

# YANOMAMÖ

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# 1 / Doing Fieldwork among the Yanomamö<sup>1</sup>

## VIGNETTE

The Yanomamö are thinly scattered over a vast and verdant tropical forest, living in small villages that are separated by many miles of unoccupied land. They have no writing, but they have a rich and complex language. Their clothing is more decorative than protective. Well-dressed men sport nothing more than a few cotton strings around their wrists, ankles, and waists. They tie the foreskins of their penises to the waiststring. Women dress about the same. Much of their daily life revolves around gardening, hunting, collecting wild foods, collecting firewood, fetching water, visiting with each other, gossiping, and making the few material possessions they own: baskets, hammocks, bows, arrows, and colorful pigments with which they paint their bodies. Life is relatively easy in the sense that they can 'earn a living' with about three hours' work per day. Most of what they eat they cultivate in their gardens, and most of that is plantains—a kind of cooking banana that is usually eaten green, either roasted on the coals or boiled in pots (Figure 1.1). Their meat comes from a large variety of game animals, hunted daily by the men. It is usually roasted on coals or smoked, and is always well done. Their villages are round and open—and very public. One can hear, see, and smell almost everything that goes on anywhere in the village. Privacy is rare, but sexual discreetness is possible in the garden or at night while others sleep. The villages can be as small as 40 to 50 people or as large as 300 people, but in all cases there are many more children and babies than there are adults. This is true of most primitive populations and of our own demographic past. Life expectancy is short.

<sup>1</sup>The word Yanomamö is nasalized through its entire length indicated by the diacritical mark 'ö'. When this mark appears on any Yanomamö word, the whole word is nasalized. The vowel 'ö' represents a sound that does not occur in the English language. It is similar to the umlaut 'ö' in the German language or the 'oe' equivalent, as in the poet Goethe's name. Unfortunately, many presses and typesetters simply eliminate diacritical marks, and this has led to multiple spellings of the word Yanomamö—and multiple mispronunciations. Some anthropologists have chosen to introduce a slightly different spelling of the word Yanomamö since I began writing about them, such as Yanonami, leading to additional misspellings as their diacriticals are characteristicly eliminated by presses, and to the *incorrect* pronunciation 'Yanomamee.' Vowels indicated as 'ä' are pronounced as the 'uh' sound in the word 'duck'. Thus, the name Kägbawä would be pronounced 'cow-ba-wuh,' but entirely nasalized.



*Figure 1.1. Babini, wife of Bisaasi-teri headman, harvesting plantains, a cooking banana that comprises a large fraction of Yanomamö diet.*

crossed only in the dry season. Thus, they have traditionally avoided larger rivers and, because of this, contact with outsiders who usually come by river. They enjoy taking trips when the jungle abounds with seasonally ripe wild fruits and vegetables. Then, the large village—the *shabono*—is abandoned for a few weeks and everyone camps out for from one to several days away from the village and garden. On these trips, they make temporary huts from poles, vines, and leaves, each family making a separate hut.

Two major seasons dominate their annual cycle: the wet season, which inundates the low-lying jungle, making travel difficult, and the dry season—the time of visiting other villages to feast, trade, and politic with allies. The dry season is also the time when raiders can travel and strike silently at their unsuspecting enemies. The Yanomamö are still conducting intervillage warfare, a phenomenon that affects all aspects of their social organization, settlement pattern, and daily routines. It is not simply ‘ritualistic’ war. At least one-fourth of all adult males die violently in the area I lived in.

Social life is organized around those same principles utilized by all tribesmen: kinship relationships, descent from ancestors, marriage exchanges between kinship/descent groups, and the transient charisma of distinguished headmen who attempt to keep order in the village and whose responsibility it is to determine the village’s relationships with those in other villages. Their positions are largely the result of kinship and marriage patterns; they come from the largest kinship groups within the village. They can, by their personal wit, wisdom, and charisma, become autocrats, but most of them are largely ‘greaters’ among equals. They, too, must clear gardens, plant crops, collect wild foods, and hunt. They are simultaneously peacemakers and valiant warriors. Peacemaking often requires the threat or actual use of force, and most headmen have an acquired reputation for being *wateri*: fierce.

The social dynamics within villages are involved with giving and receiving marriageable girls. Marriages are arranged by older kin, usually men, who are brothers, uncles, and the father. It is a political process, for girls are promised in marriage while they are young, and the men who do this attempt to create alliances with other men via marriage exchanges. There is a shortage of women due in part to a sex-ratio imbalance in the younger age categories, but also complicated by the fact that some men have multiple wives. Most fighting within the village stems from sexual affairs or failure to deliver a promised woman—or out-and-out seizure of a married woman by some other man. This can lead to internal fighting and conflict of such an intensity that villages split up and fission, each group then becoming a new village and, often, enemies to each other.

But their conflicts are not blind, uncontrollable violence. They have a series of graded forms of violence that ranges from chest-pounding and club-fighting duels to out-and-out shooting to kill. This gives them a good deal of flexibility in settling disputes without immediate resort to lethal violence. In addition, they have developed patterns of alliance and friendship that serve to limit violence—trading and feasting with others in order to become friends (Figure 1.2). These alliances can, and often do, result in intervillage exchanges of marriageable women, which leads

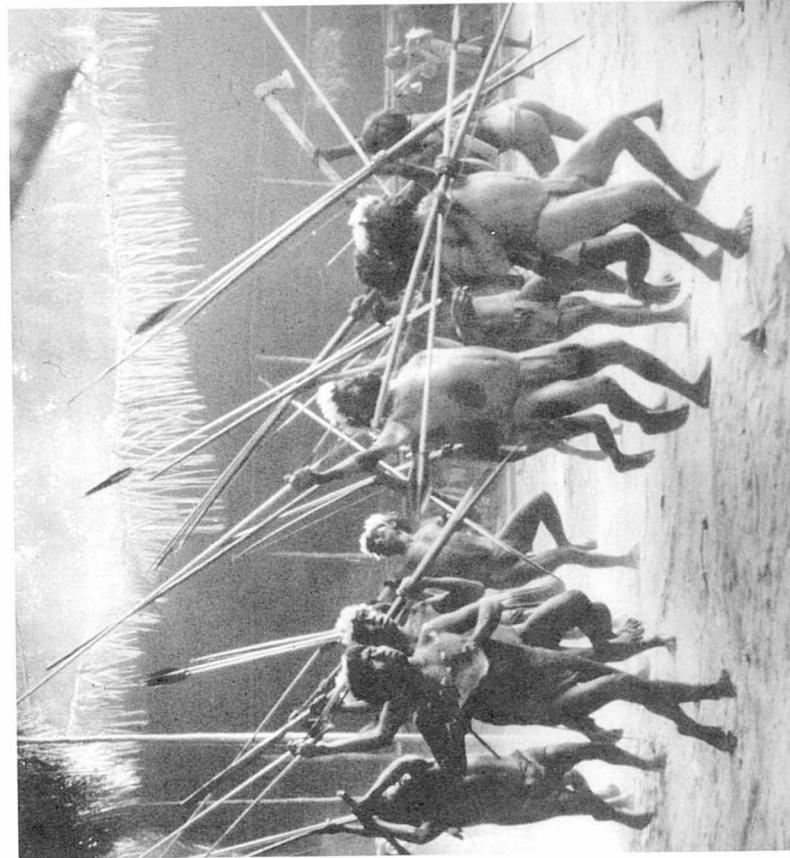
The Yanomamö fall into the category of Tropical Forest Indians called ‘foot people’. They avoid large rivers and live in interfluvial plains of the major rivers. They have neighbors to the north, Carib-speaking Ye’kwana, who are true ‘river people’. They make elegant, large dugout canoes and travel extensively along the major waterways. For the Yanomamö, a large stream is an obstacle and can be



*Figure 1.2. Käobawä, headman of Upper Bisau-si-teri, trading with his Shammatari allies for arrows, baskets, bam-mocks, and dogs.*

importance that aggression played in shaping their culture. I had the opportunity to witness a good many incidents that expressed individual vindictiveness on the one hand and collective bellicosity on the other hand. These ranged in seriousness from the ordinary incidents of wife beating and chest pounding to dueling and organized raids by parties that set out with the intention of ambushing and killing men from enemy villages. One of the villages discussed in the chapters that follow was raided approximately twenty-five times during my first 15 months of fieldwork—six times by the group among whom I was living. And, the history of every village I investigated, from 1964 to 1991, was intimately bound up in patterns of warfare with neighbors that shaped its politics and determined where it was found at any point in time and how it dealt with its current neighbors.

The fact that the Yanomamô have lived in a chronic state of warfare is reflected in their mythology, ceremonies, settlement pattern, political behavior, and marriage practices. Accordingly, I have organized this case study in such a way that students can appreciate the effects of warfare on Yanomamô culture in general and on their social organization and political relationships in particular (Figure 1.3).



*Figure 1.3. Visitors dancing as a group around the shabono during a formal feast.*

to additional animosity between villages. No good thing lasts forever, and most alliances crumble. Old friends become hostile and, occasionally, treacherous. Each village must therefore be keenly aware that its neighbors are fickle and must behave accordingly. The thin line between friendship and animosity must be traversed by the village leaders, whose political acumen and strategies are both admirable and complex.

Each village, then, is a replica of all others in a broad sense. But each village is part of a larger political, demographic, and ecological process, and it is difficult to attempt to understand the village without knowing something of the larger forces that affect it and its particular history with all its neighbors.

#### COLLECTING THE DATA IN THE FIELD

I have now spent over 60 months with Yanomamô, during which time I gradually learned their language and, up to a point, submerged myself in their culture and way of life.<sup>2</sup> As my research progressed, the thing that impressed me most was the

<sup>2</sup>I spent a total of 60 months among the Yanomamô between 1964 and 1991. The first edition of this case study was based on the first 15 months I spent among them in Venezuela. I have, at the time of this writing, made 20 field trips to the Yanomamô and this edition reflects the new information and understandings I have acquired over the years. I plan to return regularly to continue what has now turned into a life-long study.

I collected the data under somewhat trying circumstances, some of which I will describe to give a rough idea of what is generally meant when anthropologists speak of 'culture shock' and 'fieldwork.' It should be borne in mind, however, that each field situation is in many respects unique, so that the problems I encountered do not necessarily exhaust the range of possible problems other anthropologists have confronted in other areas. There are a few problems, however, that seem to be nearly universal among anthropological fieldworkers, particularly those having to do with eating, bathing, sleeping, lack of privacy, loneliness, or discovering that the people you are living with have a lower opinion of you than you have of them—or you yourself are not as culturally or emotionally 'flexible' as you assumed.

The Yanomamó can be difficult people to live with at times, but I have spoken to colleagues who have had difficulties living in the communities they studied. These things vary from society to society, and probably from one anthropologist to the next. I have also done limited fieldwork among the Yanomamó's northern neighbors, the Carib-speaking Ye'kwana Indians. By contrast to many experiences I had among the Yanomamó, the Ye'kwana were very pleasant and charming, all of them anxious to help me and honor bound to show any visitor the numerous courtesies of their system of etiquette. In short, they approached the image of 'primitive man' that I had conjured up in my mind before doing fieldwork, a kind of 'Rousseauian' view, and it was sheer pleasure to work with them. Other anthropologists have also noted sharp contrasts in the people they study from one field situation to another. One of the most startling examples of this is in the work of Colin Turnbull, who first studied the Ituri Pygmies (1965, 1983) and found them delightful to live with, but then studied the Ik (1972) of the desolate outcrops of the Kenya/Uganda/Sudan border region, a people he had difficulty coping with intellectually, emotionally, and physically. While it is possible that the anthropologist's reactions to a particular people are personal and idiosyncratic, it nevertheless remains true that there are enormous differences between whole peoples, differences that affect the anthropologist in often dramatic ways.

