

The paradise that never was

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Abstract

The Upper Orinoco region incensed Europeans' imagination much, including Columbus'. Bewildered by the sight of its majestic mouth, Columbus recognised the Orinoco as one of the rivers of the Earthly Paradise. In fact, it is Yanomami country, which straddles the Brazil-Venezuela border. It displays both the grandiosity of the Amazon and the wise use the Indians make of it. By focusing on the trail networks opened up in the immense forest by continuous generations, this paper emphatically denies that the Amazon is a 'demographic void', thus firmly rejecting the insidious fallacy according to which the emptiness of Amazonia places a threat to national security, a danger that is argued to be averted with intensive colonisation and economic projects. This recurrent fallacy persistently disqualifies the obvious and important presence of indigenous peoples in the Amazon forest.

Keywords: Amazon forest, Yanomami, spatial movements, indigenous land occupation.

1. Christopher Columbus' imaginings

From his third trip to the New World and until he died, Christopher Columbus was convinced he had found paradise on the earth. This belief came to him when he saw the mouth of a huge Amazonian river, the Orinoco. Such majestic spectacle, he reckoned, could only be of divine origin. Surely, the grandiose mouth of the Orinoco indicated he was gazing at one of the four rivers of Eden. Columbus oscillated between the Christian mystique of divine power and the overwhelming empirical demonstration that right there, under his bewildered eyes, was the tip of a whole

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new continent defying the Christian dogma about astronomy and the constitution of the planet Earth. Thus wrote the astounded admiral of the Ocean Sea:

‘Great signs these are of the Earthly Paradise because the site conforms to the opinion of these saints and sacred theologians. Indeed, the signs are so similar as I have never read or heard that so much fresh water would jut into salt water and be so close to it; and there is also the extremely soft climate. And if it does not come from Paradise it is even a greater marvel for I do believe nowhere in the world there is a river so large and deep’ (Colón 1984: 216).

It was, in K. Sale’s words, a ‘muddled mishmash of theology and astronomy and geography and fantastic lore, rumbling, repetitive, illogical, confusing, at times incoherent, self-serving, servile and vainglorious all at once – and quite loony’ (Sale 1991: 175).

In the end, C. Columbus maintained his belief that the Orinoco was indeed one of the rivers of Eden: ‘But I am much more convinced in my own mind that there where I said is the earthly paradise’ (Greenblatt 1991: 79). His awe was even greater when he perceived signs of gold in those lands in the form of ornaments borne by the natives. In K. Sale’s reading of C. Columbus’ arguments, those natives ‘had plenty of gold, just as the Bible said was to be found in the land of the first river out of Eden; and they lived just above the Equator, where the best authorities had always argued Paradise would be found; and they called their land Paria, the name an obvious form of *Paraíso*’ (Sale 1991: 175).

If it does not quite match C. Columbus’ Edenic fantasies, the Orinoco River deserves to have a place in history for various reasons; one of them is the privilege of being the home of one of the best-known indigenous peoples nowadays. On its headwaters, about twenty-five thousand Yanomami spread out along a myriad of streams on Venezuelan soil, separated from their Brazilian relatives by the Guiana Shield.

On the south side of that magnificent watershed, itself a source of inspiration for other fantasies, such as Conan Doyle’s hallucinatory *Lost World* (first published in 1912), lives the other half of the Yanomami people. They are about 19,000 in Brazil and share with the 360 Carib-speaking Yekuana (Andrade 2007) a territory of over 9,000,000 ha officially recognised by the Brazilian state. The Yanomami speak at least

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four different but closely related languages; they plant their gardens, exploit the forest's resources, and transmit to the new generations a cultural style that has guaranteed them a fine livelihood and, until recently, a remarkable capacity to expand their territory.

2. Behind the appearances

To the untrained eye, the landscape of the Guiana Shield, encompassing southern Venezuela and northern Brazil, seems uninhabited, isolated, and even monotonous in its endless repetition of trees struggling for a place in the sun. But it is neither a human void nor a uniform and seamless green expanse. One has to learn how to perceive the Amazon. Looked at from within, the jungle shows an enormous diversity, a landscape teeming with plant and animal life that has been transformed by the millenary action of many human generations.

