

# A Man Called Bee:

## Studying the Yanomamo



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### Forward:

**Taken from Timothy Asch's *Bias in Ethnographic Reporting***

In 1968, Napoleon Chagnon invited me to join a multi-disciplinary expedition to study the Yanomamo. As a result of this trip, we completed two films, one an introduction to the Yanomamo that included the work of the population geneticists on the expedition, and the other about a feast held between two villages to initiate an alliance. Later, we received a joint grant to return for further filming and in 1971 we shot footage that we subsequently made into 36 films. These films represent a collaborative effort that benefited from each of our strengths.

### Political Climate During Chagnon's Initial Research

Chagnon began his research among the Yanomamo in 1964. This was the same year that Robert Gardner completed his

film, *Dead Birds*, which focused on warfare among the Dani of Irian Jaya. (It is not surprising that Chagnon first took his own film footage of the Yanomamo to Gardner for evaluation and advice.) By 1966, when Chagnon submitted his Ph.D. dissertation, the United States was increasingly divided over the Vietnam war-ghetto dwellers would soon burn cities and young men burn draft cards. The entire country was preoccupied with the subject of violence. And as is so often the case, anthropological interests were influenced by the concerns of the wider society, particularly the campus community.

In the social and biological sciences there was a swing toward the exploration of the biological roots of behavior epitomized in the 1966 publications of *On Aggression* by Konrad Lorenz and *The Territorial Imperative* by Robert Ardrey. Anthropologists, such as Sherwood Washburn and Irvan DeVore, were studying primate social behavior in order to see both how aggression was han-

dled within different species and whether we could learn something about human social organization by looking for analogies in the social organization of our closest biological cousins.

Thus, when Chagnon ‘discovered’ the Yanomamo, an isolated society that still engaged in frequent raiding and acts of hostility, his work quickly came to the attention of other social scientists, winning him considerable recognition. Chagnon first published *Yanomamo: The Fierce People* in 1968. It has subsequently sold over one million copies - according to Chagnon, more than any other ethnography. In that same year Fried, Harris and Murphy edited and published *The Anthropology of Armed Conflict and Aggression*, which contained an article by Chagnon on the effects of war on Yanomamo social structure. The previous year, *Natural History Magazine* had published an article by Chagnon. His portrayal of the Yanomamo seemed to strike a sympathetic chord among both academic and general readers in America.

### **Collaboration Between Different Personalities**

Working with Chagnon among the Yanomamo wasn’t always easy. For example, Chagnon and I accompanied about 15 Yanomamo men and women on a three-day journey through the jungle to a proposed feast in a distant village. We snuck up on the village and only at the last moment announced, by shouting, that we were nearby. Napoleon and the headman who had guided us knelt at the entrance to the village with his shotgun over his knees. I was told to go into the center of the village with the other visitors and strike the usual heroic pose. I borrowed a machete from somebody and nervously prepared to do as was told. Napoleon looked up

at me and said, “It’s alright, I only have to shoot one of them.” (Was that a joke?) That really terrified me, for I thought, “Shoot one of these Yanomamo and the others would make you into a pin cushion with their arrows.”

When I got to the center of the village, I dramatically struck my pose and then what seemed like hundreds of Yanomamo came running down upon us, all rattling their long bows and arrows, making a terrible, fearsome clatter. Finally, we were individually taken to a hammock and there I was minutely examined by a number of Yanomamo warriors. “Look how white and peaked his skin is. How on earth did such a skinny, weak looking person manage to walk that great distance? He looks like a monkey with all that hair under his arms.” On the other hand, when they went to inspect Chagnon, he passed muster very nicely with hardly a murmur.

At the end of this long day, I was physically and emotionally exhausted. When I tried to tie my hammock to a pole, I suddenly realized that I had forgotten the knot that I had been taught to tie the night before. I tied it once and got into my hammock with great relief. But no sooner had I sat in the hammock, than it collapsed to the ground. I got up and tied it again, but the same thing happened. I just couldn’t get up a third time. Finally, Napoleon, who was reclining in his hammock with his hand respectfully over his face, turned to me and shouted in a hoarse whisper, “For God’s sake, get up and tie your hammock, you’re embarrassing the entire expedition!”

