

# AMAZON JOURNEY

An Anthropologist's Year  
Among Brazil's  
Mekranoti Indians

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I dedicate this book to three anthropological colleagues whose examples and encouragements have helped me over many professional and personal hurdles—to Carol Ember for her clarity and honesty, to Dan Gross for his enthusiastic persistence, and to Nancy Flowers for her ability to put things in calm perspective.



## — Preface —

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I had many reasons for writing this book. Probably the more personal ones were the most important. My friends and family prodded me with questions about what it was like to live among a primitive tribe, somewhat amazed that I, who had always shunned the countryside, should decide to spend a year living in the middle of the Amazon jungle. I wanted to collect all the anecdotes I had been telling them. I also thought I should talk informally about some of my technical studies that they had never read. Maybe then they would understand why I was so interested in the Indians.

A second reason was the need for a book for introductory anthropology students. Usually I assign one of the popular accounts of travels among an exotic people written by journalists or explorers. These books are delightful reading and, by and large, well-rounded studies, but they do not talk much about how their authors actually gathered data. Yet books on field techniques tend to be too stodgy for beginning students.

The solution was to write my own personal account, showing what it was like to be confronted with hundreds of new people speaking a strange language and doing strange things. I tried to convey the bungling awkwardness of plopping oneself down, uninvited and ignorant, among a foreign people, and the sense of satisfaction in gradually growing to understand them. In the process I hoped to explain a few handy research techniques as well.

My third reason for writing the book was directed at my anthropological colleagues. While I was still in graduate school, a fellow student once complained that every time I opened my mouth numbers came out. Although she did not know me very well, she was aware that I used statistics

and that was enough for her to brand me an insensitive technocrat. Like many social scientists, she felt it was dehumanizing to reduce people to lifeless numbers. How could one possibly sense individual passions, hates, anxieties, and humor in tables of sterile statistics? For her, quantification, at best, simply obfuscated the obvious. It seemed you needed to know the answers even before you asked the questions. At their worst, statistics seemed overly manipulatable. They merely confirmed the comment attributed to Mark Twain that there are three kinds of lies—big lies, little lies, and statistics.

I can understand these feelings. In their fascination with their statistical tables, many social scientists do forget about the individuals behind the numbers. Some researchers do spend their time, rather uncreatively, using ever larger samples and more refined statistical techniques to reach conclusions that have already been demonstrated in countless earlier investigations. And a few researchers have even been caught falsifying their data to make them conform to some cherished theory, while others have distorted their data or their conclusions in more subtle or unconscious ways.

Yet, despite these problems, I wanted to show that statistics could be an extraordinarily useful research tool. Sometimes the numbers in my studies revealed things that otherwise I would not have seen. When I mention that Bànhōr is thought the most stupid man in the Mekranoti village, I know this, not because I am a particularly keen observer, but because I asked a random sample of adults to tell me who was stupid, and Bànhōr was named more often than anyone else. Knowing how he was viewed by the rest of the villagers, I was able to empathize more with him, and with the problems he faced in the village.

When I observed that “like many other *kupry* (single mothers who provide sexual services for the village’s men) Ngrwa’o lost her mother while still a child,” I am relying on a statistical correlation. The correlation told me something new about why Mekranoti women become *kupry*. In fact, when I gathered the information about the *kupry* and about people’s childhood caretakers, I had not thought at all about a possible relationship between the two. It was only much later that I even considered looking for a correlation. I certainly did not know the “answers” before asking the questions.

Sometimes the statistics even revealed things that I had avoided learning. While in the field I paid only slight attention to the *kupry*, and entertained the notion that here was a society where people looked kindly upon “prostitutes” and did not discriminate against them. Yet a later analysis of data showed that the *kupry* were thought lazier, uglier, and less acceptable as work partners than were other women. They were also more likely never to have

received a good ceremonial name. No amount of manipulation on my part could make these correlations disappear, although I did delay in publishing these results.

To make for smooth reading I do not report correlation coefficients or other statistics in the text. But they are there, backing up what probably look like casual offhand remarks. At the end of the book I provide a bibliography of publications in scientific journals for those interested in confirming the statements.

