The Last Days of Eden

The Yanomama Indians will have to adapt to the 20th century—or die

Doshamosha-teri sits on a little hill near a bend in the clear black Siapa River, just north of the equator, in one of the least traveled regions of the Amazonian rain forest. Two dozen extended families of Yanomama Indians—149 broad-chested men, painted women and their children—live there, in one roughly circular thatch-roofed dwelling furnished only with bark hammocks. They cultivate small plots of plantains, gourds and bananas on the hillside. Beyond that the great wall of the emerald rain forest rises, enclosing a dazzling bazaar of wild pigs, monkeys and plumed birds. Most people in Doshamosha-teri ("Maggot-of-the-Gumba-Tree Place") have never heard of Venezuela, though they happen to live there. They have yet to invent the wheel. Their entire number system consists of "one," "two" and "many." Ask about abstractions such as work and leisure, poverty or wealth, and you get a blank stare. Life consists of survival.

Survival has never been ensured; everyone knows that evil charms can carry death through the air, that tiny gremlins race over the treetops hunting for souls, that jaguars and enemy bowmen crouch in ambush. But these days there is talk of another danger. *Garimpeiros,* the grizzled prospectors on the front lines of Brazil's Amazonian gold rush, are pushing relentlessly toward and, in a few places now, into the pristine Venezuelan rain forest. No one in Doshamosha-teri has ever seen a garimpeiro, but everyone associates the Portuguese word with trouble. "They put poison in the water and the fish die," says a man named Amoahiwa. "Where the garimpeiros go," adds Reriwa, the local headman's son, "the Yanomama die."

Until recently, the Yanomama had the good fortune to live their Stone Age lives on land that no one else wanted. Today their world, 60,000 square miles of rain forest straddling the Venezuelan-Brazilian border, sits in the path of the onrushing juggernaut of development. The 9,000 Yanomama in Brazil have dwindled by one sixth since the gold rush began three years ago, luring tens of thousands of prospectors—and the malaria and other diseases they carry. The dazed survivors are scattered among 19 reserves, gold-hungry miners pressing in from all sides. "The dangers to the Yanomama 20 years ago were minuscule compared to what they are now," anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon said during a recent three-day visit to Doshamosha-teri and other Yanomama settlements in Venezuela's remote Siapa River Valley. "The best we can hope for is a respite, long enough for them to consider their choices."

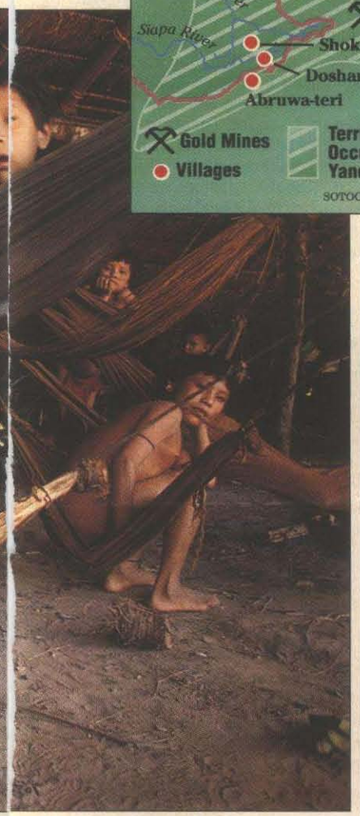
As the world's largest remaining group of unacculturated tribal people, the Yanomama represent a last chance for the modern world to atone for the savage obliteration of so many of the original Americans, North and South alike. Without fast action, the Yanomama will suffer the same fate—or, perhaps worse, give up their independent ways and join the modern world's long list of pathetic misfits. Governments, Indian activists and scientists agree on the need to save them. The question is, how?

