

Señores Naturales - Yānomāmi, 1978 - 1980

The Empty Mirror

On a 16-day journey in 1978, three canoes, held together by five tree trunks and powered by outboard motors, are navigated through the headwaters of the Orinoco River. The convoy transports my equipment from Puerto Ayacucho upriver to the forests of the Parima Highlands, a watershed between Brazil and Venezuela.

The Path of Signs

In times of war strategic decisions, are often made by neighboring bands of Yānomāmi. To better defend themselves against their many surrounding enemies, the communities of Kashorawë-theri and Yāpitawë-theri have merged. Below the Raudal de Guajaribos, a cascade in the Upper Orinoco River, an enormous roundhouse, their new *shapono*, is under construction on the south bank of the river. The open structure measures about 65 meters in diameter and gives shelter to 84 people at 36 fireplaces. To cover the roof structure, the people gather palm leaves from the dense forest ground on the opposite shore. Men balance heavy loads as they swim through the current of the seasonally shallow waters. High up on the roof structure, Korosiwë, one of the headmen and shamans of Yāpitawë-theri, folds the leaves into place.

Voices in the Forest

To build their first canoes, the Yānomāmi people sought suitable *āpuri uhi* trees in the forests close to the river. After one-and-a-half moons, nine trees were finally brought down to carve six boats. Men worked in groups to give shape to the fallen trunks. Controlled fire is used to widen the inner section. Cutoff branches form the path on which the new canoes are maneuvered above the dense forest ground. The Yānomāmi navigate them for the first time on the distended river.

The Color of Birds

The Wawëwawë-theri people host guests from the Kashorawë- and Yāpitawë-theri in their *shapono* at a *reahu* ritual, a feast at which game and vegetables are offered to their former enemies. On their way downriver the guests come across the Shashanawë-theri *shapono* and convince these allies to join them for the big event at the 'swamp' people's place. To appear stronger in number, the Wawëwawë-theri had invited the Mahekodo-theri. The swamp people have just sent game and cooked bananas to the guests from Kashorawë- and Yāpitawë-theri at their forest stopover a short distance away. After eating, the men paint themselves in black before continuing on to the hosts' *shapono*. They do not want to be easily recognizable by their hosts as former enemies. For a moment their personal history of war and murder is camouflaged.

In the Presence of the Body

Suddenly the hosts notice the arrival of the guests from the "Caterpillar" village at their *shapono*'s surrounding gardens. A hail of loud catcalls from the swamp people announces the guests' arrival. One by one, the black-painted men enter the *shapono* to present themselves, rounding the large empty plaza to dance and sing before each fireplace as the hosts sway in their hammocks and critically observe the performance. Over 250 Yānomāmi join the feast. In different body paint patterns they celebrate the *prai ai* dance of the *reahu*, in which they all present themselves, yelling fiercely while dangerously swinging their weapons. The performance, of conceited bravery, vain beauty, and exposed aggression, is a chance to demonstrate for the new allies the performers' courage in the face of possible mutual enemies and future threats. At the all-day gathering, generous promises about commercial engagement and support are exchanged.

Bamboo arrowheads, *rahaka*, are examined and swapped among the men, who celebrate alliance after a history of war.

Mothers exchange news about their children, and men speculate about the exchange of women, a polygamist lifestyle practice among the Yānomāmi. Or they plan future relationships for their children within the frame of the cross-cousin marriage system used in their patrilineally and matrilocally organized society.

Different hallucinogenic powders, *epena* and *yakōāna*, are shared and snuffed—but only by men. Shamans dance and perform their *hekuramou* séances to heal the ill. The *ishipë koai* ritual is celebrated: relatives eat the ashes of their dead in banana compote. Children learn to paint their bodies or watch the hunters as they paint their dogs. All night long the *wayamou* ritual takes place between hosts and guests. In chest-pounding duels, the men display their bravado with their fists, steel cutlasses, and axes, drawing blood and even cutting to the bone, sometimes with fatal consequences. They ferociously harm each other to demonstrate their willingness to kill mutual enemies in future conflicts. After two days, the guests drag away all game, cooked bananas, and *rasha* palm fruits when they leave. They take off with the promise that next time, when they are the hosts, they will give more.

In the Manner of Spirits

An *ishipë koai* ritual celebrating a dead member of the caterpillar shapono and the ‘Trumpeter-bird’ people is under way. Koprëpëwë, a member of the Yāpitawë-theri, has painted himself with vibrant red nana seeds and inserted black-and-white spotted *mārāshi* feathers into the holes in his ears, symbolizing the passage from day to night. Huddled on the floor in a tight circle around the calabash on the earthen ground of the *shapono*, he has positioned himself to praise the achievements of the dead woman in a ceremonial prayer to the others. For one long year the woman’s mother, Hëmakami, has carried the ashes with her on their nomadic travels through the forests. Standing warriors, two-meter-long bows and arrows held close to their painted bodies, form a protective circle around the mourners at their feet. Shaiprëpowë, the headman of the Kashorawë-theri, fills the large bowl with warm banana compote and passes it to Koprëpëwë. While wailing and weeping, Koprëpëwë carefully opens the smaller calabash and pours the bluish-gray ashes of the human bones into the yellow compote in the larger vessel. He cautiously lowers his right hand to mix the ashes into the liquid and then, shedding tears of empathy, closes the opening of the calabash and sets it aside. After a pensive moment, filled with sorrow, Koprëpëwë offers the ashes to Siroroma, one of the sisters. She drinks and passes the vessel to Yashishimi and Himohimomi, the daughters. The two girls cannot contain their tears and profound grief. Hëmakami, who is also mother of Shaiprëpowë, raises her arms in grief and weeps loudly onto the mourners. A second and third helping of the ashes is prepared and handed to Prushishimi, another sister, who takes them in with deep distress. Old Hëmakami, mother of so many in the group, uses her fingers to lick up the remnants of her daughter’s ashes from the tray. Heartbroken, she weeps openly, sharing her grief over the bereaved in the circle.

Lothar Baumgarten