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**YANOMAMI AND GENDER  
TOWARD A SANUMÁ THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE**

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*Yanomami - the image*

Perhaps the most famous of lowland South American indigenous groups, the Yanomami have fired the imagination of many an American undergraduate, journalist, and even offended feminist<sup>1</sup>. The image of the most primitive people on earth (the Aborigine is dead, God save the Yanomami) abusing their women, killing their babies, and acting like baboons<sup>2</sup> has poured over the media no doubt to supply the West with an increasingly rare symbol of primitive savagery. Exotic par excellence, the image of the Yanomami as fierce people has had the ambiguous effect of making this people known worldwide, but as "our contemporary ancestors" (Chagnon 1983:214), that is, our Hobbesian alter-ego before humanity tamed itself into civilization. Yanomami violence has become an axiom for sociobiological demonstrations while Yanomami warfare has been a current commodity in anthropological circles and continues to feed a seemingly inexhaustible editorial market<sup>3</sup>. By Yanomami it is commonly meant half of the Yanomami, i.e. men. The other half, women, seems to exist for no other reason than to give their men the opportunity to display to avid Westerners their taste for blood.

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1. Consider the following headline (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, April 7, 1990, p. 10): "Feminists attack Yanomami." The piece goes on to comment on the reaction of teacher and students in a Communications classroom at Menlo College, Atherton, California, to Yanomami male violence toward women. The teacher, Marilyn Faulkenburg, responded to a newspaper article about the impact of gold rush on Yanomami lives as follows: "According to distinguished anthropologist Marvin Harris, the Yanomami were nicknamed as fierce people because they practice wife battering and female infanticide. Our question," continues Marilyn, "is: does that society deserve to be protected against the twentieth century? Or, put it another way, would the [invading] gold miners be the real bandits in this story as suggested in the article?" She is quoted as having said that to preserve "so brutal and primitive" a culture would only benefit anthropologists. Marilyn's diatribe was published in the letters section of the *Wall Street Journal*. The crudeness of such a view reflects the most virulent form of misappropriation that can be made of anthropological materials.

2. Time Magazine, May 10, 1976, p. 37, under the headline *Beastly or Manly?*: "Implied in Chagnon's findings so far is a notion startling to traditional anthropology: the rather horrifying Yānomamō culture makes some sense in terms of animal behavior. Chagnon argues that Yānomamō structures closely parallel those of many primates in breeding patterns, competition for females and recognition of relatives. Like baboon troops, Yānomamō villages tend to split into two after they reach a certain size." This article inaugurated a long string of written abuse against the Yanomami.

3. To my knowledge, the most recent product is Ferguson 1995. Symptomatically, there is not a single thorough, well-documented ethnography of Yanomami warfare as such.

### *Sanumá - the counter-image*

But the Yanomami are a fiction. "Yanomami" is a blanket term used by whites to refer to the language family comprising about 20 thousand speakers of four closely related languages. The imagery mentioned above has been mostly drawn from Chagnon's reports on his fieldwork with the Yanomami or Yanomamö on the Venezuelan side of the border with Brazil. There is, therefore, more to the "Yanomami" than meets the exoticizing eye.

There are, for instance, the Sanumá, the northernmost subgroup of the Yanomami family among whom I happened to do fieldwork. Although it would never occur to me to label the Sanumá the "Tame People," it would be equally strange to call them "Fierce." Wife and child abuse, chronic warfare, daily bickering, and gloomy temperament are as foreign to my Sanumá experience as loving care is to Chagnon's ethnographic texts. Are such discrepant views the result of drastic cultural differences or of drastically opposed ethnographic outlooks? There are, for sure, marked distinctions between the various Yanomami subgroups, but they are by no means sharper than the stamp of family resemblance one senses when dealing with any Yanomami of any subgroup. With a little effort and time, any of the four languages can become intelligible for us who have knowledge of one of them. The basic cultural matrix is easily discernible as we move from one subgroup to another. Can we then conclude that Yanomami are more or less violent depending on the ethnographer's disposition to pick and choose his/her emphasis? Up to a point, yes (Ramos 1987). How warlike would the Yanomamö be in an ethnography written by me? How meek would Sanumá women be in Chagnon's hands? Academic questions? Maybe, but with some epistemological consequences to which I shall return. Meanwhile, I will give my reasons why I find Sanumá gender to be a magnificent exercise in complementarity which is manifested at the cognitive level, in the realm of ideas rather than in social interaction.