On the second day while walking in the jungle, I tripped. “He’s so harmless he couldn’t hit a tapir with a bow and arrow at 20 feet,” a headman told Chagnon shortly thereafter. Needless to say, my role was soon

one of comic relief compared to Chagnon's macho male. Of course, Chagnon might be justified in arguing that I could afford to play this role because I was under his protection. But frequently, I have found it beneficial to put myself under the protection of others—anthropologists or local people—and to admit my cultural incompetence when I am new to a community.

Certainly, here is an example of how personality can affect the way in which each of us behaves in another culture. The consequences of personality differences on data collection are compounded because these differences usually influence our choice of informants and influence a potential informant's attraction to us.

### Filmmaking

I lacked the confidence in my own ability to make a complex, narrative film about the Yanomamo that would represent their cultural perspective in any significant way. This, combined with my ambition to demonstrate that ethnographic film could become a valuable component in teaching anthropology, led me to take a sequence based approach to our film project.

It is common in documentary filmmaking to only make one general film out of the entire corpus of footage shot. In order to tell a story, the filmmaker usually takes a few feet from here and a few feet from there to make a one-hour film out of as much as

30 hours of exposed film. He or she may never use the remaining footage. In an effort to make the best use of his Ju/wasi (!Kung) footage, the filmmaker John Marshall, developed a new approach: the sequence film method. After I had worked with Marshall on such sequence films as *The Meat Fight* and *An Argument About a Marriage*, I was eager to apply this approach to filming the Yano-



mamo. Thus, whenever I turned on the camera, I tried to film long sustained shots of social interaction that comprised a sequence. We produced these sequences, each as an independent film, and then we made more general films out of them, like *A Man Called "Bee": Studying the Yanomamo*, which focuses on

Chagnon's fieldwork and research methodology. The contrast in these two kinds of films, as well as Chagnon's and my biases, is well illustrated by two films we made that use the same footage of a man and woman talking and weaving a hammock (*A Man and His Wife Weave Hammocks*).

### Fieldwork

Fieldwork seems to me to have four quite different goals: to contribute to contemporary analyses and discourse on ethnography, to broaden and enrich the life of the fieldworker, to record some of the lives and voices of a group of people who might otherwise be silent, and to provide data for future scholars to analyze, thus serving as an historical re-

cord for members of the group studied. Yet, as I have pointed out, it is very difficult for an ethnographer to attain all of these goals in a single, written ethnography. This is because the interpretative nature of ethnography allows our biases to seep in.

I also believe that there are ways in which we can reduce the effect of our biases in our work. In order to do this we should recognize each of our biases individually. Gender is one of the most obvious influences on fieldwork. Not only are each of us socialized into the gender roles and attitudes of our own society, but the societies that we study have their own gender-based distinctions.

It is often difficult for men to get access to women's activities. Many people have

criticized Chagnon's work because of its male bias. I think this is largely unfair. He is a male. Yet this does cause difficulty

when he is asked to speak or write about Yanomamo society as a whole and characterizes all of the men, women and children as "The Fierce People". Happily his latest (fourth) edition (1992) drops this label and retains the simple title of Yanomamo. Yanomamo headmen control important ritual and political knowledge and it is they who have the power to grant permission to reside in their villages. (In many parts of the world, this power resides with men.) It is common for these male leaders to become anthropologists' chief informants and cul-



tural guides. If general ethnographies, such as most of those in the Spindler Introductory series, were to acknowledge this bias and to state openly that they primarily reflect the views of those in power, we would avoid characterizing whole groups by the behavior of their leaders. This would at least identify the nature of the descriptions and analyses presented in these texts, and it might encourage us to recognize that other kinds of studies were necessary to enrich our understanding of other societies.

Another way to reduce personal biases is to work in pairs, particularly male/female pairs or in teams to juxtapose different perspectives. Such approaches admit the presence of bias and are useful in grasping the complexity of any social group. Moreover, they capitalize on the contrasts between the researchers, not only by broadening the database but also by demonstrating how asking different kinds of questions of different people in a community produces different findings.