Hence, what I say about some of my experiences is probably equally true of the experiences of many other fieldworkers. I describe some of them here for the benefit of future anthropologists—because I think I could have profited by reading about the pitfalls and field problems of my own teachers. At the very least I might have been able to avoid some of my more stupid errors. In this regard there is a growing body of excellent descriptive work on field research. Students who plan to make a career in anthropology should consult these works, which cover a wide range of field situations in the ethnographic present.<sup>3</sup>

#### The Longest Day: The First One

My first day in the field illustrated to me what my teachers meant when they spoke of 'culture shock.' I had traveled in a small, aluminum rowboat propelled by a large

outboard motor for two and a half days. This took me from the territorial capital, a small town on the Orinoco River, deep into Yanomamó country. On the morning of the third day we reached a small mission settlement, the field 'headquarters' of a group of Americans who were working in two Yanomamó villages. The missionaries had come out of these villages to hold their annual conference on the progress of their mission work and were conducting their meetings when I arrived. We picked up a passenger at the mission station, James P. Barker, the first non-Yanomamó to make a sustained, permanent contact with the tribe (in 1950). He had just returned from a year's furlough in the United States, where I had earlier visited him before leaving for Venezuela. He agreed to accompany me to the village I had selected for my base of operations to introduce me to the Indians. This village was also his own home base, but he had not been there for over a year and did not plan to join me for another three months. Mr. Barker had been living with this particular group about five years.

We arrived at the village, Bisaasi-teri, about 2:00 p.m. and docked the boat along the muddy bank at the terminus of the path used by Yanomamó to fetch their drinking water. It was hot and muggy, and my clothing was soaked with perspiration. It clung uncomfortably to my body, as it did thereafter for the remainder of the work. The small biting gnats, *bareto*, were out in astronomical numbers, for it was the beginning of the dry season. My face and hands were swollen from the venom of their numerous stings. In just a few moments I was to meet my first Yanomamó, my first primitive man. What would he be like? I had visions of entering the village and seeing 125 social facts running about altruistically calling each other kinship terms and sharing food, each waiting and anxious to have me collect his genealogy. I would wear them out in turn. Would they like me? This was important to me; I wanted them to be so fond of me that they would adopt me into their kinship system and way of life. I had heard that successful anthropologists always get adopted by their people. I had learned during my seven years of anthropological training at the University of Michigan that kinship was equivalent to society in primitive tribes and that it was a moral way of life, 'moral' being something 'good' and 'desirable.' I was determined to work my way into their moral system of kinship and become a member of their society—to be 'accepted' by them.

#### How Did They Accept You?

My heart began to pound as we approached the village and heard the buzz of activity within the circular compound. Mr. Barker commented that he was anxious to see if any changes had taken place while he was away and wondered how many of them had died during his absence. I nervously felt my back pocket to make sure that my notebook was still there and felt personally more secure when I touched it.

The entrance to the village was covered over with brush and dry palm leaves. We pushed them aside to expose the low opening to the village. The excitement of meeting my first Yanomamó was almost unbearable as I duck-waddled through the low passage into the village clearing.

I looked up and gasped when I saw a dozen burly, naked, sweaty, hideous men staring at us down the shafts of their drawn arrows! Immense wads of green tobacco were stuck between their lower teeth and lips making them look even more hideous,

<sup>3</sup>See Spindler (1970) for a general discussion of field research by anthropologists who have worked in other cultures. Nancy Howell has recently written a very useful book (1990) on some of the medical, personal, and environmental hazards of doing field research, which includes a selected bibliography on other fieldwork problems.

and strands of dark-green slime dripped or hung from their nostrils—strands so long that they clung to their pectoral muscles or drizzled down their chins. We arrived at the village while the men were blowing a hallucinogenic drug up their noses. One of the side effects of the drug is a runny nose. The mucus is always saturated with the green powder and they usually let it run freely from their nostrils (Figure 1.4). My next discovery was that there were a dozen or so vicious, underfed dogs snapping at my legs, circling me as if I were to be their next meal. I just stood there holding my notebook, helpless and pathetic. Then the stench of the decaying vegetation and filth hit me and I almost got sick. I was horrified. What kind of welcome was this for the person who came here to live with you and learn your way of life, to become friends with you? They put their weapons down when they recognized Barker and returned to their chanting, keeping a nervous eye on the village entrances.

We had arrived just after a serious fight. Seven women had been abducted the day before by a neighboring group, and the local men and their guests had just that morning recovered five of them in a brutal club fight that nearly ended in a shooting war. The abductors, angry because they had lost five of their seven new captives, vowed to raid the Bissasi-teri. When we arrived and entered the village unexpectedly, the Indians feared that we were the raiders. On several occasions during

the next two hours the men in the village jumped to their feet, armed themselves, nocked their arrows and waited nervously for the noise outside the village to be identified. My enthusiasm for collecting ethnographic facts diminished in proportion to the number of times such an alarm was raised. In fact, I was relieved when Barker suggested that we sleep across the river for the evening. It would be safer over there.

As we walked down the path to the boat, I pondered the wisdom of having decided to spend a year and a half with these people before I had even seen what they were like. I am not ashamed to admit that had there been a diplomatic way out, I would have ended my fieldwork then and there. I did not look forward to the next day—and months—when I would be left alone with the Yanomamô; I did not speak a word of their language, and they were decidedly different from what I had imagined them to be. The whole situation was depressing, and I wondered why I ever decided to switch from physics and engineering in the first place. I had not eaten all day, I was soaking wet from perspiration, the *bareto* were biting me, and I was covered with red pigment, the result of a dozen or so complete examinations I had been given by as many very pushy Yanomamô men. These examinations capped an otherwise grim day. The men would blow their noses into their hands, flick as much of the mucus off that would separate in a snap of the wrist, wipe the residue into their hair, and then carefully examine my face, arms, legs, hair, and the contents of my pockets. I asked Barker how to say, 'Your hands are dirty'; my comments were met by the Yanomamô in the following way: They would 'clean' their hands by spitting a quantity of slimy tobacco juice into them, rub them together, grin, and then proceed with the examination.

Mr. Barker and I crossed the river and slung our hammocks. When he pulled his hammock out of a rubber bag, a heavy, disagreeable odor of mildewed cotton and stale wood smoke came with it. 'Even the missionaries are filthy,' I thought to myself. Within two weeks, everything I owned smelled the same way, and I lived with that odor for the remainder of the fieldwork. My own habits of personal cleanliness declined to such levels that I didn't even mind being examined by the Yanomamô, as I was not much cleaner than they were after I had adjusted to the circumstances. It is difficult to blow your nose gracefully when you are stark naked and the invention of handkerchiefs is millennia away.

#### Life in the Jungle: Oatmeal, Peanut Butter, and Bugs

It isn't easy to plop down in the Amazon Basin for a year and get immediately into the anthropological swing of things. You have been told about horrible diseases, snakes, jaguars, electric eels, little spiny fish that will swim up your urine into your penis, quicksand, and getting lost. Some of the dangers are real, but your imagination makes them more real and threatening than many of them really are. What my teachers never bothered to advise me about, however, was the mundane, unexciting, and trivial stuff—like eating, defecating, sleeping, or keeping clean. These turned out to be the bane of my existence during the first several months of field research. I set up my household in Barker's abandoned mud hut, a few yards from the village of Bisiasi-teri, and immediately set to work building my own mud/hatch



Figure 1.4. Yanomamô man with monkey-tail headband and with ebene, a hallucinogenic snuff, drizzling from his nostrils.

but with the help of the Yanomamö. Meanwhile, I had to eat and try to do my 'field research.' I soon discovered that it was an enormously time-consuming task to maintain my own body in the manner to which it had grown accustomed in the relatively antiseptic environment of the northern United States. Either I could be relatively well fed and relatively comfortable in a fresh change of clothes and do very little fieldwork, or I could do considerably more fieldwork and be less well fed and less comfortable.

It is appalling how complicated it can be to make oatmeal in the jungle. First, I had to make two trips to the river to haul the water. Next, I had to prime my kerosene stove with alcohol to get it burning, a tricky procedure when you are trying to mix powdered milk and fill a coffee pot at the same time. The alcohol prime was always burned out before I could turn the kerosene on, and I would have to start all over. Or, I would turn the kerosene on, optimistically hoping that the Coleman element was still hot enough to vaporize the fuel, and start a small fire in my palm-thatched hut as the liquid kerosene squirted all over the table and walls and then ignited. Many amused Yanomamö onlookers quickly learned the English phrase 'Oh, shit!', and, once they discovered that the phrase offended and irritated the missionaries, they used it as often as they could in their presence. I usually had to start over with the alcohol. Then I had to boil the oatmeal and pick the bugs out of it. All my supplies, of course, were carefully stored in rat-proof, moisture-proof, and insect-proof containers, not one of which ever served its purpose adequately. Just taking things out of the multiplicity of containers and repacking them afterward was a minor project in itself. By the time I had hauled the water to cook with, unpacked my food, prepared the oatmeal, milk, and coffee, heated water for dishes, washed and dried the dishes, repacked the food in the containers, stored the containers in locked trunks, and cleaned up my mess, the ceremony of preparing breakfast had brought me almost up to lunch time!

Eating three meals a day was simply out of the question. I solved the problem by eating a single meal that could be prepared in a single container, or, at most, in two containers, washed my dishes only when there were no clean ones left, using cold river water, and wore each change of clothing at least a week to cut down on my laundry problem—a courageous undertaking in the tropics. I reeked like a jockstrap that had been left to mildew in the bottom of some dark gym locker. I also became less concerned about sharing my provisions with the rats, insects, Yanomamö, and the elements, thereby eliminating the need for my complicated storage process. I was able to last most of the day on *café con leche*, heavily sugared espresso coffee diluted about five to one with hot milk. I would prepare this in the evening and store it in a large thermos. Frequently, my single meal was no more complicated than a can of sardines and a package of soggy crackers. But at least two or three times a week I would do something 'special' and sophisticated, like make a batch of oatmeal or boil rice and add a can of tuna fish or tomato paste to it. I even saved time by devising a water system that obviated the trips to the river. I had a few sheets of tin roofing brought in and made a rain water trap; I caught the water on the tin surface, funnelled it into an empty gasoline drum, and then ran a plastic hose from the drum to my hut. When the drum was exhausted in the dry season, I would get a few Yanomamö boys to fill it with buckets of water from the river, paying them with crackers, of which they grew all too fond all too soon.

I ate much less when I traveled with the Yanomamö to visit other villages. Most of the time my travel diet consisted of roasted or boiled green plantains (cooking bananas) that I obtained from the Yanomamö, but I always carried a few cans of sardines with me in case I got lost or stayed away longer than I had planned. I found peanut butter and crackers a very nourishing 'trail' meal, and a simple one to prepare. It was nutritious and portable, and only one tool was required to make the meal: a hunting knife that could be cleaned by wiping the blade on a convenient leaf. More importantly, it was one of the few foods the Yanomamö would let me eat in relative peace. It looked suspiciously like animal feces to them, an impression I encouraged. I referred to the peanut butter as the feces of babies or 'cattle'. They found this disgusting and repugnant. They did not know what 'cattle' were, but were increasingly aware that I ate several canned products of such an animal. Tin cans were thought of as containers made of 'machete skins', but how the cows got inside was always a mystery to them. I went out of my way to describe my foods in such a way as to make them sound unpalatable to them, for it gave me some peace of mind while I ate. They wouldn't beg for a share of something that was too horrible to contemplate. Fieldworkers develop strange defense mechanisms and strategies, and this was one of my own forms of adaptation to the fieldwork. On another occasion I was eating a can of frankfurters and growing very weary of the demands from one of the onlookers for a share in my meal. When he finally asked what I was eating, I replied: 'Beef.' He then asked: 'Shaki?'<sup>4</sup> What part of the animal are you eating? To which I replied, 'Guess.' He muttered a contemptuous epithet, but stopped asking for a share. He got back at me later, as we shall see.