But, before anything else, let me make it quite clear that I am not writing this paper in the key of women's studies or in any way referring my discussion to a theory of gender. For one thing I doubt whether such a theory would have any useful application for the Sanumá, derived as it is from a primarily Western problematic. Let me also establish once and for all a crucial baseline on which the thrust of my discussion will hinge. I want to emphasize that Sanumá women are far from being the impotent victims of their men's brutality. Here are some "facts" to show why this is so. Over more than two decades I have had a three-year period of very close contact with the Sanumá. During this time, occasions when women were unilaterally brutalized or abused by men were extremely rare. In contrast, I cannot count the times when I witnessed women show a great deal of clout in a number of different contexts. Let me mention a few.

In the domestic sphere. Men, the hunters, carry the prestige of the trade, but also the burden of being the meat providers par excellence. Husbands who neglect their hunting duties are subjected to their wives' diatribes driving them to shame by pointing out their children's "meat hunger." Just as men chide lazy wives who fail to keep the household constantly supplied with garden produce, so do women pressure sluggish husbands into activity with both words and gestures, such as tying their dog to a leash and taking it outdoors, ready for a hunting trip.

In the public sphere. Ceremonial dialogues are public affairs involving members of

relatively distant villages. Male hosts and visitors engage in a verbal duel that is highly ritualized and usually performed in a tense atmosphere. These are occasions when important news items are exchanged and, most importantly, trading arrangements are made. Like in a play, while men deliver their act on stage as expected, women fire their cues from backstage, urging their men to say the right things, to strike the best bargains. As pairs of males, locked in a nervous embrace while squatting uncomfortably, straining to present a perfect performance to an excited audience, female relatives stand up around them, demanding a share of the men's concentration with unrelenting shouts for them to strike a good bargain. The rules of the game dictate that men remain undisturbed and continue their number unscathed, as if deaf to the women's intervention. But in the end, it is the joint effort of man and woman that results in the best of negotiations in these ceremonial dialogues.

In the cultural sphere. Elderly women, perhaps more often than elderly men, are considered to be repositories of cultural, sometimes esoteric, information. For instance, in doubt as to the edibility of some unusual animal, young people resort to the wisdom and experience of old women before they venture eating it. Or, not knowing how to answer some whimsical question from the ethnographer either regarding recondite aspects of culture or details of things past, a committed informant goes out of his/her way to consult a patasoma ('old woman') who happens to be around. Personality, of course, plays an important role regarding how much respect and deference individuals may command, and thus we find old people, both men and women, who are the target of ridicule and insolence. But whenever one needs wisdom, one looks for it in the elderly, women especially.

In the moral sphere. Very seldom can Sanumá men dispose of women as their involuntary pawns or play-things. Apart from orphaned girls or women who, for one reason or other, find themselves all alone in a strange community, men have to contend with female individuality and assertiveness when they think of seducing a woman or in any way trespassing the limits of her personal will or moral conviction. This female self-possessedness came home to me when I witnessed an angry speech from a married woman against an unrelated man in the same community. As usual, the row attracted every resident who happened to be at ear shot, for the woman's intention was to let the cause of her anger be known as widely as possible. In clearly condemning terms, she attacked the man for his nerve in propositioning to her. But the main target of her outrage was not the man's invitation to an adulterous affair; she was utterly offended because he had addressed a pregnant woman. With total indignation, she proceeded to humiliate him in front an arbitrating assembly who censured him for his boorishness and lack of tact. Pregnancy is sacrosanct. One should not beat a pregnant woman in any circumstance, nor treat her as fair game for sexual escapades.

I could add more "facts" and episodes to show that Sanumá women do not conform to the image of victims passively enduring fits of cruelty from their male oppressors (see Ramos 1979), but I doubt whether a mere catalog of examples would qualitatively change the point I want to make. It seems to me we need a more ambitious approach here and I propose something at once broader and deeper than simply a factual account of what women do or fail to do in Sanumá society. Rather than insisting on an artificial emphasis on sexual antagonism, I aspire to convince the reader that in Sanumá culture gender means complementarity at various levels. Hence my effort will be to demonstrate that, over and above a marker for sexual differences, gender is a powerful idea closely associated with some key "categories of understanding." I am specifically referring to notions of space and time as they are realized in the realm of social organization. What follows is a brief

summary of certain features of Sanumá social organization that are absolutely crucial to make my point clear<sup>4</sup>.

### Brother-sister, the ultimate pair

To a very large extent, the brother-sister duo is Sanumá sociality in a nutshell. Brother and sister are blood relatives who produce affines. They are the epitome of the paradoxical co-existence of intimacy and restraint. They incarnate dispersal and permanence. They symbolize maintenance of identity through time and maintenance of bonds in space.