Many of the criticisms aimed at written ethnographies, also apply to ethnographic films. The vast majority of these films have been made by white men about male leaders in non-western societies. The balance can only be addressed if we overtly look at different types of social actors and if the films are made by people with different backgrounds: women, minorities and people from within the communities being represented. Even Chagnon and I, two white males, chose different people and activities to film. Imagine how different our representations might have been, had our differences been even greater.

I believe that film can contribute most directly to the second two goals of ethnographers that I outlined above: to give a voice to people who might otherwise be silent, and

to provide historical data for future analysis. Long sequences with synchronized sound do allow members of a group some voice, even though selected and bounded by an outsider. Although the filmmaker decides when to turn on the camera and where to point it, he (and it usually has been a he) doesn't control everything that is in the frame. Often films provide evidence to support interpretations contrary to, the ones suggested by the ethnographer. For example, when Margaret Mead used film to illustrate her interpretation of Balinese socialization and Balinese character at the meetings of the American Anthropology Association, other scholars criticized her findings, using as evidence the very film she had shown to support her analysis.

Long shots, that follow individuals through a set of relationships, make explicit whose perspective is being represented. Even if the film focuses on a headman, for example, the audience does have evidence of how other social actors are behaving and it knows that the focus is on a headman and not on all men or all members of the society. Because videotape has inexpensive, two-hour long cassettes, filmmakers can now follow events without interruption. They can allocate a percentage of their footage to covering the lives of a variety of social actors—men, women and children—while focusing the majority of their attention on a specific project or group of people. For example, Jane Goodall, Christopher Boehm and assistants at the Gombe Chimpanzee Center followed the central Alpha male for several months to provide a continuous videotaped record of his behavior. Additionally, they have videotaped the behavior of all the other members of the troop on a roster basis, focusing on the behavior of a single animal for a day, thus recording all those who interacted with that

animal.

Finally, if the resulting footage is properly documented and archived with the ethnographer's transcriptions, translations and field notes, along with related publications, it can serve not only as a valuable historical record, but it can also be used by scholars for re-examination and reinterpretation of a culture. Having access to this raw data would allow future scholars to ask new kinds of questions. It would also give descendants of those filmed a better opportunity to view their predecessors on their own terms. This is not to say, of course, that the raw data does not reveal certain biases. Nevertheless, I do believe that field notes and unedited film footage allow for a reinterpretation of a culture more easily than does a completed, interpretative ethnography, or narrative-style ethnographic film.

I'm reminded of a story told about an exhibit of portraits of the great photographer, Alfred Stieglitz. Many of the exhibiting photographers had come to the opening. While they were eating cheese and crackers and drinking wine outside the gallery, Stieglitz quietly studied each of the photographs intently. After a while he walked out of the gallery and announced to the photographers, "You know, so many photographs and yet not one of them is really a portrait of me." The implication was that the portraits told more about the photographers than they did about Stieglitz.

Although it is not the purpose of anthropology to do so, anthropologists often use another culture to produce an image of themselves and their own culture. I have tried to outline the ways that this can happen, and I have tried to present some ways to ameliorate it. Whether we are scientists, anthropologists, artists or historians, we should openly recognize our biases because these critically

influence what we perceive and later what we represent to others, through our writing and film editing.

And, while we cannot avoid the biases and problems inherent in the interpretation of culture, if we make as careful a record of rapidly changing cultures as we can, we certainly can make it easier for the reinterpretation of culture.

Boris Pasternak once said that the good thing about being a writer is that:

“Although the artist will die, the happiness of living which he has experienced is immortal; captured in a personal and yet universal form, it can actually be relived by others through his work.”

Perhaps the good thing about being an ethnographer is that we have an opportunity to represent another people’s unique culture in a way that tells us more about them than it does us.

