

YANOMAMI

# Pitt Scholar Fights To Save Tribe In Brazil

By CHRISS SWANEY

**A** POINT BREEZE anthropologist worries that he may be writing the obituary for a Brazilian tribe he has devoted years to studying.

The tribe: Yanomami Indians of northwest Brazil who for hundreds of years have developed free of outside influence.

The symptoms: Culture shock, disease.

The affliction: Progress and economic growth.

Working on his Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh, the Rev. Giovanni Saffirio of the Consolata Society for Foreign Missions is studying the Yanomami culture for his research thesis.

Nicknamed "the bald one" by Yanomami elders, Saffirio has just returned from a visit to the tribe he lived with from 1968 to 1975.

Although FUNAI — the Brazilian Indian rights agency — might disagree, Saffirio fears the tribe's cultural and physical survival may fall victim under increasing national pressure to exploit natural resources.

Living and working on the border

between Brazil and Venezuela much as their ancestors have for centuries, the 15,000 Yanomami are scattered in 350 villages along the Orinoco and Branco rivers, flanked by rich mineral deposits and highway developments.

Diseases brought by workers on Brazil's new Northern Perimeter Highway already have destroyed 13 Yanomami villages.

Tuberculosis, measles, venereal infections and other diseases increased 25 percent in the first 15 months of road construction.

The 43-year-old priest has spent 15 years trying to convince Brazilian authorities that highway developments are setting the pace for

bitter encounters between outsiders and Indians.

He recommends setting up a Yanomami Park. But that proposal has become a part of a political chess game in Brazil.

Ignoring pleas by the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Anthropology Resource Center of Boston, the Brazilian government recently announced a strategy to station troops between clusters of Yanomami villages and uninhabited forest.

Saffirio and other anthropologists believe the troops are a direct move by the Brazilian government to gain an upper hand in the struggle over Indian land rights.

Saffirio, who was present when the roadbuilding started in 1975, recalls that many Yanomami Indians were shocked by the government's blatant disregard for their ancient culture.

The Yanomami look to a tribal leader called a shaman — a combination of chief and witch doctor — to guide them through daily life in the villages.

Family loyalty and kinship are keystones of their tribe. The Catholic missionary said Yanomami extended family ties should be emulated by the West.

"Unlike our culture, the Yanomami take care of and respect the older generation," said Saffirio.

In his thesis study, Saffirio shows that Indians along the highway soon gave up their own language, neg-

lected to rebuild gardens uprooted by bulldozers and began wearing clothing.

Now they have become addicted, in a way, to a modern economy.

"The natives living by the road have lost a great part of their technological autonomy by depending more on material goods," said Saffirio.

"They are in continuous need of machetes, knives, matches, fishing lines and other products not endemic to their natural culture."

The Brazil government maintains that many of the problems of modernization in the Yanomami's territory can be avoided if exploration and development are restricted to multinational corporations rather than individual prospectors.

"Since the government and FUNAI have been reticent to recognize the importance of uninhabited hunting land for the Yanomami, the creation of a park is the only solution," said Saffirio.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the entire culture for Saffirio is an ability to preserve their environment. "They never seem to intrude on nature," he said.

"This is why I think the park idea is good because it would insulate them from fast-paced modernization but still give them freedom to perpetuate their tribal culture," he explained.

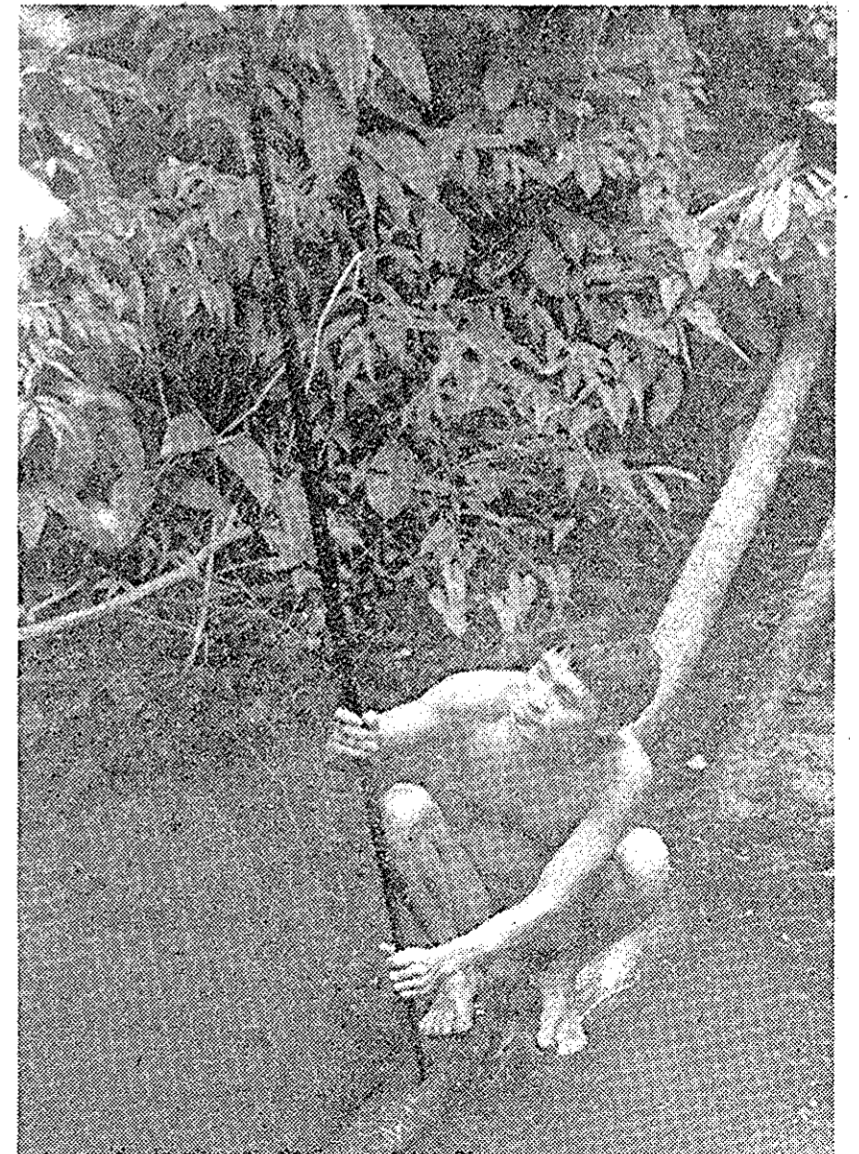
"I don't think the Indian plight has reached a stage where a requiem is needed but I do hope world opinion will halt the spread of ethnocide," he said.



Yanomami children, wearing jungle finery, prepare to visit a neighboring tribe.



Giovanni Saffirio has lunch with Yanomami children.



Yanomami hunter gets ready to spear fish.