

INTO *THE*
HEART



*One Man's Pursuit of
Love and Knowledge
Among the Yanomama*

KENNETH GOOD

WITH DAVID CHANOFF

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND SPELLING

The Yanomama have a taboo on uttering personal names which becomes even stronger when an individual dies. Out of respect for this taboo, all Yanomama names in this book have been fictionalized. The spelling of Yanomama names and words has been rendered in a way that most closely approximates their pronunciation. Thus the word *nape* (outsider) is spelled “nabuh,” which is approximately how the word sounds in Yanomama.

The name Yanomama itself has appeared in various forms in English language publications, most commonly Yanomami or Yanomamo. The form Yanomami, which regularly appears in newspaper accounts, is a corruption of the phonetic spelling Yanomamɨ, where the *ɨ* sounds similar to the *e* in roses. We have used Yanomama here, since the final *a* renders an English pronunciation close to the original.



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TO THE HASUPUWETERI,
WHO SHOWED ME THE
YANOMAMA WAY OF LIFE,
AND ESPECIALLY TO MY
WIFE, YARIMA, WHO SO
COURAGEOUSLY ENDURED THE
TRIALS OF BOTH HER
WORLD AND MINE

FOREWORD

For centuries the lost world of the Amazon has cast its spell on outsiders, spawning legends and drawing to itself conquerors, adventurers, explorers, and scientists. Greedy, curious, brave, or foolhardy, they have come, beginning with Christopher Columbus, who discovered the Orinoco half a millennium ago, and extending to present-day botanists, biologists, zoologists, anthropologists, and other, less benign, intruders. The Amazon still has places where a good botanist can emerge from a field expedition with twenty or thirty species of heretofore undiscovered plants; for anthropologists, the jungle's remotest depths even now are home to groups uncontacted by the modern world, perhaps the last place on earth that still beckons with such splendid seductions.

From the earliest days of exploration Spaniards, Portuguese, and Germans came, men with names like Orellana, Teixeira, Ursua, Berrio, Aguirre, and Alfinger. By the time the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth rock, expeditions of discovery had been penetrating the

Amazon for almost a hundred years. Yet in 1914 one of the later explorers, Teddy Roosevelt, still called it the “last true frontier” and barely escaped death on his own mapping voyage down an uncharted Amazonian river. Many of Roosevelt’s predecessors, and some who came after him, weren’t as fortunate. In the jungle’s interior death took unpleasant forms: septicemia, starvation, snake-bite, fevers, and the curare-tipped arrows of hostile Indians all claimed their share of the intrepid. Some returned on the backs of their friends; some were eaten by cannibals; others, like Colonel Fawcett, surveyor of the Brazilian border, simply disappeared.

But despite the monumental suffering the jungle routinely inflicted on its visitors, they still came. Something about the Amazon breathes mystery and fires imaginations. Within its unknown immensity what might not be awaiting discovery by so-called civilized man? What astonishing and wonderful—or odious and horrifying—places and creatures? What wealth? What knowledge? After Pizarro’s conquest of the Inca empire, he forged eastward, sending parties of conquistadors and Indian slaves in search of the fabled land of El Dorado, so rich that its king rolled naked in gold dust each morning and washed himself clean each evening in a lake whose golden sediment deepened by the year. Francisco de Orellana led one of these expeditions. He found no gold, but the Franciscan father who accompanied him reported that they saw women warriors, “white and tall, with long braided hair wound around their heads, and they are very robust and go naked, except with their privy parts covered, with bows and arrows in their hands, fighting like ten men.” This was in 1540. Three and a half centuries later the Amazon had lost none of its hold on the imaginative. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle dreamed that in the heart of the jungle a vast plateau rose, an island forgotten by time, where dinosaurs and ape-men battled for survival. His book was called *The Lost World*. One wonders how much he had heard about the *tepui* plateaus of the Guiana shield that rise in sheer walls thousands of feet above the surrounding jungles and are indeed islands in time.

Of all the vast Amazonian jungle, perhaps the least explored region lies in the fastness of Venezuela’s Territorio Federal Amazonas, which spreads out from the rough frontier capital of Puerto Ayacucho southward toward the Brazilian border. Through this country of dense rain forest and rugged hills the great Orinoco River curves toward the sea, draining in its sweep more than 350,000 square miles and linking up through the Casiquiare and Río Negro

with the even mightier Amazon. When Columbus first discovered the broad mouth of the Orinoco he wrote to Queen Isabella that it seemed "the gateway to Celestial Paradise." Sir Walter Raleigh thought it might lead to paradise, too, though an earthier one, sparkling with treasure. The expeditions he launched in 1595 and 1617 found neither, but they implanted in the English imagination the vision of El Dorado that had already been heating Spanish and Portuguese dreams for decades. Some believed the city lay on the shores of Lake Parima in the far highlands or in the kingdom of Chibcha in the distant southwest. Alexander von Humboldt himself, the great nineteenth-century naturalist explorer, did not reject all of the Amazon legends outright. "Beyond the cataracts [near present-day Puerto Ayacucho]," he wrote, "an unknown land begins."

