of tribes have been exterminated. The war against them has taken many forms: officially sanctioned slavery (abolished, in 1755) "pacification" carried out by religious orders (which meant befriending Indians and "helping" them to abandon their culture and get in step with "national" norms); the seizure and destruction of Indian lands; military attacks, bombings, and even the use of napalm.

The Yanomami were spared all of this, until recently, because of their remote location, far away from any major tributary of the Amazon. Even the appearance during the 1950s, of rubber tree tappers, nut gatherers, and hunters seeking ocelot, jaguar, and tropical birds in Yano-

mami lands did not cause significant problems. Yet the missionaries who established outposts at Surucucu in 1961 and Catrimani in 1965 (intending not to "pacify" the Indians but to respect and support their culture) had an uneasy sense that these people's time was running out. "There was a certain feeling that we had been called there," says Father Giovanni Saffrino, who lived among the Yanomami from 1968 to 1978, "although nobody quite knew why."

In 1968, the first epidemic—measles—struck the Yanomami on both sides of the Parima Mountains. While the missionaries were able to save all but one stricken Indian on the Brazilian side, the Venezuelan Yanomami had no health assistance: between 8 and 15 percent of their number died. During this period, a young anthropologist named Napoleon Chagnon was living with the Venezuelan groups; with the publication of his book, *The Fierce People*, the tribe's name became, briefly, a household word throughout the U.S. Focusing on the Yanomamis' inter-village raids, battle preparations, and competitive male rituals (e.g., chest pounding and spear dancing), Chagnon gave them a reputation for violence that other observers would dispute. Chagnon's critics don't quarrel with his descriptions of Yanomami customs, but with the impression he created that fighting is a constant, undertaken for enjoyment. Father Saffrino agrees that the Yanomami are well able to defend themselves; however, he considers the warfare which Chagnon observed to be a direct result of the measles epidemic. "Traditionally, the Yanomami believe that when someone dies suddenly and inexplicably, it's because someone from another, unrelated village has cast a spell on the victim," he explains. "The shaman then determines which village was responsible, and the victim's relatives often retaliate with a raid, in which they might kill, at most, three men." Today





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says the priest, most of the Indians understand the biological spread of disease.

Father Saffirio recalls only three raids during his ten-year stay. In striking contrast to Chagnon's portrait, he describes his adopted people as warm and affectionate. The Catrimani mission, where Father Saffirio served, had only two or three nonnative people at a time, so the missionaries were immersed in the Yanomamis' way of life.

"The most amazing aspect of Yanomami culture is their togetherness," says Saffirio. "They never feel isolated, as we do; one is never alone with a problem. Anything you need, you can find.

"Of course," he chuckles, "everybody knows *everything* you do. If you leave the house to pee, if a husband and wife are going out to the forest to make love—everybody knows it." He recalls a fun-loving animated people: "They always have *so much* to talk about! They will talk for a week about how 'the Bald One' (their nickname for me) fell down, or about something a child or an animal has done."

Each extended Yanomami family of twenty to eighty people lives in a large communal house, and the smaller, "nuclear" families are apportioned outer sections of the house and separate entrances. Built by the men from poles and woven leaves, the Yanomami houses are comfortable and watertight, but must be abandoned and replaced every four or five years when the cockroach population in the walls and ceilings grows to such proportions that not a scrap of food can be stored overnight. Each *maloca* centers on an open area used for fires, ceremonies, and feasts; almost a monthly event, these feasts (featuring spider monkey as the preferred delicacy) may bring 120 people together under one roof for a week.

Men definitely have the upper hand in this culture. Between the ages of fifteen and forty, they spend most of their time hunting; when they're older, they turn to gardening. Women work in the house, garden, and collect fruit in the forest. Marriages are generally monogamous, though a few men, usually shamans or leaders of the group, may have two or three wives. "This increases the leader's

power and status, because it increases his potential kinship ties," says Father Saffirio. "Each marriage gives his group ties with another family or village; and he can have more children, which further increases his relationships, and his share in posterity.

"Children get the best of everything, especially food," Saffirio notes, and both children and the elderly get a great deal of physical affection, although adults are not affectionate with one another in public.

Child-bearing is highly regulated to assure that each child will be well taken care of. Women nurse their babies for two and a half to three years, and the nursing, Saffirio observes, "usually" prevents pregnancy. If a nursing mother should become pregnant, the milk is then considered to be unhealthy, and she will try to abort, using herbal and spiritual remedies. Such attempts usually succeed. Traditionally, the few babies born before they are wanted—or born with no man to take responsibility for them—have been put to death. "Their single question is, Who will be responsible for the child?" according to Father Saffirio. "There is no place in the culture for a child without a father."