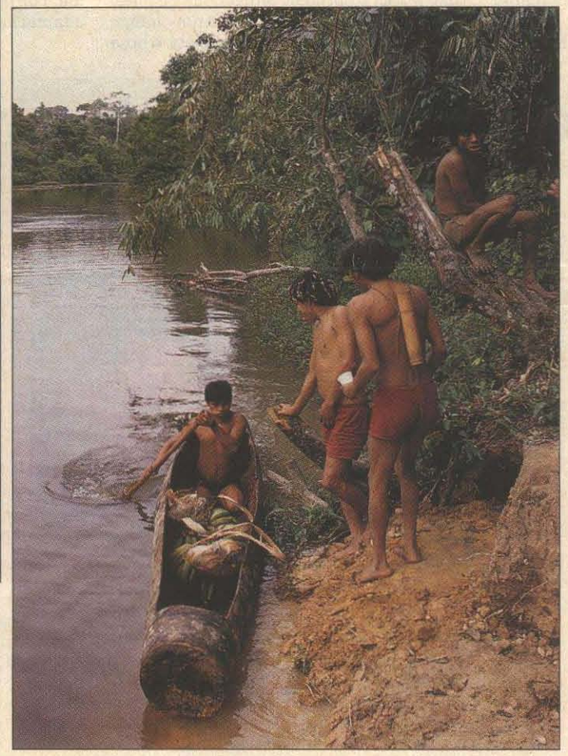
Part of the answer can be found by observing how not, and nowhere is that lesson more acute than in Brazil. There, until the mid-1980s, the Yanomama's contact with outsiders was fleeting. "Missionaries and anthropologists brought things they wanted, like axes and machetes," says Father Giovanni Saffirio, who heads a mission in Yanomama territory. "The Yanomama never understood that outsiders could be dangerous." Apocalypse arrived with the 1987 gold rush in Roraima state, with a jackpot reaching $1 billion a year. Miners poured in as bewildered Indians looked on helplessly. In an effort to protect the Yanomama, Brazil reaffirmed the tribes' rights to 8,000 square miles of land. But it was chopped into small parcels—reserves whose borders government agents have been totally unable to defend. Now, whole Yanomama villages hover on the edge of starvation, the women too ill to tend gardens, the men too wasted by white men's disease to pursue game already decimated by miners' rifles. Malaria rates are as high as 90 percent in some villages; of 1,682 Yanomama in one Health Ministry survey, 243 died this year. The plain fact is that there is little hope for the Brazilian Yanomama. As anthropologist Orlando Villas Bôas said, "All we can do is . . . marvel that we lived to witness the last days of Eden."

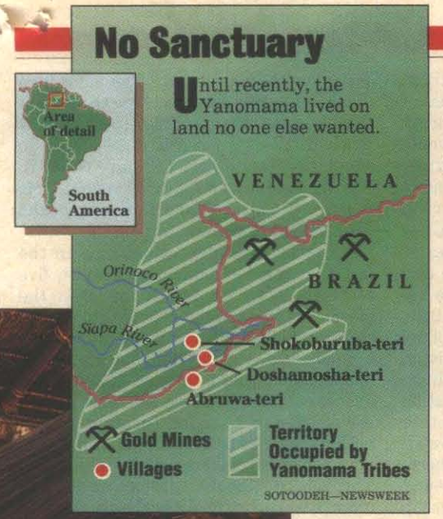
The Venezuelan Yanomama, in contrast, do have some hope of survival, if the term is broadly defined. Their virtually impenetrable "green hell," as early explorers called the Amazonian rain forest, seems to contain nothing that anyone in oil-rich Venezuela wants badly enough to come in and haul out. Outsiders would be lucky to even find the place. A vast and trackless expanse of public lands, Caracas barely administers it; the closest thing to an outside presence is half a dozen tiny Roman Catholic and Protestant missions. Anthropologists may have been too late to save Brazil's Yanomama; but now, as scientists lobby hard to save indigenous peoples, the Venezuelan tribes may benefit. Says Chagnon, "To simply go out and study a people to advance a theory is tantamount to professional irresponsibility." (Ironically, Chagnon's celebrated description of the Yanomama as "the fierce people," 44 percent of whose adult males have participated in killing another human, has been seized on by some to advocate bringing the Yanomama into "civilized" society where they can be pacified.)

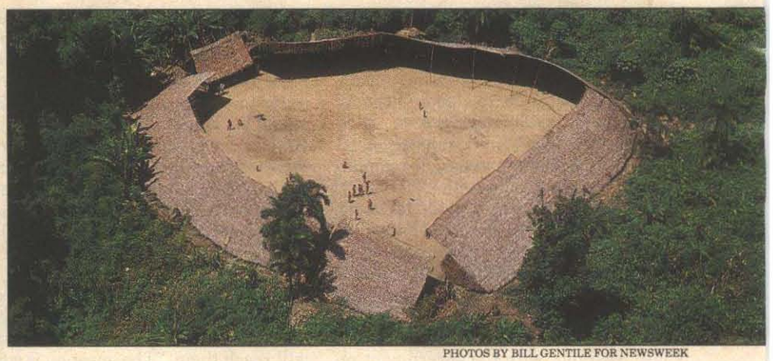
Physical survival: The first task is to ensure the Yanomama's basic physical survival. Historically, disease brought by Europeans killed more Indians in North and South America than bullets ever did. Now the near certainty of greater contact with the outside world and its germs means that Venezuela's Yanomama need to be vaccinated against mumps, measles, polio and tuberculosis. That is not easy. The Indians are isolated and their settlements are spread over thousands of square miles. The national government is supposed to assign a doctor to one mission on the Orinoco, but the job has been open for six months because no one will take it.

To survive in more than body, the Yanomama need rights to their land. Only then can they maintain the hunting grounds and trading networks that define their way of









PHOTOS BY BILL GENTILE FOR NEWSWEEK

'Our contemporary ancestors': *Aerial view of thatched-roof communal village at Doshamosha-teri (above), crossing the Siapa on the way back to Brazil (below), a headman's family at home in their hammocks*

life. Deciding which rights, however, gets tricky. The most radical scheme, advanced by Indian-rights advocates, would give the Yanomama total sovereignty. That's a nonstarter in Caracas. There is more hope for creating a protected ecological park run by the tribes with advice from anthropologists and others. Under one proposal, three quarters of the area would remain pristine, 10 percent (bordering Brazil) would become a security zone and the rest would be open to tourism and benign development. Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who is being advised by the Caracas-based aid group FUNDAFACI, has hinted that some such "biosphere" plan will be approved early next year, but with the government retaining fundamental control.

