

Face to Face with the Yanomamo
An Anthropological Adventure in the Amazon
by Larry L. Baron 1989



The plane was descending. Hours had passed since leaving the west Texas town of El Paso. Now, those farewell warnings from some of the twenty-five guests rang our louder, “Larry, don’t go down there alone. It’s too dangerous.” I appreciated their advice, but did they really think that I wouldn’t make it back?

As the jet got close, a tiny glimmer of the light appeared in the middle of total darkness. We were approaching Manaus, the jungle capital of Amazonia. Echoes of the bon voyage party crept inside my thoughts again. Facetious remarks from other friends about the appetites of hungry carnivorous fish, poisoned arrows, head-hunting warriors, and man-sized insects suddenly hinted at an eminent dangerous reality. We were landing in an area where famous anthropologists immerse themselves into the most primitive Indian cultures in the world.

Business Anthropology is my profession. I collect and sell authentic primitive artifacts. In my field, some risk is always involved in order to bring back worthwhile

materials. On Feb. 19, 1989 in spite of a lot of discouraging talk from family and friends, and with some minimal planning, I left my wife in charge of our artifacts store in El Paso, Texas and took off for the State of Amazonas, in Brazil.

Besides a money belt, my only belongings were a backpack with 3 or 4 pairs of pants, a few pairs of underwear, 5 shirts, a pair of hiking boots, a pair of tennis shoes, and 2 mini-flashlights. Incredibly, I did not think to bring a raincoat, apparently the phrase 'rain forest' didn't set off a light bulb.

I had done only a cursory study about the Indian tribes I wanted to visit perhaps because I didn't believe I'd actually get to encounter them. In fact, as with all my other excursions, my plans for this one were somewhat amorphous. Once I arrive in a particular country, I basically remain flexible and respond to circumstances as they occur, in other words: if something worthwhile comes up, I just do it. If an opportunity presents itself to go to an interesting locale, I go unencumbered by rigid schedules. This 'flexible' trip to Amazonas would ultimately prove quite strange, exciting and extremely exhausting.

I arrived in the jungle capitol, Manaus, on February 21, 1989 at 3:00 am. Three days later I received permission to travel with a group of Indian men working on a government program mandated to take food to remote Indian tribes. Even though it cost me \$400 along with a smaller bribe for a seat on a 12 passenger jungle hopper, I felt fortunate. I knew that to be allowed to go to such a remote area where I might purchase artifacts directly from the indigenous tribes was a chance of a lifetime.

Fortunately, years earlier while a student of Anthropology at the University of the Americas in Cholula, Puebla, Mexico, I had done some study about the region and its inhabitants. Now, prior to leaving for the trip as I waited in Manaus, I had time to

review a book about these ‘fierce’ people that I wanted to visit: the Yanomamo Indians. I was excited about the prospect of encountering this fascinating group of Indians face to face and perhaps even trading for artifacts from within the confines of their Amazon jungle villages.

The area where these Brazilian government agents planned to take food to the Indians was actually a restricted area, an illegal area where miners had converged seeking gold. A veritable gold rush was taking place in certain Amazonas jungles and violent conflicts were constantly arising between the Indians and these ‘gold rushers’ so tight restrictions on travelers into that jungle were very real. As with many of my other trips and for reasons unknown to me, I managed to get invited to take part in a river adventure to deliver approximately one thousand kilos of food to the Yanomamo Indians.

I asked no questions about the proposed river adventure other than, “Do you have plenty of clean drinking water? Are you going to take safe drinking water on this trip?” I knew safe drinking water was a must in that tropical region. They assured me that plenty of good water would be available on the boat and further insisted they had everything one could possibly want. However, their concept of good drinking water would prove much different than mine.

As an artifacts trader, the success of my business depends largely on developing contacts and finding areas where no other traders have ventured - - therefore I won’t give the exact location we were headed for. I will say that it was in the State of Amazonas not far from the Rio Negro and reveal that we traversed some of the smaller rivers that flow into the Rio Negro where tribes of Indians have rarely, if ever, seen a white man.

Dr. Napoleon A. Chagnon, a well-known anthropologist wrote a book entitled

‘Yanomamo, the Fierce People’ after having lived approximately eighteen months in the vicinity of the Yanomamo. Eventually he lived among them forty-one months before the Venezuelan government restricted anthropologists. The third edition in 1968 by Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, gives an excellent, brief cultural description of the Yanomamo Indians.

Dr. Chagnon’s research revealed that the Yanomamo inhabit a part of Southern Venezuela and a part of Northern Brazil. There are approximately 150 widely scattered villages consisting of forty to 300 hundred people; (1.) however, the average population of the villages is about 75 to 80 people. Some anthropologists estimate that the total Yanomamo population in both countries is approximately 10 thousand Indians. This, of course, is only a guess since we are dealing with a group of Indians who live in the ‘Mata’ - - in a mat of jungle that is very difficult to penetrate. As I studied Dr. Chagnon’s book, I realized that I would be seeing a culture that was quite different from our so-called ‘civilized’ one, to say the least. . . .if in fact we succeeded in ever getting there loaded down with food as our small riverboat would be. Ultimately, my few days with the Yanomamo would see me develop an incredible amount of respect for Dr. Chagnon, who stayed with or near them for a total of 42 months during 10 field trips from 1964 through 1983.

Reading his book as I waited for our expedition to get underway did not exactly frighten me but I did become apprehensive about venturing into the Yanomamo’s jungle home carrying \$5,000 in a fanny pack. After failing to find a safe place in which to leave my money, I had to choice but to carry it with me.

1.) Napoleon A. Chagnon, ‘Yanomamo, the Fierce People’ (3rd Edition, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983) pp. 4, 200.

This 7 day boat trip in Amazonas across remote rivers would prove to be the most rugged one I have ever taken. Certainly, I was not ready to go into an area as untamed as this was. I remembered that I'd gone in much the same way years earlier when I had ventured into Mexico on a buying trip among the Tarahumara Indians.

On Feb. 26, 1989, I left from the airport in Manuas and arrived at our destination in the jungle approximately 6 hours later. There was a 3 hour delay at this first jungle airport where I had to pay a bribe to get on the 12-seat plane that would be flying me deep into the jungle. I paid a bribe to fly another 3 hours in a rat-trap of a plane and hopefully arrive within sight of the Columbian and Venezuelan border! Getting on the 12 seat was hair-raising not just because that plane didn't exactly evoke confidence, but also because we'd be putting it down in a very remote, overgrown jungle area where there is no such thing as a 'large' landing field.

Picked up by "taxi" at this remote airport, I arrived 20 minutes later at the village. Then another 80 kilometers across a dirt road through the jungle to a place where the boat was docked on land. But finally I would get to meet my fellow travelers for the river trip into Yanomamo territory! One of the men spoke limited Spanish, which he'd picked up while working in a local restaurant. He was classified as my 'guide' though he was not the kind of guide one might imagine, which didn't prevent him from addressing me in a rather officious manner. He promptly advised me that there would be a one-day delay due to problems with the 40-horsepower motor on the boat.