This is one of the very few aspects of

Yanomami culture that the Catramani missionaries have tried to influence: a family that finds itself with a baby it can't care for may leave the infant at the mission, which later may place the baby with an older couple. "We respect their culture and try not to interfere with it," says Father Saffrino, "but in this case we felt that it's important to try to replace the many people killed in the epidemics."

The soft-spoken, Italian-born priest found the Yanomami culture in no way lacking in comparison to "modern, westernized" ways. He found no cruelty or random violence among the forest people; rather, he was deeply touched by their warmth, their animation and enjoyment of life, and their acceptance of people strange and different from them.

"It was very hard to leave them," admits Saffrino, 42, who is now working towards a Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. "If you are trying to help, if you care about them, they know it—and they give it all back. Everyone who really stays, and works there awhile, has a hard time leaving the Indians."

The Political Battle for Survival

Beginning in 1968, the tribe's advocates both outside and inside the Brazilian government began preparing carefully documented reports on the location and condition of the Yanomami, and proposals for their future protection, including the creation of a Yanomami reserve or park. To date there have been twelve such proposals; all but the last two have been tabled or mysteriously "lost" in a laby-

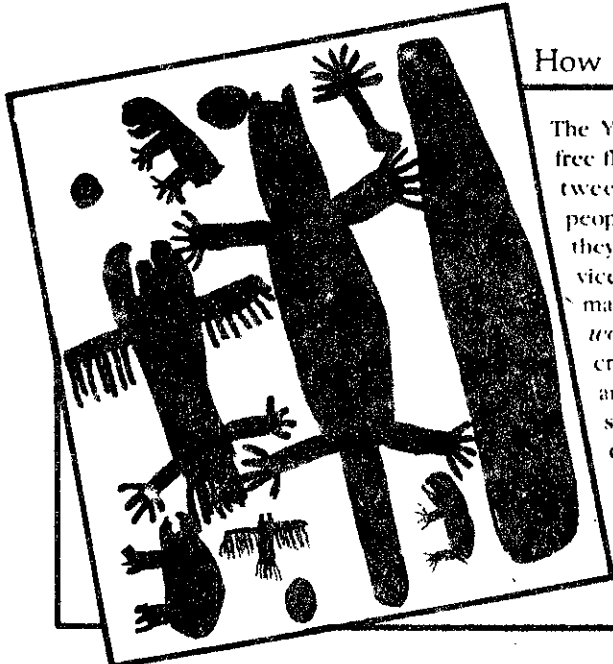
rinth of governing agencies. The missionaries and anthropologists trying to intervene on the Indians' behalf have dogged the footsteps of officials at every level—local, federal and military—and have encountered contradictory responses and mixed results. A University of Brasilia health team organized by Scottish anthropologist Kenneth I. Taylor, for example, waited nine months for FUNAI funds, then received only a fraction of the promised amount; when FUNAI pulled out, the Yanomami Project went forward on its own, limited resources and achieved at least one clear success. Acting as consultant to a company doing mineral exploration, the team showed that with proper screening, preparation, and supervision, outsiders could work in Yanomami territory without harmful effects.

But by this time the trickle of "foreigners" had become a flood. In 1975 government mineral surveyors confirmed that there was gold in that thar' rainforest—as well as diamonds, uranium, and a rich tin ore called cassiterite. The Brazilian government, looking to unbridled resource development as a quick-fix solution to its \$60 billion foreign debt, was overjoyed. Surucucu, where most of the minerals—as well as most of the Yanomami (4,500)—are concentrated, looked like a promising prospect for a boom town. The attitudes of local officials were typified in a remark made by the governor of Roraima Territory (where most Yanomami land is located): "An area such as this cannot afford the luxury of having a half dozen Indian tribes obstruct development."

The unsupervised influx of 500 prospectors and placer (surface) miners in 1975 had much the same impacts as the highway incursion in 1973. Though placer mining by nonindigenous people is against the law, the Brazilian authorities waited eighteen months—until fighting broke out between Indians and miners—before evacuating the miners. Currently, according to the ARC, at least 1,500 gold prospectors are illegally present in Yanomami territory.

Pressure on the Yanomami and their environment has recently been escalating from many directions: one government bureau has clear-cut part of their territory so that corporate cattle ranching could move in; another agency is encouraging poor peasants to become landowners by "colonizing" the jungle. The usual complement of Brazilian state-owned companies and multinational interests are busily acquiring permits to go in and dig up the minerals. There are plans on government and business drawing boards for dozens of massive hydroelectric plants on the Amazon and its tributaries, gas and oil wells in the jungle, and even a proposal for liquefying most of the remaining 415 billion cubic feet of the Amazon forest for fuel.

