

Yanomami

From "Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender: Men and Women in the World's Cultures"

ALTERNATIVE NAMES

Yanomami are also known as Yanomamĩ, Yanoama, Yanomamö, Waika, Guaika, Shiriána or Xiriana, Guaharibo, and Sanemá.

LOCATION

The territory of the entire ethnic group of the Yanomami people comprises the southeast of the federal state of Amazonas in Venezuela and the neighboring federal states of Amazonas and Roraima in Brazil. The Yanomami region, which has an area of approximately 190,000 km², is situated west of the Guiana (Guyana) Shield between latitude 5°N and the equator and between longitude 61°W and 67°W. Except for some savanna areas in the north the terrain is mainly tropical rainforest. The linguistic subgroups are as follows: (1) the Yanoam and their subdivision Ninam who live in the northeast and the east; (2) the Sanemá (also known as the Sanuma, Sanĩma, or Sanima) in the north; (3) the Yanomam, who live to the east of the national border as well as on the slopes of the Sierra Parima mountain range; (4) the central Yanomami (the Yanomamĩ or Yanomamö) who live in the center and in the west and south. The last of these groups, particularly the villages near the Upper Orinoco which belong to the Patanowëtheri group, are the subject of this article.

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The Yanomami are a hunter-gatherer and swidden horticultural society with a population of about 25,000 (10,000 in Brazil and c. 15,000 in Venezuela). The people live in communities of approximately 40-200 individuals. Each village consists of three to eight or more extended families, which are often united by marital relations. Among the Yanomami, in the far south of Venezuela, family homes are built close to each other in a circle. These large palm-thatched circular communal dwellings are called *shapono*. The members of each family group work, sleep, and socialize around a central hearth. Second or third partners in polygamous marriages as well as unmarried adult family members maintain their own fire nearby. The only household furnishing is a hammock. New roofs are constructed every 2-7 years and the old settlements are abandoned. Several times a year the people leave their village, together or in groups, to spend a few weeks in temporary camps in the forest or as visitors with allied villages.

The main crop is plantain, although manioc has become increasingly common in recent decades, supplemented by maize, sweet potatoes, and sugar cane. Sources of collected protein are small catfish, crabs, crayfish, caterpillars, large insects, grubs, and nuts. A long bow and arrows fitted with a variety of points made from bamboo, wood, or bone are used for hunting.

Yanomami material culture is simple and functional. Baskets, calabash gourds, forked sticks, and fresh leaves serve as their cooking utensils. However, they no longer use their traditional pottery since metal pots have become accessible. The use of metal axes, machetes, and knives has also become standard.

Linguistically, as well as anthropologically (genetically and anthropometrically), the Yanomami are distinct from the adjacent ethnic groups; their language is an isolate. Although communities are self-sufficient, networks of alliances are intensified by invitations and visits and by the exchange of commodities. Marital ties strengthen affiliations between communities. Local groups, that are not well known to each other, often suspect each other of causing illnesses and misery. The Yanomami are a relatively egalitarian face-to-face society, which is politically structured by kinship. Cross-cousin marriage is central in social interaction. Affinity is socially emphasized more than cognatic ties. Owing to their remote location in the interfluvial area between the Orinoco River, the Rio Branco, and the Rio Negro, the Yanomami lived in relative isolation until the middle of the 20th century. However, they have experienced a long history of direct and indirect contacts (Ferguson, 1995). Acculturation has been quite slow compared with other indigenous societies of South America. In Venezuela, Yanomami territory is protected to some extent as a United Nations Biosphere Reservation. However, on the Brazilian side of the territory, road construction and an invasion of miners between the 1970s to 1990s has brought considerable illness and death. International protests forced the Brazilian government to take decisive steps to put an end to this disastrous situation. Now the Yanomami are trying to deal with the consequences of the intrusion with the help of social workers and anthropologists. A demographic increase observed in the late 1990s should not hide the fact that illnesses like malaria, influenza, tuberculosis, and hepatitis are severe threats to all the Yanomami. Epidemics have the potential to wipe out entire communities within a short time if no professional help is available. The miners and the Brazilian government have also failed to keep their promises to grant land rights to the Yanomami.

CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

The principal gender categories in the Yanomami culture, "male" and "female," are divided into subclasses according to age (see

below). The concept of gender is strongly determined by the idea of the couple, an idea that is enhanced in daily life and reflected in abstract conceptions of reality. Neither maleness nor femaleness dominates the concept of gender; rather, the concept entails the presence of both genders. Hence the moon or the sun are neither male nor female, but exist in both forms. All tutelary spirits, through whom the shamans perform their power, exist in a male and a female form, although sometimes one gender is more prominent in songs or tales. A man and a woman need to cooperate to produce tobacco. The man sows the seeds after having prepared the garden site. Then the woman will care for the crop and eventually harvest it, dry it, and store it. It is then her possession and she will prepare the daily wad of tobacco from these leaves for her husband and herself. The tobacco can only be given away as a gift or an object of exchange with the consent of both the man and his wife. Tobacco is a very important offering to enhance alliances, and it is worth noting that a couple, ideally a married couple, is necessary to produce such goods for gift exchange and thus for the formation of social or political affiliation. The fact that neither a man nor a woman alone can traditionally produce tobacco can be taken as a metaphor for political influence—a single person has no power. This suggests that the Yanomami do not exhibit strong gender antagonism. But how does this fit with the well-known image of Yanomami women as being subjected to severe physical and social repression? Yanomami women have many times been depicted as abused and brutalized, and the Yanomami have been described as a radically gender antagonistic society (Chagnon, 1983; Harris, 1977, 1987). The reason for this assessment is that a relatively high level of violence in Yanomami life seems to lead to the impression of specific brutality against women. Actually, the display of brave and violent behavior is indeed a cultural ideal, but the conception of fierceness is shared by both genders. Further explanation for these controversial representations will be given under “Gender-Related Social Groups” below.

The genders are not spatially separated, nor are there places that men or women are forbidden to enter. There are no secret cults that are open to only one gender, nor are women or men punished if they see a special act or sacred objects. (For more information see the explanation of the *yipimou* puberty ritual for girls below.) In their daily lives, Yanomami males and females have slightly different costumes. Girls and young women use polished sticks for adornment which they insert in the facial perforation—the ear lobe, the septum, under the lower lip, and next to the corners of the lips. Men's facial perforation is restricted to the ear lobes, and sometimes a small hole pierced under the lower lip to insert a little feather. Adult men traditionally used to wear a belt around their waist and tied their penis up on their prepuce. Women use more cotton decoration—apron, belt, and strings—than men. There is no substantial difference in hairstyle or in the way that their bodies are painted with vegetable dye. Among the Yanomami of the Orinoco area, females may adorn themselves with flowers, palm fronds, and other plants or leaves, while males prefer feathers and skins or pelts of animals. Women blacken their cheeks when mourning a close relative. Men do not adopt these emblems of sorrow. However, men paint themselves totally black when leaving to raid another village.

GENDER OVER THE LIFE CYCLE

Gender differentiation takes place as soon as the newborn is accepted as a human being after birth. The Yanomami have been reported as practicing preferential female infanticide, which appeared to explain the sometimes imbalanced sex ratio (Chagnon, 1977). I was unable to verify this assumption and, in addition, Lizot (1988) found in a comprehensive study that more boys than girls seem to be born. The first time a baby boy is nursed he is given the right breast, whereas a baby girl is first fed from the left breast. This is the initial act of culturally inscribing the appropriate gender to the new infant. Serious names are only given after about 3–4 years, although among the Sanemá this may be done shortly after birth (Ramos, 1995). A strictly observed name taboo bans the usage of names for addressing other people. This rule leads to teknonymy, nicknaming, and the use of classificatory kinship terms to speak to or about someone. However, any term used when speaking to or about a person usually includes a gender marker. This is either a suffix that indicates the gender or, in the case of kinship terms, indicates a male or female addressee.

Children are generally addressed by mentioning their sex in an affectionate way: *moka* or the variants *mokawë*, *moroshi*, or *moroshiwë* for boys, and *naka* and its variants *nakami* or *nakasimi* for girls. *Moka* and *naka* relate directly to the sexual organs, as the penis is *pei moka* and the vagina is *pei naka*. A young girl is addressed as *suwë hëri*, “premature woman,” from about the time she loses her milk teeth until she reaches puberty (6–17 years). From the conclusion of her puberty ritual until the end of her reproductive phase a woman belongs to the category *suwë moko*, “mature woman,” and after that she is *suwë pata*, “old woman.” The transition from boy to man is not as clearly defined as that from girl to woman. A boy is considered *ihiru*, “child,” and then he is called “*maranapë*,” premature, until he becomes *huya*, “a man.” However, there is no exact date marking this transition. Seniors are called *pata*, which means both “old” and “honorable” and refers to men as well as women.