Two men who spoke Portuguese and a young married couple were also on the 24-foot boat. The young couple were teachers who spoke several different languages. They had already taught among the Yanomamo for a year and were returning to teach there for

another year. The textbook they used was written in the Yanomamo language. I thought it rather interesting that they were not teaching the Portuguese language. Since I did not speak any Portuguese and my 'guide' in turn spoke very little Spanish, I had difficulty communicating with the others on the boat.

Also traveling with us was a government outpost agent and a Yanomamo Shaman and his wife. These 3 were rough-edged Indians who were capable of living off the land and certainly did not need government food. They could survive in the jungle easily without any problem. The other passengers on the 24-foot boat seemed like rugged individuals who were quite inscrutable to me. I concluded they could easily become intolerant if not outright hostile to me. Thus, I felt somewhat wary of them.

As mentioned earlier, the 24-foot motor boat carried approximately one thousand kilos (about 2,000 pounds) of food to be taken to the Indians. This was a work boat designed to navigate small rivers and haul heavy loads of supplies, mostly food and medicine to remote areas. The food we were taking to the Indians consisted of canned corn beef, large amounts of rice, sardines and bags of powdered milk from the U.S. meant to be given away.

The bags were stamped with instructions stating that this was only to be given away, not sold or traded. I can unequivocally state that these instructions were strictly obeyed. We also carried medicine, coffee, sugar, salt, bath soap, laundry soap, flashlights and batteries, perfumes and combs. We brought a large food grinder to be used for grinding up manioc or cassava roots to make farina meal, a staple of the Indians.

On the first day of the trip Feb. 27th, we were up by 7:00 am. We loaded supplies on a large 5-ton truck and drove 80 kilometers to the river. We then carried the 24-foot

aluminum boat to the river and deposited the 2,000 pounds of supplies and several containers of gasoline. We set off about 9:30am for what turned out to be a 2-day journey to the main Yanomamo village. At first I thought the gasoline was water, but there was no drinking water on the boat. I said, "Where is the water? Do you have any drinking water on the boat?" The Indians laughed and scooped up some river water and said, "Here's the drinking water." So, there I was, stuck on a boat with no safe drinking water. I could drop out and quit, or I could drink river water for a week. I knew I was likely to contract parasites, but I simply muttered a silent prayer and chose to stay and live as the Indians did for a week, if I could hang in there.

It began to rain and did not abate at all that first day on the river. The weather was downright cold. One Indian was shivering in the boat he was so cold. I was cold too, but I had wisely purchased a raincoat in Manaus. In the middle of the unrelenting rainfall, the Shaman who traveled with us, put his hands up and began to wave them around as if trying to shoo the rain away. He was deadly serious in his efforts to manipulate the spirits of the rain. He made brushing motions and waved his hands dramatically while chanting in the Yanomamo language: "Go away, rain. Go away. Clouds go away." This is a form of spirituality and polytheism that most of us Westerners know nothing about. Later, I would have a truly strange encounter with this Shaman in his own village.

In spite of the rain, the trip was fantastic. From the moment we put the boat onto the river, we were enveloped by green. It was just like going through a green tunnel to get out onto the main river. This required approximately 30 minutes. Beautiful flowers were growing on this canvas of greenery and I could hear monkeys chattering in the trees. Some trees had fallen across the river so we had to edge our way around them. But this

gave us a chance to take in the spectacular vistas. Some trees towered 60 to 70 feet high over the banks of this smaller river; along the Amazon River trees 100-feet high form a wall of green on both sides.

We arrived at the first Yanomamo camp at 12:45pm and distributed a few goods but we stayed there only about 20 minutes since it was a relatively small camp. It seemed that the Indians here were fairly acculturated. At any rate, they'd certainly had more contact with outsiders than the other Yanomamo we would encounter later.

Nine of us set off down river in the pouring rain for the larger, more remote Yanomamo camp. The other passengers on the boat seemed to be quite accustomed to traveling in this kind of weather. We traveled over four different, comparatively small rivers in order to get to our proposed destination that first day. They proved to be efficient highways through the jungle that day.

Tired, cold, miserable and hungry, we finally arrived at the first government outpost at about 8pm. The outpost consisted of a daub-and-wattle house that was completely devoid of any furniture. A daub-and-wattle house has walls made of horizontal and vertical wooden slats. Mud or adobe fills the spaces in between. This outpost was completely finished on the outside yet no work had been done on the inside. Two stools and some limited equipment were the only signs of potential habitation. This otherwise vacant building did have ties for securing our hammocks and provided great shelter from the still falling rain. Most Americans would have considered our lodging to be little more than a storage unit however after having been drenched all day, it looked like the Hilton to me! We built a fire and ate canned food that night before literally falling into our hammocks.

A small Yanomamo village of only a few houses was within walking distance of this first outpost, but the Indians were not there. They were attending a social event at another camp. The next day, Feb. 28th, the second day of our river trip, we were up by 7am, had some coffee and visited the vacant village before breakfast. From a respectful distance we peered inside their houses. I could see beautiful woven Yanomamo baskets and even some burden baskets. By 8am after a breakfast that consisted of rice and canned sardines, we set out on the river again. Waiting for the sun to take hold and the day to warm up was quite uncomfortable since I was forced to wear damp clothing. I had tried to dry my clothes over a fire the night before, to no avail.

But our day on the river was blessed with brilliant sunshine all day. This was the first sunshine I had seen since leaving El Paso, Texas nine days earlier. It was such a beautiful day that I basked in it, failing to realize that I was becoming badly sunburned on my legs and shoulders. This burn would turn out to be a real problem that night when attempting to walk with the group deep into Yanomamo territory. With every painful step, my skin felt like tinfoil being peeled and cracked.

Since rest-room stops are essential for travelers, I will speak frankly about the kind of 'bathroom breaks' we enjoyed while on this non-luxury tour. Our first one occurred at a huge fallen tree while I rode in the very back of the boat. By the time I'd crawled over 2 thousand pounds of food in order to reach the front of the boat, the women passengers had easily climbed up and over the tree, found a place of privacy for themselves and were already returning to the boat.

The position of the fallen tree was such that all the top branches appeared to be shooting toward the boat. It was like having to climb a tree from the top down!

Climbing over a massive tree was nothing to these Indians, but my tree-climbing skills are non-existent. I hail from the South Plains of Texas where there are no such trees upon which a growing boy can practice.

When I realized that my slow bathroom start and finish would delay our departure another 20 minutes, I sullenly returned to my place on the boat and waited for nightfall and the final stop. Slightly uncomfortable holding it till until 7pm! I placated myself only slightly by surmising that certainly my fluids had largely evaporated during those hours when the sun beat down on us mercilessly in the open boat.

With everyone refreshed and comfortable (except me!) back in the boat, we continued on down river until we came to a swiftly running waterfall which our little 24-horsepower motor could not negotiate without great risk of damage to the boat as well as to the motor. So what did we do? An old-fashioned portage job, of course!

We secured the boat at the edge of the waterfall, unloaded our supplies and all 2 thousand pounds of food which we then hand-carried 65 yards around the waterfall. Next, we ‘walked’ the boat around the rapids using rollers similar to those the Egyptians used in making the Pyramids. Incongruous though it might seem, try visualizing Egyptian pyramid builders in a Brazilian jungle! Although the boat was heavy, we successfully carried and rolled it around the edge of that waterfall.