I have tried to remain as faithful as possible to the actual events of my stay among the Mekranoti, but I did take a few liberties with direct quotes, which would have been inexact after translation even if I had recorded them. Also, except for the few instances where I mention that someone told me a story, I did not collect myths, but relied on tales gathered by other anthropologists and missionaries among the Kayapó. In general where I speak of the Kayapó rather than the Mekranoti I am referring to customs that hold across the different Kayapó groups. To protect the Indians and others, I have also changed everyone's name, including the names of the outsiders who were with me in the Indian village. Only the names of Mekranoti ancestors and of my fellow anthropologist, Gustaaf Verswijver, have been left unaltered. I tried to make up Kayapó names much as the Indians do, by adding special prefixes and suffixes to the names of animals, plants and other objects in the Kayapó environment. Some Kayapó prefixes, such as Bep, Tàkàk, Ngrenh, Koko and Nhàk indicate "good" names among the Kayapó. In changing the names of Indians with these special prefixes I substituted one "good" name for another. This way scholars may "map" the special names if they wish. The Mekranoti may find some of the names inappropriate. If so, I beg their pardon.

My information on the Indians comes from many different sources, and I am deeply grateful to the Mekranoti and to all of the others who helped. These include especially Pykatire, Bebgogoti, Bepkum, Ajo, Nokàre, Ire'i, Pakyx, Bemotire, Nhàkti, Ngrenhkàjet, Gustaaf Verswijver, Ruth Thompson, Micky Stout, Kathy Jefferson, Raimundo Amaral, and Senhor Guilherme. I also thank Dan Gross, Nancy Flowers, Maddy Ritter, and Carol Ember for their encouragement throughout my studies, and Jean Langdon for her suggestions on the book. My sister Joyce and my friend Rafi helped me with practical and personal matters during the writing of the book. National Science Foundation grants BNS 76-03378, BNS 78-25295, and BNS 78-24706 generously supported the research on which the book is based.

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## ORIGINS

The deep green of the Amazon jungle extends over more than 6,600,000 square kilometers, an area significantly larger than all the countries of Europe (except Russia) combined. But most of the vast forest is still unknown. Rivers and altitudes have yet to be mapped accurately. Thousands of exotic plant and animal species await identification. A few isolated Indian groups have escaped discovery by the outside world. Even with all our elaborate science, we are still humbled by the forest's secrets.

Brazilian peasants living precariously along the banks of the jungle's larger rivers do not disguise their awe at the forest's mysteries. They turn pale with fright at stories of strange river beasts, like *cobra grande*, the 200-meter snake that lives in a hole at the bottom of the river and hypnotizes people with its blue eyes. Some of the fishermen report having seen the creature, and know of two children who were pulled into the river by the reptile and there turned into snakes. There is also the water jaguar that attacks people after flopping its ears loudly on the water's surface, the hybrid creature with a monkey's head and a snake's body, and the river porpoise that sometimes entices women into sexual acts, and whose penis serves as an infallible love charm. Some fishermen working in the flooded forest have even seen the

river's guardian, Mother Fish, in the form of a dark-skinned woman with a red dress sitting in the back of their boat before vanishing into the cool forest air. Enchanted places where past cities, like Atlantis, have fallen into the waters threaten all who unwittingly venture nearby, attracted by the sounds of the bleating goats or laughing children imprisoned in the submerged world. Unkind woodland sprites, borrowed from Indian folklore, lurk hidden among the trees, like the goblins and elves of Germanic fairy tales.

After spending only a short time in the dense forest, you can easily understand this sense of mystery. No matter where you look you can see only a few feet away. There is no use trying to find a wider view. The trees are too tall and too close together, their leaves are too broad, and the lianas and vines that stretch between them give a thick and heavy feel to the forest canopy. If you are lucky you may come across a sylvan glade where a fallen tree has made a small clearing and allowed the sun to pass through. No matter where you go, all appears still. Only frail breezes work their way through the trees. The forest sounds—the barks of howler monkeys, the grunts of wild boars, the bellowing of swamp frogs, and the whistles of birds—seem to come from nowhere, or from everywhere. To the unaccustomed, and even to those who have lived in the forest for years, the sounds are mysterious. You can never tell if they are the calls of a bird, an insect, a small animal, or an Indian imitating these sounds.

Dangers and pleasures are ever present but hidden from view. Tarantulas scurry unexpectedly across the narrow jungle paths, and strange insects or even plant leaves may cause days of intense pain if you accidentally brush against them. Honey, delicious exotic fruits, and strange, delicate orchids also lie obscured among the forest foliage until you are almost upon them. Everywhere is the overwhelming presence of the mysterious.

Some six hundred million years ago the South American continent looked different from today. The Andean mountains had not yet been born, and part of the land was under water. The seas gradually withdrew three hundred million years ago, exposing the land, its rivers flowing westward from the eastern mountains to the Pacific ocean. Gradually these early mountains eroded into hills, leaving behind the poor soils that characterize the region. Then seventy million years ago the great chain of mountains that became known as the Andes erupted. Rivers changed direction, now flowing eastward into the Atlantic Ocean. The great lake that lay at the eastern border of the Andes filled with the sediment carried from the new mountains, and the Amazon River began to take on its present-day look.

