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The Yanomami: Deep in the Amazon



Written by David Meissner

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A Different Look

What if you arrived at school one day with red stripes painted on your body? What would your friends say? What if your nose and lips were pierced with little sticks? What if you wore parrot feathers in your ears? Would people laugh at you?



Yanomami man

wearing red stripes, sticks, and feathers is strange. But if you grew up in certain parts of the Amazon rainforest, it would be completely normal. Your parents and grandparents would dress this way, and your friends, too.

Well, what seems strange to one person may seem normal to another. The answers to these questions probably depend on what culture you grew up in. Your friends might think that

In fact, if you walked deep into the Amazon rainforest dressed like you are right now, people would probably stare at you. Things that may seem normal to you (such as T-shirts, socks, and shoes) would look very strange to them.

People do wear sticks in their noses and feathers in their ears. They also walk barefoot in the jungle with bows and arrows. These people pick bananas that grow in the wild. They eat fruit, monkeys, and even insects.

These people also have lived deep in the rainforest for thousands of years. They still use local **resources** for food, shelter, and clothing. Most of them have never left the rainforest. They do not have stores, cars, electricity, or television.

They are one of the world's oldest traditional cultures. They are called the Yanomami.

In this book, you will learn about the Yanomami. They are an interesting group of people who may live very differently from you. You will read about where they sleep, how they find food, and how they dress. You will also learn why the Yanomami became "famous" around the world.

At Home in the Amazon

The Yanomami live in the richest part of the natural world: the Amazon rainforest. The Yanomami live in the northern part of the Amazon rainforest. Their lands are located in present-day Venezuela and Brazil, although the Yanomami have lived there long before those countries even existed.

The Amazon is home to more kinds of plants and animals than any other place on Earth. The Amazon rainforest has plenty of rain, sun, and warm weather. It is full of green plants. These plants produce fruit and flowers all year. This makes great food for animals to eat. And all of these resources (water, plants, and animals) make it a place where humans can live, too.



The Amazon is lush throughout the year.



Hammocks can be made out of vines, bark, and cotton.

The Yanomami are almost a part of the rainforest. They pick fruits that grow on trees. They hunt animals that live nearby. They make their homes out of wood, leaves, and vines. For thousands of years, the Amazon rainforest has given the Yanomami all that they need to survive.

Do You Know?

Yanomami can be spelled in different ways:
Yanoama, *Yanomama*, and *Yanomamo*.



An entire Yanomami village may live under one circular roof!

Traditional Ways

The Yano

The Yanomami live in big, circular huts called *yanos*. They build them with wooden poles, vines, and thatched leaves. If you saw a yano from above, it would look like a big circle with a hole cut out in the middle. The center of the circle is open to the sky. This is where the adults hold ceremonies and where the children play.

An entire Yanomami village may live in the same yano. This means that many families share the same roof. Instead of living in separate rooms, each family has its own area where family members eat and sleep. Each family has its own fire pit for cooking. And each person has his or her own hammock to sleep in. The roof protects the Yanomami from the rain and the fire keeps them warm at night.

Gathering and Gardening

The Yanomami know the rainforest well. They know which plants are **edible**. They know which ones are poisonous. They know which herbs to use for a headache and which ones to use for a cold.

Yanomami women gather wild foods like fruit, nuts, and roots. Sometimes children climb high in the trees to pick fruit. The Yanomami even gather insects to eat, such as termites.

Yanomami villages also plant gardens in the rainforest. To make room for the garden, they cut and burn the trees on a small section of land. Then they plant sugar cane, **plantains**, sweet potatoes, **manioc**, and more. The Yanomami know that rainforest soil is thin. This is why they move their garden to a new place every few years. This way they do not harm the land. The old garden soon grows back into rainforest again.

Each Yanomami village has its own garden. Within that garden, each family has a small plot of land.



Why a Wayumi?

When the Yanomami do not have enough food from gathering and gardening, they set out on a *wayumi*. A wayumi is a **trek** through the rainforest in search of food. Entire villages travel on wayumis that may last from a few days to many weeks. On wayumis, they eat roots, make hammocks out of bark, and sleep under big leaves to keep dry.

Hunting and Fishing

Yanomami men hunt with long bows and wooden arrows. They attach bird feathers to the arrows to make them fly straight. Sometimes they dip their arrowheads in poison. Hunters walk barefoot through the rainforest. They look for anteaters, **tapirs**, and other animals. When a hunter kills an animal, he shares its meat with the entire village.

The Yanomami use different **methods** to catch fish. They may shoot arrows at fish in the river. Or they may skim baskets through the water. The Yanomami also know how to fish with the poisonous *ayori-toto* vine. They cut the vine and slide it through the water. The poison drips into the water and stuns nearby fish. The fish then float to the surface. That's when the Yanomami scoop them up.

The Yanomami hunt animals with bows and arrows.