In many Amazonian societies, Sanumá included, one finds the Dravidian pattern of kinship reckoning according to which brother and sister are the parents of cross-cousins. In turn, cross-cousins are the preferred spouses. But different peoples can describe cross-cousins in more than one way. Whereas among the Yanomami,- subgroup, for instance, one learns that people will marry the children of *shoriwä*, "brothers-in-law" (Chagnon 1968:64), with the Sanumá we hear that marriageable people are the children of siblings of opposite sex (*peze di,-bi,-*). From the point of view of these marriageable children, their parents' opposite sex siblings are affines, whether or not the expected marriages actually occur. In other words, a brother and a sister, while locked in a permanent blood relationship, find themselves in the ambivalent position of being affines to their respective children's potential or actual spouses. The brother-sister dyad is thus charged with supplying spouses for the next generation, which amounts to saying that responsibility for group reproduction is regarded as resting on their shoulders rather than on those of husband and wife. It is no wonder that mothers look for the services of a shaman when they have a string of male or female babies. The motherhood ideal is to have as many sons as daughters<sup>5</sup>.

The above analysis might be credited to the ethnographer's imagination on the basis of sheer observation or perhaps misobservation of actual people doing actual things were it not for the fact that the Sanumá themselves, having thought about the matter, fashioned it as myth and hence formulated it as part of their own theory of society. Sure enough, among the numerous Sanumá myths, we find those that quite explicitly confront the ambivalence that underlines the brother-sister pair. In some Sanumá myths, one sibling kills the other. It is either a brother who kills his sister, such as in the various versions of the myth of the Bat Girl (Colchester 1981:45-46; Borgman in Wilbert & Simoneau 1990:559-61), or it is a sister who murders her brother, as in the myth of the Armadillo Woman (Colchester 1981:48). In others, a sister sadly mourns her dead brother killed by someone else, as in the narrative about Honey Magic (Colchester 1981:59; Borgman in Wilbert & Simoneau 1990:203-4). But it is in one particular myth that we find an unambiguous statement about the differences in allegiance between siblings and between spouses. It seems to epitomize

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4. For a fuller ethnographic account of Sanumá society see Ramos 1995.

5. Revealing are the comments of adult women about the desirable sex ratio of their children. They prefer to have both boys and girls in a balanced proportion. If only boys are born, they say, it is bad because they will go away to marry; if only girls, it is equally bad because girls don't hunt game. Therefore, if a woman has a series of babies of the same sex, she will request the services of a shaman to try to restore the desired equilibrium.

the furtive struggle of consanguinity and affinity. It is worth presenting the myth as it was collected by Colchester (1981:59-60):

Koshiloli, his wife and her brother lived at some distance from the rest of his wife's relations. One day Koshiloli went hunting a great distance. On returning with his wife's dog and his brother-in-law, his brother-in-law killed a parrot. But the arrow lodged in the branches.

"Climb up and shake the arrow down," said Koshiloli. The brother-in-law climbed up and managed to shake the arrow back down. Koshiloli lurked by the foot of the tree. The brother-in-law climbed back down; Koshiloli killed him, striking him angrily with a stick - *to! to! to! to!*

Koshiloli returned to the house carrying the dead Sanema. He reached the house and laid the Sanema on the ground. He approached his wife.

"Butcher the game!" he said to his wife. She, seeing her dead brother lying on the ground, mourned for him.

"It's heavy," she said. She cut open the belly and pulled out the guts - *wi! wi! wi! wi!*

"No spoor?" she asked Koshiloli.

"No, nothing," he replied.

Once she had prepared the game, she went over to her people.

"My husband has killed my brother," she reported.

"Really!" her people replied. "Right. Make him sit outside and pretend to pick out his lice, bend his face back, like this!, so he faces into the sun."

"Yes!" she said.

Returning home she cooked up the liver. The child ate it.

"Come and sit here! I'll do your lice," she said to her husband.

"Yes!" he replied. He came and sat down in front of her. She bent his head back to face into the sun, while her people, come raiding, approached. She held Koshiloli's face up towards the sun. The others killed him with a blow of the machete - *ka!* So Koshiloli died.

The myth devises a rather unusual residence arrangement: a married man dodging bride-service, living with his wife and her brother, a young brother, it would seem, otherwise he would not take orders from his sister's husband so readily. The improbable trio of husband, wife, and brother-in-law, plus an unidentified child, living all by themselves, is a narrative device to emphasize the play of antagonisms and loyalties involved in what Lévi-Strauss once called "the most elementary form of kinship that can exist" (1963:46). It calls attention to the tenuous bond that exists between husband and wife and to the problems that affinity, a necessary evil in the life of Sanumá men, can bring about. The double killing -- the man murdering his brother-in-law, and the woman with her relatives murdering the husband -- highlights both the permanent tension that exists between in-laws and the loyalty that is expected from blood relations. The outcome of the tale -- the woman taking her people's advice to treat her husband wifely as a stratagem to have him pay with his life for the life of her brother -- in its hyperbolic creativity, perhaps

says more about brother-sister versus husband-wife alliance than any belabored anthropological analysis.