Today the mighty river spews twelve times more water into the ocean than the Mississippi, giving the seas one fifth of all the runoff water they

receive every year. But the water's force does not come from its slope. A boat traveling up the Amazon can go far into Peru before ever coming across rapids or falls. As a result of the flatness, whenever the river floods its banks it covers vast areas of the forest floor. From the air you can sometimes see the water's shimmer under the trees in the few spots where there is enough of a clearing for the sun to reach the ground and reflect off the temporary swamp.

Wandering south from North America, the first human beings probably made their way to the southern continent more than ten thousand years ago. Some may even have arrived while glaciers still covered part of the Andean mountains, although evidence for South American ice-agers is poor. The first settlers shunned the Amazon valley. Instead, they clung to the mountains, following herds of wild animals far into southern Chile and then spreading out into what is now Argentina long before venturing into the Amazon forest.

When they finally did enter the Amazon valley they avoided the dark interior areas, preferring to live along the rivers that flowed out of the western mountains. Here the soils were more fertile because of the rich Andean silt deposited by the annual floods, and the waters carried more fish and supported more birdlife than in other areas of the forest. Even the swampy savannas of northern Bolivia were preferred over the Amazonian interior. When the first Europeans arrived on the continent, the Amazon forest, at least away from the rivers, was the most sparsely populated area of South America, probably having no more than 0.2 persons per square kilometer.

In the lowlands, it was the dense populations on the Brazilian coast and along the Amazon River that most fascinated the first European explorers. These explorers saw the Indians either as enemies to be destroyed or as pawns in their battles with other Europeans vying for the new land. Few were interested in their cultures. Hans Staden, a humble German sailor working for the Portuguese, was captured in 1554 by the Tupinambá Indians near the present site of Rio de Janeiro. Several times he narrowly escaped being eaten by the cannibals in one of their rituals. After living with the Indians for more than nine months he finally escaped to describe his adventures "for the glory of God." His detailed accounts are among the first written descriptions of South American Indian cultures.\*

\*Hans Staden made two trips to Brazil, one in 1547 and the other in 1550. It was on this second trip that he was captured by the Tupinambá Indians. His accounts, originally published in 1557 in German, Flemish, Dutch, Latin, French, English, and Portuguese, have been republished several times over the centuries. A recent Portuguese edition includes detailed notes by historians and anthropologists: *Duas viagens ao brasil*. Editora da Universidade de São Paulo. Livraria Itatiaia Editora Ltda. 1974.

A popular Brazilian film entitled *Como era gostoso o meu frances* (How Delicious Was My Frenchman) is based on Hans Staden's accounts and occasionally appears in New York and other U.S. cities.

The Tupinambá lived in fortified communities surrounded by a double row of palisades. The heads of their enemies were placed on poles at the village entrance. Wearing carved stones hanging from the holes in their lower lips, they fished with spears and nets in the ocean, and went off on warring expeditions in their long bark canoes. Using spears, arrows, and the smoke from burning pepper to drive out their enemies, they brought their captives back to their villages to be mocked by the women and children. Sometimes they gave the prisoners wives, who guarded them and took care of them until the day when they were sacrificed and eaten. Any children born of these marriages were raised as any other village children until the day when they too were killed and eaten. The cannibalistic feasts were rituals of anger against the enemy.

The Tupinambá were not the only group to intrigue the first Europeans in Brazil. From the Indians, Hans Staden had already heard about the women warriors to the north. When Carvajal went up the Amazon River in 1542 he observed these female "captains," who held the front positions in battle and clubbed to death any of the men who dared turn their backs. The event was impressive enough to give the entire area the name of the mythical Greek women who also excelled in war. The narrow strip of rich Amazon floodland was heavily populated in those days by two Indian civilizations, the Tapajós and the Omagua. The Tapajós lived farther downstream in villages tightly arranged next to each other. At the mouth of the river named after them was their capital, a city that could muster 60,000 warriors. The Omagua, with their foreheads flattened since childhood by boards tied to their heads, lived farther upstream in large villages with houses made of cedar planks. They raised tortoises captured from the Amazon River, and raided the sparse interior tribes for children, whom they treated as slaves. Their earthly ruler was called the same as "god."

As highly developed as these societies were, they could not survive the onslaught of the European invasion. Many Indians died in battles with the newcomers, and even more succumbed to illnesses for which they had no resistance. Over the years, epidemics of smallpox, measles and even the common cold ravaged their lands. From what was probably a native population of five million when Europeans discovered the area, the Amazonian population has tumbled to a fragile 500,000 Indians today.