Clothing

In the hot rainforest, the Yanomami do not wear much clothing. Men tend to wear **loincloths** and strings tied around their waists. Women wear little fringed aprons and no top. Children often don't wear any clothing. The Yanomami do not normally wear shoes or sandals.

The Yanomami paint their bodies with different colors. They use red dyes from seeds, purple dyes from palm fruit, and black powder from charcoal. They like to paint dots and squiggly lines.

Yanomami girls like to pierce their nose, lips, and ears. They insert small wooden sticks in their nose and lips. From their ears, they hang bright bird feathers. They also wear necklaces made of seeds and armbands made of fragrant leaves. The boys sometimes crown their heads with small, white hawk feathers.



(Above) The local jewelry of a Yanomami girl

(Right) A Yanomami boy looks at his face paint.



The Yanomami Today

About 20,000 Yanomami live in the Amazon today. They live in a way that is similar to their **ancestors**. They still hunt, gather food, and sleep under yanos.

But in the last fifty years, more and more outsiders have reached their land. These outsiders travel by motorized boats, trucks, and airplanes. The Yanomami are no longer so isolated in the rainforest.

They call these outsiders *nabuh*. The arrival of nabuh has been hard for the Yanomami. Some of them have died from new diseases introduced by the nabuh. Others have been killed by gold miners. But the Yanomami also feel threatened for another reason. Nabuh are quickly destroying their home—the Amazon rainforest.



Garimpeiros are some of the outsiders on Yanomami land.

Garimpeiro Gold Rush

In Portuguese, *garimpeiro* means “wildcat gold miner.” This is a person who usually goes out alone or with a small group of people in search of gold. In the 1970s, many garimpeiros invaded Yanomami land hoping to strike it rich.

Many nabuh who visit the Amazon rainforest take something away from it. Some take gold from the ground. Others take rubber from trees. Many outsiders cut down large sections of rainforest to take out wood.

