

EXCERPTS FROM THE YANOAMA INDIANS *

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The Yanocama are a sylvan people par excellence and, therefore, distinct from the great bulk of tropical forest cultures which are essentially riverine in orientation. While these latter peoples navigate, the traditional Yanocama method of viewing a stream or swamp is as an obstacle to be bridged...

... Their gardens are an indispensable element of the Yanocama ecosystem, and they are not abandoned until new ones have been prepared and come into production. Like shabono (communal shelter), gardens are established focal points conducive to permanency of settlement.

Social, political and economic organization is based on kinship, specifically on blood ties and formal marriages. Thus, literally every aspect of life is submerged in interpersonal relationships. The tangible manifestation of the socioeconomic, political settlement unit is the circular shabono community. When the shabono is viewed in terms of the specific family shelters it comprises, the spatial patterns is an intricate reflection of the intragables of teri (village) kinship. Each Yanocama must identify with some such residence group. Egalitarianism seems to dominate the social structure, and it is equally evident in both economic and political realms. The political organization might best be described as acephalous, although in the literature there are frequent references to "chiefs" and "headmen". Each shabono community is practically self-sufficient, with a firm base in horticulture. An important supplement is provided by rather specialized collecting of forest products. Hunting is also significant, but traditionally fishing is not.

... "Each teri is autonomous. Political organization is truncated, with no hierarchical level of authority superior to the teri itself. Nevertheless, any particular teri is part of a system of inter-shabono linkages. These systems, which greatly overlap each other, are essentially social in nature and rooted in kinship ties.

Overt, explicit manifestations of leadership are not always clearly evident to the foreign observer, and the political organization within the teri community has been the subject of varying interpretations. However, there is general agreement that leadership does exist and is in the hands of vigorous, mature males. In a teri there may be several such men, their personalities varying from offensive extroverts to pensive, tactful men. Similarly, certain teri have strong leadership while others do not.

Some writers have called such a leader a headman or chief. Whether or not there is in Yanocama society an institutionalized position of headmen, there can be no doubt that a hierarchy of adult males dominates each teri and its activities. The authority of an individual leader is circumscribed and temporary. Economically for example, he is almost powerless in the allocation or distribution of wealth that is not his own. He can enforce his decisions only when he can convince other people that they ought to cooperate.

The Yanoama Indians, pg. 2

Nevertheless, there are men who want to be leaders, although those with the necessary qualifications are few. A man who has proven himself to be a powerful sorcerer and who has convinced people that he is clever and fearless (waiteri) possesses impressive leadership qualities. Also important is his kinship following. The man with numerous sons and sons-in-law who support him is automatically an influential man. This kind of implicit, informal authority characterizes Yanoama leadership. As long as the decisions of such a man satisfy the people of his teri, there is little likelihood of serious competition from other men. A leader wears no special insignia that distinguishes him, except occasionally in his capacity as sorcerer. He is essentially primus inter pares. A leader consults with other men, and, as a consequence, all adult males are involved in important decision making. Once a decision is reached, however, each man is still free to do what he pleases.

Certain old people are highly respected and very influential, some of them functioning in a leadership capacity. This is true of a patriarch or matriarch with sufficiently large numbers of offspring and kinsmen to comprise an entire teri, or at least a significant portion of one. Certain old men seem to have a tempering influence on some of the high-spirited young males. In fact, young men have relatively little influence. Warfare, a very serious matter, is often decided upon by the mature men.

Apart from matriarchs, younger Yanoama women can also participate in decision making. Some are closely related to and have the ear of influential men. Mature wives and sisters often speak up, loudly, to express their views. From earliest childhood, both males and females have closely observed the life of the shabono and have formed opinions on most matters.

All in all this system appears to be quite democratic, but inefficient. There is no effective mechanism for making quick, clear, binding decisions. Men are not obliged to comply with decisions they dislike. Sometimes, too, interpretations of a decision vary greatly. At times of crisis the making of a decision can be delayed much too long. This kind of political organization has been described as follows: "One word from the chief and everyone does as he pleases."

... "Much has been written about the violent and fierce nature of the Yanoama. It is implied that this particular culture trait is as universally distributed over Yanoama territory as the language, the teri and shabono institutions, and the plantain gardens; it is also implied that it characterized Yanoama men as much as do long bows and arrows, quivers, and tobacco wads. It would appear, however, that, in contrast to these universal traits, the degree of ferocity is variable like trade goods, fishing, and the use of dugout canoes. Perhaps there is even a positive correlation between these particular variables. Conceivable, certain lowland Yanoama (such as the Orinoco Waika), far removed from the security of their own cultural and spatial dominance, constantly menaced by aliens and foreign values, respond violently as an exaggerated defense to compensate for their insecurity...