## Introduction

This is one of the few ethnographic films in which the anthropologist appears as one of the subjects, and as such it is a lively introduction to the nature of fieldwork. Napoleon Chagnon, who lived among the Yanomamo for 36 months over a period of eight years, is shown in various roles as “fieldworker”: entering a village armed with arrows and adorned with feathers; sharing coffee with the shaman Dedeheiwa who recounts the myth of fire; dispensing eye drops to a baby and accepting in turn a shaman’s cure for his own illness; collecting voluminous genealogies; making tapes, maps, Polaroid photos; and attempting to analyze such patterns as village fission, migration, and aggression. The commentary touches on the problems of the fieldworker (all the genealogies compiled

in the first year were based on false data, and had to be discarded). Between the images and the commentary we also glimpse some of the ambiguities of the anthropologist’s role and his relation to the subjects of his study. For example, in the tension between mutual exploitation and reciprocity. The film complements Chagnon’s book on his fieldwork, studying the Yanomamo.

## Transcription

### VOICE OVER NARRATION

The Yanomamo Indians of Venezuela and Brazil presently number 15,000 people, living in some 150 villages that are scattered over a vast tropical forest. During the past 100 years, the Yanomamo have expanded in all directions from the Sierra Parima, a chain of low lying forested hills that forms the backbone of the tribal distribution. This expansion is still going on today, continuing a process of micro political evolution, which has led to linguistic, demographic, and organizational differences in the large blocks of villages that comprise the entire tribe. In the central and southwestern areas, villages are very large, warfare is intense, and social organization is more complex than in other regions. In the southwest, The Shamatari population bloc is typical. Their original villages grew to about 150 people, and fissioned to produce two new villages. These new villages entered into wars with each other, moving further and further apart, penetrating new lands. In turn, each village grew, fissioned, and entered into wars among themselves and with their neighbors. Today, there are about a dozen villages in the Shamatari cluster, all descended by fissioning and population growth from a single village. During the past 8 years, I have spent a total of 36

months among the Yanomamo, collecting anthropological data that describes and explains this process of growth and fissioning. Much of that time was spent in the village of Mishmishimabowei-Teri, one of the larger Shamatari villages, some 275 people in total.

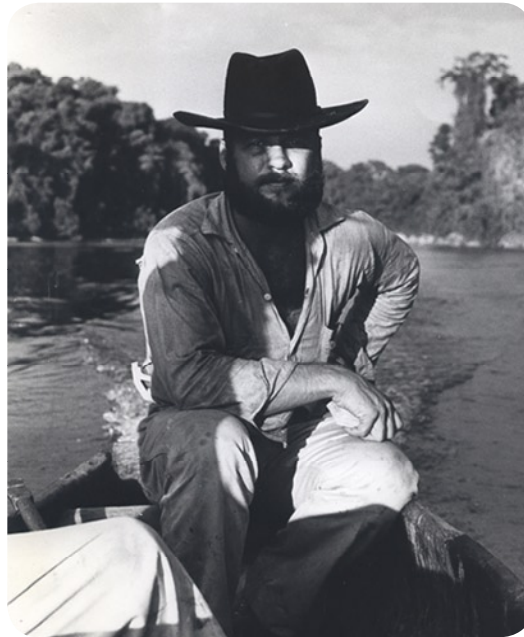
In 1968, against the advice of my friends in the village of Bisaasi-Teri, I ascended the Mavaca River and contacted the Mishmishimabowei-Teri, who had never before seen foreigners. The Bisaasi-Teri, mortal enemies of the Mishmishimabowei-Teri, were certain that they would kill me on the spot, or that lahalas, fabulous water serpents, would rise up out of the river and devour me. I survived both these hazards, and returned to visit the Mishmishimabowei-Teri every year until 1972.

**TITLE: MISHMISHIMABOWEI-TERI**  
26 February 1971

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:**

When I first went to live with the Yanomamo, they wanted to know my name. I told them that it was Chag-non, or Chagnon, but they couldn't pronounce it. It sounded to them like their name for a pesky bee, "shaki," and that is what they decided to call me. To the Yanomamo, I am the man called "bee." Visitors are supposed to recline with poise. Nanokawa, one of the hosts, grows impatient with his own customs,

and excitedly tries to converse with me. He is a leader in his own village, which broke away from Mishmishimabowei-Teri recently. He has temporarily moved back into Mishmishimabowei-Teri, at the insistence of his several brothers-in-law. He and the local headman are closely related in the male line, and do not get along well. They are competitors for women and leadership.



**SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:**  
"Younger brother, when did you rejoin this village?"  
"Just recently!"  
"Aren't you living somewhere else, though?"  
"No, I live here now ... over there in that house!"  
"Well, I'll be a..."

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:** I reciprocate the continuing good will of the people with goods and services. They have grown to trust me, and to recognize the effectiveness of the medicines I always bring for them. They expect me to cure the perennial eye infections of the children and babies, and although their language has no words for thank you, they can express their appreciation in other ways: a smile, a click of the tongue, or a gift of food.

**SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:**  
"Hold him tight. None of it went into his eyes. He's got a bad infection. I'll give him more medicine tomorrow."

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:** Wadoshewa and his brothers are an important faction in the village. No gift is unencumbered, and as he presents me with a basket of smoked meat

and peach palm fruit, he whispers,

**SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:** “Shaki, I’m out of matches...”

“You’re very generous. I’ll really enjoy this.”

“You should. I am generous.”

“Why are you so generous? Why?”

“I am the one who is generous.”

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:** My possessions are more important to the Mishimishimabowei-Teri than my services, and we always exchange items. I do not really want the bows, arrows, spun cotton, and other things they offer me, but I cannot do my work without providing them with fish hooks, fish line, machetes, and knives. They would

not accept me for very long, unless I brought them these things. But if I gave them away freely, those who



did not receive something would resent me, and all would be reminded of my stinginess. Therefore we trade with each other. I have spent many delightful hours with Dedeheiwa, one of the most knowledgeable men I have known, and a true leader. He has told me about the details of village history, of ancient and current wars with other villages, and secrets of kinship and genealogy that bind the members of his village together. As he periodically reminded me, he possesses the truth.

Dedeheiwa possesses the truth about the spirits, and has tried to teach me his complex, rich, and sophisticated religion. To perform effectively as a religious leader, one must learn the behavior of all of the spirits; how they kill their enemies by destroying their souls with fire, and how mortals, in the form of hekura spirits, can kill other mortals by eating their souls, removing all trace of polluting body fat by licking their fingers clean. Shamans spend many hours attacking their enemies in distant villages. Since people, especially children, are dying regularly, this is proof that their spiritual aggression is effective. If the miyamo portion of one’s soul is devoured by enemies, there is no antidote.

**SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:**

“When you take ebene again, put some here, in my nose!”

“The headman (Moawa) gave me this corn in exchange for sardines.”

“Are you enjoying the corn?”

“I sure am.”

“Are you fierce?”

“Yup!”

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:** Polaroid photographs are very convenient in my census work.

Primitive society is defined and organized in large part by kinship ties, marriage practices, and descent from common ancestors. Genealogical data are fundamental for building a coherent picture of village composition and fissioning. It is therefore necessary to know and understand the variations in kinship terminology, the system of classifying and referring to relatives. Then I can show how all the members of each village are related to each other and I can construct a genealogical

diagram of the entire village.

**SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:**

“Is this your daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Did raiders take her away?”

“Yes, they dragged her away.”

“This is Amotawa. How are you related to him?”

“I call him ‘husband.’”

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:**

To study village fissioning, it is important to also show how the members of one village are related to people in other villages. Only then is it possible to find out how different kinship groups stayed together or divided when earlier villages fissioned.

**SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:**

“Does she two names?”

“She certainly does!”

“You look confused.”

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:** It is also possible to discover the size of large lineages and their significance in the politics of each village. Some large lineages are distributed among all the villages that constitute a population bloc. Mishmishimabowei-Teri is comprised of several large lineal descent groups, the largest of which is the headman’s group, Moawa’s lineage. Nearly 85 percent of the residents of Mishmishimabowei-Teri belong to only four lineages. These have been bound to each other over several generations by reciprocal marriage exchanges. But these 4 lineages and others are also found in neighboring Shamatari villages. Village fissioning divides the lineal groups into local segments and redistributes them in new villages in varying proportions depending on past mar-

riage ties.