Take, for instance, the agricultural pattern of peoples like the Yanomami. Each family has its own garden the approximate size of a small soccer field. When this garden is at the peak of production, they open a new one while a third, old and overgrown with secondary vegetation, still provides banana, peach palm fruit, and some roots. The very low soil fertility in this area – as reported in a Brazilian survey in the 1970s (Albert, Zacquini, 1979: 131-136) – yields no more than three years of high productivity. Old gardens are not immediately replanted. The jungle takes over, large tree stumps begin to sprout, and the forest starts its recovery. In 20 to 30 years, it seems that garden had never existed. In the late 1960s, I lived for about two years in that remote part of the border between Brazil and Venezuela, during fieldwork in a couple of villages of the northernmost Yanomami subgroup, the Sanumá. One of these villages was then closely surrounded by gardens (Ramos 1990a). Less than 30 years later, I went back. Confused, I tried to identify what my hosts pointed out as the old village where I had lived. All I saw was dense forest and a few tenuous signs of what had been gardens big enough to feed nearly one hundred people.

We must keep in mind that each village has an average of 20 families, each one opening up gardens in a two- to three-year cycle. Consider that approximately

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3,000 Yanomami families do that continuously on the Brazilian side of their territory. If we multiply this by the other innumerable families of the many other indigenous peoples throughout the Amazon,¹ it is hard to imagine that what we see today as the Amazon rainforest is still a virgin forest after centuries of slash-and-burn agriculture, hunting, and gathering. Furthermore, although the degree of soil fertility varies in the region, it is seldom fertile enough to permit large permanent settlements. Our usually impatient and untrained eyes see what appears to be a forever-static land. But in fact, the huge green mantle that so impresses us is the result of a subtle flow of tiny clearings that sprinkle the landscape, and the counter-flow of forest rejuvenation that is possible thanks to the parsimonious way in which indigenous peoples impose their economic activities upon the environment. Deep down in their wisdom, the Yanomami, like all contemporary native peoples in the Amazon, engendered a social, political, and economic system that favours territorial dispersal, aware that excessive demographic concentration inevitably leads to the exhaustion of natural resources. Their land is vast and there are very good reasons for it to be so.

In fact, the way the Yanomami handle their territory is a first-rate example of resource management in an area that is notorious for its fragility as evidenced in the pattern of highly sparse fauna and flora species. Responding to this natural dispersal Yanomami communities are small (traditionally less than 100 people in most cases), far apart (from a few hours to several days walking), and connected by a dense network of trails.

Fine earth lines, sometimes straight, sometimes twisted, going resolutely up and down hill, halting at streams to reappear on the other side, mixed with tree roots snaking around the forest floor, or over tree trunks across swollen streams, such are the Yanomami trails. At ground level, they make themselves visible, at least to the trained eye, but seen from an airplane, they are imperceptible, meticulously hidden by the forest canopy. Through these trails, people walk metres, or kilometres, cross national or international borders in minutes, hours, days or weeks to reach gardens, hunting grounds, and near or distant villages.

Yanomami trails are the most pedestrian evidence, if I may say so, of this

¹ The present-day indigenous population of the Amazon is estimated to be around 600,000 (Instituto Socioambiental - ISA 2006: 11) and it was certainly larger in the past.

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people's disposition to walk, move, and spread out. Paths in the forest opened up with machetes are enlarged and maintained by the trampling of many feet that constantly tread the area. They last as long as the people's interest in keeping their ties with specific places; they can be well defined, clearly visible and relatively easy to follow, or a mere hint of old routes, barely distinguishable from the forest brush and an invitation for the neophyte to get lost. If, however, by a magician's trick, or an extraordinary technological innovation, all the trails that have been slashed through the forest along the centuries of Yanomami presence in the region came up to the surface, we would have one of the most intricate road maps ever drawn. Such a map, if projected on paper, screen, or any other visual medium, would give us a faithful picture of all the routes linking all the gardens, all the villages, and all camping grounds past and present in a mind-boggling profusion of graphic signs of the centenary, perhaps millennial efficiency with which the Yanomami have occupied the western Guiana region. This hypothetical map would strike a definitive blow on the recalcitrant fallacy of the Amazon as an immense human void. With shortsighted, single-minded, and uneducated arguments, politicians have attempted to annul the demarcation of Yanomami land with the false premise that an 'empty' Amazonia would condemn it to abandonment and backwardness. It is said that to 'give' so much land to so few Indians is wasteful and even dangerous, because, not knowing how to exploit the forest, these Indians are indirectly responsible for the penury of legions of landless Brazilians, allegedly robbed of economic opportunities in the rainforest. Furthermore, these detractors blame what they see as indigenous gullibility, naively encouraging foreign greed for the Amazon. In short, these arguments expose the epitome of 'civilised' conceit: what urban whites cannot see, does not exist!