Meals were a problem in a way that had nothing to do with the inconvenience of preparing them. Food sharing is important to the Yanomamö in the context of displaying friendship. 'I am hungry!' is almost a form of greeting with them. I could not possibly have brought enough food with me to feed the entire village, yet they seemed to overlook this logistic fact as they begged for my food. What became fixed in their minds was the fact that I did not share my food with whomsoever was present—usually a small crowd—at each and every meal. Nor could I easily enter their system of reciprocity with respect to food. Every time one of them 'gave' me something 'freely', he would dog me for months to 'pay him back', not necessarily with food but with knives, fishhooks, axes, and so on. Thus, if I accepted a plantain from someone in a different village while I was on a visit, he would most likely visit me in the future and demand a machete as payment for the time that he 'fed' me. I usually reacted to these kinds of demands by giving a banana, the customary reciprocity in their culture—food for food—but this would be a disappointment for the individual who had nursed visions of that single plantain growing into a machete overtime. Many years after beginning my fieldwork I was approached by one of the prominent men who demanded a machete for a piece of meat he claimed he had given me five or six years earlier.

Despite the fact that most of them knew I would not share my food with them at their request, some of them always showed up at my hut during mealtime. I gradually resigned myself to this and learned to ignore their persistent demands while I ate. Some of them would get angry because I failed to give in, but most of

<sup>4</sup>Their could not pronounce "Chagnon." It sounded to them like their name for a pesky bee, shaki, and that is what they called me: pesky, nosy bee.

them accepted it as just a peculiarity of the subhuman foreigner who had come to live among them. If or when I did accede to a request for a share of my food, my hut quickly filled with Yanomamö, each demanding their share of the food that I had just given to one of them. Their begging for food was not provoked by hunger, but by a desire to try something new and to attempt to establish a coercive relationship in which I would accede to a demand. If one received something, all others would immediately have to test the system to see if they, too, could coerce me.

A few of them went out of their way to make my meals downright unpleasant—to spite me for not sharing, especially if it was a food that they had tried before and liked, or a food that was part of their own cuisine. For example, I was eating a cracker with peanut butter and honey one day. The Yanomamö will do almost anything for honey, one of the most prized delicacies in their own diet. One of my cynical onlookers—the fellow who had earlier watched me eating frankfurters—immediately recognized the honey and knew that I would not share the tiny precious bottle. It would be futile to even ask. Instead, he glared at me and queried icily, 'Shäki! What kind of animal semen are you pouring onto your food and eating?' His question had the desired effect and my meal ended.

Finally, there was the problem of being lonely and separated from your own kind, especially your family. I tried to overcome this by seeking personal friendships among the Yanomamö. This usually complicated the matter because all my 'friends' simply used my confidence to gain privileged access to my hut and my cache of steel tools and trade goods—and looted me when I wasn't looking. I would be bitterly disappointed that my erstwhile friend thought no more of me than to finesse our personal relationship exclusively with the intention of getting at my locked up possessions, and my depression would hit new lows every time I discovered this. The loss of the possessions bothered me much less than the shock that I was, as far as most of them were concerned, nothing more than a source of desirable items. No holds were barred in relieving me of these, since I was considered something subhuman, a non-Yanomamö.

The hardest thing to learn to live with was the incessant, passionate, and often aggressive demands they would make. It would become so unbearable at times that I would have to lock myself in my hut periodically just to escape from it. Privacy is one of our culture's most satisfying achievements, one you never think about until you suddenly have none. It is like not appreciating how good your left thumb feels until someone hits it with a hammer. But I did not want privacy for its own sake; rather, I simply had to get away from the begging. Day and night for almost the entire time I lived with the Yanomamö I was plagued by such demands as: 'Give me a knife, I am poor!'; 'If you don't take me with you on your next trip to Widokaiyateri, I'll chop a hole in your canoe!'; 'Take us hunting up the Mavaca River with your shotgun or we won't help you!'; 'Give me some matches so I can trade with the Reyaboböwei-teri, and be quick about it or I'll hit you!'; 'Share your food with me, or I'll burn your hut!'; 'Give me a flashlight so I can hunt at night!'; 'Give me all your medicine, I itch all over!'; 'Give me an ax or I'll break into your hut when you are away and steal all of them!' And so I was bombarded by such demands day after day, month after month, until I could not bear to see a Yanomamö at times. It was not as difficult to become calloused to the incessant begging as it was to

ignore the sense of urgency, the impassioned tone of voice and whining, or the intimidation and aggression with which many of the demands were made. It was likewise difficult to adjust to the fact that the Yanomamö refused to accept 'No' for an answer until or unless it seethed with passion and intimidation—which it did after a few months. So persistent and characteristic is the begging that the early 'semi-official' maps made by the Venezuelan Malaria Control Service (*Malariaología*) designated the site of their first permanent field station, next to the village of Bisasasi-teri, as *Yababuhiti*: 'Gimme.' I had to become like the Yanomamö to be able to get along with them on their terms: somewhat sly, aggressive, intimidating, and pushy.

It became indelibly clear to me shortly after I arrived there that had I failed to adjust in this fashion I would have lost six months of supplies to them in a single day or would have spent most of my time ferrying them around in my canoe or taking them on long hunting trips. As it was, I did spend a considerable amount of time doing these things and did succumb often to their outrageous demands for axes and machetes, at least at first, for things changed as I became more fluent in their language and learned how to defend myself socially as well as verbally. More importantly, had I failed to demonstrate that I could not be pushed around beyond a certain point, I would have been the subject of far more ridicule, theft, and practical jokes than was the actual case. In short, I had to acquire a certain proficiency in their style of interpersonal politics and to learn how to imply subtly that certain potentially undesirable, but unspecified, consequences might follow if they did such and such to me. They do this to each other incessantly in order to establish precisely the point at which they cannot goad or intimidate an individual any further without precipitating some kind of retaliation. As soon as I realized this and gradually acquired the self-confidence to adopt this strategy, it became clear that much of the intimidation was calculated to determine my flash point or my 'last ditch' position—and I got along much better with them. Indeed, I even regained some lost ground. It was sort of like a political, interpersonal game that everyone had to play, but one in which each individual sooner or later had to give evidence that his bluffs and implied threats could be backed up with a sanction. I suspect that the frequency of wife beating is a component in this syndrome, since men can display their *waiteri* (ferocity) and 'show' others that they are capable of great violence. Beating a wife with a club is one way of displaying ferocity, one that does not expose the man to much danger—unless the wife has concerned, aggressive brothers in the village who will come to her aid. Apparently an important thing in wife beating is that the man has displayed his presumed potential for violence and the intended message is that other men ought to treat him with circumspection, caution, and even deference.

After six months, the level of Yanomamö demand was tolerable in Bisasasi-teri, the village I used for my base of operations. We had adjusted somewhat to each other and knew what to expect with regard to demands for food, trade goods, and favors. Had I elected to remain in just one Yanomamö village for the entire duration of my first 15 months of fieldwork, the experience would have been far more enjoyable than it actually was. However, as I began to understand the social and political dynamics of this village, it became patently obvious that I would have to travel to many other villages to determine the demographic bases and political

histories that lay behind what I could understand in the village of Bisasí-terí. I began making regular trips to some dozen neighboring Yanomamö villages as my language fluency improved. I collected local genealogies there, or rechecked and cross-checked those I had collected elsewhere. Hence, the intensity of begging was relatively constant and relatively high for the duration of my fieldwork, for I had to establish my personal position in each village I visited and revisited.

For the most part, my own 'fierceness' took the form of shouting back at the Yanomamö as loudly and as passionately as they shouted at me, especially at first, when I did not know much of the language. As I became more fluent and learned more about their political tactics, I became more sophisticated in the art of bluffing and brinkmanship. For example, I paid one young man a machete (then worth about \$2.50) to cut a palm tree and help me make boards from the wood. I used these to fashion a flooring in the bottom of my dugout canoe to keep my possessions out of the water that always seeped into the canoe and sloshed around. That afternoon I was working with one of my informants in the village. The long-awaited mission supply boat arrived and most of the Yanomamö ran out of the village to see the supplies and try to beg items from the crew. I continued to work in the village for another hour or so and then went down to the river to visit with the men on the supply boat. When I reached the river I noticed, with anger and frustration, that the Yanomamö had chopped up all my new floor boards to use as crude paddles to get their own canoes across the river to the supply boat.<sup>5</sup> I knew that if I ignored this abuse I would have invited the Yanomamö to take even greater liberties with my possessions in the future. I got into my canoe, crossed the river, and docked amidst their flimsy, leaky craft. I shouted loudly to them, attracting their attention. They were somewhat sheepish, but all had mischievous grins on their impish faces. A few of them came down to the canoe, where I proceeded with a spirited lecture that revealed my anger at their audacity and license. I explained that I had just that morning paid one of them a machete for bringing me the palmwood, how hard I had worked to shape each board and place it in the canoe, how carefully and painstakingly I had tied each one in with vines, how much I had perspired, how many *bareto* bites I had suffered, and so on. Then, with exaggerated drama and finality, I withdrew my hunting knife as their grins disappeared and cut each one of their canoes loose and set it into the strong current of the Orinoco River where it was immediately swept up and carried downstream. I left without looking back and huffed over to the other side of the river to resume my work.

They managed to borrow another canoe and, after some effort, recovered their dugouts. Later, the headman of the village told me, with an approving chuckle, that I had done the correct thing. Everyone in the village, except, of course, the culprits, supported and defended my actions—and my status increased as a consequence. Whenever I defended myself in such ways I got along much better with the Yanomamö and gradually acquired the respect of many of them. A good deal of

their demeanor toward me was directed with the forethought of establishing the point at which I would draw the line and react defensively. Many of them, years later, reminisced about the early days of my fieldwork when I was timid and *mohode* ('stupid') and a little afraid of them, those golden days when it was easy to bully me into giving my goods away for almost nothing.

Theft was the most persistent situation that required some sort of defensive action. I simply could not keep everything I owned locked in trunks, and the Yanomamö came into my hut and left at will. I eventually developed a very effective strategy for recovering almost all the stolen items; I would simply ask a child who took the item and then I would confiscate that person's hammock when he was not around, giving a spirited lecture to all who could hear on the antisociality of thievery as I stalked off in a faked rage with the thief's hammock slung over my shoulder. Nobody ever attempted to stop me from doing this, and almost all of them told me that my technique for recovering my possessions was ingenious. By nightfall the thief would appear at my hut with the stolen item or send it over with someone else to make an exchange to recover his hammock. He would be heckled by his covillagers for having been caught and for being embarrassed into returning my item for his hammock. The explanation was usually, 'I just borrowed your ax! I wouldn't think of stealing it.'