It was the simpler interior groups that survived into the twentieth century. They lived in small villages or in houses dispersed throughout the jungle and hunted paca, tapir, and deer to add to the food from their simple gardens. Outsiders were not very interested in what seemed to them uninteresting cultures and an inhospitable place to make a living, but eventually civiliza-

tion began to invade even these groups. In some areas, it was the presence of wild forest products like rubber or Brazil nuts that attracted the invaders. Elsewhere it was pasture for cattle, or agricultural land for growing coffee or cocoa. Almost half of the Indian groups in contact with one of these economic frontiers in 1900 were extinct by 1957. Even among those that avoided direct contact, 20 percent became extinct, mostly because they fell to the epidemics that made their way into their territory even before the invaders.

The fights between the encroaching outsiders and the Indians were so severe that, among the rubber gatherers along the southern tributaries of the Amazon, one man had to stand guard with a rifle in case of Indian attack while another drew out the latex sap. Agriculturalists sometimes put gun traps around their houses and fields in case any Indians wandered nearby, or they poisoned the water with strychnine and gave the Indians the contaminated clothes of smallpox victims. In some places, even in the twentieth century, captured Indians were sold as slaves. And professional Indian-killers hired by farmers or by construction firms became regional heroes. Sometimes these killers sold war "trophies"—parts of their victims' bodies—as a sideline. Sometimes they turned one Indian group against another to let the Indians do the killing. As recently as 1963 an airplane swooped over one Indian village, using a machine gun and dropping dynamite to exterminate the villagers. Some Indians were remarkably passive in the face of these massacres. One group was so timid that ranchers began to see the Indians as harmless animals they could kill for sport in their free time.

Other Indians fought back. At first they attacked with bows and arrows while hidden in the forest, but soon most stole enough guns to make their attacks more murderous. As they tried to hide deeper in the forest, some groups dug holes and filled them with pointed stakes hoping the deadly traps would discourage the invaders, or they mined the paths with sharp sticks.

Even their resistance eventually wore down; there were just too many foreigners. Seeing their enemies multiply, one Indian group reasoned that whites must regenerate after they are killed. How else could their increasing numbers be explained? They decided to cut off the heads and genitals of their victims in the hopes that this would prevent their coming back to life. But the onslaught continued even so. As the old coffee plantations lost their fertility, the agriculturalists had to look for new frontiers. With their rubber trees chopped down, the latex gatherers also had to move on. And the ranchers had to look for greener pastures.

The southern part of Pará was labeled by some anthropologists in the late fifties and early sixties as the last frontier for Brazilian expansion. The headwaters of the area's rivers had little to interest early settlers. The land



was thought less fertile than lands farther west. It was flooded during several months every year, and the rivers were not easily navigable. Also, the area was inhabited by fierce Indians known as the Kayapo. Eventually even this area would be invaded by gold prospectors and cattle ranchers living along the Araguaia River to the east and by latex- and Brazil-nut-collectors from the north and west slowly putting a squeeze on the Indians' lands.

The region soon became known for the fierce battles between natives and whites, and the Kayapo groups that lived there earned a reputation as the most hated and feared Indians of all Brazil. Sensationalist headlines in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro proclaimed the savagery of the forest tribes. Some of the violent stories were more mythical than real. The area's "civilized" residents delighted in exaggerating the assassinations of their hated enemies. According to one account, a man, alone in the forest, once killed an Indian who insulted him only to find himself confronted with a hundred angry warriors. For protection, he used a suitcase as a shield and began shooting at the Indians, until, single-handedly, he had massacred almost all of them. Actually, the man who supposedly carried out this extraordinary feat denied having ever seen any Indian footprints, let alone Indians, during his sojourn. But he told another story about a massacre he witnessed when a group of Indians were invited to a white man's feast in which an ox was killed for the revelers. When the Indians went to sleep at least twenty of them were killed by the whites.

Not all of the violent stories were exaggerations. The Kayapo were, indeed, one of the fiercest groups in all of Brazil. For years the Indians assaulted rubber-gatherers in their area, sometimes taking away captive women and children to join to their group. They attacked unexpectedly and quickly ran back to the forest. A nomadic people who wandered about in the vast area between the Araguaia and Tapajós Rivers, they were difficult to find, and seemingly more dangerous because of their unpredictability.

In the early part of the twentieth century there were a few honest attempts at pacifying the Kayapo, but these were not very successful. The first missionary to search out the Indians lost the wife of one of his Indian helpers to the Kayapo attackers. Later, a bishop managed to shout to the Indians from a distance before they fled to the forest. In 1935 three English missionaries, known as the "Three Freds," sailed up the Fresco River in an ill-fated adventure they knew would cost them their lives. In a letter written before their departure they revealed that they knew they would die, but asked not to be criticized, for they were on a religious mission. They were more interested in proving their worth in the eyes of God than in actually helping the Indians.