Parenthetically, this same ignorant arrogance was painfully displayed in the case that became known as the 1993 'Haximu massacre', the murder of sixteen Yanomami by a group of Brazilian placer miners. In the absence of corpses, the incident was questioned and even denied (Albert 1996). The fact that the Yanomami do not leave their dead lying around, but cremate them and keep the ashes for the appropriate funerary ceremonies, was abundantly described and explained by Indians, anthropologists, and federal police agents. Even so, it did not convince

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the vulgar Cartesian minds that insisted on the misleading notion that 'I don't see it, *ergo*, it doesn't exist', or 'I only believe what I see'.

On a different key, but in accord with the view of the demographic void, is the intermittent refrain the military usually play according to which continuous Indian territories on the international frontier zone threaten national sovereignty. Defending a pseudo-Weberian logic, they associate territory to independent State; they then conclude that any indigenous people whose territory is on the border strip will automatically claim the status of a sovereign nation. Why this should happen only on the frontier and why now and not in the past – when indigenous peoples were regarded as true 'defence walls in the hinterland' (Farage 1991), and as President Lula, publicly and emphatically, declared in May 2008 they still are – the supporters of the Indian threat never explain². Nor do they seem interested to know that there is no record of American Indians ever claiming state independence (Brysk 2000), or that indigenous peoples in Brazil have no vocation for separatism (Clastres 1978; Ramos 1996a).

Let us return to the hypothetical Yanomami road map. We have reached the twenty-first century with the possibility, at least in part, of making the magician's trick come technologically true, the trick that in the mid-nineties helped me imagine the density of Yanomami cartography. New research tools are now capable of revealing in detail patterns of resource use and, up to a point, vestiges the passage of time has blurred. As useful tools in meticulous ethnographic research, these new instruments greatly contribute to deepen our understanding of specific empirical situations. I am referring to the detailed and impressive work of tracing these vestiges with GPS and high-resolution satellite images. Combining high technology and fieldwork in loco, French anthropologist Bruce Albert and French geographer François-Michel Le Tourneau exhaustively scanned a Yanomami area (*Watoriki*) in the Demini region in the northern state of Amazonas in Brazil. Among other

² In April 2008, during the celebration of the Indian Week, the military commander of the Amazon, General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro Pereira, following what seems to have become a Brazilian military tradition (Ramos 1998: 222-242), declared he was against the recognition of the Raposa-Serra do Sol indigenous land in east Roraima. Although this land had been officially demarcated and confirmed, it was still the object of a bitter dispute involving half a dozen rice-growing invaders and most of the Indians who lived in it. The general argued that being on the frontier zone, that indigenous land was a threat to national sovereignty, a deep-rooted refrain that belies all evidence to the contrary.

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things, they showed that the hunting, fishing, and gathering trails of the local Yanomami follow a reticular, netlike pattern rather than the routinely accepted zoning in concentric circles. The Yanomami at Demini and elsewhere are experts in building a network of bifurcating trails, which are evocative of Jorge Luis Borges' literary imagination³. B. Albert and F.- M. Le Tourneau's technological research confirms the perception I acquired in my prolonged stay with the northern Sanumá subgroup without the high tech apparatus of the French researchers (Ramos 1990a)⁴. The satellite images of *Watoriki* also show trails and gardens already in disuse, giving us precise information on the magnitude of the Yanomami cultural cartography. Thus, the authors were able to detect a model that is 'structured by the collective knowledge and use of a web of identified forest paths (principal and secondary) tying together notable sites labelled by toponyms (hunting and gathering camps, former habitation and garden sites, groves of fruit trees, geographic features, and so on)' (Albert, Le Tourneau, 2007: 584). These crisscrossing, subdivided, and bifurcate paths reflect a series of activities both individual and collective. They trace routes that cover about 20 km as the crow flies (Albert, Le Tourneau, 2007: 589). It is worth noting that the authors limit themselves to economic activities, leaving out other spheres of Yanomami life, such as inter-village visiting, which would increase manifold the complexity of the research.

And so we get a little closer to demonstrating to the adamant defenders of the empty spaces fallacy how empty their knowledge is about the sophistication of indigenous life in the Amazon.

3. Yanomami on the move

From the still largely invisible, but no less real, map that covers over the entire Yanomami land, which results from Yanomami historical and geographical experiences as projected on the ground, we can outline some of their moves.

³ I am referring to the famous 1941 short story by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, about the paths that bifurcate to infinity.