#### Collecting Yanomamö Genealogies and Reproductive Histories

My purpose for living among the Yanomamö was to systematically collect certain kinds of information on genealogy, reproduction, marriage practices, kinship, settlement patterns, migrations, and politics. Much of the fundamental data was genealogical—who was the parent of whom, tracing these connections as far back in time as Yanomamö knowledge and memory permitted. Since 'primitive' society is organized largely by kinship relationships, figuring out the social organization of the Yanomamö essentially meant collecting extensive data on genealogies, marriage, and reproduction. This turned out to be a staggering and very frustrating problem. I could not have deliberately picked a more difficult people to work with in this regard. They have very stringent name taboos and eschew mentioning the names of prominent living people as well as all deceased friends and relatives. They attempt to name people in such a way that when the person dies and they can no longer use his or her name, the loss of the word in their language is not inconvenient. Hence, they name people for specific and minute parts of things, such as 'toenail of sloth', 'whisker of howler monkey', and so on, thereby being able to retain the words 'toenail' or 'whisker' but somewhat handicapped in referring to these anatomical parts of sloths and monkeys respectively. The taboo is maintained even for the living, for one mark of prestige is the courtesy others show you by not using your name publicly. This is particularly true for men, who are much more competitive for status than women in this culture, and it is fascinating to watch boys grow into young men, demanding to be called either by a kinship term in public, or by a tekinonymous reference such as 'brother of Himotoma' (see Glossary). The more effective they are at getting others to avoid using their names, the more public acknowledgment there is that they are of high esteem and social standing. Helena

<sup>5</sup>The Yanomamö in this region acquired canoes very recently. The missionaries would purchase them from the Ye'kwana Indians to the north for money, and then trade them to the Yanomamö in exchange for labor, produce, or 'informant' work in translating. It should be emphasized that those Yanomamö who lived on navigable portions of the Upper Orinoco River moved there recently from the deep forest in order to have contact with the missionaries and acquire the trade goods the missionaries (and their supply system) brought.

At first I tried to use kinship terms alone to collect genealogies, but Yanomamö kinship terms, like the kinship terms in all systems, are ambiguous at some point because they include so many possible relatives (as the term 'uncle' does in our own kinship system). Again, their system of kin classification merges many relatives that we 'separate' by using different terms: They call both their actual father and their father's brother by a single term, whereas we call one 'father' and the other 'uncle.' I was forced, therefore, to resort to personal names to collect unambiguous genealogies or 'pedigrees'. They quickly grasped what I was up to and that I was determined to learn everyone's 'true name', which amounted to an invasion of their system of prestige and etiquette, if not a flagrant violation of it. They reacted to this in a brilliant but devastating manner: They invented false names for everybody in the village and systematically learned them, freely revealing to me the 'true identities of everyone. I smugly thought I had cracked the system and enthusiastically constructed elaborate genealogies over a period of some five months. They enjoyed watching me learn their names and kinship relationships. I naively assumed that I would get the 'truth' to each question and the best information by working in public. This set the stage for converting my serious project into an amusing hoax of the grandest proportions. Each 'informant' would try to outdo his peers by inventing a name even more preposterous or ridiculous than what I had been given by someone earlier, the explanations for discrepancies being 'Well, he has two names and this is the other one.' They even fabricated devilishly improbable genealogical relationships, such as someone being married to his grandmother, or worse yet, to his mother-in-law, a grotesque and horrifying prospect to the Yanomamö. I would collect the desired names and relationships by having my informant whisper the name of the person softly into my ear, noting that he or she was the parent of such and such or the child of such and such, and so on. Everyone who was observing my work would then insist that I repeat the name aloud, roaring in hysterical laughter as I clumsily pronounced the name, sometimes laughing until tears streamed down their faces. The 'named' person would usually react with annoyance and hiss some untranslatable epithet at me, which served to reassure me that I had the 'true' name.

I conscientiously checked and rechecked the names and relationships with multiple informants, pleased to see the inconsistencies disappear as my genealogy sheets filled with those desirable little triangles and circles, thousands of them. My anthropological bubble was burst when I visited a village about 10 hours' walk to the southwest of Bisasaki-teri some five months after I had begun collecting genealogies on the Bisasaki-teri. I was chatting with the local headman of this village and happened to casually drop the name of the wife of the Bisasaki-teri headman. A stunned silence followed, and then a villagewide roar of uncontrollable laughter, choking, gasping, and howling followed. It seems that I thought the Bisasaki-teri headman was married to a woman named "hairy cunt." It also seems that the Bisasaki-teri headman had a son called "asshole" and a daughter called "fart breath."

And so on. Blood welled up to my temples as I realized that I had nothing but nonsense to show for my five months of dedicated genealogical effort, and I had to throw away almost all the information I had collected on this the most basic set of data I had come there to get. I understood at that point why the Bisasaki-teri laughed so hard when they made me repeat the names of their covillagers, and why the 'named' person would react with anger and annoyance as I pronounced his 'name' aloud.

I was forced to change research strategy—to make an understatement to describe this serious situation. The first thing I did was to begin working in private with my informants to eliminate the horseplay and distraction that attended public sessions. Once I did this, my informants, who did not know what others were telling me, began to agree with each other and I managed to begin learning the 'real' names, starting first with children and gradually moving to adult women and then, cautiously, to adult men, a sequence that reflected the relative degree of intransigence at revealing names of people. As I built up a core of accurate genealogies and relationships—a core that all independent informants had verified repetitiously—I could 'test' any new informant by soliciting his or her opinion and knowledge about these 'core' people whose names and relationships I was confident were accurate. I was, in this fashion, able to immediately weed out the mischievous informants who persisted in trying to deceive me. Still, I had great difficulty getting the names of dead kinsmen, the only accurate way to extend genealogies back in time. Even my best informants continued to falsify names of the deceased, especially closely related deceased. The falsifications at this point were not serious and turned out to be readily corrected as my interviewing methods improved (see below). Most of the deceptions were of the sort where the informant would give me the name of a living man as the father of some child whose actual father was dead, a response that enabled the informant to avoid using the name of a deceased kinsman or friend. The quality of a genealogy depends in part on the number of generations it embraces, and the name taboo prevented me from making any substantial progress in learning about the deceased ancestors of the present population. Without this information, I could not, for example, document marriage patterns and interfamilial alliances through time. I had to rely on older informants for this information, but these were the most reluctant informants of all for this data. As I became more proficient in the language and more skilled at detecting fabrications, my informants became better at deception. One old man was particularly cunning and persuasive, following a sort of Mark Twain policy that the most effective lie is a sincere lie. He specialized in making a ceremony out of false names for dead ancestors. He would look around nervously to make sure nobody was listening outside my hut, enjoin me never to mention the name again, become very anxious and spooky, and grab me by the head to whisper a secret name into my ear. I was always elated after a session with him, because I managed to add several generations of ancestors for particular members of the village. Others steadfastly refused to give me such information. To show my gratitude, I paid him quadruple the rate that I had been paying the others. When word got around that I had increased the pay for genealogical and demographic information, volunteers began pouring into my hut to 'work' for me, assuring me of their changed ways and keen desire to divest themselves of the 'truth'.

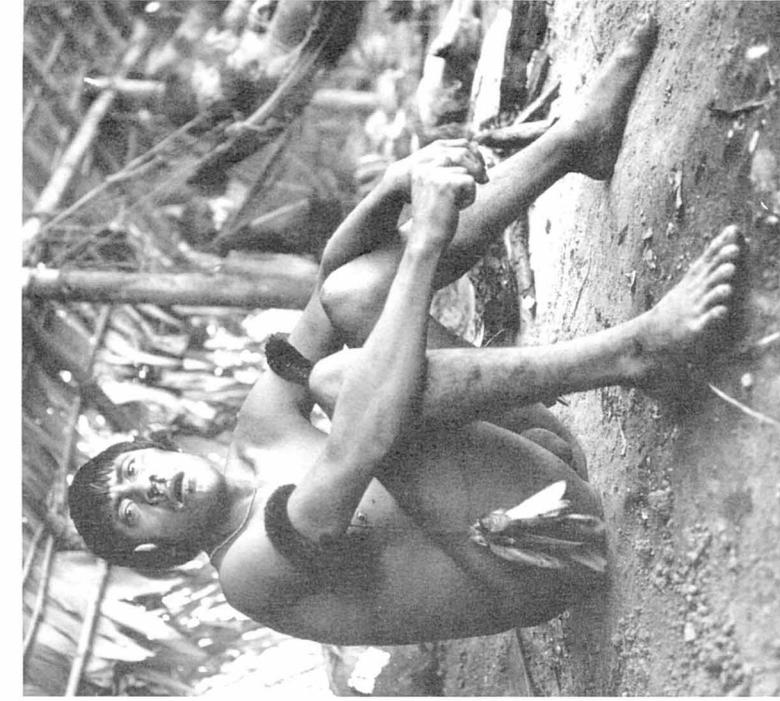


Figure 1.5 Rerebawä, one of the author's closest friends and a constant companion on long trips into remote villages.

I discovered that the old man was lying quite by accident. A club fight broke out in the village one day, the result of a dispute over the possession of a woman. She had been promised to a young man in the village, a man named Rerebawä, who was particularly aggressive. He had married into Bisasí-teri and was doing his 'bride service'—a period of several years during which he had to provide game for his wife's father and mother, provide them with wild foods he might collect, and help them in certain gardening and other tasks. Rerebawä had already been given one of the daughters in marriage and was promised her younger sister as his second wife. He was enraged when the younger sister, then about 16 years old, began having an affair with another young man in the village, Bákotawä, making no attempt to conceal it. Rerebawä challenged Bákotawä to a club fight. He swaggered boisterously out to the duel with his 10-foot-long club, a roof-pole he had cut from the house on the spur of the moment, as is the usual procedure. He hurled insult after insult at both Bákotawä and his father, trying to goad them into a fight. His insults were bitter and nasty. They tolerated them for a few moments, but Rerebawä's biting insults provoked them to rage. Finally, they stormed angrily out of their hammocks and ripped out roof-poles, now returning the insults verbally, and rushed to the village clearing. Rerebawä continued to insult them, goading them into striking him on the head with their equally long clubs. Had either of them struck his head—which he held out conspicuously for them to swing at—he would then have the right to take his turn on their heads with his club. His opponents were intimidated by his fury, and simply backed down, refusing to strike him, and the argument ended. He had intimidated them into submission. All three retired pompously to their respective hammocks, exchanging nasty insults as they departed. But Rerebawä had won the showdown and thereafter swaggered around the village, insulting the two men behind their backs at every opportunity. He was genuinely angry with them, to the point of calling the older man by the name of his long-deceased father. I quickly seized on this incident as an opportunity to collect an accurate genealogy and confidentially asked Rerebawä about his adversary's ancestors. Rerebawä had been particularly 'pushy' with me up to this point, but we soon became warm friends and staunch allies: We were both 'outsiders' in Bisasí-teri and, although he was a Yanomamô, he nevertheless had to put up with some considerable amount of pointed teasing and scorn from the locals, as all unmarried 'sons-in-law' must (Figure 1.5). He gave me the information I requested of his adversary's deceased ancestors, almost with devilish glee. I asked about dead ancestors of other people in the village and got prompt, unequivocal answers: He was angry with everyone in the village. When I compared his answers to those of the old man, it was obvious that one of them was lying. I then challenged his answers. He explained, in a sort of 'you damned fool, don't you know better?' tone of voice that everyone in the village knew the old man was lying to me and gloating over it when I was out of earshot. The names the old man had given to me were names of dead ancestors of the members of a village so far away that he thought I would never have occasion to check them out authoritatively. As it turned out, Rerebawä knew most of the people in that distant village and recognized the names given by the old man.

I then went over all my Bisasí-teri genealogies with Rerebawä, genealogies I had presumed to be close to their final form. I had to revise them all because of the numerous lies and falsifications they contained, much of it provided by the sly old man. Once again, after months of work, I had to recheck everything with Rerebawä's aid. Only the living members of the nuclear families turned out to be accurate; the deceased ancestors were mostly fabrications.