We reloaded the boat, set off again and were on the river four more hours in complete darkness. These guys were hell bent to get to our destination in 2 days. They said we’d arrive in the Yanomamo country within 2 days and they meant it - - our days started early and continued well into nightfall.

We had some guns on the boat to be used for trading and also for our own hunting

purposes and we succeeded in shooting a cayman which weighed about 3 ½ kilos.

Among the cache of weaponry was a 410 shotgun that shot .45 caliber bullets. Three of them were 16 gauge shotguns. Later, we would give all of these to the Yanomamo. The Indian instructor used the 410 shotgun with a .45 caliber bullet to kill the cayman.

When we arrived at the base camp about 11pm, I was sunburned, tired, hungry and sleepy. This base camp was approximately 18 kilometers from the main Yanomamo village. After a long day on the river and the arduous portage, everyone was famished. Skinning the cayman as fast as we could, we cut out the white meat and barbecued it for supper. We'd also caught a few fish along the way in a net so we also enjoyed smoked fish and fried fish. After gorging ourselves like gluttons, we regrouped at 12:30am.

I thought we'd soon be sleeping at this riverside camp. But such bliss was not to be. I was told to grab my backpack and prepare for a 20 minute walk. I said, "Surely you jest. Aren't we going to sleep here?" "No," the agent replied, "we have to walk inland 20 minutes to get to the next government outpost on the edge of the Yanomamo culture." Clearly I had no choice, so I just said, "OK, all right. Let's go." Appearing to be weak was not an option but in truth I could barely walk because of the hideous sunburn and overwhelming fatigue that drained my entire being.

During this painful hike, the first place we arrived at was a bridge made of 2 poles that couldn't have been more than 5 to 7 inches in diameter. I knew those poles spanned a ravine, but I had no idea how deep the ravine was until days later when I saw that it was about 10 feet deep. Now, imagine this hapless white man with poor equilibrium, real bad co-ordination, a touch of night blindness, a sunburned body and hauling a heavy backpack on my shoulders!

As I attempted to precariously balance myself on those poles that spanned the 35 foot long bridge, I knew it was little more than a tight-rope bridge. I flung my backpack off and in final desperation, asked an Indian to let me hold onto his hand so that I could tiptoe across! Considering my numerous handicaps that night, I was lucky not to have tumbled into the ravine where I would certainly have been a welcome cayman appetizer. Incredibly, we had to cross 3 more bridges like this one before arriving at the government 'house' where we could finally stay and maybe sleep. But unlike the first government outpost, this house really was a mere skeleton of a daub-and-wattle for it had no mud or adobe packed between the slats. Except for the tin roof, it afforded us very little protection. With no solid walls and once again, not a scrap of furniture, it was less than primo. But I had more serious concerns, namely all the money I carried. Although I kept it out of sight, the other passengers surely suspected I was carrying money. They knew I would not venture into a strange country without money, which is why I guarded my fanny pack much as a wolf would guard his coveted fresh kill.

That night we did most of our sleeping in hammocks tied to trees. I have never been able to sleep well in a hammock, but the danger from insect attacks on the ground is greater than in a hammock. We had no protection from mosquitoes since no one had mosquito nets. So the mosquitoes enjoyed the feast that was my body! As I tossed and turned in a hellacious night of itch and scratch and swat, it was clear to me once again that I had made inadequate preparations for this kind of an adventure. I swore to myself that never again would I venture into any jungle without taking plenty of mosquito nets!

While on this subject, let's talk about other insects – healthy, predatory jungle

insects. During the day, virulent tiny gnats, ‘no see ums,’ descended on us in droves and bored right into all of our pores. Each little gnat bite produced a blood spot right in the pore. My body was covered with these blood spots, especially in the area of my elbows and ankles.

The Indians were also covered with insect bites but this did not seem to bother them very much, instead they calmly mashed and popped the nits right out of their pores. Soon I realized why. . . if those blood spots remain there, the pores become infected. This was worse than the mosquito bites! I have a vivid picture in my mind of many of these small insects drowning in the pooled perspiration that coated a heavy set Indian man’s skin. He simply let them land and drown. He was literally covered with drowned insects.

Adding to my mounting discomfort, was the fact that I did not have adequate clothing. Foolishly, when I left El Paso I’d concluded that the weather in the Amazon jungle would be so hot that I would need only lightweight clothes for daytime and that I could simply sleep in my shorts. As it turned out, my destination was in the mountainous area of Northern Brazil. I couldn’t get over my incredible stupidity for not having been better prepared with at least a light coat or parka. Roasted by day - shivering by night! I began to believe that I would probably contract malaria just for good measure.

On the third day, March 1, 1989, I anticipated leaving for a large Yanomamo camp, but we were delayed for one more day because we were told the chief, the Tusi, was not there. Even the government agent, who considered himself a friend and trusted confidant of the Tusi, refused to go into the village when the chief was not there. He said it would not be safe for us to go there until the Tusi returned. Frankly, I was glad to have a day to recuperate because my body was too battered to tackle the two slash and burn

areas that lay between the government base camp and the Indian village, which was 18 kilometers away.

Our base camp was surrounded by one of these slash and burn areas which attracted all kinds of biting insects. They love that combination: an open area and the sun. I thought those insects would've been more abundant tucked back in the jungle but when I walked 60 yards or 150 yards into the jungle, there were fewer insects. Which is why I took several trips into the jungle to bathe in a crystal clear stream about 150 yards from base camp. The water was nice and cool and appeared to be pretty clean. Tiny organisms and fish were swimming around in it. I thought that must be a sign that the water wasn't contaminated. I must have swallowed 10 gallons of it.

The first contact we had with the Yanomamo villagers was on the down day when some of them came into the base camp. The group consisted mostly of women and children who were quite friendly. Many of the women were bare-breasted and the few men among them wore short cut-off pants similar to running shorts. I was informed that they had acquired the cut-offs by trading. Some of the women had lip plugs with feathers in them. A little hole was pierced in the lip with a piece of reed sticking out and feathers were then attached to the reed. Some wore ear plugs of a similar design.

Both men and women took a tobacco leaf, rolled it up, spit on it, then rolled it in charcoal and dirt. They then wadded it up and put it in their mouths just back of their lips much the same way as Americans put chewing tobacco in their mouths. But for some reason, the Yanomamo's way of wadding the tobacco really stretches and juts out the lower lip – a not too appealing sight.

That day the Indians who came to base camp were very curious about the color

of my skin since many of them had never seen a white man. Because of my sunburn, I looked like a neon sign or maybe more like a tomato-red man. Their ritual was to put their fingers on my back and arms, press in and watch my skin change color from red to white. It was interesting to watch them be entranced by this. In fact, as I prepared to take a bath and removed my shoes, my porcelain white feet shocked them. They laughed long and loud as though this was one of the funniest things they'd ever seen.

Mosquitoes were enjoying all of us that day. I had a limited amount of mosquito repellent, about 5 or 6 little bottles. Of course, all of the Indians wanted my mosquito repellent too but I could not give it to them. I tried to distract them with other little things. I had already shared some repellent with my fellow passengers from the boat. Since I knew we'd be there for a week, I tried to hold on to my precious stash though it didn't seem to do too much repelling; in all fairness, I'm certain I would have been bitten several thousand more times without it.