The structural double bind involving opposite sex siblingship, created by the combination of consanguinity (children of same parents) and affinity (parents of children related as affines), is also evident in the way brother and sister behave toward each other. Until just before puberty, siblings of same and opposite sex constitute a virtually indivisible pack who, together with other co-resident children, roam around village, gardens, river banks and immediate forest like omnipresent urchins filling the air with shrieks, tearful cries and much laughter. This carefree routine changes rather suddenly as both boys and girls begin to show signs of the approaching adulthood. Brothers and sisters stop treating each other as playmates and begin to rehearse the demeanor they will have for the rest of their lives: courteous to each other but no longer bosom companions; restrained but ready to defend each other whenever necessary. During my long acquaintance with the Sanumá, I have had the opportunity to witness several incidents involving men and women in physical confrontation: husband versus wife, mother versus son, mother-in-law versus son-in-law, but I never saw a brother and sister fight. Quite the opposite, in various occasions, when some man threatened to beat his wife, the latter's brothers would immediately intervene in defense of their sisters.

But what has all this to do with space and time?

#### Mother-in-law/father, pivotal figures

Let us consider two central characters in the life of Sanumá, especially males: mother-in-law and father who, after all, are brother-sister from the viewpoint of men in the next generation. To most Sanumá men, mother-in-law means the locus of married life. With uxorilocal residence, most men have to leave their parents' house and village to find a wife. Since Sanumá villages are small -- from thirty to sixty people on average -- endogamous marriage choices are extremely reduced. The result is that each community has to export the majority of its male children, while most girls remain with their parents. Marriage involves a long period of bride service. If a man marries far from his home, he is usually alone, away from close relatives who would back him up both psychologically and politically. He is virtually defenseless, at the mercy of his affines. The quintessence of a man's difficult years after marriage is his relationship with his mother-in-law: strict avoidance under the same roof and the obligation to supply her (and her husband) with services and food. It is no mere coincidence that the major symbol for an incestuous relationship is the mother-in-law/son-in-law dyad. Facial expressions of repulsion usually accompany the description of what such an incestuous relationship would be like, modeled on the behavior of a certain mythical sloth, *sauli*, -si-, with its languid motion climbing up trees while clinging to its son-in-law in an obscene embrace. A mother-in-law is another necessary evil in the life of every young man. That is why there is a certain demand for orphaned and older women who have no mothers to complicate a man's life. Mothers-in-law thus represent the embodiment of male dispersal. When I once asked an old woman why so-and-so did not marry in his own village, she answered that it would have been impossible, as there were no "mothers-in-law" available to him. The message was: no mother-in-law, no wife.

While men circulate, women stay put. A woman at home, i.e. at her parents' home,

is a fulfilled woman. What this means is that women find in space -- space of residence, space of production and reproduction -- the dimension where they are most at ease. Or, put it another way, the mode of space is the most congenial for the expression of femaleness. Perhaps we can appreciate this best in negative, so to speak, when we see a woman living away from her parents. Orphans who move to their husbands' villages, and especially when they then become widows, are a sad spectacle of misery and helplessness. While childless or during their children's infancy, they are the target of various forms of mistreatment, all the way from inconsequential teasing to insults and beatings. As their children grow up, the burden of their condition as second-class citizens tends to subside and they become recognized as the mothers of first-class citizens.

Things are quite different for men. The fact that most of them leave their parents' village to marry makes the lucky ones who stay at home an exception. Life as a son-in-law in someone else's village subjects a man to the equivalent position of an orphaned woman in her husband's home. There are, of course, fine gradations in the way people treat their daughters' consorts. We find husbands who endure constant brother-in-law assaults on their belongings or even on their persons, as we find husbands who develop an easy-going relationship with their in-laws (except, of course, for parents-in-law who are always formally avoided). But leaving home to marry is never like being at home. Hence, it is reasonable to say that for men, even in favorable conditions, space means the sacrifices of bride service, the co-habitation with people they are obliged to avoid, and the suspicion of co-villagers for whom they are guilty before proven innocent. Their privileged dimension is definitely not space. It is in time that they have a chance to create something social and project themselves onto posterity. While space disperses them, time prolongs them.

Why time? Because it is through time that men may develop their full potential. The category *time* is represented here by the transmission of patrilineal identity from one generation to another. Each village has members of a variety of patrilineal units (call them sibs), dispersed as they are through Sanumá country. Wherever men and women go, they are identified by their father's sib name. In fact, it is an identification system which works as an efficient mechanism to guarantee hospitality where there are fellow sib members. Sibship, a strategy for social classification, is not in any way affected by uxorilocal residence.