Discouraging as it was to have to recheck everything all over again, it was a major turning point in my fieldwork. Thereafter, I began taking advantage of local arguments and animosities in selecting my informants, and used more extensively informants who had married into the village in the recent past. I also began traveling more regularly to other villages at this time to check on genealogies, seeking out villages whose members were on strained terms with the people about whom I wanted information. I would then return to my base in the village of Bisasí-teri and check with local informants the accuracy of the new information. I had to be careful

in this work and scrupulously select my local informants in such a way that I would not be inquiring about *their* closely related kin. Thus, for each of my local informants, I had to make lists of names of certain deceased people that I dared not mention in their presence. But despite this precaution, I would occasionally hit a new name that would put some informants into a rage, or into a surly mood, such as that of a dead 'brother' or 'sister'<sup>6</sup> whose existence had not been indicated to me by other informants. This usually terminated my day's work with that informant, for he or she would be too touchy or upset to continue any further, and I would be reluctant to take a chance on accidentally discovering another dead close kinsman soon after discovering the first.

These were unpleasant experiences, and occasionally dangerous as well, depending on the temperament of my informant. On one occasion I was planning to visit a village that had been raided recently by one of their enemies. A woman, whose name I had on my census list for that village, had been killed by the raiders. Killing women is considered to be bad form in Yanomamö warfare, but this woman was deliberately killed for revenge. The raiders were unable to bushwhack some man who stepped out of the village at dawn to urinate, so they shot a volley of arrows over the roof into the village and beat a hasty retreat. Unfortunately, one of the arrows struck and killed a woman, an accident. For that reason, her village's raiders *deliberately* sought out and killed a woman in retaliation—whose name was on my list. My reason for going to the village was to update my census data on a name-by-name basis and estimate the ages of all the residents. I knew I had the name of the dead woman in my list, but nobody would dare to utter her name so I could remove it. I knew that I would be in very serious trouble if I got to the village and said her name aloud, and I desperately wanted to remove it from my list. I called on one of my regular and usually cooperative informants and asked him to tell me the woman's name. He refused adamantly, explaining that she was a close relative—and was angry that I even raised the topic with him. I then asked him if he would let me whisper the names of *all* the women of that village in his ear, and he would simply have to nod when I hit the right name. We had been 'friends' for some time, and I thought I was able to predict his reaction, and thought that our friendship was good enough to use this procedure. He agreed to the procedure, and I began whispering the names of the women, one by one. We were alone in my hut so that nobody would know what we were doing and nobody could hear us. I read the names softly, continuing to the next when his response was a negative. When I ultimately hit the dead woman's name, he flew out of his chair, enraged and trembling violently, his arm raised to strike me: 'You son-of-a-bitch!' he screamed. 'If you say her name in my presence again, I'll kill you in an instant!' I sat there, bewildered, shocked, and confused. And frightened, as much because of his reaction as because I could imagine what might happen to me should I unknowingly visit a village to check genealogy accuracy without knowing that someone had just died there or had been shot by raiders since my last visit. I reflected on the several articles I had read as a graduate student that explained the 'genealogical method,' but could not recall anything about its being a potentially

lethal undertaking. My furious informant left my hut, never again to be invited back to be an informant. I had other similar experiences in different villages, but I was always fortunate in that the dead person had been dead for some time, or was not very closely related to the individual into whose ear I whispered the forbidden name. I was usually cautioned by one of the men to desist from saying any more names lest I get people 'angry'.<sup>7</sup>

#### Kaobawä: The Bisasati-teri Headman Volunteers to Help Me

I had been working on the genealogies for nearly a year when another individual came to my aid. It was Kägobawä, the headman of Upper Bisasati-teri. The village of Bisasati-teri was split into two components, each with its own garden and own circular house. Both were in sight of each other. However, the intensity and frequency of internal bickering and argumentation was so high that they decided to split into two separate groups but remain close to each other for protection in case they were raided. One group was downstream from the other; I refer to that group as the 'Lower' Bisasati-teri and call Kägobawä's group 'Upper' (upstream) Bisasati-teri, a convenience they themselves adopted after separating from each other. I spent most of my time with the members of Kägobawä's group, some 200 people when I first arrived there. I did not have much contact with Kägobawä during the early months of my work. He was a somewhat retiring, quiet man, and among the Yanomamö, the outsider has little time to notice the rare quiet ones when most everyone else is in the front row, pushing and demanding attention. He showed up at my hut one day after all the others had left. He had come to volunteer to help me with the genealogies. He was 'poor,' he explained, and needed a machete. He would work only on the condition that I did not ask him about his own parents and other very close kinsmen who had died. He also added that he would not lie to me as the others had done in the past.

This was perhaps the single most important event in my first 15 months of field research, for out of this fortuitous circumstance evolved a very warm friendship, and among the many things following from it was a wealth of accurate information on the political history of Kägobawä's village and related villages, highly detailed genealogical information, sincere and useful advise to me, and hundreds of valuable insights into the Yanomamö way of life. Kägobawä's familiarity with his group's history and his candidness were remarkable (Figure 1.6). His knowledge of details was almost encyclopedic, his memory almost photographic. More than that, he was enthusiastic about making sure I learned the truth, and he encouraged me, indeed, *demanded* that I learn all details I might otherwise have ignored. If there were subtle details he could not recite on the spot, he would advise me to wait until he could check things out with someone else in the village. He would often do this clandestinely, giving me a report the next day, telling me who revealed the new information and whether or not he thought they were in a position to know it. With the

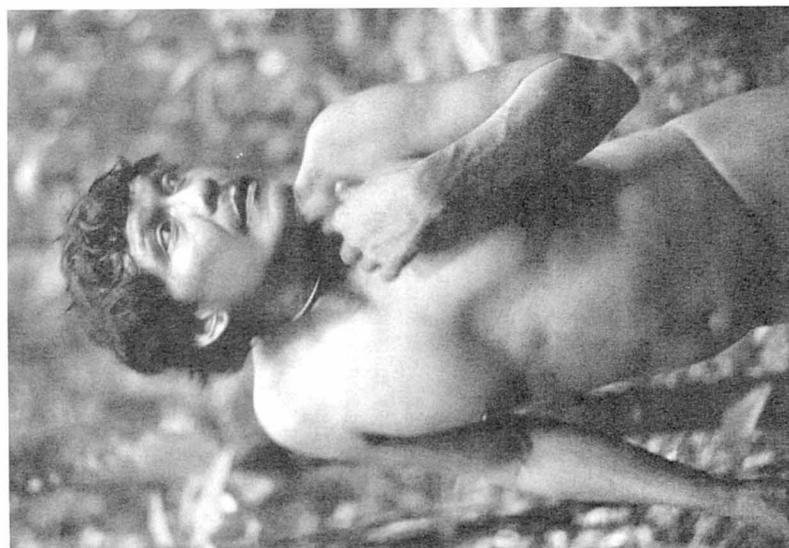
<sup>7</sup>Over time, as I became more and more 'accepted' by the Yanomamö, they became less and less concerned about my genealogical inquiries and, now, provide me with this information quite willingly because I have been very discrete with it. Now, when I revisit familiar villages I am called aside by someone who whispers to me things like, 'Don't ask about so-and-so's father.'

<sup>6</sup>Rarely were these actual brothers or sisters. In Yanomamö kinship classifications, certain kinds of cousins are classified as siblings. See Chapter 4.

Without the help of Rerebawä and Käobawä it would have taken much longer to make sense of the plethora of details I had collected from not only them, but dozens of other informants as well.

I spent a good deal of time with these two men and their families, and got to know them much better than I knew most Yanomamö. They frequently gave their information in a way which related themselves to the topic under discussion. We became warm friends as time passed, and the formal ‘informant/anthropologist’ relationship faded into the background. Eventually, we simply stopped ‘keeping track’ of work and pay. They would both spend hours talking with me, leaving without asking for anything. When they wanted something, they would ask for it no matter what the relative balance of reciprocity between us might have been at that point. I will speak of both of them—and their respective families—frequently in the following chapters, using them as ‘examples’ of life in Yanomamö culture. For many of the customary things that anthropologists try to communicate about another culture, these two men and their families might be considered to be ‘exemplary’ or ‘typical’. For other things, they are exceptional in many regards, but the reader will, even knowing some of the exceptions, understand Yanomamö culture more intimately by being familiar with a few examples.

Käobawä was about 40 years old when I first came to his village in 1964. I say “about 40” because the Yanomamö numeration system has only three numbers: one, two, and more-than-two. It is hard to give accurate ages or dates for events when the informants have no means in their language to reveal such detail. Käobawä is the headman of his village, meaning that he has somewhat more responsibility in political dealings with other Yanomamö groups, and very little control over those who live in his group except when the village is being raided by enemies. We will learn more about political leadership and warfare in a later chapter, but most of the time men like Käobawä are like the North American Indian ‘chief’ whose authority was characterized in the following fashion: “One word from the chief, and each man does as he pleases.” There are different ‘styles’ of political leadership among the Yanomamö. Some leaders are mild, quiet, inconspicuous most of the time, but intensely competent. They act parsimoniously, but when they do, people listen and conform. Other men are more tyrannical, despotic, pushy, flamboyant, and unpleasant to all around them. They shout orders frequently, are prone to beat their wives, or pick on weaker men. Some are very violent. I have met headmen who run the entire spectrum between these polar types, for I have visited some 60 Yanomamö villages. Käobawä stands at the mild, quietly competent end of the spectrum. He has had six wives thus far—and temporary affairs with as many more, at least one of which resulted in a child that is publicly acknowledged as his child. When I first met him he had just two wives: Bahimi and Koamashima. Bahimi (Figure 1.1) had two living children when I first met her; many others had died. She was the older and enduring wife, as much a friend to him as a mate. Their relationship was as close to what we think of as ‘love’ in our culture as I have seen among the Yanomamö (Figure 1.7). His second wife was a girl of about 20 years, Koamashima. She had a new baby boy when I first met her, her first child (Figure 1.8). There was speculation that Käobawä was planning to give Koamashima to one of his younger brothers who had no wife; he occasionally allows his younger brother to



*Figure 1.6 Käobawä, the headman, alert for any telltale sign from the forest.*

information provided by Käobawä and Rerebawä, I made enormous gains in understanding village interrelationships based on common ancestors and political histories and became lifelong friends with both. And both men knew that I had to learn about his recently deceased kin from the other one. It was one of those quiet understandings we all had but none of us could mention.

Once again I went over the genealogies with Käobawä to recheck them, a considerable task by this time. They included about two thousand names, representing several generations of individuals from four different villages. Rerebawä’s information was very accurate, and Käobawä’s contribution enabled me to trace the genealogies further back in time. Thus, after nearly a year of intensive effort on genealogies, Yanomamö demographic patterns and social organization began to make a good deal of sense to me. Only at this point did the patterns through time begin to emerge in the data, and I could begin to understand how kinship groups took form, exchanged women in marriage over several generations, and only then did the fissioning of larger villages into smaller ones emerge as a chronic and important feature of Yanomamö social, political, demographic, economic, and ecological adaptation. At this point I was able to begin formulating more sophisticated questions, for there was now a pattern to work from and one to flesh out.



*Figure 1.7. Käobawä and his oldest and favorite wife, Bahimi. She is his mother's brother's daughter.*

have sex with Koamashima, but only if he asks in advance. Käobawä gave another wife to one of his other brothers because she was *beshi* ("horny"). In fact, this earlier wife had been married to two other men, both of whom discarded her because of her infidelity. Käobawä had one daughter by her. However, the girl is being raised by Käobawä's brother, though acknowledged to be Käobawä's child.