⁴ The original, shorter version of this article was published in *Revista do Migrante*, January-April, 1996. At that time, without today's technological resources, I used another kind of resource, namely, imagination, to express my understanding of how the Sanumá use their land. It was a pleasant surprise to see part of my informed guess confirmed by my French colleagues' detailed and empirically precise research.

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They appear to be similar, but their social and economic origins and motivations differ. Some are the outcome of very small shifts, others we may call migrations, and yet others come from strong external pressures. By no means should we take them as examples of nomadism, yet another obstinate fallacy that has caused great damage to indigenous peoples (Ramos 1998: 33-40). It is a particularly troubling misrepresentation of indigenous mobility, due to its insidious use in everyday discourse and stubborn persistence in the anthropological vocabulary.

In order to clarify this point, it is worth opening another parenthesis to discuss the problems that surround the notion of nomadism. It probably derives from the first Old World city-states that hid behind walls to leave out 'nomadic barbarians'. Carried over to the New World, it became one of the conquerors' tools to mark out the difference between the 'civilised' and the 'primitives' based on the inflated value they put on sedentary life. Following Pierre Bourdieu, we might say that nomadism is one of those received ideas that were smuggled into the anthropological lexicon and mind-set via a 'clandestine persuasion' (Bourdieu 1989: 33). Nomadism has been recurrently attributed to indigenous peoples by a wide range of conquerors, such as missionaries, administrators, businesspeople, and settlers. As it entered anthropological discourse, nomadism changed from plain stereotype to scientific truth. The fallacy of nomadism, like a weed, is very hard to extirpate whether in common sense or in anthropological discourse.

Common sense has in dictionaries its canon of truth. They provide an apt justification for the persistence of stereotypes the notion of nomadism exemplifies. The popular character of dictionaries is what makes them strategic to unveil received ideas. In *Keywords* Raymond Williams shows a productive way to elucidate underlying meanings, particularly regarding vocabulary. He identifies two senses in which words can be problematic: 'the available and developing meanings of known words [...] and the explicit but as often implicit connections which people were making, in what seemed [to be] particular formations of meaning' (Williams 1985: 15). Taking R. Williams' lead, I now turn to how the meaning of nomadism has been formed and how the Yanomami, among many other peoples, have been affected by it.

Let us begin with a couple of entries from the *Webster's Encyclopedic*

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Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language:

nomad, *n.* 1. a member of a race or tribe which has no fixed abode, but moves about from place to place according to the state of the pasturage or food supply. 2. any wanderer.

wandering, *adj.* 1. moving from place to place without a fixed plan; roaming; rambling; *wandering tourists*. 2. having no permanent residence; nomadic; *a wandering tribe of Indians*. 3. meandering; winding; *a wandering river, a wandering path*. *n.* 4. an aimless roving about; leisurely traveling from place to place: *a period of delightful wandering through Italy*. 5. Usually, *wanderings*. a. aimless travels; meanderings: *His wanderings took him all over the world*. b. disordered thoughts or utterances; incoherencies: *mental wanderings; the wanderings of delirium*.

The English dictionary associates *nomad* to *wanderer*. What do these words have in common? First, they share a negative quality, an absence. Nomads and wanderers have no fixed abode, moving from place to place without a fixed plan. Their most striking feature is the lack of a sedentary pattern of settlement. Second, both words include the idea of an open-ended movement with no point of return. Third, both entries literally refer to indigenous peoples: while a nomad belongs to a 'race or tribe', a wanderer is said to be part of 'a wandering tribe of Indians'. The evocation of wanderings (in the plural) as some sort of madness manifested in 'disordered thoughts' and 'wanderings of delirium' is not lost on the reader. Fourth, the thread of thought linking both entries is a movement away from order toward unpredictability. In contrast to sedentary life and a permanent residence, nomadic living, or a wandering existence, suggests a loose, undisciplined way of life beyond the pale of state authority (Ramos 1998: 33).

The *Aurélio* Portuguese Dictionary adds the notion of 'vagabond' to the list of meanings under nomadism. Considering that in urban contexts, at least in Brazil, a vagabond is someone with no fixed residence, and since whoever lacks a fixed, identifiable residence is subjected to legal penalties, one gets very close to the ultimate consequences of a captious syllogism: as a synonym of vagabond, nomad verges on illegality. This is not an abstract possibility. The nineteenth-century Mura Indians of western Brazil (Amoroso 1992) and the twentieth-century Kayapó

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of Central Brazil (Fisher 1995) were in different ways subjected to abusive and inappropriate treatment by national society for the 'crime' of alleged nomadism, which ultimately meant the incapacity of the state to control them. With their constant moves, they baffled their pursuers and eluded surveillance. For all intents and purposes, being anywhere, they were nowhere.