"The unknown land," Venezuela's Amazonas. Even today the epithet is apt, for much remains unexplored, and, unlike the Brazilian Amazon, the region is still relatively unexploited and unsettled by modern man. Gold and diamond smugglers ply their trade, naturalists and anthropologists do their research, now and then a photographer or filmmaker ventures upriver for a brief stay with the Catholic fathers of St. Francis de Sales or the American Protestants of the New Tribes mission. But few have penetrated above the Guajaribo rapids. Few have heard the chittering of the vampires below Peñascal or seen the print of a jaguar on the sand beside the Orinoquito. The great Sarisarinama *tepui* is known to a small number of Sanema and Ye'kwana Indians whose villages lie near the Brazilian border but to almost no one else. La Neblina, the cloud mountain that rises nine thousand feet out of the Sierra Imeri and is the highest Venezuelan peak outside the Andes, was not even discovered until 1953. Except for the rare adventurer, and the scientists who have found a trove of unusual flora and fauna on its rain-drenched heights, the mountain has been seen only by the occasional band of seminomadic deep-forest Indians.

These seminomads of the Brazil-Venezuela borderlands are the Yanomama. Horticulturalists and hunter-gatherers, they inhabit the remotest interfluvial backlands of the rain forest, a land that until recently has remained closed to outsiders. For the ten thousand or so Yanomama who live scattered through the Venezuelan Amazon it still is. Their brothers and sisters across the border in Brazil have not been so fortunate. During the last decade their forests have been devastated, their rivers poisoned, their game destroyed by the miners, rubber workers, and farmers who make up the wave of im-

migrants that is relentlessly pushing back the forest and driving its inhabitants toward extinction. But in the meantime, for the Venezuelan Yanomama of the interior, life goes on more or less as it has as far back as they have memory, as far back as anyone can trace.

Many anthropologists believe the Yanomama were part of the second wave of Paleo-Indians who crossed the Bering land bridge into North America some 25,000 years ago. For thousands of years they wandered southward, arriving in their present home as long as 20,000, or perhaps as recently as 12,000 years ago. No one can say with certainty. Today their settlements span only a degree or two on either side of the equator. They live communally in large circular houses called *shaponos*; rarely does a group number more than a hundred and twenty. With the exception of sex and defecation, they carry on all their activities in public.

In terms of their material and technological culture, the Yanomama stand out for their primitiveness. They have no system of numbers; they manage with "one," "two," and "many." Their only calendar is the waxing and waning of the moon. On trek they carry everything they own on their backs; they have not invented the wheel. They know nothing of the art of metallurgy, and interior villages might boast only a few worn machetes and battered tin pots, acquired in trades with groups living closer to the *nabuh*, the non-Yanomama from beyond. Until recently they made fire with fire drills, the efficient rubbing together of two sticks.

Traditionally the Yanomama wear no clothes; they paint their bodies in serpentine and circular designs of red *onoto* seed paste; their thick black hair is cut in a regular bowl fashion, sometimes tonsured. Among men, body hair is sparse; most women have none at all. Girls and women adorn their faces by inserting slender sticks through holes in the lower lip at either side of the mouth and in the middle, and through the pierced nasal septum. Except for this and for their pierced ears, into which women insert flowers and men feathers, they do not practice bodily mutilation.