Bahimi, his oldest wife, is about five years younger than he. She is his cross-cousin (see Glossary)—his mother's brother's daughter. Ideally, all Yanomamô men should marry a cross-cousin, as we shall discuss in a later chapter. Bahimi was pregnant when I began my fieldwork, but she destroyed the infant when it was born—a boy in this case—explaining tearfully that she had no choice. The new baby would have competed for milk with Ariwari, her youngest child, who was still nursing. Rather than expose Ariwari to the dangers and uncertainty of an early weaning, she chose to terminate the newborn instead. By Yanomamô standards, this has been a very warm, enduring marriage. Käobawä claims he beats Bahimi only 'once in a while, and only lightly' and she, for her part, never has affairs with other men.

Käobawä is a quiet, intense, wise, and unobtrusive man. It came as something of a surprise to me when I learned that he was the headman of his village, for he stayed at the sidelines while others would surround me and press their demands on me. He leads more by example than by coercion. He can afford to be this way at his age, for he established his reputation for being forthright and as fierce as the



*Figure 1.8. Koamashima, one of Käobawä's younger wives, with her first child. Because of her youth, she enjoys his favor more regularly.*

situation required when he was younger, and the other men respect him. He also has five mature brothers or half-brothers in his village, men he can count on for support. He also has several other mature 'brothers' (parallel cousins, whom he must refer to as 'brothers' in his kinship system) in the village who frequently come to his aid, but not as often as his 'real' brothers do. Käobawä has also given a number of his sisters to other men in the village and has promised his young (8-year-old) daughter in marriage to a young man who, for that reason, is obliged to help him. In short, his 'natural' or 'kinship' following is large, and partially because of this support, he does not have to display his aggressiveness to remind his peers of his position. Rerebawä is a very different kind of person. He is much younger—perhaps in his early twenties (Figure 1.5). He has just one wife, but they have already had three children. He is from a village called Karohi-teri, located about five hours' walk up the Orinoco, slightly inland off to the east of the river itself. Käobawä's village enjoys amicable relationships with Rerebawä's, and it is for this reason that marriage alliances of the kind represented by Rerebawä's marriage into Käobawä's village occur between the two groups. Rerebawä told me that he came to Bisasíteri because there were no eligible women from him to marry in his own village, a fact that I later was able to document when I did a census of his village and a

preliminary analysis of its social organization. Rerebawä is perhaps more typical than Käobawä in the sense that he is chronically concerned about his personal reputation for aggressiveness and goes out of his way to be noticed, even if he has to act tough. He gave me a hard time during my early months of fieldwork, intimidating, teasing, and insulting me frequently. He is, however, much braver than the other men his age and is quite prepared to back up his threats with immediate action—as in the club fight incident just described above. Moreover, he is fascinated with political relationships and knows the details of intervillage relationships over a large area of the tribe. In this respect he shows all the attributes of being a headman, although he has too many competent brothers in his own village to expect to move easily into the leadership position there.

He does not intend to stay in Käobawä's group and refuses to make his own garden—a commitment that would reveal something of an intended long-term residence. He feels that he has adequately discharged his obligations to his wife's parents by providing them with fresh game, which he has done for several years. They should let him take his wife and return to his own village with her, but they refuse and try to entice him to remain permanently in Bisaasi-teri to continue to provide them with game when they are old. It is for this reason that they promised to give him their second daughter, their only other child, in marriage. Unfortunately, the girl was opposed to the marriage and ultimately married another man, a rare instance where the woman in the marriage had this much influence on the choice of her husband.

Although Rerebawä has displayed his ferocity in many ways, one incident in particular illustrates what his character can be like. Before he left his own village to take his new wife in Bisaasi-teri, he had an affair with the wife of an older brother. When it was discovered, his brother attacked him with a club. Rerebawä responded furiously: He grabbed an ax and drove his brother out of the village after soundly beating him with the blunt side of the single-bit ax. His brother was so intimidated by the thrashing and promise of more to come that he did not return to the village for several days. I visited this village with Käobawä shortly after this event had taken place; Rerebawä was with me as my guide. He made it a point to introduce me to this man. He approached his hammock, grabbed him by the wrist, and dragged him out on the ground: 'This is the brother whose wife I screwed when he wasn't around!' A deadly insult, one that would usually provoke a bloody club fight among more valiant Yanomamö. The man did nothing. He slunk sheepishly back into his hammock, shamed, but relieved to have Rerebawä release his grip.

Even though Rerebawä is fierce and capable of considerable nastiness, he has a charming, witty side as well. He has a biting sense of humor and can entertain the group for hours with jokes and clever manipulations of language. And, he is one of few Yanomamö that I feel I can trust. I recall indelibly my return to Bisaasi-teri after being away a year—the occasion of my second field trip to the Yanomamö. When I reached Bisaasi-teri, Rerebawä was in his own village visiting his kinsmen. Word reached him that I had returned, and he paddled downstream immediately to see me. He greeted me with an immense bear hug and exclaimed, with tears welling up in his eyes, 'Shaki! Why did you stay away so long? Did you not know that my will was so cold while you were gone that I could not at times eat for want of seeing you again?' I, too, felt the same way about him—then, and now.

Of all the Yanomamö I know, he is the most genuine and the most devoted to his culture's ways and values. I admire him for that, although I cannot say that I subscribe to or endorse some of these values. By contrast, Käobawä is older and wiser, a polished diplomat. He sees his own culture in a slightly different light and seems even to question aspects of it. Thus, while many of his peers enthusiastically accept the 'explanations' of things given in myths, he occasionally reflects on them—even laughing at some of the more preposterous of them (see, for example, the humor in his skepticism as he tells the myth of 'Naro' in the film described in the film list at the end of this book). Probably more of the Yanomamö are like Rerebawä than like Käobawä, or at least try to be.

#### BEYOND THE BISAASI-TERI AND INTO THE REMOTE VILLAGES

As my work progressed with Käobawä, Rerebawä, and many other informants, a very important scientific problem began to emerge, one that could be solved only by going to visit many distant Yanomamö villages to collect genealogies, demographic data, and local histories from the people there. But the fieldwork required to solve the scientific question led to some exciting and even dangerous adventures, for it meant contacting totally unknown Yanomamö—people who had never before seen foreigners. The 'first contact' with a primitive society is a phenomenon that is less and less likely to happen, for the world is shrinking and 'unknown' tribes or villages are now very rare. In fact, our generation is probably the last that will have the opportunity to know what it is like to make first contact. For this reason, I include a description of what one such situation was like, put into the context of the scientific reasons for going into the unknown Yanomamö area.

#### The Scientific Problem That Emerged

It became increasingly clear that each Yanomamö village was a 'recent' colony or splinter group of some larger village, and a fascinating set of patterns—and problems—began to emerge. I could see that there were cause effect relationships among a number of variables. These included village size, genealogical composition of villages, age and sex distributions, ecological and geographic variables, and marriage ties or 'alliances' between 'families'. Moreover, it became abundantly clear that intervillage warfare was an indelible force that affected village size and village distribution—how large villages got to be before they would 'fission' and divide into two groups, and where the newly created groups would move as they avoided their old enemies, attempted to get away from those they had just separated from, or sought new allies in distant places. I will discuss the details of this problem in a later chapter, but the simple discovery of the pattern had a marked influence on my fieldwork: It meant that I would have to travel to many villages in order to document the genealogical aspects of the pattern, take detailed censuses, collect local versions of 'historical truth' from all parties concerned, and map as best I could the locations of existing villages and locations of sites that they had abandoned in the recent past, sometimes penetrating new, virgin, unknown forest as pioneers on the expanding front of their population. What was exciting about this

was the formal and ecological similarity that it suggested during the early centuries of the discovery of agriculture, and how our own ancestors in Eurasia and Africa spread agriculture into new lands, lands formerly inhabited by hunters and gatherers, or lands that had never been occupied.

Getting to some of these new villages turned out to be a staggering problem for a number of reasons. First, I was living in Bisaasi-teri, and old wars and current animosities prevented me from easily recruiting trustworthy guides who were politically able to visit some of the distant villages, or if able, willing to. Second, I had to deal with the political pressures put on any of my guides by the older men in the village, who would have much preferred to have me dispense all my goods and gifts in *their* village and not take them inland to other Yanomamö. Some of the older men went to great lengths to sabotage my plans to visit other villages, putting pressure on my guides to back out or to cause me to turn back once started. Third, some of the villages were at a great distance away and their precise locations to my guides unknown: They were uncontacted villages many days by trail away, and usually bitter, mortal enemies of the Bisaasi-teri among whom I lived—and with whom I was somewhat identified by Yanomamö in all surrounding villages. My first year's research, which unraveled many details of previous wars, killings and treachery, convinced me that the Bisaasi-teri were justified in holding very caustic, hostile attitudes toward some of their distant neighbors, particularly members of villages that they collectively referred to as 'the Shamatari.' The Shamatari, to the Bisaasi-teri, were a congeries of many interrelated villages to the south, some of which had a long history of bitter warfare with the Bisaasi-teri. All the Shamatari villages were related to each other and had come into existence as larger villages fissioned into smaller ones, grew, fissioned again, and occupied new lands, moving in a general direction from northeast to southwest (see maps in Chapter 2). Two of the closest 'Shamatari' villages lay immediately to the south of the Bisaasi-teri, and I visited both of them on foot my first year in the field—a 10-hour walk to the closest one, a two-day walk to the more distant one. These two groups were on somewhat friendly terms with the Bisaasi-teri, and a number of intermarriages had recently taken place between them. They were Kägobawä's allies, but a good deal of mutual suspicion and occasional expressions of contempt also marked their relationships.

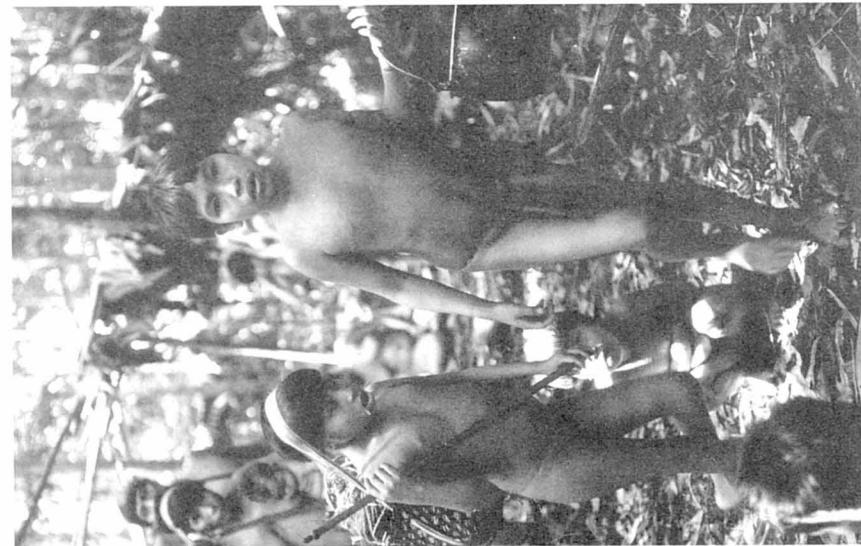
Far to the south and southeast of these two Shamatari villages lay other Shamatari villages, mortal enemies to the Bisaasi-teri. It became clear to me, as my genealogical, demographic, and settlement pattern histories accumulated, that I would have to visit them. They had never before seen outsiders and the Bisaasi-teri chronically advised me about their treachery and viciousness, particularly Kägobawä and Rerebawä, who genuinely had my personal safety at heart.

The group of Shamatari I wanted to reach on my initial foray into this region was known to the Bisaasi-teri as 'Sibarariwä's' village, Sibarariwä being the headman of the village and a man who was hated by all Bisaasi-teri for engineering a treachery that led to the deaths of many Bisaasi-teri, including Kägobawä's father (see Prologue). Sibarariwä was *waieri* and had a reputation for aggressiveness in many villages, even in villages whose members had never met him or members of his village.