Against the common sense that takes any kind of indigenous spatial mobility as nomadism, I must make emphatically clear that what follows refers to the spatial habits of a people who are *mobile*, not *nomadic*, a point insistently made by the geographer William Smole in his study of a Yanomami subgroup in Venezuela he identifies as Yanoama:

'The Yanoama are a very mobile people. However, this mobility is not to be equated with nomadism. Nomads have no fixed dwelling place, while each Yanoama *teri* ['village'] has a *shabono* [communal house] to which it invariably returns. Every group move is to a particular location for a specific purpose, even though to the casual observer it might appear to be an aimless wandering. Group relocations are of two different kinds: the short-term change of residence for the purposes of collecting, gardening, or social visiting, and permanent relocation involving the building of a new *shabono*. The former, or temporary, change of residence varies in duration from a single night to months' (Smole 1976: 80-81).

We can refine W. Smole's description to include other types of movement. Part of the Yanomami wisdom in managing their territory is subtly evident in two micro-shifts. One results from the need to open up new gardens every two to three years and to find new hunting grounds when game becomes scarce around the villages. Communities follow this rhythm by moving, in part, to look for new sites where the forest is more suitable for gardening, gathering, and hunting. If a community stays in the same place for too long, sources of animal protein diminish and the distance between village and gardens increases to the point when it is more practical and sensible to move the village closer to the new gardens. These shifts normally cover an average of 3 to 5 km in 10 years. For those who live regularly among the Yanomami or visit them yearly these movements are hardly noticeable, but become perfectly evident after an absence of some years.

The other micro-shift takes longer and may result from the cumulative

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depletion of a given area. Intensive gardening and hunting may be higher than the recovery rate of a micro-region that usually contains several communities. In order to counterbalance this tendency, approximately each generation moves the village further out in a radius of about 10 to 30 km (Albert, Zacquini, 1979).

However, moves can also occur for other reasons. The break of epidemics or the burst of conflicts between communities can provoke the dispersal of their members. Settling down in a new place away from the previous one may result in new social and political arrangements in the area. All this is closely related to one of the most salient features of Yanomami socio-political organisation, namely, the community's traditional splitting pattern according to which new local groups are formed every two or three generations. Political rivalry in the communities leads to periodic fissions and represents an effective mechanism to keep the size of villages within the limits of the area's carrying capacity. Dissenting groups move away in search of a new village site where they can exploit resources more comfortably. Kinship ties continue to be activated as long as the parties are socially close to each other. Allied at first, these communities gradually go their separate ways until their mutual ties are no closer than with any other community. Two positive results are achieved in this process: to avoid the harmful effects of an overgrown settlement where many people exploit limited resources at the same time, and to preserve or even expand the vast network of relationships that covers the entire Yanomami territory.

A third mobility mode that we might call migratory is closely related to the previous two in terms of dynamics, but with different geopolitical consequences. It was responsible for the Yanomami territorial expansion throughout the Guiana region. This process is still little known in detail because there are neither archaeological nor historical data, while oral reports by the Yanomami do not go back far enough into the past to permit an assessment of the earliest occupation of their present-day territory. The little evidence there is gives us an idea about the last 200 years of their geographical trajectory. Moreover, linguistic techniques contribute to fill in the gaps with inferences drawn from the degree of similarity and difference between the four known Yanomami languages: Yanomae, Yanomamö, Yanam, and Sanumá.

4. Silent history

Yanomami speakers have lived in the Guiana region since at least the eighteenth century when European explorers first recorded their presence (Albert, Zacquini, 1979). However, if we turn to glottochronology dating – the linguistic technique that measures the approximate time languages take to separate – we have some revealing figures. Using this methodological procedure, linguist Ernesto Migliazza (1972) stated that the first Yanomami language to split away was Sanumá in the thirteenth century. This means that no less than 700 years were necessary for all the four languages to subdivide and reach today's degree of differentiation. Based on this calculation, geographer William Smole (1976) concluded that the original Yanomami territory must have been much larger than it is now, because the members of all four languages live relatively near each other, which would explain why the first dispersal produced such big language differences. If they had been as close together in the past as they are now, their languages would not be so far apart. After a maximum point of expansion, their territory probably contracted.