There is, however, a more localized instance, that is, descent groups, where patrilineality contributes to aggravate the predicament of agnates who face post-marital dispersal. For descent groups to emerge, it is necessary that agnatically related men keep together in the same village for a sufficient amount of time (two, three generations) to permit the formation of a well-defined group with a distinct agnatic identity. These groups are named, exogamous and politically relevant. Both men and women inherit membership in them through the father and retain it for life. For lack of a better term, I have called these groups lineages with the necessary caution that they should not be taken for what they are not (African-style, for instance). The existence of these groups is very tenuous as it depends on a number of haphazard circumstances (births, deaths and spouse availability). Chances are that, once created, they will not survive for long.

The centrifugal effect of uxorilocality leads to the dispersal of agnatically related males. In the long run, descendants of these dispersed men end up losing their lineage affiliation in the absence of a residential focus. Without a common residence, lineages will crumble out of existence. As they crop up and die out along the way of an unpredictable diachrony, a large number of individuals are left with no lineage affiliation. In other words, the life of a lineage will depend on the capacity of a group of men to control space for a

small number of generations. For them space, rather than being a given, has to be conquered. The net result is that those who succeed in holding together, will have their name continued in their offspring on a time scale that may be short, but will always be longer than their individual lives. Sanumá lineages will not exist without spacial concentration, and spacial concentration is achieved to the extent that men can circumvent the necessity to marry out. Lineages are thus the resolution of a collision of forces: the centrifugal force of exogamy -- men go where their wives are -- and the centripetal force of agnatic transmission -- the desire to create an enduring agnatically meaningful collectivity. Men create descent groups but have no control over the latter's destiny. Demographic factors such as lack of male children, or a lethal epidemic are beyond one's power and yet, they can destroy a descent group. Lineages, ephemeral as they may be, epitomize the successful attempt by both men and women to achieve, against all odds, the co-occurrence of time and space. If all men could marry in their own community, each village would become a monad, a thing turned into itself, mechanically perpetuating endogamous cross-cousin marriage. In such an ideal, but virtually impossible situation, father and mother-in-law would perhaps have equal weight. At it is, a man is usually divided between allegiance to father and duty to mother-in-law. The degree of his success in creating his own descent group is a measure of the play between these two determinant figures.

To more clearly demonstrate this matter of temporalizing space, I shall refer now to a phenomenon in Sanumá ethnography that still intrigues me. In the past, certain residential clusters had a particularly important place in the lives of their members. When, for various reasons, they dispersed and fanned out northward and eastward, memory of these places accompanied them and was passed on to their children in the form of patronyms. For example, people who were born many miles away from Sauladu, in Venezuela, acquired the identity of *saulagi,-dili di,-bi,-* (the people of the Sauladu) because their fathers had been residents of the Sauladu village or cluster of villages.

Here we find the intricate play of space and time as two categories of understanding set in motion when space is lost and time is the only peg on which to hang one's group identity. In the course of migrations such as those carried out by the Sanumá, phenomena such as *saulagi,-dili di,-bi,-* are like the trace of a lost space transmuted as regained space, now in the form of temporal continuity. Patrilineality worked like a mooring in face of the uncertainties of other times and other spaces.

In all these cases - sibs, lineages, and former residence clusters turned into patrilineality - the father figure is the uncontested focus of attention. In his father a man places his hopes that marriage will not lead him astray amidst suspicious in-laws. The irony of it all is that his father, the symbol of temporal permanence, is very likely to be the brother of his mother-in-law, the protagonist of his own dispersal. In short, behind a temporal father there is always a spatial mother-in-law.

Metonyms of space, home and gardens (including old ones which constitute veritable historical files) are the hub of one's kin, where women feel at home and men wish they would never leave. They evoke ideas of stability, rootedness, dependability. In contrast, time brings uncertainty to both men and women. When space is collectively lost, it turns into time via paternal filiation. It stands for uprootedness, instability, insecurity and adventure. It is a match for Sanumá male ethos which favors bravado, courage, adventurous spirit, but at heart, this is a way of making a virtue out of a predicament. We might, therefore, say that, if there is one dimension that suits Sanumá men, that dimension is time, despite the vicissitudes it brings about. In the last analysis, temporality is a means to master space, for it is either when space is collectively gained (in lineage formation) or

lost (in dispersal) that time (via patrilineal transmission) is activated.

As categories of understanding, women-space and men-time qualify as constitutive elements in a Sanumá theory of knowledge. In their complementarity, female and male together emerge as metaphors of stasis and motion, fundamental ideas to make sense of the world.