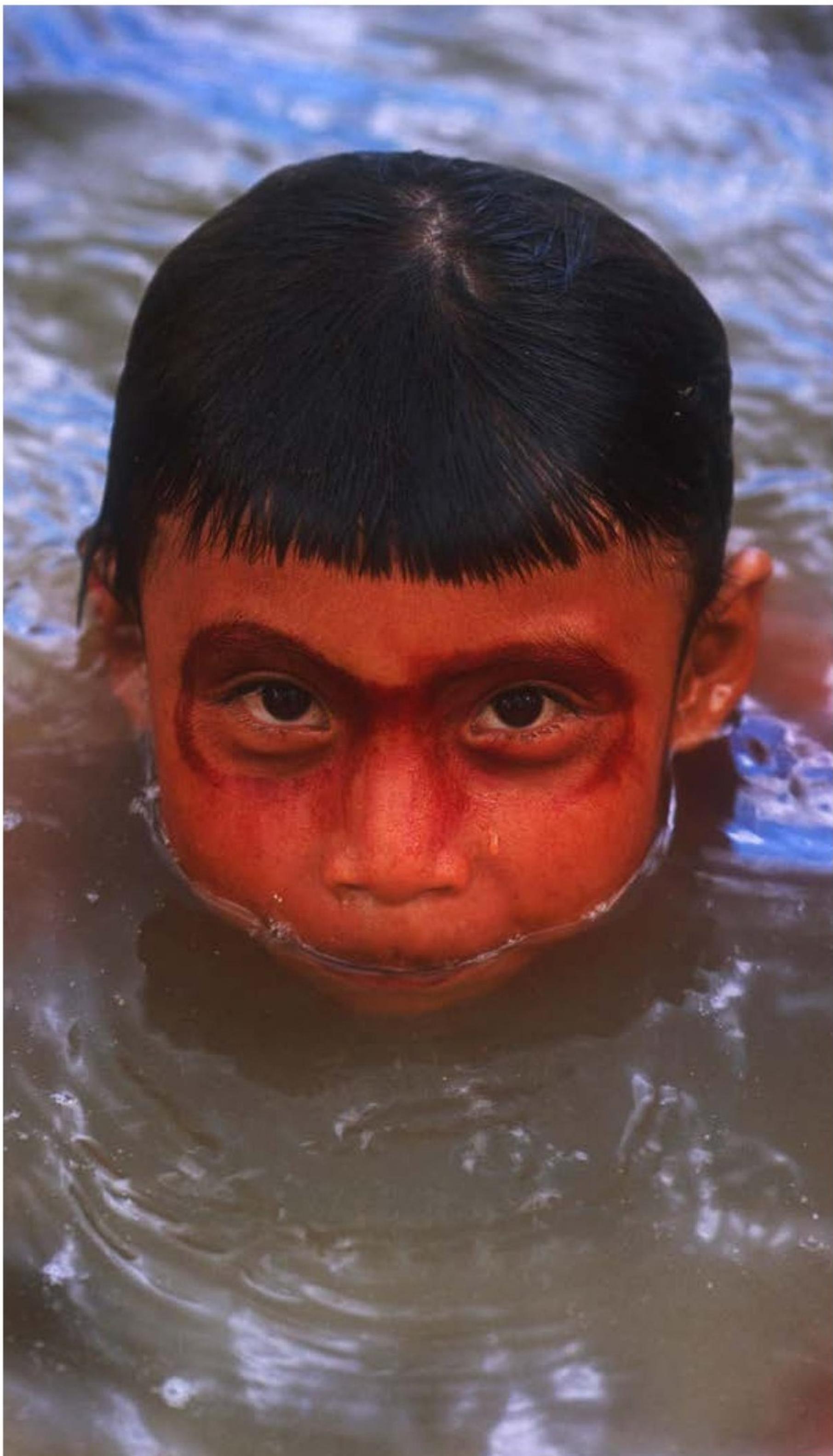


Every day more of the Amazon rainforest is cut down.

This must seem threatening to the Yanomami because they know that if the rainforest is not healthy, they will not be healthy. If there are no trees, there will be fewer animals. And without trees and animals, the Yanomami could not exist. Their life is in a delicate balance with the rainforest. They could not survive without it.

Living for Today and Tomorrow

The Yanomami do something very special: they live in a way that is **sustainable**. This means that the way they live today will leave a healthy rainforest for tomorrow. They don't cut down any more trees than they need. And they don't hunt any more animals than they need. This way their children and grandchildren will still have fruit to pick and animals to hunt.



Why Does the World Care?

In the past twenty years, the Yanomami have become kind of “famous.” Their faces appear in books, magazines, and even movies. People around the world have become fascinated by their culture. But they have also been worried that the Yanomami are in danger.

Many people around the world have worked to protect the Yanomami way of life. In 1991, the government of Brazil set aside a large piece of rainforest for them. The government even blew up airstrips to keep the gold miners from landing there.

But most Yanomami do not even know that they are famous. They do not know that they are the subjects of books and movies. They just continue to live their daily lives in the rainforest—as they have done for thousands of years.

So why should we care about people in such a faraway place?

Well, it’s not actually as far away as it seems. The Amazon rainforest is important to all of us on Earth. It produces a lot of the world’s oxygen. It affects a lot of the world’s weather. It is home to many unique animals. And of course, it is home to special people.



Young Yanomami woman weaving a basket

The Yanomami culture is probably different from yours. Chances are that you don't go to school with red stripes painted on your body. And you probably don't wear sticks in your nose. But after reading about the Yanomami, they might seem a little less strange to you.

Just as you put on a shirt, the Yanomami paint red stripes on their chests. Just as you go to school in the morning, they walk into the rainforest to find food. And just as you have learned from your parents, the Yanomami learn from their parents. So in some ways, you are not that different after all.

Explore More

Did you find the stories of the Yanomami interesting? Would you like to read more about them?

① At the Library

Tell your librarian you want to read about people who live in the Amazon rainforest. In addition to the Yanomami, there are many more interesting groups of people who live in the Amazon region.

② On the Web

- A. In the address window, type: *www.google.com*.
- B. Then type:
Yanomami. Click on “Google Search.”
- C. Read the colored links. Click on one that looks interesting.
- D. When you want to explore other links, click the back arrow at the top left of the screen.
- E. Or try some different searches: *Yanomamo*, *Amazon rainforest people*, or *Brazil*.

TRY THIS!

Let's Investigate!

The Yanomami know where their food, clothes, and houses come from. Do you?

Do you know where your clothes were made? What about the very shirt on your back? Well, a person on the other side of the world may have helped to make it!

There's a pretty easy way to find out where things come from: read the label. There are labels on shirts, fruit, canned food, toys, and many more things. Labels might read: "Made in Spain" or "Made in China" or "Made in Brazil." See where the things in your house were made. If there's not a label, maybe it was made nearby. Ask somebody!

If you start to find things from all over the world, it might be fun to photocopy a world map. Then you could draw an "X" (or put a sticker) on each country where things are from. Then you would see how global your life really is.

Glossary

ancestors	relatives who lived a long time ago (p. 12)
culture	the customs and ways of a certain group of people (p. 4)
edible	able to be eaten (p. 9)
loincloths	small pieces of clothing worn around the hips (p. 11)
manioc	the starchy root of a tropical tree that is used for food (p. 9)
methods	particular ways of doing things (p. 10)
plantains	wild bananas that grow in the tropics (p. 9)
sustainable	able to be used in a way that does not completely use up or cause permanent damage to a resource (p. 14)
resources	a supply of something valuable or very useful (p. 5)
tapirs	big, hoofed animals that are related to the horse and the rhinoceros (p. 10)
trek	a long journey on foot (p. 10)

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