The linguistic record is one of the few vestiges of the Yanomami remote past. On the one hand, climactic conditions in the Amazon do not favour archaeological remains. In a very short time, the hot and humid weather destroys most organic matter, such as dwellings, ornaments, etc. On the other hand, the Yanomami cremate the dead and their personal belongings, while several subgroups consume the deceased's ashes during an elaborate funerary ceremony. Thus, there are hardly any remains left of their bodies and culture, besides very few stone axes and fragile clay pots. We have to make do with glottochronology, travellers' accounts, and the oral history of the Yanomami themselves.

For a recent phase of this history, there are stories, for instance, of the Sanumá, about their arrival at the Auaris River valley on the headwaters of the Branco River in the Brazilian state of Roraima. Some three or four generations ago, the Sanumá and their neighbours, the Carib-speaking Yekuana, were at war for the occupation of a territory left half-empty by the decimation of entire peoples, mostly Carib and Arawak speakers. One after another, these peoples succumbed to ill-treatment and epidemics brought by non-Indians into the Amazon, mainly during the nineteenth-century rubber boom. Coming from the southwest, the

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Sanumá fanned out and reached the traditional land of the Yekuana, one of the very few peoples who survived that violent period (Arvelo-Jiménez 1974, Andrade 2007). In the twentieth century, after many Sanumá skirmishes against the Yekuana, the latter counter-attacked and faced the Sanumá at gunpoint (a legacy from the white invasion) to end the hostilities once and for all (Ramos 1980). The intertribal war was over and since then both groups have coexisted in the same region, maintaining peaceful but tense relationships in a climate vaguely reminiscent of the cold war. One or two marriages of Yekuana men with Sanumá women sealed their peace. Nowadays, Auaris is mostly peopled by the Sanumá and by a growing Yekuana population.

In their fan-like expansion, the Sanumá occupied other valleys besides Auaris, such as the Merevari and Caura Rivers in Venezuela. They mention the Ocamo River, an Orinoco tributary, as their historical hub from where they started out northward straddling the Brazil-Venezuela border. They say they were fleeing from the attacks of other Yanomami, such as those they call Samatali to the southwest. In their slow flight, community clusters stayed at several sites in succession where they cleared gardens, had children, split up, and formed new alliances. In about two generations, they practically occupied the whole area that once belonged to extinct Carib and Arawak peoples (Ramos 1990b). No doubt, the difficult access to the headwaters of Guiana Rivers spared the Yanomami the calamity that came upon those peoples because of continuous invasions. However, they were not immune to the indirect effects of contact mainly through epidemics and the allure of trade goods that reached them before whites arrived in person. Having escaped the fate of the extinct Caribs and Arawaks, the Yanomami in general and the Sanumá in particular were able to take over new lands that until then had been unknown to them. These were truly migrations, quite different from the small changes of residence within a culturally defined space (Ramos 1995). It is worth repeating that none of these spatial movements has any similarity with what has been misnamed nomadism. In this sense, neither the Yanomami nor any other known indigenous people fit the prejudiced notion that takes sedentary life to be the ultimate sign of civilisation.

5. Greed that kills

From the mid-twentieth century on, the Yanomami have lived a long and tragic period, perhaps the worst in their history. The opening up of the Perimetral Norte highway in the 1970s left a trail of disease and death that wiped out entire communities (Ramos 1979). The survivors of four villages on the Upper Catrimani River, struck by a measles epidemic that killed half of their inhabitants, reassembled in what is now the Demini community, headquarters of Davi Kopenawa, the Yanomami leader who is known worldwide for his campaign against miners' invasions and in defence of the rainforest. In the Apiaú region, an agribusiness project expelled the local communities and transformed their members into rootless pariahs in other villages (Taylor 1979).

In a dreadful rendition of C. Columbus' fantasies about the land of Paria, in August 1987, tens of thousands of placer miners (*garimpeiros*) began a long and wide-ranging invasion of the Yanomami territory in a gold rush that got out of control. In that year, gold reached high prices in the London and New York stock exchanges (MacMillan 1995), provoking devastating shock waves in the Amazon in general and among the Yanomami in particular. In a matter of months, hordes of fortune hunters caused the worst malaria pandemics ever seen in the region. Countless communities were devastated and the survivors stranded from village to village in search of a new home and subsistence base (Menegola, Ramos, 1992; Ramos 1995; Castro Lobo 1996). For these survivors it was a very unusual form of moving, utterly imposed from outside pressures. It was a violent and chaotic mobility. Rather than leading to the expansion of the Yanomami social fabric, it had the opposite effect. The Indians experienced the social and spatial contraction that typically accompanies severe social disruption and psychological distress caused by massive loss of people. Malaria in particular has the potential to transform the chimerical Amazonian 'empty spaces' into reality due to its capacity to destroy people and jeopardise their vital sources (Ramos 1996b).