If there's any hope for protecting the Yanomamis, as well as their territory, it lies in a dedicated international human rights movement organized by Brazilian native rights advocates in 1979, with the creation of the Commission for the Creation of a Yanomami Park (CCPY). Aided by the Anthropology Resource Center (ARC), the American Anthropological



How the People Got the Fire from the IYO

The Yanomami assume a lot of free flow and transmutation between people and animals; people have animal alter-egos; they can become animals, and vice versa. In one myth a Yanomami had become IYO ("ze-woc"), a big alligatorlike creature who lived on land and had fire. But IYO was selfish with the fire, so everyone else had to eat raw meat. The people noticed that IYO cooked his meat by spitting fire on it, so they tried to make him smile; if he did, they

thought, the fire would fall out of his mouth. Finally, the people in bird form (Seis, Kore) did something to make the IYO open his mouth. (There are many versions of what the birds did: let their droppings fall on him, threw dust at him, made him laugh, etc.) The fire fell out of the IYO's mouth, and the people grabbed it up and hid it in the Poronaihi, or cocoa tree (the Yanomami still start fires with the hard wood of a cocoa tree). The IYO was so ashamed of himself that he went to the river and became an alligator (represented by the spirit *Caiman*). There he has stayed to this day, only showing his eyes, because he is afraid of the Yanomami, and still ashamed.

Association, Cultural Survival, Survival International, and the Indian Law Resource Center (CCPY) brought the Yanomami's plight to the attention of the world community and to human rights forums in the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of Indians in the Americas (held in Rotterdam, Holland, in November 1980). The effort has been a resounding success: more than 15,000 letters, petitions, and telegrams have been sent to the Brazilian government in support of CCPY's proposal for a Yanomami Park that would include most of the tribe's natural range.

This spring, in mid-March, FUNAI agreed to do just that: it interdicted 17 million acres to be set aside for the Yanomami, with the federal government having the only right of outside access.

While those who have created and fought for the park are deservedly rejoicing in this victory, they emphasize that the government must go further to make the Yanomami park a reality. "It's an election year in Brazil," ARC's Robin Wright points out. "On several occasions in the past, the government has interdicted Indian areas, but has later revoked them. The most important step has yet to be taken: that of delimiting (formally mapping) Yanomami land. It's important now for people to pressure FUNAI to take this step immediately."

If and when a park plan goes into effect, its proponents have no illusions about its vulnerabilities. Under Brazilian law, the tribe's "exclusive use and control" is only of the land's surface; the minerals below still belong to the government and can be taken by the authority of the Ministry of Mines and Energy. The National Institute of Forestry Development, the Special Secretariat for the Environment, and other agencies are also typically given certain kinds of rights on reservation lands. All of this external pressure on the Park will theoretically be strictly supervised and regulated by FUNAI, but



Support organizations are hoping that international observation and pressure can be exerted to protect the tribe's rights to autonomy and self-determination.

FUNAI's effectiveness depends both on the commitment of its personnel and on the amount of power and recognition accorded to it by higher levels of officialdom.

"We are aware that there are no guarantees," says Father Saffirio. "But this really is the best we can hope for. At least it gives us some official protection we can work with. Anything stronger has simply never been an option."

Support organizations are hoping that continued international observation and pressure can be exerted to keep Brazil's administration of the reserve in line with the tribe's rights. However, Saffirio's statement points up a tragedy both moral and ecological, which will remain no matter how well the Yanomami Park is administered: that to leave a relatively tiny segment of the vast Amazon basin just as it's been for hundreds of years, in the hands of people who live there, is not, and has never been, an option. There are laws on the books in Brazil, in many other nations, and in international covenants which talk lavishly about preserving cultural diversity and which guarantee autonomy and self-determination to every indigenous people left on earth. Yet any proposal that would make these principles a reality, anywhere, by allowing a people and their habitat to continue as they were before "civilization" discovered them, has been categorically

superseded by the demands of development. It seems to be a given that the reshaping of the physical world into money or items having monetary value is always—everywhere—a priority to which all other considerations must bow. There is overwhelming evidence that this policy is damaging—ethically, ecologically, psychologically, spiritually, and in the long run, even economically. Yet those people who don't understand or don't want to see this evidence are still making the decisions about how land is used on our globe. It is up to the rest of us—somehow—to call the current path of "progress" into question before the damage is irreversible.

For further information and ongoing reports on the Yanomami, contact the Anthropology Resource Center, 59 Temple Place, Suite 444, Boston MA 02111, (617) 426-9286; Survival International, 36 Craven St., London WC2N 5NG, England; or the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Frederiksbolms Kanal 4-A, 1220 Copenhagen K, Denmark. Letters asking the Brazilian government to delimit the Yanomami lands immediately should be sent to Coronel Paulo Moreira Leal, Presidente da FUNAI, SAS Quadro 1, Bloco-A, 7 Andar, Brasilia 70-D-F, Brazil; copies should be sent to Claudia Andujar, CCPY, Rua Sao Carlos Do Pinaal 345, Sao Paulo 01333-S.P. Brazil.