### Affinity for whom

A sort of sociological corollary of the above is the question of consanguinity and affinity. One of the most puzzling traits in my Sanumá ethnography is the absence of affinal terms for certain people vis-à-vis a female speaker. In the diagrams below, we notice a blank space for both reference and address terms for a woman's female cross-cousin. To the question "What do you call your husband's sister," the answer, accompanied with an amused look, was always *kuu maigite!*, "don't say," meaning "Call nothing!" The same applies to the wife of a woman's brother's. In turn, a man uses the same term, of address and reference, for both his wife's brother and his sister's husband, *soli*<sup>6</sup>, i.e. his male cross-cousin/brother-in-law. This is a term that has gained wide currency as it is used by any man for any unrelated male of about his age, including foreigners who happen to come by. It is a "passport term," as it were, associated with the world outside the community (sometimes mistranslated as *amigo*, friend in Portuguese), even if it is also used for one's "real" cross-cousins/brothers-in-law. The absence of address terms for people one avoids -- parents-in-law and children-in-law -- is perfectly understandable. But why do women "say nothing" regarding their female cross-cousins/sisters-in-law? The most plausible explanation I can find has to do with the differential value of affinity for men and for women.

Men's desire to marry within their own village does not exempt them from uxori-locality and its attendant bride service. There are cases of village endogamy and these cases keep alive in men the hope of establishing a post-marital residence without emigrating. Marriage gives a new accent to inherited affinity. A man who marries his genealogical cross-cousin continues to avoid his wife's parents as he always did. But now he has to work for them. Accompanying this change of social inflection is the use of a new set of reference terms for one's parents-in-law: they don't stop being *soaze a* and *saaze a*, mother's brother and father's sister, respectively, but affinity is overstressed by the terms *p\_shia* and *pi,-zi,-sa*, father-in-law and mother-in-law, respectively. As for a man's cross-cousins turned brothers-in-law, if they were once members of the same children's group, there is little apparent change in their relationship, but now, in the horizon of their sociability, there is always the specter of conflict ensuing from the duty of brothers-in-law to defend their sisters in attempts of wife mistreatment. Therefore, no matter where a man marries, post-marital affinity does change his life.

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6. The Sanumá *soli* is the equivalent of the Yanomami *shoriwä*.

	MEN	WOMEN	
+2	<i>hawa</i>	<i>nawa</i>	
+1	<i>soaze a</i>	<i>saaze a</i>	
0	<i>sawa</i>	<i>heano a</i>	(+) <i>hebala</i>  (-) <i>hoosa</i>
-1	<i>si,-zo</i>	<i>si,-zomi</i>	
-2	<i>ulu a</i>	<i>thewi,- a</i>	

Fig. 1.a. Terms of reference — women speaking

	MEN	WOMEN	
+2	<i>haba</i>	<i>naba</i>	
+1			
0	(+) <i>ai'a</i>	(+) <i>ai'a</i>	
-1			
-2	<i>pi,-zai</i>	<i>nagai</i>	

Fig. 1.b. Terms of address — women speaking

But, does it alter a woman's life? Not really, if she has living parents, especially her mother, to claim bride service from her husband. When she marries within the village, nothing changes in her life regarding her affines. She may even adopt the post-marital terms for her husband's parents, but not necessarily and with little social consequence. After all, she needs not worry about bride service obligations. As for her sisters-in-law, she continues to interact with them in the relaxed way she always did. As far as they are concerned, her marriage brings nothing really important for their relationship.

How about those unfortunate women who are taken to their husbands' villages? For them affinity matters, but kinship terminologies are not made to account for exceptions. To the contrary, it is the exceptions that reveal the force of the rule.

In brief, post-marital affinity, which determines much of an adult male's life, for a woman is a matter of indifference.

### *Oppressed by default*

As will become clearer below, my inclination in this paper is not to offer a far-reaching intercontinental comparison on gender. But I can't help noticing a couple of striking parallels. One of these [coincidences?] is that in Yanomami as, for instance, in New Guinea Highlands ethnography, women seem to be oppressed as a matter of course. Male domination is in danger of becoming essentialized, as part of nature. In the absence of assertions to the contrary, everyone who is minimally informed about these areas assumes sexual antagonism and/or male supremacy.

The other similarity that connects my ethnographic endeavors with those of some New Guinean experts is the effort to reverse the established canons of gender relations. I shall cite the work of only two colleagues as examples of the need to prepare the reader for something so unusual as female power. It is like fighting a trend that, taken too far, can become rather pernicious, as in the Yanomami case.