Social disruption occurred at several levels, beginning with the destruction of the communities' economic base. Gardens were ruined by colossal hoses gushing out powerful water jets that in a matter of seconds opened up gaping craters; trails were bisected by the same process, isolating villages, gardens, and hunting grounds; game

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animals fled the area deeply disturbed by the pandemonium of mining machinery and aircraft coming and going non-stop amidst an inferno of noise and pollution. All of this happened while Yanomami lives were relentless drained away by contagious diseases and physical violence caused by the miners. Even the communities that had no direct exposure to these mining activities felt the effects of the gold rush. Epidemics that started in a given place spread like wild fire affecting hundreds of villages, and leaving behind a trail of misery. Tuberculosis, malaria, malnutrition, and a number of other lethal diseases mutilated and killed, breaking down the demographic balance of whole regions. Each new airstrip, mining site, and miners' camp multiplied the catastrophe. There were no immune communities, not even those across the border in Venezuela, as the 'Haximu massacre' exemplifies. Like a process of metastasis, the impact of mining activities corrodes the arteries, veins, and capillaries of the great organic chain that is Yanomami society. In the first two years of gold mining, an estimated 1,500 Yanomami, that is, 12.5% of their population in Brazil, died as a direct consequence of the gold rush. If we apply this same proportion to the country's population, we would have over 14,000,000 Brazilians dead, a veritable national hecatomb. And hecatomb it was for the Yanomami on the eve of the twenty-first century. The Yanomami continue to suffer the assault of mining waves even with the investment of generous state funding in repeated but ineffectual police operations to evacuate the invaders.

A carefully planned and carried out health programme was launched in the first years of the twenty-first century. The non-governmental organisation Urihi-Saúde Yanomami, funded by the Ministry of Health, succeeded in reversing the high mortality rates of the previous decade. By late 2002, it had reduced infant mortality in 80% and in 100% of malaria in the areas where it operated (Urihi, *Resumo das Atividades de Assistência à Saúde*, April 2003; see also Brum 2002: 56-57). The project came to an abrupt halt due to policy changes in the administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. It was replaced with misconceived measures and incompetent and corrupt personnel altogether unprepared to work among indigenous peoples such as the Yanomami. As a result, malaria came back, tuberculosis increased, and the general discontent by both Indians and health agents in the field was critically exacerbated.

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Adding to these drawbacks, the Yanomami now face a new kind of peril, namely, the periodic attempts by conservative politicians to annul the demarcation of their territory with the worn-out arguments that indigenous settlements on the frontier zone are a threat to the national security, and that there is too much land for too few Indians! Immoral and illegal, these arguments are an affront to the Brazilian Constitution that guarantees the right of indigenous peoples to have territories sufficiently large to allow for the continuity of their lifestyles.

6. Inspiring cultures

In this post-progress day and age of recurring ecological disasters and global bewilderment with the abuses of technological megalomania, to talk about indigenous wisdom in handling nature has become a cliché. Nevertheless, I prefer to follow the rhetorical style of many indigenous peoples who rely on the efficacy of repetition to maximise the chances of good communication. It is wise, then, to reiterate this post-industrial truism in the hope that somewhere at some point the message will get across to those who profess the still hegemonic discourse of Western style progress and civilisation.

In this vein, by way of conclusion, I evoke some statements about the subtle beauty of Yanomami life, which by no means is limited to ecological good sense that, for them, is indeed a truism. They are passages from the works of dedicated researchers who brought to light aspects of Yanomami culture that gained their respect and admiration. The researchers – mainly anthropologists, geographers, and linguists – carried out prolonged fieldwork in Yanomami villages in both Brazil and Venezuela. Last, but not least, is a testimony by Davi Kopenawa, the man who from his *Watoriki* village in the Amazon projected the universe and saga of the Yanomami onto Western consciousness (Kopenawa 2000: 18-23; 2004: 44-45). Each of these statements is like a piece of a mosaic depicting our visions of Yanomami savvy and integrity. I have chosen them almost at random mainly for the flavour the authors imprint in their texts. Above all, they are a tribute to indigenous wisdom.