Although I have known Amonamo for four years, it was not clear to me until this interview that she was the same person as Kashinamo, a name given to me by informants in other, villages. All genealogical information has to be checked and cross checked with many informants from different villages in order to eliminate redundancies and errors. People often deceive me about names and relations in order to avoid using the names of close kinsmen or in some cases, to play a practical joke. Because of this, I had to throw away most of the genealogical data I collected during my first year of study. With detailed accounts of past wars and the history of each settlement, and with accurate genealogies that show how members of widely separated villages are related, a complete picture of village fissioning emerges. Village fissioning can be explained in terms of the marriage patterns, the social composition of particular villages, and the demographic features of the population.

The way people are related to each other by kinship and marriage is also reflected in where they live in the village. Whole lineage segments, the adult males of the same lineal descent group, often occupy a single section of the village with their wives and children. Within the village, people avoid some kinsmen because of taboos, but may visit freely with others. The Yanomamo villages in this region of the tribe are conspicuously larger than those in other areas, and there is more living space for each person. The immense clearing in the center of the village is used for dancing, and as a playground for the children. When men have killed large game on the hunt, they strut across the clearing to exhibit their abilities. Mapping the village in

great detail will enable me to show how living space varies from village to village within a population bloc and between villages of adjacent population blocs. It appears that where political alliances based on feasting are important in inter-village affairs, the villages themselves are larger, to accommodate visitors who come to trade, dance and feast. Thus, inter-village politics has an effect, not only on the numerical size of the village, but on its physical size as well.

One must have a detailed map of the area around a village, in order to understand land views and agricultural practices. The Yanomamo practice a kind of slash-and-burn horticulture known as “pioneering” cultivation. It is presently rare, but was much more widespread in the past. Land once used is never re-cleared and cultivated a second time. Many miles and thousands of fertile acres separate Yanomamo villages. Still, old garden regions are an attraction since peach palm trees, which produce an important crop, continue to bear fruit long after the garden has been abandoned. Thus, new gardens are often found near old ones, and people prefer to remain in one general area for a long time, to exploit their peach palm crops.



#### SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:

“What’s this in the photograph?”

“I don’t know. What is it?”

“It’s your village; see!”

“Where is the waterfall you call Shayarewa?”

“Over there ... in that direction.”

#### VOICE OVER NARRATION:

Two factors determine Yanomamo settlement pattern. Short, micro-movements are in response to the demands of agriculture. A garden plot is abandoned after a few years, and a new plot is cleared nearby, often just beyond the existing garden. On the other hand, the long migrations, macro-movements, are determined by military factors. Detailed maps based on field data, reveal the political and ecological reasons for past village movements. Each garden is associated with particular prominent men who founded the village. I collect their names in order to cross-reference settlement pattern history with genealogies and data with village fissioning. People know where their children, siblings and ancestors were born so that the recent settlement history of each village can be reconstructed by using birthplace, estimated ages of village residents, and the maps of abandoned garden sites. All of this information gradually builds up until a detailed picture of village fissioning emerges.

It took two years to become fluent enough in Yanomamo to penetrate the rich concepts of mythology and cosmology. By then, I knew enough about the various myths that I could ask knowledgeable men like Dedeheiwa to

recite particular myths as completely as they could. By pretending to be ignorant of the myth, I could put informants at ease. They enthusiastically told me the complete truth, to show me that they knew more than the people in other villages.

#### SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:

“In the very beginning, the ancestors had no fire. They are nothing but raw caterpillars.”

“Caterpillars? Wasn’t it dirt that they ate?”

“Dirt my foot! Caterpillars! The ancestor ‘Alligator’ also lived then.”

“Who? Which ancestor stole the fire?”

“‘Alligator’ secretly had fire.”

“You don’t say!”

“‘Alligator’ wouldn’t share the fire.”

“Where was this?”

“Over there! At ‘Caterpillar Rapids.’”