Can land rights be cast in a way that also protects the environment? What if the Yanomama decide to raze the forest and peddle hardwoods to Japan? Some Yanomama headmen in Brazil are already talking about selling mining rights. Perhaps autonomy includes the right to self-destruct. But many global environmental problems depend for their solution on the rain forest; some voice in the use of the jungle would seem to belong to the Argentine farmer losing his lands to global warming, and to the Chilean cancer patient whose survival depends on a rare rain-forest flower, no less than to the Yanomama who live there.

Land rights: Protection from disease and guaranteed land rights would buy the Yanomama time to choose their own future. Today they are aware dimly, if at all, of the inconceivably powerful and unforgiving world that is about to come crashing in on them. There is no question that civilization will reach them. "The question is whether it will be on their terms or someone else's," says Venezuelan anthropologist Roberto Lizaraldi. Adds David Maybury-Lewis, president of Cultural Survival, a group that works to protect indigenous peoples, "They don't have the option to not change at all. But I've never seen a society whose desire for change is zero." The point is to allow the Yanomama to choose the pace of that change. Is that possible? To decide how much of the 20th century they wish to adopt, the Yanomama will have to see it. Having done so, can they ever regain their innocence? Can the Yanomama engage the Western world without joining it?

There is something astonishing in the fact that the Yanomama even exist, five centuries after Columbus launched the bloody conquest of the New World's great civilizations. Chagnon calls them "our contemporary ancestors," their cultural development diverging from ours 10,000 years ago. If we lose them, we lose part of ourselves. Or, if that's too sentimental, consider that they may be the only ones who know how to use the rain forest without killing it. Throughout history, people meeting a more powerful culture have had to adapt or die. The tragedy is that, for the Yanomama, adaptation may be death itself.

SPENCER REISS *in Venezuela*

At Play in the Fields of the Stone Age

The little bull of a man with brushcut hair and only a bark string around his waist was studying our Venezuelan Air Force Super Puma helicopter like a scientist. Once before he had seen something similar, and he drew his arm high across the sky in an arc. "I kept calling him to come down, but no luck." What about the chopper, we asked, what was it? He paused for a moment, then tentatively offered: "It's an animal, a *hashimo*"—a smooth-feathered green grouse—and by way of explanation waved his arms and made the thrashing sound of a big bird exploding from the underbrush. What kept it here? "It's a pet." Did he want to go for a ride? "I don't think so," he said, suddenly getting nervous. "Maybe later. A long time from now. A really long time."

We learned only later that his name was Yokokoma, a fact divulged by one of the "informants" that field anthropologists like Napoleon Chagnon, who led our visit, depend on to construct accurate genealogies from behind the fog of Yanomama taboos. To us he was simply *"Shoriwa,"* literally brother-in-law, the same honorific he used for us. Seemingly in his late 40s, and roughly 5 foot 1—about average for a grown Yanomama man—he was only visiting Doshamosha-teri; his own *shabano* was Shokoburuba-teri, about a day's walk away. Typically, too, he had four children: two girls ("One ripe, one not ripe") and two boys ("One who ties his penis up, and one who will soon"). His wife, Wiyami, looked a few years younger—an earlier one died, Chagnon's informant told us—and seemed cheerful about the indignities of an utterly sexist life. "She's a very good worker—I don't have to get angry," Yokokoma proudly told us. "Just look at her head—she has hardly any scars."

BILL GENTILE FOR NEWSWEEK

'I kept calling him to come down, but no luck': *Yokokoma*

Yokokoma's hair was cut short because he had recently been sick with what was probably malaria—he mimicked chills when we asked, but blamed them on an enemy from another village "blowing charms." While most of the men and boys were satisfied just to touch our clothes, Yokokoma examined the helicopter and toyed with the shortwave radio. He quickly mastered an autofocus camera, and borrowed a pad and pen to "take notes"—row after row of snakelike squiggles across the page. But there were definitely communication limits: when I gestured to him—I thought—to take a note to NEWSWEEK photographer Bill Gentile back at the shabano, he tore it in half and cheerfully stuck it in his ears like little ice-cream cones.

On the final morning, when the rest of our group had already left for the chopper, Yokokoma stood gravely and asked me for some goodbye gifts. First he pantomimed what he called "the bottom part of clothes." He also wanted some soap, which he indicated by rubbing his hair and smiling like he had with some shampoo we had given him in the river the day before. I gave him the soap, but not the shorts. When I finally left, I had the feeling of watching a movie you know will end badly. I hoped he wouldn't go for a ride for a long time, a really long time.

SPENCER REISS *in Doshamosha-teri*