Swimming against the current of domineering males/oppressed females, Lederman begins her article on Mendi politics of gender as follows: "Highlands societies are famous in the anthropological literature for sex antagonism and male dominance, and yet, in Mendi, women cannot simply be considered socially subordinate to men" (Lederman 1984:85). In the same vein, Kulick criticizes the most common anthropological image of New Guinea women: "Not only do women remain silent during public meetings in the New Guinea Highlands or during a Samoan *fono*, but they are also rendered mute by the types of talk we choose to analyze" (Kulick 1993:511-12). On the basis of his own fieldwork, he disagrees: Gapun "women blithely fashion stereotypes that demean them into powerful positions from which they can publicly speak and demand hearing" (:534). Kulick's study is a detailed example of how Bourdieu's maxim *Ce que parler veut dire* (Bourdieu 1982) is not restricted to Western contexts.

I join these New Guinean dissident voices in proposing an alternative attitude that departs from this:

Although women suffer under male dominance, they do have means of coping with it. They form mutual-help groups informally led by one or more old ones (...). The women have their own little secrets, their own magic practices, their own domains; they help one another, and they are irreplaceable in the economic life of the community. The old ones who are no longer sexually attractive can have a role in political affairs: In the event of exchanges with visitors, they urge the men to be less generous; during internal quarrels or armed clashes, they incite to violence, call for vengeance, and stimulate the males' aggressiveness. The wiser ones are respected counselors to their husbands (Lizot on Venezuelan Yanomami, - 1985:71).

And from this:

It is not difficult to understand, then, why Yanomamö women in general have such a vindictive and caustic attitude toward the external world. By the time a woman is 30 years old she has "lost her shape" and has developed a rather unpleasant disposition. Women tend to seek refuge and consolation in each other's company, sharing their misery with their peers (Chagnon on Venezuelan Yanomami, - 1983:114)<sup>7</sup>.

Could it be that an international border such as that which divides Brazil from Venezuela had so drastic an effect on Yanomami men and women as to render them so incredibly different from those of my own experience? Could it be that male ethnographers precipitate bad vibes in Yanomami women?<sup>8</sup>

Joking aside, the image of the abused female, along with chronic warfare, has become the *imprimatur* of Yanomami in many a Western mind. It has turned into a stereotype intermittently nourished by blunt tirades such as Chagnon's and condescending musings such as Lizot's. What would Yanomami women say about it? If those women were Sanumá, based on their own men's presentation of self, they would probably laugh in mockery and crack a few jokes as they recognized in the anthropologists' diatribes the theatrical necessities of male egos to show off their

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7. Notice that through the years Chagnon has diluted his emphasis on violence. Beginning in 1968 with a book titled *Yanomamö. The Fierce People*, he now publishes a new version of it as *Yanomamö. The Last Days of Eden* (1992). The paragraph quoted above from the third edition now reads: "The women tend to lose their shapes by the time they are thirty, because of the children they have borne and nursed for up to three years each and because of their years of hard work. They seem to be much more subject to bad moods than the men are -- moods in which they display a sullen attitude toward life in general and men in particular. To an outsider, the older women appear to speak constantly in what sounds like a whine, punctuated with contemptuous remarks and complaints. When the women are happy or excited, the whining tone disappears, and they laugh gleefully, make wisecracks, and taunt the men, or each other, with biting insults and clever -- usually bawdy -- jokes" (Chagnon 1992:150). What has changed, Yanomamö women, Chagnon's disposition, or his perception of Yanomamö women, after more ethnographic information on these Indians has been made available?

8. Bruce Albert, who worked with the southeastern Yanomam subgroup in Brazil does not address the matter of gender relationships. Would he have ignored male violence against women if he had seen it? (Albert 1985).

worth.

A more productive approach to the importance of gender among Yanomami, New Guinea Highlands, and perhaps anywhere else, is, it seems to me, to go beyond appearances. For appearances, as Lederman puts it, may lead anthropologists to overvalue "ceremonial and male-dominated events" and, therefore, be "misled by the bustle and fanfarre that attend them" (Lederman 1984:86). For personal or methodological reasons, different anthropologists "see" different "facts." No two ethnographies look the same even if drawn from the same space at the same time. The problem is not in selecting a slice of reality for study; the problem is to inflate certain cultural aspects out of all proportion, especially if such inflation is potentially detrimental to the people being studied. It is, in other words, a touchy subject that has political consequences (see notes 2 and 3 above).