At the base camp during that day of rest, all of us were continuously swatting mosquitoes because we were smack dab in the middle of a slash and burn area. I wondered why the government agent, who was a Tukano Indian, had built his house in the jungle and then cleared out all of the vegetation around it so that it became a haven for ants and mosquitoes.

Although he never told me his reasons, I considered several possibilities. Maybe he wanted to watch his crops more carefully so they would not be stolen. Maybe he did not want to walk 65 yards. Or maybe he just never thought about the insects. Maybe the insects drowned in his perspiration as they did on the heavy set man. That day the Indians did not stay at base camp very long. When they left, they carried 1,000 kilos of food to

their village, leaving our boat substantially lighter.

For dinner we had fried fish and boiled fish and rice again. Typically, we alternated having smoked fish, fried fish or boiled fish. Our main courses were usually supplemented with oranges and bananas or fried bananas which are really appetizing. Another tasty jungle plant looked like a large cantaloupe and was full of bulbous, very sweet material. We added clear water from the stream and shook it vigorously to make a delicious 'water shake,' the jungle version of a milk shake. By the end of that exciting third day, I was so exhausted that I slept quite well in spite of the discomfort of trying to sleep in my hammock.

On the 4th day, March 2, 1989, we finally walked 18 kilometers to the main Yanomamo village, the place I had traveled so far to see. With a population of about 175 people, this village was one of the largest. But first we had to scramble across two large slash and burn areas in order to get to the village. This was extremely difficult and strenuous walking. Perhaps you are asking what exactly is a 'slash and burn area?' The Indians cut down all trees – big ones and little ones – and burn them. Then they plant bananas and vegetables. In these two areas however, the trees had been slashed but not yet burned. We had to climb over felled tree after felled tree after felled tree, covering acre after seemingly endless acre!

I took time to make a 12 foot long pole which I used to help me keep my balance. The Indians thought my efforts to keep my balance and follow them through the slash and into the jungle was really funny. Even though I fell several times, I managed to keep up fairly well. Certainly I did not want to be left too far behind.

When we finally arrived at the Yanomamo village, I was tired but elated because

I anticipated finding spectacular artifacts and learning more about this tribe of Indians. Admittedly, my research about the Yanomamo was limited. Even so, I was aware of some of the Yanomamo's significant cultural behavior patterns which Dr. Chagnon outlined in his carefully researched book, 'Yanomamo, the Fierce People,' 3rd Ed. According to Chagnon, to this tribe of Indians the meaning of 'good' and 'evil' is inverse in meaning to that ascribed by the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition. In other words, what seems 'good' or 'desirable' to them may be undesirable or 'bad' when judged by the criteria of Western man and Christian culture.

With no qualms of 'conscience,' they will take advantage of adversaries, or even friends, whenever they think they can get by with such 'malicious' behavior. Chagnon reports that they have a huge capacity for rage and proudly cultivate their fierce image. This fierceness and rage are expected behaviors in their culture. They also have a very quick flashpoint and easily become carried away by intense anger.

Dr. Chagnon points out that the Yanomamo have very interesting beliefs, such as their belief in demons. They believe that when they are dancing, they can extract demons from tiny rocks and leaves in the jungle and store these in their chests in order to control them. Later, they believe, they can unleash these demons on other people if need be. In their Creation myth, 'Moonblood' dripped blood from his wounded belly onto earth and gave birth to inherently fierce men. This forms their core belief about why they must be so fearlessly aggressive. (pg. 95)

I was not aware of any missionaries who might be working in this Yanomamo Village. More than likely, they would be hostile to any missionaries invading their territory. In fact, I was told that some missionaries had been killed by the Yanomamo.

They do not like their religious beliefs being infringed upon by outsiders. They strongly believe that they manipulate both the demon and spirit world. Therefore Christianity would be diametrically opposed to their own religion, their own beliefs. They are not about to throw away something of value for nothing; and in their eyes, a strange new religion with it's own view of gods and demons would be as nothing.

Prior to going into the Yanomamo village, I became aware of two of their rituals that might seem cruel and 'barbaric' to Westerners. One is chest pounding and the other is clubbing. In the clubbing duel, one man hits another over the back of the head with a club, causing tremendous scars and calluses. But such scars are to them symbols of manly toughness and ruggedness, a status symbol. The chest pounding ritual is a sort of contest between individuals in which one man hits another on the chest with his fist so hard that it causes internal bleeding.

Chronic bloody warfare amongst themselves and with other tribes is an integral part of their culture. They are threatened by destruction from their enemies in much the same way we are threatened by destruction from nuclear warfare except that they are threatened by a more visible force which could be lurking only a few kilometers away in another village. This particular group was supposed to be somewhat 'civilized,' but 80 kilometers from where we were, there was reportedly another Yanomamo group that had never encountered outsiders. I knew an 80 kilometer journey was not much of a trip for these fast-walking, agile Indians.

One reason the Yanomamo male always carries his bow and two arrows is that he wants to be prepared in case he encounters Indians from another village. One of his arrows consists of a monkey's femur ground down to a sharp point at both ends so

that when the arrow goes in, it will not come out. It's used for bird hunting, fishing and during warfare. The arrowhead on the second arrow is a long bamboo piece crafted in such a way that once it enters an animal, it's dragged through the jungle, causing the point to come off while decimating the animal and making it bleed to death.

The Yanomamo always carry these two arrows because they are looking out for other Yanomamo clans as well as animals. It is important to keep in mind that while the Yanomamo are one culture with one religion, they do live in separate villages, and warfare among the groups exists. Political alliances are attempted but because of their quick tempers and aggressive culture, much warfare still takes place. Internal problems which arise regularly cause villages to split up. One group will go its separate way and begin a new village with a new name, new garden and new political alliances among other villages.

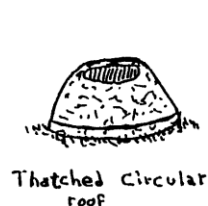
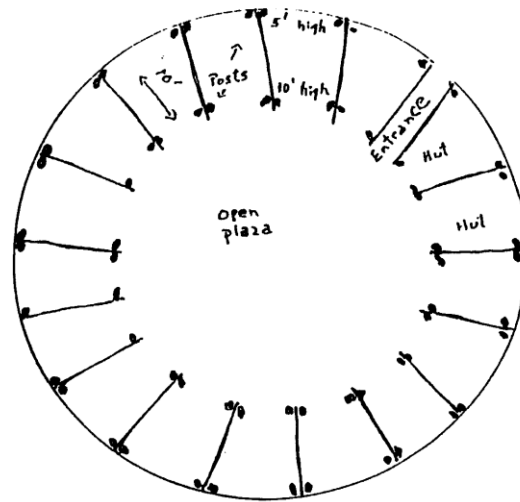
Whenever these intense people want to obtain an objective, they resort to outright aggression and treacherousness, which to them, are laudable qualities. They enhance and intensify their practiced, fierce behavior through an almost daily use of a hallucinatory drug known as Ebene, which they extract from the inside of the bark of a tree. I observed, at close range, several Shaman in the village using a long tube of bamboo and blowing the drug into another man's nostrils.

Fully aware of the Yanomamo's infamous characteristics, I nevertheless eagerly entered into their midst wanting to learn more about them through first-hand experience. Before my observations ended that day, I would be forced to conclude that their brutality might possibly extend to this white intruder.