The first attempt I made to contact Sibarariwä's village was in 1966, near the end of my first field trip. It was unsuccessful primarily because my young guides, three in number, forced me to turn back. Two were from Bisaasi-teri and the third was from one of the friendly Shamatari villages, Möjmariböwei-teri, a 10-hour walk away. We ascended the Mavaca River for about two days, chopping our way through large trees and tons of brush that clogged the river and made canoe passage very difficult. The river had not been ascended that far up in many years, perhaps 75 years if the historical sources reveal any clues (Rice, 1921). The last adventurers ran into hostile Yanomamö, and some died at their hands (Rice, 1921). Apparently my young guides banked on the assumption that the hardships would discourage me and I would give up. Much to their consternation, I refused to turn back and, on the third day's travel, we began running into fresh signs that Shamatari hunters or travelers had recently crossed the Mavaca. We found their flimsy foot bridges made of poles and vines. These signs began to worry my guides as we ran into more and more of them. By that night they were adamantly opposed to going any further and even refused to sleep at the place where I had pulled in the canoe: it turned out to be right on a recently traveled trail, a trail that my young guides concluded was used only by raiders. Angered, I had no choice but to go back downstream to a location more suitable to them. We left for home, Bisaasi-teri, the next morning, and on reaching it, I was pressed for the payment I originally promised to my guides. I was reluctant to pay them because they forced me to turn back, and when I asked them why they agreed to guide me in the first place, they responded: 'For the machetes you promised to us! We *never* thought we would get to the Shamatari!'

It was too late that year to make another attempt. On my next field trip I tried again to reach Sibarariwä's village. This time I chose my guides more carefully, or at least that was my plan. I picked an older man whose name translates into 'Piranha.' He was from a village far to the north and had married into Kägobawä's village recently. Thus, he had no personal reasons to either fear the Shamatari or be despised by them, but he was from Kägobawä's village at this point and that might be taken with hostility by the Shamatari. The other guide I picked was just a kid, a boy named Karina. I had met him briefly the year before, when he and his mother straggled into the village of Möjmariböwei-teri, the Shamatari village 10 hours' walk south of Kägobawä's. He and his mother had been abducted by Sibarariwä's group some 10 years earlier, so Karina had grown up to the extent he was grown at all, in Sibarariwä's village and knew all the current residents. He had been terrified at the sight of me—his first glimpse of a non-Yanomamö—the year before (Figure 1.9), but several visits to Kägobawä's village exposed him to the missionaries there and he gradually lost his fear of foreigners. Still, he was only about 12 or 13 years old. This, actually, was an advantage in one respect: He was still innocent enough to give me the accurate names and shallow genealogies of all the residents of Sibarariwä's village before I had even reached it.

The first attempt in 1968 ended when I discovered that all my 'gasoline' had been stolen and replaced with water, a common problem in the Upper Orinoco where gasoline is scarce, has to be hauled in by an eight-day river trip, and filched by all who come in contact with it at every step of the way, including the very



*Figure 1.9. Karina, my young guide when I first met him—a year before he led me into Shammatari country.*

do at night to save time to assure my waning guides that we would make progress. As I sat there, half ready to throw in the towel, a young man, Bäkotawä, appeared at the river to take an early bath. He was the young man that Rerebawä had challenged to the club fight over the possession of Rerebawä's wife's younger sister. He knew that my other guide had backed out and that I was down to just one. I asked him if he were willing to go with me to Sibarariwä's village. He thought about it for a moment. 'I'm a Bisasasi-teri, and they might kill me,' he said, adding '... but I could tell them that I'm really a Patanowä-teri and they wouldn't know the difference.' I turned to Karina, who lay whimpering in the canoe in the most comfortable 'bed' I could arrange, using my pack and gasoline tanks as props. 'Would you vouch for him if he said he was a Patanowä-teri?' I asked. He grunted, unenthusiastically, that he'd go along with the deception and agreed that it was better than being a Bisasasi-teri. At that, we agreed that Bäkotawä would be my second guide. He rushed off to the *shabono* (village) to collect his hammock and a few items to trade, and returned a few minutes later, ready for the great adventure into unknown lands where his older kin feared to tread. I brought along a second shotgun that I said he could 'use' (he didn't know which end to put the cartridges in), and this pleased him immensely, not to mention bolstering his confidence.

We thus set off for the headwaters of the Mavaca in my large wooden dugout canoe, on top of which I carried a smaller, lighter aluminum boat for negotiating the high Mavaca where the big boat could not get through. My plan was to go as far in the bigger, heavier boat as we could, dropping off gasoline and other stores along the way for the trip back.

The dry season was at its peak and the rivers were very low, so low that we only made it about a day and a half upstream in the larger canoe before reaching an insurmountable obstacle: two very large trees had fallen across the river and were half submerged. They were there before, but the water was high enough that I managed to get the canoe across them. But the river had dropped since then. They were too thick to chop through with axes, and too much of the trunks was above the water to permit the three of us to horse the heavy dugout over. We thus had to leave the big canoe at that point, transfer everything to the smaller aluminum boat, and set off, badly overloaded, for the headwaters of the Mavaca. Karina was feeling normal again. He began goading Bäkotawä, asking rhetorically, 'What would they do if they knew you were really a Bisasasi-teri? Maybe I might slip and tell them that you are Bisasasi-teri.' Bäkotawä grew silent, then moody, then visibly nervous. On the third day, Karina rose up to his knees, began looking intently at the river banks on both sides, and then exclaimed: 'I know this place! We're getting close to Sibarariwä's village! Their trail to Iwähikoroba-teri is just a short way off the river, over there!' as he pointed to the east bank of the tangled, narrow river, a stream so small at this point that it would have been difficult to turn our boat around without lifting it most of the way. We proceeded a few hours further upstream, slowly, because the river was both shallow and narrow, but mostly because it was now choked with deadfalls and branches through which we had to constantly chop our way.

We pulled over about midday and dragged the boat up a bank after unloading the supplies. We would walk inland from this point, for the river was now too narrow to

people you paid to bring it to you. We had gotten far up the Mavaca when I switched to one of my reserve gasoline tanks and the motor died—the tanks were full of plain water. We thus had to return to Bisasasi-teri where my gasoline supplies were stored and where I could dismantle my motor and spend the night cleaning it. We set off again the next morning with fresh gasoline supplies and again were high up the Mavaca when I switched to one of my reserve tanks. This time it wasn't water, but it wasn't gasoline either. It was kerosene. Back down the Mavaca again, clean the engine again, and set off again. By this time—four or five days after starting the first trip—my guides were growing impatient and weary. My older guide failed to show up at dawn as agreed, and Karina, the 12-year-old, was feeling ill and didn't want to go. I persuaded Karina that he would feel better in a day and he decided to come with me again.

He was my only guide at this point. I sat in my canoe, tired and depressed, wondering if I should try to make it with just a 12-year-old guide. It was a murky, dismal dawn. I hadn't slept more than a few hours each night, for I had to dismantle and reassemble my outboard motor each time we floated back home, a task I had to

proceed any further. We were in a hilly region and could catch glimpses of relatively high peaks, all covered with dense vegetation and punctuated with scraggy outcroppings of rocks. We were in the headwaters of the Mavaca, and beyond the stark ridge ahead of us lay the almost legendary Shukumöna kā u, the River of Parakeets and homeland of the Shammatari—and lair of the legendary Sibarariwā and his warriors.<sup>8</sup>

I divided the supplies into those we would take inland with us and those we would leave behind for the return trip. As I did, I was alarmed at the relatively small amount of food we had at that point. In my concern over gasoline and sputtering motors, I had failed to restock the food after each aborted trip. There was enough for several days, but if we failed to contact the Shammatari, we would have to ration ourselves carefully.

Karina said the village was to the southeast, indicating the distance as Yanomamö always do, by pointing to where the sun would be if we left now and where it would be when we reached the village. It was about a 4- or 5-hour walk by his description, and it meant that we would reach the village just before dark—not a good thing to do on a first contact. Even the Yanomamö like to have as much daylight as they can get when they visit a strange village. That way, you have time to make friends and assess the situation. We set off with our back packs at about 2:00 P.M. and soon began running into fresh signs of human activity—footprints made a day before, husks of palm fruits, discarded items of no value, broken twigs where someone cleared the trail as he proceeded along it, and so on. My heart began to pound, for clearly we were close to Sibarariwā's village.

A ferocious rain, the onset of the rainy season, hit us about an hour after we began walking, and we had to huddle together under a small nylon tarp I always carried for such occasions. We lost about an hour because of the rain and decided that we should camp for the night. We would reach the village too late in the day to 'make friends'. We ate some boiled rice and strung our hammocks in an abandoned temporary hut made by some Shammatari hunter months earlier. As dusk settled, Karina began teasing Bäkotawā about the nastiness of Sibarariwā's group, reminding him mischievously that he was really a Bisasasi-teri, not a Patanowä-teri. Bäkotawā lay sullenly and unhappily in his hammock, and I had to scold Karina for his ill-natured humor. At dawn we got up and began packing. Bäkotawā quietly informed me that he was going no further and intended to return to the canoe; he honestly and frankly admitted, "Ya *kirii*." (I am frightened.)

I gave him a share of the food and a quick lesson in how to load and fire the shotgun, providing him with a box of 25 cartridges. I told him we would be gone about 'three days' (indicating the duration by three fingers) before we would rejoin him at the canoe. He assured me that whereas he was frightened here, he would be safe and confident at the canoe and he would make his camp there, waiting for our return. Karina and I set off to the southeast. Bäkotawā disappeared silently into the shadowy forest, heading north, back toward the canoe. Karina and I walked for

several hours, continuing to run into fresh signs of Yanomamö travelers. We found footprints that had been made just that morning, last night's rainwater still oozing into the depressions. A banana peeling here, a discarded bunch of palm fruits there. We were now very close. Karina grabbed my arm and whispered excitedly: "The village is just beyond the top of this hill!" We crept to the ridge and looked down into the valley below, where a gigantic, well-kept banana plantation surrounded an extremely large, circular *shabono*, the largest one I had ever seen up to then. We were there. Karina peered intently and then urged me to follow. In a few minutes we were in the garden, and shortly after we could see the back side of the *shabono* roof, the village structure, and the clearing. But something was wrong: no noise. No babies crying, no men chanting to the *hekura* spirits, no smoke, no dogs barking, and no buzzing of voices. The *shabono* was *broke*—empty.

Deserted, but only recently deserted. Karina went to investigate the garden, returning with a pile of ripe plantains a few minutes later and with the information that someone had been in the garden that very morning to harvest plantains. He guessed that Sibarariwā's group was camped out, but camped close enough to the garden that they could return easily to harvest food. He guessed that they would be further upstream, at a place they often camped at this time of the year because certain wild fruits were in season there. We decided to leave our packs behind, in the abandoned village, and strike off to find them. The sun was high, and we would have all afternoon to look for them.

By this point I was down to my hammock, sneakers, shotgun, and a red loincloth I had borrowed from one of the Bisasasi-teri men—I had given all my new loincloths away. I wanted to look as inconspicuous as possible when I contacted these people, and wearing a loincloth instead of clothing would help. Karina brought only his bow, several arrows, and a large wad of now-aging tobacco tucked behind his lower lip—and his own loincloth. As we walked, we ran into fresher and more abundant signs of Sibarariwā's group, and I knew that we would soon run into them. As dusk began to settle we smelled smoke and, a few minutes later, saw a lazy cloud of bluish smoke drifting through the grey forest and rising slowly to the tree tops. Then we heard the chatter of many voices and babies crying. We had found their camp at last.