The quiet, subdued stance of a woman can be deceptive if one stops short of reflecting on what is the local "social ontology" of Woman and Man. Individual women may be more or less lively, more or less sour, just as individual men may be more or less exuberant, more or less docile. Much female subordination described in ethnographies seems the result of whimsical bad tempers on the part of male despots. But why do men get away with it so easily? Why don't women rebel as men did in the "matriarchy" myths recurrent both in Amazonia and New Guinea? Perhaps because a deep structure of thought underlies apparently disruptive behavior. Perhaps because there are other dimensions where gender is expressed in a different key from the visible (often misperceived) round of daily life. The ethnographer would do more justice to the complexity of the social world under study if he or she took a few steps toward a less personalized, more conceptual, if you will, grasp of the people as a culturally dense collectivity producing organized thought. It is at this level of abstraction that male-female relations should be examined and cross-cultural comparisons attempted. In saying this, I am inspired by M. Strathern on the trade of anthropology: "Anthropological exegesis must be taken for what it is: an effort to create a world parallel to the perceived world in an expressive medium (writing) that sets down its own conditions of intelligibility" (Strathern 1988:17).

### *Putting comparison on the bench*

Having praised the merits of comparison, I will now take a 180-degree turn and play the devil's advocate to pose a rather vexing question: do comparisons such as the present one, engaging by request a number of scholars in the arduous job of bringing together two continents, accomplish more than making us all more cosmopolitan, more erudite about each other's part of the world? How much does it contribute to a better understanding of one's own ethnographic work and that of our antipodal colleagues?

Regarding one's own work, I recognize that without the stimulus of this symposium, I would have never thought of reflecting on Sanumá gender, let alone

on gender as a component of a native theory of knowledge. Granting that the readings I did on New Guinea aroused my imagination, I am not too sure that the same result would not have been achieved if this symposium were exclusively on Amazonia, on Yanomami or, for that matter, on Sanumá alone. How much, then, of the mental impulse to further one's analysis is due to comparison per se, or to the drive of other minds striking some universal chord? In my present case, it was especially Lederman, Kulick, Strathern, but it could have been, as it was elsewhere, Proust, Woolf, or Mann. The source of one's inspiration is as random as the phenomena that activated the theory of chaos -- rather unpredictable. Be that as it may, the fact is that my mind was forced to probe deeper than I anticipated into Sanumá ethnography in order to meet the challenge of the symposium proposal.

But what can we say about the capacity of intercontinental comparison to heighten our understanding of the societies our "Melanesian" colleagues study? Would intense anthropological discussion and writing operate the wonder of comprehension, I mean *real* grasping, at a distance? Is it possible for ethnographic outsiders to capture the singularity of a remote culture just by hearing and reading about it?

Let me evoke the experience of a French "Africanist" colleague in the Lowlands of South America. Christian Geffray was startled out of his Africanist habits when he first entered a village of the Uru-eu-wau-wau Indians in the Brazilian state of Rondonia. The myriad children's, men's and women's hands, looks or words freely and spontaneously inspecting him caused him to ponder on the power of first impressions. He was astounded by the liberty with which every person, male or female, mature or immature, approached him without any apparent restraint. Unconsciously he had expected to find unsaid rules selecting who would address the stranger, after the fashion of an African lineage leader. Lack of such rules in this Amazonian milieu was a puzzle for him. The same sensation was repeated on his short visit to a Yanomami group in the Brazilian state of Roraima.

Geffray's gut reaction triggered in his mind the need to make sense of such disparity of styles. The resulting article (Geffray in press) is a tour-de-force on the implications of comparison. His short but ambitious discussion of the structural factors that are responsible for such disparity of cultural modes is a powerful lead into both the ontology and epistemology of comparative endeavors. The stark contrast between his formal analysis of African/Amazonian societies and the almost confessional tone of his final remarks reflects his trajectory from the subjective first impact to the labored sociological models that emerged from that shock of alterity in Amazonia. Geffray came out of his disorienting new experience with South American Indians reflecting on his African material at a much deeper level than anything that might have resulted from simply reading his South Americanist colleagues. In fact, when he (and seemingly other French Africanists) read materials from the New World, he tended to dismiss them as some ethnographic fantasy.

Overreactions apart, we might well take Geffray's cue and consider the implications of a first contact. The indelible impressions of our arrival in a village, being surrounded by curious strangers, à la Malinowski left on the beach, or being ignored out of existence, as the Geertz in Bali, represents that subjective spark

which will set in motion our ethnographic curiosity. Call it style, call it ethos, call it *imponderabilia*, but short of formal comparisons, can we really capture the "other" without being exposed to the jolt of difference? I appreciate Kulick's lively style in describing vociferous Gapun women as they display their empowering four-letter word strategies, but can I comprehend what makes them be what they are? Can we reach a real understanding on the basis of intellectual exercises? It may be enough for the advancement of anthropology to extract from ethnographic data the ingredients that are necessary for theoretical innovation, but is this sufficient for us to bridge the distance between alterities? The cold page of an ethnographic text, or the voice of a speaker at a professional meeting may give us precious information about a group of people personally unknown to us, but nothing replaces the sensorial reactions of a close encounter.

This paper is, among other things, an invitation for our Melanesian colleagues to experience Amazonia.

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