When we entered the village, we met the Tusi, the chief of the tribe. He

impressed me as a capable, wise leader who had earned and deserved the respect of his peers. He was definitely in charge of his village and no one seemed to dispute or resent his authority. I was glad we waited for him to return from his hunting trip before venturing into the village because our presence and our bartering would certainly have created chaos in the settlement had he not been there.

Next, I observed the Yanomamo huts and their arrangement. All of the huts opened into a circular courtyard that was in essence, an extremely large circular patio. The huts were built close together and actually joined one another. None of the huts had walls on the side facing into the circle, but on the back side facing the jungle, all the walls were solid and enclosed. I was told that this circular, living arrangement symbolized the connectedness of the people living in the jungle.



Yanomamo village
(Shabono)

At night and in times of danger the entrance is covered with brush.

Family units lived in these small huts which were made of daub-and-wattle materials similar to the house in the government base camp. Inside these family dwellings I could easily see bows and arrows, a few shotguns for which the Indians had traded baskets, burden baskets and drinking vessels. All of these items except the shotguns were made of natural materials. I also observed two types of hammocks. One kind was made out of fiber from a jungle plant and the other kind was made of wild cotton fibers, kapok.

In a few households I saw Shaman pipes used to blow the Ebene drug into the nose of another person. In other huts, I observed canoe paddles, Brazil nut vessels, dried meat, tobacco quids, dried fish, small wooded stools and plantains hanging from ceiling beams.

Walking alone around the circle and going from hut to hut, I felt as if I had been accepted by the group to some extent. Their small children were allowed to walk alongside me and hold my hand, put their arms around me and poke my strange skin just to watch it change colors. The Spanish-speaking trader who was designated as my 'guide', really seemed to be accepted by these Yanomamo. It helped me to know that he was able to have some limited communication with them. No such direct communication with them was possible for me.

Nevertheless, I felt comfortable and at home with them although their customs were extremely primitive. I respected their rugged individualism and marveled at their shared religion, common belief system and origins. At this point I had no reason to imagine that soon I'd actually be relieved to leave this beautiful jungle village. Little did I foresee, that within minutes I would become the unwitting focus of Yanomamo ferocity.

I was about to witness a Yanomamo chanting ceremony that few white men have ever seen. Before it was all over, I'd conclude that perhaps I, too, should not have been allowed to see the chanting ritual.

The afternoon was quite hot with temperatures ranging from 100 to 110 degrees. As I unobtrusively walked around, I heard a loud voice chanting. From a distance of about 100 yards, I could see a man jumping up and down and waving his arms in the air. At that distance I couldn't make out his chant but as I got closer, it appeared he was saying, "Hey, Ya no ma mo, Ya no ma mo." I assumed he was a Shaman blessing his people and blessing our arrival with the food. Maybe he also prayed for the young warriors of the tribe who were expected to arrive later with their bounty of wild pig.

The Shaman and the villagers certainly had much to celebrate since word had come to the village from the Tusi that soon they would have a large supply of smoked meat. They were anticipating a great feast that night. Now, early in the afternoon, the Shaman appeared to be getting the celebration underway with his chanting and dancing.

I continued my tour around the circular patio of huts looking for artifacts that I might later try to trade for. I glanced toward the growing crowd and wondered if it would be safe for me to venture near the circle of Yanomamos gathering around the Shaman. Finally, I said, "What the heck. I'm going over to observe firsthand and close up." So I went to the edge of the circle directly in front of the Shaman and sat down. It didn't occur to me until much later that I might have been blocking the path or entry into their circle.

The Shaman wore a feathered band on each arm. Otherwise he was totally naked with one exception - - around his body was a cord tied to the foreskin of his penis which

held it erect against his abdomen. His attire, or lack of it, indicated that he was a high ranking Shaman. After a few minutes of watching him intently, I realized he was the same Shaman who had been a passenger on our boat, the Shaman who had prayed to make the rain go away.

Although I had spent two days on the boat with this man, I had not immediately recognized him because his face was completely painted in black and contorted from his profound state of hallucination. It was the hottest part of the day so he was sweating profusely. The black paint on his face was being washed in rivulets down his naked body. I thought he was an eerie, demonic looking dancer, but I tried desperately not to show my feelings. It was quite a harrowing sight.

Earlier, from a safe distance, I had witnessed another Shaman blow Ebene through a long tube of bamboo directly into a man's nostrils. Shortly after inhaling, a thick mucus ran out of the man's nostrils. As he snorted, he backed up, slung the mucus from his nose then, unceremoniously, vomited.

The Shaman in the circle seemed to be locked in a hallucinogenic state some place between the demon world and the villagers. As he danced, he continued to take the drug which only propelled him into a more frenetic state. In spite of his frightful behavior or perhaps because of it, he seemed to be respected by the villagers. He shouted, chanted and jumped around, waving his arms wildly or suddenly squatting and rocking on his heels in an extremely nimble manner.

As I sat at the edge of the circle, the Shaman danced up to me several times, not just once. He kept getting closer and closer. At first he was about 2 feet away from my face. Next, he was about a foot away. The third time he approached me, he was about

an inch away from my face. He constantly chanted, “Hey, Ya no ma mo.”

This time he approached me squat-like, his testicles dragging on the ground and his hands nearly touching my shoulders on each side. He jumped from one side of me to the other in frog-like leaps. He never lost his balance and seemed incredibly strong. The drug clearly gave him an adrenalin rush, along with a strength he might not have had without Ebene. It was very difficult for me to sit there calmly. But, I did. I never took my eyes off him as he danced backward toward the center of the circle and away from me, then back again.

At first I thought I was being blessed. Later I thought he was attempting to put a curse on me since I was an outsider and someone to be viewed suspiciously. Maybe he was trying to take stored demons from his chest and place them into my body in order to cause me to become sick. He might have been attempting to bless me or curse me or just frighten me. If he were trying to frighten me, he certainly succeeded. I kept telling myself he was just trying to test me in much the same way old-time cowboys on Texas ranches put a ‘tender foot’ on the wildest broncos.

Throughout this ‘ceremony,’ I sat on the ground watching this naked Shaman and refused to flinch. I refused to let him know I was afraid. In truth, I was downright frightened – there’s no doubt about it – but I did not want him to know it! I knew I could not afford to let him know my state of mind because the Yanomamo do not respect a man who is fearful, that equals weakness. What they respect is aggression and sheer power.

Several other Shamans were participating in the afternoon ritual. One other Shaman was naked, but 7 or 8 other Shaman were dressed in shorts. All were taking Ebene. One of these Shaman walked around near the circle of spectators. As he got to

me, he pretended to trip over my foot. At this point, it's important to remember that there is no such thing as a clumsy Yanomamo! They habitually glide over fallen trees, sprint over slash and burn areas, tear through the jungle - - all in a nimble, agile and sure-footed manner. I have no doubt that Shaman purposefully tripped himself when he got close to me sitting at the edge of that circle.

An evil-looking sneer came over his face as he glared at me and shouted something. Next he picked up a knife and attempted to stab me with it. This scared the wits out of me so much that I reached out and blocked his stabbing thrust with my right hand. I grabbed his wrist with both hands and would not let go.