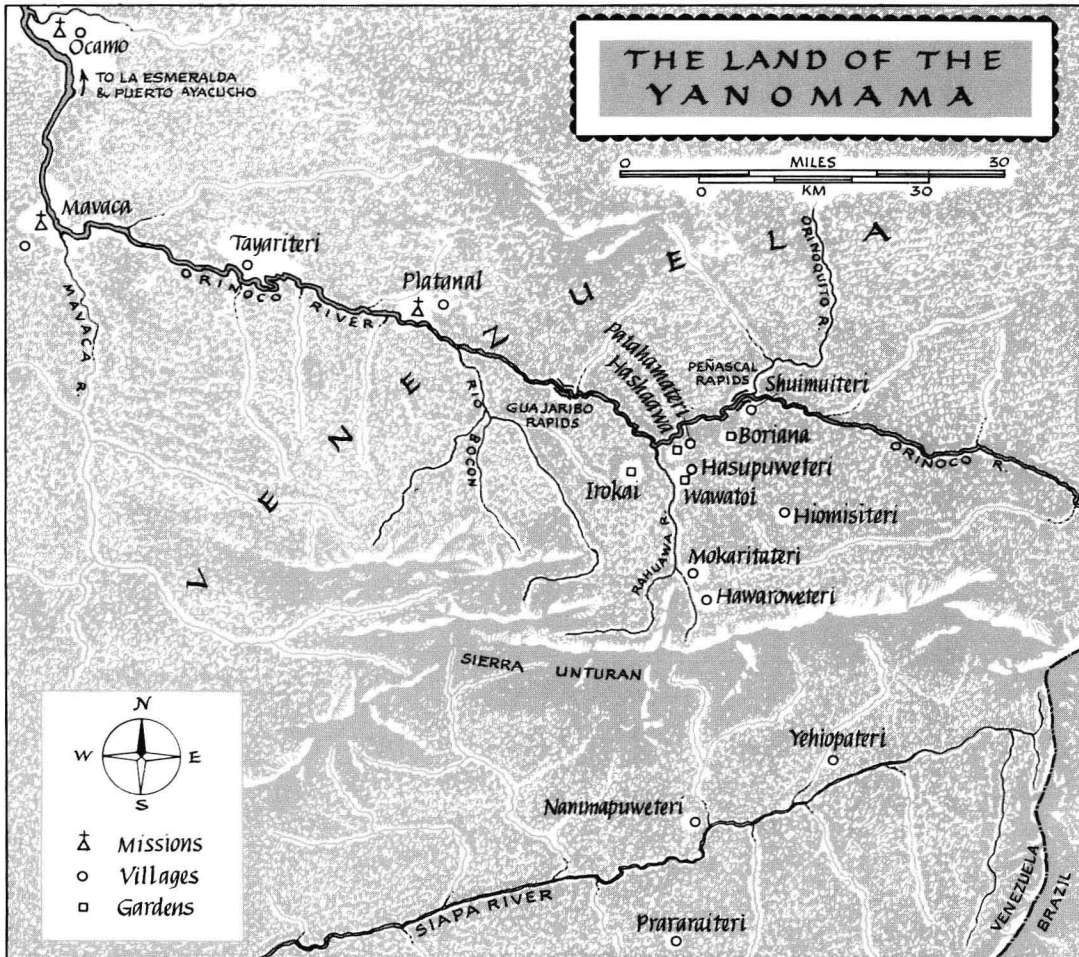
They are, it is said, a violent, bloody people. According to some anthropologists, Yanomama life is characterized by persistent aggression among village mates and perpetual warfare between antagonistic groups. They are supposedly given to club fighting, gang rape, and murder. This was my understanding when I first read about them in an anthropology course I took as an undergraduate at Pennsylvania State University in 1969, and it was still my un-

derstanding six years later when as a graduate student I went off to do a fifteen-month stint of fieldwork among them.

Contrary to all my initial intentions, I did not leave the Yanomama when the fifteen months were up. To my great surprise I had found among them a way of life that, while dangerous and harsh, was also filled with camaraderie, compassion, and a thousand daily lessons in communal harmony. In time I learned to speak their language. I learned to walk in their forest and to hunt, fish, and gather. I discovered what it meant to be a nomad. As more time passed I was adopted into the lineage of my village and given a wife according to Yanomama custom and in keeping with the wishes of the great shaman-headman. My last exit from the Amazon was in 1986, eleven years after I first passed Humboldt's cataracts into "the unknown land." But I have still not completely come out. Since then my wife, Yarima, and I have gone back up the Orinoco once; we are planning to go again. Love does not lessen the need to see other loved ones, most especially for the Yanomama, who pass their entire lives in such close proximity to family and friends.

When I was five years old my own family moved from west Philadelphia to the quiet suburb of Havertown, Pennsylvania. Havertown was a pleasant place to grow up. It was adamantly middle-class, a township of single family homes, well-tended yards, and good schools. Like many others, when my family moved we turned our eyes away from the big-city ethnic stew we had left behind. We loved the orderly homogeneity of our new neighborhood; if we looked anywhere, it was toward the even more stable and homogeneous suburbs farther out. I have often thought that I became an anthropologist in part because, having been separated from everything that was exotic and different when I was young, I was inevitably attracted to strange lands and distant peoples as I grew older. My first experience of anthropological fieldwork was in Mexico's Central Valley, where I studied the remains of the Toltec nation, conquerors of Teotihuacan and predecessors of the Aztecs. But studying a people remote in time left something inside me unsatisfied, and eventually I immersed myself in the life of a people also remote in time, but nonetheless vividly alive. How that experience would change my own life was beyond my wildest imaginings.

THE LAND OF THE YANOMAMA



- ⚓ Missions
- Villages
- Gardens