We approached quietly and cautiously, stopping at a small stream just short of the campsite to 'beautify' ourselves. Karina scolded me and urged me to clean up—my legs were all muddy and my loincloth dangled haphazardly between my scratched knees. I made myself as 'presentable' as I could, washing the mud and perspiration off, straightening my loincloth, and tying my sneakers. We had no feathers or red *nara* paint to add final touches. Karina handed me his bow and arrows and took up my shotgun, commenting, as he headed for the camp: "They might be frightened by your shotgun, so I'll take it. You carry my bow and arrows and wait for me to tell you to come in. They'll really be scared to see a *nabā* (non-Yanomamö)!" He disappeared into the jungle, whistled a signal to alert people that a visitor was coming in. A chorus of cheers, whistles, and welcoming hoots rebounded through the darkening jungle as they welcomed him in.

I suddenly realized the absurdity of my situation and the magnitude of what I was doing. Here I stood, in the middle of an unexplored, unmapped jungle, a few

<sup>8</sup>At this time in my fieldwork the Shukumöna Kā u, i.e., the Siapa River, was not even correctly shown on official maps of Venezuela. Its true location and course was not 'officially' established until 1972 when aerial radar maps of the region were developed. Most maps, prior to that, incorrectly showed the headwaters of the Mavaca River as the Siapa River.

hundred feet from a previously uncontacted group of Yanomamö with a reputation for enormous ferocity and treachery, led there by a 12-year-old kid, and it was getting dark. My only marks of being human were my red loincloth, my muddy and torn sneakers, my hammock, and a bow with three skinny arrows.

An ominous hush fell over the forest ahead: Karina had obviously told them that I was waiting outside, and they were now pondering what to do. Uncomfortable recollections flashed through my head, and I recalled some of the tales that Kaqbawä had recited to me about the Shamattari. I reflected on his intensely serious warnings that it would be hazardous to try to find them. They would pretend to be friendly, he explained, but when my guard was down they would fall on me with bowstaves and clubs and kill me. Perhaps they would do it on the spot, but they might wait until I had taken up a hammock, as visitors are supposed to do, and lay there defenseless. Perhaps they would do it at night, as I slept, or just before dawn. Silence. Anxiety. My temples pounded. I wanted to run. I could hear the hushed buzzing of voices and people moving around in the jungle, spreading out: Some of them were leaving the camp. Were they surrounding me? Could I trust Karina? Was someone now staring at me down the long shaft of his war arrow?

Karina suddenly appeared on the trail and motioned for me to come—to present myself. I tried to give the expected visitor's announcement, but I had trouble puckering my dry lips and only a pathetic hiss of meaningless air came forth as I tried to whistle. I walked by Karina and noticed his curious look. I could not decide if it were the same look he had when he told Bäkotawä he would vouch that he was a Patanowä-teri, but it was too late now to consider weighty implications and too late to do anything about them.

I was greeted by a host of growling, screaming men, naked and undecorated, who pranced nervously around me, menacingly pointing their long, bamboo-tipped war arrows at my face, nocked in the strings of their powerful bows. I stood my ground, motionless and as poised as I could be, trying desperately to keep my legs from trembling, trying to look dignified, defiant, and fearless. After what seemed like an eternity, one of them gruffly told me to follow him to one of the temporary huts. As we walked toward it, I could see young men scrambling to clear off the ground and straighten a *nara*-stained cotton hammock—intended for my temporary use. They worked quickly and nervously, and scattered as I approached. Karina placed my shotgun at the backpost and I reclined in the hammock, striking the visitor's pose—one hand over my mouth, staring at the space above me and swaying gently, pretending I was on display in Macy's front window with a noontime crowd peering in.

Eventually a few of the bolder men came closer, hissing commands to the others to "get some food prepared, quickly!" They began whispering excitedly to each other, describing my most minute and most private visible parts. 'Look at how hairy his legs are! Look at all that ugly hair on his chest! Look how pale he looks! Isn't he strange looking, and did you see how 'long' he was when he was standing there?' I wonder if he has a regular penis? What are those skins he has tied to his feet?' Their curiosity gradually became overwhelming. The bolder ones came in closer, duck-waddling right at me. A hand came forward and cautiously and ever so delicately

touched my leg. The hand retracted quickly with a hiss of amazement from its owner—'Aahhhh!' A chorus of admiring tongue clicks followed from the less bold, and then more touches and hisses, and soon many hands were touching me all over, pulling on my hairs, and they smelled my spoor repeatedly in their red-stained cupped hands, clicking their tongues and marveling that someone so different was so similar. Just a bit longer, hairier, and lighter than they were. Then I spoke to them, and again they marveled: I spoke a 'crooked' version of Yanomamö, like the Bisaasi-teri do, but they understood me.

Soon we were jabbering and visiting like long-lost friends. They scolded me for not having come sooner, for they had known about me for years and had wanted to meet me. The Reyaboböwei-teri had told them about me and had passed on what they themselves had known directly from meeting me personally, and what they had learned from the Mömariböwei-teri or the Bisaasi-teri second-hand. The Yanomamö language is very precise about what is known firsthand and what has come from second, hearsay, sources. I was flabbergasted at the detail and accuracy of what they knew about me. They knew I had a wife and two children, and the sexes and approximate ages of my children. They could repeat with incredible accuracy conversations I had had with Yanomamö in many different villages. One of them even wanted to see a scar on my left elbow. When I asked what he meant, he described in intimate detail a bad fall I had taken several years earlier on a trip to Reyaboböwei-teri when I slipped on a wet rock and landed on my elbow, which bled profusely. He even quite accurately repeated the string of Yanomamö vulgarities I uttered at the time, and my complaint to my guides that their goddamned trails foolishly went up and down steep hills when they could more efficiently go around them! For people who had never before seen a non-Yanomamö, they certainly knew a great deal about at least one of them!<sup>19</sup>

I stayed with them for several days, but Karina had revealed that I had a small treasure of trade goods at my boat and they were anxious to go there to examine them. They were also disappointed that Bäkotawä did not come to the village, for 'they wouldn't have harmed him but would have befriended him.' After systematically checking the genealogical data that Karina had given me about the current families and visiting with them at length, I reluctantly decided to take them to my boat and the cache of gifts I had left there.

It had taken Karina and me at least six hours of walking to get from the boat to this place, but since they were anxious to see the boat and the trade goods, they made very rapid time guiding me back to where I had left the river. We ran most of the way. They carried only their weapons. No food and no hammocks. I didn't know what they planned to do for sleeping or eating, since we left for the boat near midday. I guess I assumed that they planned to spend the night in their abandoned *shabono*, which they could probably have reached by dark even if they spent an hour at the boat with me.

<sup>19</sup>In 1972 several of my colleagues from the University of Michigan Medical School made a trip to the Brazilian Yanomamö to continue the biomedical research we had jointly pursued between 1966 and 1972. One of them casually mentioned my Yanomamö name, Shaki, in front of a Yanomamö. The Yanomamö immediately and excitedly demanded to know where I was and if I were going to visit them. This Yanomamö village was many miles away from any Yanomamö village I had ever visited.



Figure 1.10. Woman in a bark canoe. These canoes are occasionally made by the Yanomamö for a single trip downstream or for foraging rivers. After a few days they sag, leak, and deteriorate beyond use.

We came upon the spot where we had separated from Bäkotawä. Soon after that we came upon two expended shotgun shells, then soon after that, two more, then two more, and so on. It appeared as though Bäkotawä had fired the gun every few minutes as he retreated to the boat, and it was obvious that he was out of ammunition by the time he reached it.

We crossed the last rise before reaching the spot where I had left the boat and supplies and, much to my horror, I discovered that the boat, motor, gasoline, food, tarps, and trade goods were all gone. Bäkotawä had panicked and had taken off, leaving me stranded with people he was sure would kill all of us.

I was in a decidedly unenviable position at that point, for nobody except a few Yanomamö knew where I was. I couldn't walk out, for that would have taken at least two weeks in the best of conditions, and it had been raining regularly since I arrived. The river was rising fast, and that meant that the land between me and Bisasati-teri was beginning to flood. We spent a miserable wet night huddling under my small tarp thinking about the problem. I decided that the only feasible way to get out would be by river.

My first scheme was to build a raft, similar to the log palisades the Yanomamö make around their villages. I had one machete with me and we set about cutting numerous trees and vines for the raft. At the end of the day we assembled it in the river, and when I stepped onto it, it promptly sank.

The next day we went into Plan II—building a ‘trough’ of the sort that the Yanomamö characteristically use when they have ceremonial feasts. They make a bark trough and fill it full of plantain soup, but the same trough is occasionally used by them, when reinforced with a few ribs, as a temporary canoe that is suitable only for floating downstream (Figure 1.10). It is a kind of ‘throw-away’ canoe, useful in the kind of circumstance I was presently in. This plan was laid to rest when they told me that no suitable trees could be found in the immediate area to make such a trough. They suggested that since I was a foreigner and since foreigners make canoes, why didn’t I just make myself a canoe? I explained that it wasn’t quite that simple. Canoe-making is a complex enterprise, and I was from one of those foreign villages where we had to ‘trade’ with others for our canoes—we had ‘forgotten’ how to make them, as they had ‘forgotten’ how to make clay pots in some villages. They insisted that it was easy to remember lost arts. I said that it took axes to make canoes. They said they had axes at the village. They would not take ‘No’ for an answer, and sent young men running off to the village to fetch the axes. They returned in record time, after dark, with two of the most miserable ‘axes’ I have ever seen. They had been worn down by years, perhaps decades, of heavy use and were about one third the size they had been when they were first manufactured. But their confidence inspired me, so we set about looking for the largest, pithiest tree we could find—one that could be easily hollowed out for a single voyage. We found one, cut in, and began hollowing it out. It took all day. It looked like a long, fat cigar with a square notch cut into it. We dragged it to the river. I knew it would roll over as soon as any weight were put into it, so I designed an outrigger system that served also as a pair of seats where the two poles were lashed to the gunwales. I then lashed a pithy long pole parallel to the axis of the canoe (Figure 1.11). We spent much of another day whittling canoe paddles—three of them. One for Karina,

It still amazes me that we managed to make it all the way back down to the spot



*Figure 1.11. The canoe I made to descend the Mavaca River—with Karina, who clutches one of our hand-beaten paddles.*

where we had earlier left the large canoe, and amazes me even more that Bäkotawä had left the large canoe there as he passed by, for he had stopped at every place and collected my stores of gasoline in his voyage downstream.

Eventually, we made it back to Bisaasi-teri, much to the genuine relief of Kähabawä and Rerebawä, who had assumed the worst . . . that Sibarirriwä's group had killed me. Bäkotawä had gotten back several days before we did, and his fears provoked much anxiety in the village. I knew it would have been 'unprofessional' to hunt Bäkotawä down when I returned, for my mind was full of very hideous and vindictive plans for his future. In anthropological jargon, I wasn't in a very relativistic mood. We eventually had our predicted confrontation, the details of which I have discussed elsewhere (Chagnon, 1974). He is alive and well yet today, we greet each other pleasantly, but he doesn't go on trips with me anymore.

That is what it is sometimes like to meet an uncontacted tribe of South American Indians. Other experiences I have had were much more dangerous. On one occasion my hosts very nearly succeeded in killing me as I slept (Chagnon, 1974; Chapter V). More recently, in 1990 and 1991, I also contacted Yanomamö villages that had never been visited before, but these experiences were much less

dramatic because the people there had heard a great deal about 'foreigners' and, in most cases, at least some men of these villages had walked out to places where there were missionaries and had seen what foreigners look like (Brooke, 1990; 1991). While excited that they finally got to see me, they knew in advance what I probably looked like. The results of these trips are discussed in several of the following chapters, results that have led to significant new insights into Yanomamö culture and political history.