Another Shaman came up and persuaded me to let go. He also persuaded the Shaman, who was trying to stab me to calm down. I certainly did not want to continue trying to control him because I knew it was an insult to him; yet I did not know what would happen if I released his hand. At last the conflict was resolved when the 'stabber' Shaman just calmed down and walked away.

I regained my composure and continued to sit there and watch the first Shaman dancing naked in the 110 degree weather. He came forward toward me and then backed up continuing to chant loudly as he danced backward toward the center of the circle. He stopped and suddenly let his hands drop down. For a moment he seemed lost deep in meditation and then he came forward again toward the edge of the circle. After my last Shaman-near-miss, I decided it best to stand up and not get caught sitting so that, at the very least, I'd be in an upright position should I be attacked again.

A few minutes later I thought it best to simply leave their circle entirely. I resumed my walking tour around the various huts as I had done earlier that morning,

acknowledging the Yanomamo families in friendship and perusing their material wealth while taking some very deep, calming breaths. I also took some time off to go and eat in the Tusi's dwelling. We had boiled chicken and rice. It was a delicious meal. But given my hair-raising experience with the young Shaman, I began to wonder if something, such as drugs, had been put into my food. I would like to think they would not do such a thing, but later I concluded they had indeed put drugs into my meal.

Right before the beginning of the bartering and trading session I had another terrifying encounter with the stabber Shaman who had tripped over my foot. He came up to me, put his hand under his chin and made a slash to indicate that my head would be cut off or perhaps he wanted to slit my throat. Certainly there was a possibility that this could happen. But for now, he merely scowled at me and backed away.

Thus began our trading and bartering session with the Indians. The trader I was with, who also served as my guide, had several bars of bath soap and boxes of laundry detergent. He had metal knives, combs and lots of small trinkets meant to be traded. To me, bartering was less of a business deal and more of a ritual involving the exchange of one material wealth for another material wealth. Since we are talking about a group of people who do not have a monetary system, there is no point for traders to attempt to pay with money. Where would the Yanomamo spend or use money? There were no trading posts or missions in the area where money could be used for buying and selling. As a result, we traded our merchandise for their goods.

The bartering was interesting to observe. I was as close as I'd ever get to directly trading with the Yanomamo. This was unlike any trading I had ever experienced. While working with the Tarahaumara Indians in Mexico, I had traded directly with

hundreds of them scattered throughout Copper Canyon living in homes that ranged from 150 yards to several miles apart, with possibly 6 or 7 homes in a whole valley.

Here, however, 175 people were packed into this one grand circle where it took a good measure of diplomacy along with the presence of the Tusi to make the whole effort go as planned. There were frequent disagreements and outbursts of temper along with earnest discussions about the value of what was being traded for their bows and arrows and baskets.

On more than one occasion, the Tusi had to stop the trading and say, "Look at what we received. We received 2,000 lbs. of material free of charge and these are our friends. They have come in here to bring us these things. So, let us make this flow smoothly." Of course, I could not understand his language, but in a situation as highly charged as that one, body language and facial expressions reveal rather clearly what is being said through the spoken word.

The chief was a diplomat, yet he was firm and strong when the need arose. Without his presence there could have been severe problems for us. Without his assistance and intervention, the Yanomamo might simply have opted to take our goods and refused to exchange anything. At one point, the Tusi actually dropped his arms down and I thought he was going to get into a chest pounding or a fist fight with another Yanomamo male, but miraculously, nothing happened.

Sitting on the ground surrounded by bars of soap, knives and other items the Indians wanted in return for their baskets, I could not help but marvel at their talents, at the remarkable baskets they had woven. Yanomamo baskets look very much like Apache baskets indigenous to the South Western United States. Because of the popularity of

Apache baskets in the U.S., finding a large one is almost impossible. Apache baskets, if available, cost hundreds of dollars yet are one-fifth the size of a Yanomamo basket.

The high cost of Apache baskets has put beautiful Indian art beyond the reach of most people. So I was really pleased to see how many baskets were brought in to be traded. It seemed everyone from the village brought one, two or three baskets. Some even brought four or five baskets to trade. Others brought their bows and arrows to be traded – beautiful bows and arrows six and a half to seven and a half feet long. These were the bows and arrows they used in warfare and for hunting - - definitely not tourist toys! After a few hours, we were able to close out a very successful trading event.

Just then, the young men who'd been out on the hunt began trickling back into the village and cutting across the center of the circle toward their huts. They each carried remarkable backpacks very similar to an American Plains Indian cradle board. It was clear the backpacks had seen a lot of action – they were well worn, tough and beautifully woven. Unfortunately, I was only able to acquire about 10 or 12 of these.

These young men had been out hunting wild pig in the jungle. When a kill is made in that kind of intense heat, it is necessary to smoke the meat in the field and bring it in already preserved. The meat they brought in was skillfully wrapped in huge, broad leaves from jungle plants and tightly packed to help keep the heat out. The hunters then strapped the packages of meat to their backs.

Interestingly, throughout the day, I'd already observed that there were no strong, young men in the village, only older men. It is a good thing that the man who tried to stab me was an older man because if he had been a young man, I do not think that I could have controlled him even though I am fairly strong. I think one of those wiry, young

warriors could easily have taken the knife away from me.

Because we'd finished trading and I wanted to see what the Yanomamo warriors were bringing in, I started walking around again just saying "hello" and observing. I came to a hut where a Yanomamo was taking out some tobacco leaves. I had been wanting to try their tobacco to see what it tasted like, so I attempted to ask him in sign language if I could try a leaf.

The man became somewhat agitated and obviously did not understand what I was saying or what I wanted. So I backed away. As he emerged from his house, he started off in another direction. Again I indicated to him that all I wanted was to try his tobacco leaf. This time he became very agitated - - he grimaced angrily at me, shouted and put up both hands, so I just gave up and walked away. As I stated earlier, the Yanomamo have a very high flash point and it's possible he thought I was trying to insult him. Which, of course, was not the case.

Wisely, I decided that I had better not intrude on anyone again or infringe upon their privacy any longer. I also realized it was time for me to help the others gather up our belongings and prepare for the long hike back to the river. My fellow travelers had decided not to take part in the feast at the village planned for that evening. It was getting late and we knew we had to get back to the base camp before dark. I, for one, had not been looking forward to sleeping in the circular Yanomamo village that night, not after the threats made against me.

While packing up my gear 3 or 4 very young Yanomamo Indians kept pointing at my money belt. I said, "That is papel." I did not say it was \$5,000 worth of papel. Again I repeated, "It is just paper. That is all." Finally they gave up. I was very lucky because in

some Yanomamo villages they simply take what they want to take -- your shoes, your coat, your backpack. Why they did not take any of my things I will never know. If they had wanted to, they could have taken everything I had. Maybe they respected me because I blocked the shaman's knife and stopped him from stabbing me or scaring me off.

The Yanomamo would be sending us back with some carriers who would help us transport all the materials back to our base camp in the government outpost. Someone asked me to carry some of the huge bows and arrows to the camp, but I objected. I knew I would be very lucky just to make it through the two daunting slash and burn areas. I had only enough strength left to lug myself and my 12 foot pole over the sea of fallen trees. I was exhausted - - physically and mentally drained from my mishaps among such an aggressive, quick-tempered culture. The emotional stress of trying to keep my cool and act unafraid contributed greatly to my fatigued condition.