‘For untold generations the Yanoama have been supported by a stable economic system. This system is here viewed as a category of activities fully articulated with many other systems in the culture and not simply as the means

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whereby the Yanoama earn a living. Fundamental to all these systems is the multifamily *teri* community' (Smole 1976: 99).

'The Yanoama use their garden space judiciously and with a clear understanding of specific plant requirements. With scant exceptions, they plant vegetatively (using cuttings) rather than using seeds. This makes for perennial cloning and, coincidentally, eliminates virtually all possibility of cross-fertilisation and resultant hybridisation' (Smole 1976: 116-117).

'With the Sanumá I learned to admire – albeit not always imitate – their wisdom of taking truths and lies as relative stances; their patience in dealing with children in their worst tantrums; their ability to aim their anger exclusively at its object, thus sparing the rest of the world; and their lavish joy of life and inexhaustible taste for drama' (Ramos 1995: 5).

'An important part of Sanumá life is [...] their interaction with a vast network of spirits and supernatural beings that live above the sky, below the earth, and in the territories of virtually every Yanomami community both known and unknown. The importance of these faraway places becomes clearer in the case of the spirit-animals that live in the forest around distant villages. Since people's lives are synchronised with those of their spirit-animals, we might say that their existence depends on the fauna of those remote places. To explain certain illnesses and deaths, the Sanumá target on some culprit, be it an enemy shaman, a ghost, or evil spirits of distant communities and their surrounding forest. The shamans with whom I talked listed no less than 74 of these communities they know through their own spirits' (Taylor 1996: 149; my translation).

'It is through hunting, fishing, and gathering that the Yanomami acquire 70 to 75% of the protein necessary for a balanced diet. These activities also provide them with extremely diversified foods. They hunt by [...] tracking or attracting the animals imitating their sounds: 35 mammals and 90 kinds of birds (they also gather six kinds of turtles and 8 of reptiles). They fish 106 species both with line and fish poison. They gather forest products including about 129 kinds of edible plants (fruits, nuts, roots, and fungi), besides 5 kinds of crustaceans, 10 of batrachians, 16 of caterpillars, 15 larvae and insects (especially wasps and termites), and 25 of wild honey' (Albert, Gomez, 1997: 34; my translation).

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'One day, as I was writing down an interview, I stopped to watch a shamanic session at the second fireplace away from my hammock. The shaman's footsteps went from where I was sitting to the patient's hammock. Obviously, I was part of the shamanic context. After concentrating my attention on the scene, I began to understand that as the shaman came and went, his auxiliary spirits were teasing me and calling my attention to the impossible task I had proposed myself. They would say: 'you've come here to 'record' our words, but our words never end, that's why we give them away'. The shaman's spirits were making fun of me by pointing out both the mutant aspect of what I thought I could fix in writing, and the illogical way in which I attempted to appropriate that knowledge, by accumulating it on pieces of paper. The written word negated [three] important aspects of shamanic knowledge: orality, circulation, and mutability' (Smiljanic 1999: 7; my translation).

'Sanumá theory about the origin of the world or the universe is based on a principle similar to A. L. Lavoisier's Law: in Nature nothing is lost, nothing is created, and everything is transformed. In the Sanumá universe, beings do not emerge from nothing, but are made up from what already exists. New bodies, new spaces, new times are like recycled entities, the product of operations upon what is already given. At the beginning everything seems to have been amorphous, there were no enemies, no animals, only still undefined Sanumá. With the advent of the twin brothers Omawa and Soawö, the transforming heroes, the process of creation, differentiation and transformation of the cosmos and of beings was intensified and goes on to this day' (Guimarães 2005: 12; my translation).

'What you people call 'nature' we call *urihi a*, the forest-earth and its image, *urihinari*, as it is seen by the shamans. The trees are alive because of this image. What we call *urihinari* is the spirit of the forest: the spirits of the trees, *huutihiripë*, of the leaves, *yaahanaripë*, and the lianas, *thootheripë*. There are many of these spirits that play on the forest floor. We also call them *urihi a*, 'nature', just like the *yaroripë*, the spirits of game animals, also the bees, the turtles, and the snails. For us the forest fertility, 23; my translation).

Going back to C. Columbus' Edenic fantasy, we are justified in presuming that, if he had sailed up the Orinoco River to its headwaters, and if he had trusted his senses rather than his mystical imagination, he would have had more surprises than

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those he experienced in his third voyage to the New World. For this to happen, however, we would have to presume the impossible: he would have had to renounce his received ideas in order to make full use of his candidly unarmed senses and let himself be infused by the world displayed in front of him.

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