#### VOICE OVER NARRATION:

Their myths are rich in metaphor, and cannot be understood by knowing only the vernacular language. People tell myths dramatically, and add detail to the meaning with various body movements, tone of voice, and facial expressions.

#### NARRATOR’S TRANSLATION OF

MYTHS: “Leha was making a scaffold high in the tree when Naro snuck up and shot a charm at him. Leha shrieked as the charm passed through the skin of his throat. It did not kill him.”

“Leha was near a fallen abena tree. Leha was chopping wood from the fallen tree. Naro blew a charm at him as he chopped. It struck Leha. It nicked his throat. “

“When he struck the cord with his machete, it separated, and Sloth was flung, violently through the air. He was flipped high and far

away. As Sloth was sailing through the air, the mountain fell and crushed Naro. Even long after the birds had begun painting themselves with Naro’s blood, Sloth was still flying through the air. At long last, Sloth hit the ground. He got to the top and found the magical vine.”

“One end of it was tied to the mountain. The other end was fastened to the sky. Sloth was terrified. He was poised to strike the vine, but he was hesitant. He was in a crotch of the tree. The tree was bent over under tremendous strain. He chopped. Sloth was flung from the tree and sailed through the air.”

#### TITLE: LATER--AT A CATHOLIC MISSION ON THE ORINOCO RIVER

VOICE OVER NARRATION: After recording each myth, or variants, I spent hours and days with other informants who explain in detail the meaning of particular words, phrases, and gestures. Working privately with Lelabowa, I learn about the hidden meanings and details that Kambowa left out. Many of the ledges, like Mishmishimabowei-Teri, are remote and have no contact with the outside world except through my sporadic visits, and the rumors they hear from visiting Yanomamo.

#### SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:

“Where does Kumishiwa river flow? Are foreigners living there?”

“Yes.”

“Do they speak their own (non Yanomamo) language?”

“There are Yanomamo among them.”

“Name the villages there.”

“There was a village called Yonowa’s village. They were a rotten bunch. They

were raided recently. There were no survivors.”

“All died? Who were they?”

“Nobody survived!”

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:** Dedeheiwa and Moawa, as leaders in their villages, are concerned and alarmed by some of the changes that are taking place, especially the introduction of shotguns into some Yanomamo villages. Moawa cares about the strength and aggressiveness of his distant enemies, who have obtained shotguns from the foreigners. He is a leader, and he has to be aware of changes in military power. He is strong and valiant, and one of the most effective leaders I have met in his culture, or my own. When he looks at you and suggests something, he commands. He sizes people up and decides how far he can push them, displaying uncanny perception. In a constant game of brinkmanship, he subordinates others to his will. He knows when to be kind, and when to be strong. I found it difficult to live in his village, and yet resist his constant suggestions that I give him my shotgun.

There are other expressions of leadership among the Yanomamo. It was much easier to live with Dedeheiwa and to become intimate friends with him. His dealings with me were most often benevolent. I am sick, and he tries to cure me as he would cure a member of his own family. When he is sick, I try to cure him with my medicine. Neither of us believes in the other’s techniques or paraphernalia, but our efforts show mutual concern for each other’s well being. By indicating my willingness to be affected by his spirits and his curing, I learn a great deal more about his supernatural world than I might otherwise. The Yanomamo appreciate my interest in their hekura spirits, and want

to help me to learn the truth, to understand the secrets of the spirits, and to become a Yanomamo. Participant observation leads to an intimate understanding of another culture. It has been a great privilege to live with people like Dedeheiwa, who taught me much about being human. It is personally satisfying to know that they Yanomamo think there is hope for me, that they can transform me into a human being in their terms. I received my greatest compliment from Lelebowa, when he told me that I was “almost a human now, almost a real Yanomamo.”

**SUBTITLED DIALOGUE:**

“Biyedira shall be your hekura. I give him unto you. Go to the edge of the universe, my foreign friend. There you will find your hekura suspended from the mountains. Here is your hekura going into you now! Go ahead. Call him to you! I am a good teacher. I possess the hekura and the Truth.”