There were a couple of instances when I had to say, "Un momento por favor." One moment, please. Let me catch up. I would fall behind maybe 60 or 70 yards and then see images of having my head cut off. About the time I actually caught up, they'd start to walk again. When we finally got to within 100 yards of camp, I could barely contain my joy, "Boy howdy, I am going to take my clothes off, jump into that cool water and relax!" I could almost taste the fresh cool water and feel it soothing my body. But what happened this time?! Out of the blue, a group of Yanomamo women came scampering out across that flimsy pole bridge headed right for me! They surrounded me and put their hands out in greeting. Since the Yanomamo do not actually shake hands, their hands barely skimmed mine. So there went my plans... I couldn't rightly take my clothes off and fall into the cool nearby water now!



Little did I know what else lay in store for this weary traveler that night. It was less than 30 minutes before nightfall and suddenly everyone began heading out for another 25 minute walk to the boat. “Why,” I asked, “are we doing this?” The reason given was certainly plausible - - there was the fear of a sudden outburst from the Yanomamo or even a possible attack from another tribe.

Finally we made it to the boat, loaded it up and disembarked. I thought, “OK, fantastic, I will just sit back and enjoy the ride down the river.” But we hadn’t been gone less than 20 minutes when we ran out of gas! I couldn’t believe it. We’d run out of gasoline in the middle of an Amazona’s jungle. We were stalled there on the river in the middle of the night. Now after such a long, exhausting day we’d be forced to paddle.

Remembering it had taken 2 days with a motor to get to the place where we now sat, I dutifully picked up an oar and got to work. One good aspect of our situation was that we would be going downstream all the way to the first government outpost, the one with actual walls. Since we were going downriver with the currents, having gasoline was not absolutely necessary. The guides claimed that so long as we kept the boat going

straight and oared from time to time, we'd eventually get to camp. I, however, did not oar just a little bit. I did a lot of fast, vigorous oaring until 1:00 o'clock in the morning.

Given how expensive gasoline is by their standards, I think they purposefully ran out of fuel. The guide knew he was not taking enough. But since they were on a limited limited budget and were transporting a gringo who'd pay them anyway, why not save a little more money on gasoline? For them, money is hard to come by and time has little meaning.

An example of their stark economic reality is that most people here work for two cruzados, which is about \$1.25 a day. I don't know how much their gasoline costs, but the amount of gasoline required to run the motor a full day would have been a large amount of costly fuel. I can fully understand their 'cost cutting' measure. They saved alot of money by running out of gasoline. Be that as it may, I ended up oaring all the way down that river.

We peered into the dark looking for alligators to catch for our supper. Although we had some canned food with us, we were all hoping for delicacies from the river. We failed to find an alligator, however, we raised a fish net which the Tukano Indian had dropped into the river. It contained several small fish that we hungrily devoured. Palpable darkness now enveloped us. I had no idea where we'd be sleeping that night, if indeed, we slept at all. We searched, with no success, for the remains of some Yanomamo dwellings that we'd seen earlier along the edge of the river.

Eventually, we stopped at an old dilapidated dwelling which the traders recognized. We began to repair it by putting additional leaves over the top of the roof. We tied our hammocks up and secured the shelter as best we could. First, we put up my

hammock which appeared to be high enough and tight enough, but when I sat on it, the hammock dragged on the ground which in turn sloped down toward the jungle. All we needed now was for a jaguar to sneak into camp and drag me out to his lair.

In my delirium of total exhaustion, I kept visualizing the Yanomamo Shaman. The way things were going, he could have put a curse on me! To say the least, the memory of his grimacing face and head-cutting gesture added to my already anxious state. Actually, my real concern, was the \$5,000 I carried in my fanny pack. Surely, my fellow travelers knew that it contained money because I guarded the belt quite diligently. In fact, it was fastened so tightly that it was almost too uncomfortable to relax and sleep.

That night I began to get sick to my stomach with nausea. I wondered if parasites were hatching out and getting to work on my insides. Eventually I found out that I *had* contracted parasites from my jungle adventure. In spite of this, I did sleep some that night. Bone tired, I dozed off as a slight shiver ran through my body. My thin plastic raincoat was my only blanket. At last the eventful fourth day finally ended!

The next morning we ate an awful breakfast of corned beef and rice. The corned beef was in cans. I recall that in my father's grocery store he never let his canned goods get hot. He always put them in a cool place in the back of the store, never out in the sun. The canned goods in our boat had been out in the sun and blazing heat. Certainly the corned beef didn't taste right. I didn't eat very much of it, not enough to knock me down or really slow me down but just enough to feel sick. I tried to counter-act the poisons with 8 or 10 oranges and 4 or 5 bananas.

This kind of diet along with the strenuous exercise contributed to my fast loss of

weight. I lost 25 lbs. in 30 days. I will concede that I lost it the hard way. On this fifth day of the river trip, I did a great deal of rapid oaring. In fact, the Indians said, “Well, you are not a very good walker in the jungle but you are a good oarsman.” I was oaring rather intensely - - I was ready to leave there and get back home.

That night we succeeded in getting back to the first outpost, the daub-and-wattle house with mud on the walls. Ironically enough, there was plenty of gasoline at this outpost to traverse the last river we needed to cross in order to get back to our starting point. I think the reason was that without it, we would have had to oar up the river! Oaring upstream is possible because we passed four Yanommo in a dugout canoe who were oaring up the river. Imagine, they would be oaring up river approximately 8 days from our point of origin to their camp!

About 7 o'clock the next morning, the 6th day of the river trip, everyone was ready to go after a quick cup of java and some freshly picked fruit. Eagerly we hopped into the boat, ready to head for home. The weather was with us! We had plenty of gasoline and a whole day for traveling to our destination, where we arrived about an hour before dark.

This early arrival was a welcome surprise since every other day we'd kept on going until well after dark. Believe me, trying to maneuver in the jungle after dark is quite a challenge. I felt really good about getting safely back to our point of origin. But still glitches remained; after we had taken all our merchandise and supplies out of the boat and hauled the boat up on shore, we realized the truck was not there to pick us up. Realizing we were stuck there, we decided to take a bath in the river, clean up, and relax for a while. Just as we started to unwind, a huge rain cloud moved in overhead and began

doing quite well what rain clouds are supposed to do.

An Indian family who lived nearby, invited us into their house to get out of the rain. These Indians living within 80 kilometers of the small town that had been our starting off place were fairly acculturated. Nonetheless, they still lived in primitive conditions with dirt floors, filthy cooking conditions and tons of mosquitoes everywhere. They invited us to a supper of boiled chicken and rice with them. Since we were all pretty famished, we jumped at the offer. Actually, the food tasted delicious, I ate two helpings.

At about midnight, I hung up my hammock in their house and was ready to drop off to sleep, when suddenly people were yelling, "Let's go. vamos." I heard my guide say, "Vamos." I thought, "Where are we going now, at this time of night?" Well, the truck had arrived, so all of us made a run for it. As luck would have it, there wasn't any room up front for me so I had to sit in the back with the Indians.