Later, another English missionary attempted to verify the disappearance of the "Three Freds." A young man with a love of the Indians, he managed to make peaceful contact with the Gorotire-Kayapo, and eventually set up a mission in which the Indians were treated equally with whites. The locals expected him to be killed, but to the astonishment of all his mission flourished.

Not all contacts with the Indians were so successful. Several Kayapo groups became extinct after pacification. At the end of the nineteenth century a group of priests at the present site of Conceição do Araguaia convinced the Brazilian settlers in the region to build a church that would also serve as a fortress against Indian attacks. Recognizing their military inferiority, one group of Kayapo, the Pau d'Arco, finally decided to cooperate with the whites. But the Pau d'Arco did not last long. Epidemics soon swept over their village. Once a proud tribe of fifteen hundred, they were rapidly reduced to a few isolated souls working on nearby ranches. Some of the priests who worked with the Kayapo thought it was better to let the Indians die in Brazilian hands than to allow them to return to the forest where they could not receive baptism and last rites.

Some native groups fared better than others, mostly by putting off contact as long as possible. By fleeing farther and farther from its navigable rivers, one Kayapo horde—the Mekranoti—avoided whites until 1953. Already in 1949 they had begun accepting gifts of metal knives, scissors, and other tools from Claudio Villas Boas, the famous Brazilian Indianist, nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize. But the contact between the two cultures was brief, only a shout across a river. Claudio was using the standard method to contact warring Indians, invented years before by General Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon. On dangerous ventures out from a fortified base, Claudio laid out presents wherever he found traces of the natives in the forest—on the river bank where the Indians came to bathe, in favorite hunting spots, and in abandoned villages.

For four years Claudio patiently continued putting out presents for the Indians, achieving nothing more than an occasional glimpse of the natives as they scurried back into their forest retreat. Only in 1953, while the Indians were on trek near the Xingu River, far from their main village, did a few brave young men accept Claudio's invitation to accompany the Indianist to his campsite.

After this first peaceful encounter, part of the Mekranoti decided to remain with Claudio, where they could gain more presents. But when a cold epidemic struck, the other half ran off again to the forest interior. Here they remained until 1957 when another well-known Indianist, Chico Meirelles, sent a few pacified Kayapo as peace ambassadors to bring the Mekranoti west

to the Curuá River. Knowing they would receive bountiful presents, the Indians accepted the offer, but quickly returned to their hiding spot.

It was only in 1966 that a missionary finally moved into their village and persuaded the Mekranoti to cut an airstrip from the forest. From that time on their relations with modern civilization have been more peaceful, although they still have no qualms about killing unwelcome foreigners who venture into their territory.

Like other Indians, the Mekranoti fought fiercely with rubber workers and Brazil-nut-gatherers and were decimated by colds, measles, and malaria. But they were blissfully ignorant of all the other treacherous cruelties their relatives had suffered, and they were rapidly recuperating their lost numbers. A proud people, they saw in their history not victims of progress, but fierce warriors who maintained their own in the dense forest, and even “pacified” the whites who from time immemorial had lived to the east and occasionally made timid forays into their habitat.

According to the Mekranoti, long ago the Indians once lived in a world above the sky where everything one could want was plentiful—sweet potatoes, corn, manioc and bananas. One day a man, hunting in the forest, discovered an armadillo’s hole. Resolving to bring the game back to the village, he dug and dug until nightfall, but could not reach his prize. After several days of burrowing into the red earth, he finally sighted the giant armadillo. But in his excitement he punctured the celestial ceiling and the animal fell through the hole to another earth below. That world was just like the one above, full of palm trees, savannas, and rivers. The man returned to his village to tell the others of his discovery. After much discussion the Indians decided to move to the new world. Gathering together all the cotton cords they could find in the village, they made a giant rope to descend to the forest below. First went the young men, then the women with children on their hips, and finally the fathers and elders. Some people were afraid to come down and so remained in the world above. A child cut the rope, and then it was no longer possible for anyone else to descend to this world.

There are many other people on this lower layer of the universe as well—bat people, piranha people, and whites. This last group, too, has its origins in the mythical past. Whites were born when an Indian woman had sex with a monkey. This explains why they have so much hair on their bodies and faces. Because of the metal tools they use, whites are an especially impressive and dangerous people, although they are not very strong. Whites have curious habits like chopping down the trees in vast areas of the forest