“Yes, my friend, you teach well ... when I return to live here, you must teach me everything about hekura. I will trade for hisiomomo seeds (hallucinogens) for you from the Yanomamo who live on the Ocamo River. I will bring many seeds. Then we can all chant to the together. The rest of you here will teach me about other hekura, won’t you?”

“You bet we will! We won’t be stingy with our knowledge!”

**VOICE OVER NARRATION:** For the moment, Dedeheiwa’s culture will continue. His village will live with the constant pressures of old grievances and personal conflicts between important men. There will be tension between groups, each applying pressure on the others to pull the political alliances in one direction or another, or to resolve con-

flicts over women to the advantage of some. A few will be dissatisfied and leave, and the domestic crises will be relieved when the village becomes smaller. Other conflicts will be resolved within the village by resort to duels, to pounding chests and fighting with clubs. Men will be insulted when their status is questioned, or as stronger groups within the village try to take women from them. They will challenge these adversaries and fight with them. They will remember their victories and brag of them, and brood about their losses. As old grievances smolder and proliferate, the smallest insult can lead immediately to a serious conflict in which people can be badly injured, or even killed. Chest pounding escalates to club fights, club fights to ax fights, and ax fights to shooting with arrows.

This fight was sparked by a breach of etiquette, a failure to share food. But its roots lie deep in the history of earlier fights, and in the conflicts growing out of complex marriage arrangements that bind family to family, and lineage to lineage. People were injured in this fight, but none died. The general stress and tension in the village increased, and some people began to leave the group.



If people are killed in such fights, large segments of the village will be forced to move out and start their gardens elsewhere, or take refuge with a friendly neighbor. People anticipate this, and small groups begin clearing gardens elsewhere, knowing that sooner or later a fight will erupt. They can avoid this by moving out, by fissioning, before the level of tension becomes too high.

The pressures that impinge on the village from the outside tend to keep it at its maximum size, for a small village is vulnerable to the raids of determined men like these. They strike silently, usually at dawn, and kill. They also fear retaliation, and they know the capacity of all groups to fight back. They hesitate to attack large, powerful villages, unless they have help from their allies. Yet even the mightiest are liable to attack and live constantly, if not nervously, in a condition of threat of attack. Here, a large, powerful village mobilizes as word spreads that raiders have been seen nearby.

The Yanomamo solve some of their warfare problems by making alliances with their neighbors. They first visit them to trade bows, arrows, dogs, and baskets. This lays the necessary foundation of trust and friendship on which more elaborate alliances are built; alliances that involve feasting between the members of two villages. These alliances

help assure that neighbors will not attack each other without warning, and that some neighbors will be friendly enough either to offer refuge in a time of need, or to help raid enemies. Still, the political relationships between distant villages, even related villages, are unpredictable enough that allies do not and cannot trust each other.

Honor is paramount in relations between men. It is important for men to be aggressive, brave, and self-assured. The reputation of each village is the sum of individual reputations of how many fierce ones the village has. Little boys learn early in their lives that aggressive skills are important. These are the skills that will make their village strong and will foster fierce behavior in men. Men like Dedeheiwa are admired and respected. They perform daily in front of the entire village, before the children who will watch and imitate them.

**TITLE: CHILDREN PLAYING SHAMAN**  
(using ashes)

Like children everywhere, they subscribe to the religious beliefs of their parents and elders. For them, it is even more intensive and real, for they are constantly being cured by shamans, and are exposed daily to public expressions of the ritual and theology. They know at an early age the names and habits of the spirits. They practice shamanism at the age of four or five, and they will be ready to replace Dedeheiwa and the others by the time they are twenty.

Children do not go on raids when they are young. But they practice the two essential skills that a warrior must have: shooting accurately under stress, and dodging arrows shot in return. It is a dangerous game, but

they enjoy it. Skill in warfare keeps a village sovereign, strong in the face of threats and intimidation from others. This is perhaps the most important skill a sovereign people can transmit to its children. These may be the last people to enjoy the political luxury of declaring war without far-reaching consequences for other societies, and the last through whom we can glimpse dimly into our own past. We are looking here at ourselves, several times removed, but nevertheless, ourselves.



## Film Credits

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