One of these Indians, a Tukano man, had traveled in the boat with us and was very sick. I think he had Tuberculosis. I sat right next to him on the truck. Because there was no place for my long arms I was forced to put one arm over his shoulder. Since I felt somewhat strange, I tried to move it off after awhile. He indicated that he wanted my arm back over his shoulder, so I put it back just to kind humor him. I told him we would get him to a doctor and he would get well. I think he understood what I meant even though he didn't understand the language I spoke. Compassion can be transmitted without words.

When we got back to our point of origin, he jumped off the truck before I did and gave me a big hug. He was wearing beautiful ear plugs made of feathers. During our ride in the truck, I had tried to trade him for the ear plugs but he had refused. Finally, he

indicated that he wanted to trade them for a pair of my socks. What he wanted with my socks in the jungle, I'll never know. He was quite content with the trade but I somehow felt that I had cheated him so I gave him another pair of socks. Now he was overjoyed! I do not know if he planned to use the socks for bags or exactly what he was going to do with them. I do recall his huge smile as he walked off with his two pairs of socks.

I checked into a small hotel which did not have air conditioning but cost only \$3.00 a night. It did have a bed and a fan. I made this hotel my base camp for trading in the surrounding area. I was glad to be back in 'civilization' where I could at least go out and find a place to have a cold beer. Or wade around on the scenic shore of the upper Rio Negro while taking in the colorful locals. I did not see any other gringos there, only Brazilians and natives from the region.

Surrounding this little town were a number of Indian tribes who were somewhat acculturated. Nevertheless, their living conditions were really not much different from the Yanomamo, still very primitive. I spent 6 more days going from house to house asking them in my best Portuguese if they wanted to sell baskets that had been traded to them by the Yanomamo or any kind of other primitive artifacts they might have.

Since this area was along the Rio Negro, many Indians had their own dugout canoes in which they went fishing. They also transported themselves from one village to another and brought back bananas. Moreover, I am certain some of them were actually panning for gold in their canoes since they lived in the middle of the area experiencing a gold rush.

Multiple problems have arisen with the influx of gold-panners who have descended on the northern portion of Brazil to take their gold out and exploit the region.

Gold miners and panners come into an area where the indigenous people live and use mercury to process the gold. Since mercury is a poison, it gets into the rivers where it destroys the ecological system forcing the Indians to abandon their ancestral forest homelands. When they have to leave their homes in search of new territory, the Indians understandably become very angry.

Justifiably, hatred and animosity abound toward gold traders and their geologists who are polluting the river systems and ravaging the fragile flora and fauna. There's no denying these Indians have been here hundreds and maybe thousands of years without ruining the land. Such injustice accounts for some of the suspicion and mistrust that primitive people show toward all travelers who come into their territory.

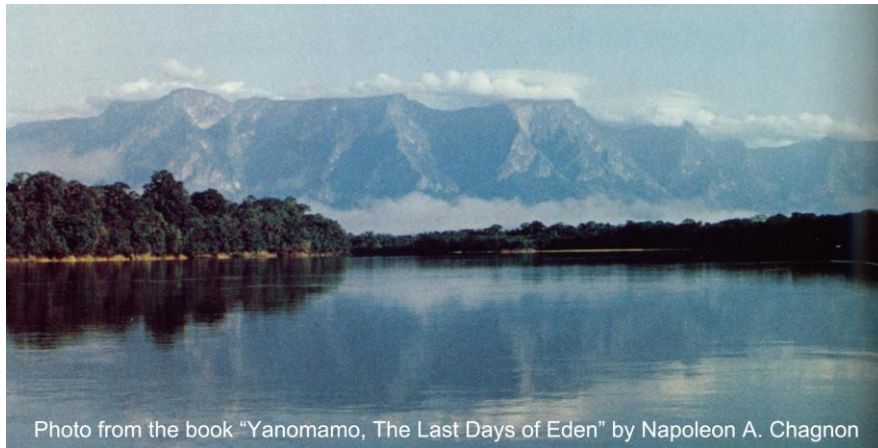


Photo from the book "Yanomamo, The Last Days of Eden" by Napoleon A. Chagnon

During my month long stay, I accumulated quite a few items - - I traded for about 150 baskets with the Indians and purchased some Maku baskets from other traders. These are as valuable, if not more valuable, than the Yanomamo baskets. Maku baskets are highly sought after by people in the U.S. In total, I had approximately 250-300 baskets to transport along with 150 bow and arrows and various kinds of other smaller artifacts.

I traded for a 17 1/2 ft museum-quality canoe made from the Palma Negra, and I also purchased a 15 foot canoe. I was overjoyed to get them both but in an entire month, I had found only 2 canoes. When I was ready to transport my merchandise, I used these canoes as containers for the smaller items such as baskets, rattles, bows and arrows. Shipping empty canoes as separate items is exceedingly expensive but when I used them as “packing boxes,” their shipping cost became somewhat more reasonable.(2)

Because there was no way I could send my merchandise by air from my location to Manaus, I had to send it by truck to a place on the river where I rented a barge to transport the merchandise to Manaus. The barge trip would require 6 days.

In the meantime, I would be trying to get to Manaus by airplane. This, however, turned out to be not so simple. In the first place, I needed to exchange dollars for cruzados since I had spent most of my Brazilian money. But the bank here would only exchange at the rate of one to one, which would cut my buying power down by nearly half. Other areas in Brazil were paying 1.7 cruzados to one U.S. dollar. A decrease in competition for the dollar equals a sharp decline in the dollar’s value. There was simply no competition in the middle of the jungle for my dollars.

After I secured my merchandise on the barge, I realized I desperately wanted to get to Manaus where I could R & R for a few days and await the barge’s arrival with my haul. Airplanes from Manaus to my location made round trips every 3 days. My guide told me that the plane had surely already left to go back to Manaus, that we were simply

(2) In Peru two years ago when my wife and I wanted to ship a canoe to El Paso, Texas, the quoted cost was \$1,000. Needless to say, we did not ship the canoe

out of luck. But I would not be dissuaded, “I am going to the airport and that airplane is going to be there.”

I had a ‘taxi’ take me to the airport. And sure enough, the plane was sitting there on the tarmac. It was experiencing some kind of mechanical problem that had prevented its take-off on time. We waited a while before anyone came to talk to us and then it was to inform us, ”You were late, so you can’t get on the plane. There are other passengers who signed up in another village and we’re going to pick them up. Since you were late, you’ll have to stay here and wait for the next flight out.”

I said, “Oh hell, when is the next plane coming?” They said it would be another 3 days before the plane came back. But once again my overwhelming urge to finally get home to El Paso, caused me to declare that I wasn’t going anywhere.....I would stay at the airport and wait just in case things changed. Fortunately for me, they could not get the mechanical problems straightened out. As a result of their difficulties, they would have to fly directly back to Manaus and skip all their other stops. This gave me the chance to get on that plane and take a 3 hour trip to Manaus.

Mechanical problems notwithstanding, I eagerly boarded that plane. I just said a quick prayer for protection, crossed my fingers and hoped that plane did not go down in the mata. The flight to Manaus went smoothly, and soon I could see a little patch of white lights twinkling amidst a sea of green. We landed safely. After re-entry into ‘civilization,’ strange things started to happen to my stomach and my spirit. . . .but that is another story.