Socialization of Boys and Girls

The Yanomami appreciate boys and girls equally. A preference for boys is sometimes expressed verbally, but no differences can be detected in the rearing of boys and girls. If a woman has had several children of the same sex, she generally expresses a desire for a child of the opposite sex. It is considered advantageous to have children of both genders, as the balance of the sexes is essential for the group reproduction. Boys and girls are needed to provide cross-cousins to marry in the future generations—brothers and sisters who live in the same village are the parents of future spouses. Boys and girls are socialized quite similarly, as the important virtues—showing generosity, willpower, and bravery—are the same for both genders. Caretakers

enhance these qualifications, by instructing the children in their rhetoric skills and in the exertion of physical strength. Even though it has been stated that girls are brought up to be submissive among the people of the Upper Orinoco (Chagnon, 1992), both girls and boys are encouraged to retaliate if other children attack them (Herzog-Schröder, 2000).

At the age of about 8–10 years boys were traditionally ordered to tie up their penis at the prepuce, as was the custom among men. This tradition is not always followed now; instead boys start wearing a loincloth or shorts.

In early childhood girls often take the responsibility of caring for younger brothers and sisters while their mothers are working. Girls frequently baby-sit collectively and they regularly join the adult women in the gardens or on trips through the forest. Young boys also accompany their mothers, but they have few duties or responsibilities so that at times they look somehow lost. They often “hang out” and are not much help to anybody. Young girls have less leisure time than boys as they are more involved in obligations connected to the family and the household. However, they are much more involved in the system which provides daily necessities, and they take pride “knowing how to do things.”

Attainment of Adulthood

Among the Yanomami of the Upper Orinoco area the transition to womanhood is marked by a ritual called *yîpîmou*. This ritual bears all the features of an initiation process of the “rites of passage” type. It takes place partly in the house but important stages of the process occur in the forest in the presence of females only.

The mother, the grandmother, or an older female relative of the pubescent girl organizes the different phases of the process. In essence the ritual is a performance of “becoming” a woman, an event which is highly esteemed by the entire community. On the appearance of menstruation, the girl withdraws to a small shelter in the back of her home. She will obey a number of restrictions on her behavior; these taboos refer to talking, body position, and diet. She only eats a small amount of banana and crabs. The most important rule is not to touch her body and above all not to scratch her skin and her head with her fingernails. She uses a set of special wooden sticks to relieve itching.

After a few days the curtain which separates the girl from the big communal house is taken away and she is completely covered with red dye. From time to time the initiate leaves her home accompanied by female friends and relatives and goes to nearby creeks to hunt *oko* crabs. This period of transition culminates in a ceremonial crab hunt (*okomou*). During this time the initiate is presumably extremely susceptible to seduction by evil spirits of the forest. She takes care not to talk and moves cautiously. This phase of the ritual represents the metamorphosis from youth to womanhood; the girl ritually performs the “shedding off her skin.” As she walks along the creeks, where she drags the crabs out of their tunnels under the shores, her body becomes covered with white clay. After returning to the other women in the forest she cleans her body and in this way “sheds her skin.” Then the older women dye her skin with pigment and adorn her with a new garment made from cotton decorated with palm fronds, blossoms, and feathers. Now she can return to the village where all the men give her a rousing welcome when she proudly enters the *shapono*. Hereafter the mother or grandmother might tell the young woman: “Now speak out loudly!” (Cocco, 1972). This suggestion implies the status of being an adult, of defending oneself, and of becoming politically and socially active.

The Yanomami image of the transformation of the initiate is the crab. A crab periodically sheds its old shell to continue a supposedly new life and thus represents recuperative vitality. The periodic regeneration of the crab, which sheds its shell, is metaphorically linked to the menstrual cycle of the adult woman. A girl's future husband has the option of participating in this ritual. If a man's desire to marry the girl is serious, he will also follow her diet and use the sticks to scratch his body and head, as he too will then actually feel the itch on his body and thus perform the “shedding.” Couples who have experienced this ritual jointly often seem to have long-lasting marriages (Herzog-Schröder, 2000).

The main gender difference in socialization is that boys do not have a “rite of passage.” A boy is viewed as starting the process of becoming an adult when his voice starts to break. Success in hunting and bride service for his future parents-in-law are the markers for a boy becoming a man. It is important to note that the rules and taboos which are to be respected at the time of puberty are very similar to the rituals that have to be undergone, mainly by warriors, after having killed a person. Therefore to have the will and strength to fight, and hence to kill an enemy, is also a marker of adulthood.

Middle Age and Old Age

Most men and women aged between 20 and 40 are married. After the death of a partner, new marriages often follow the rule of the levirate or the sororate, or a new mate is chosen who fits the position of a classificatory marriage partner. When a woman's second child has been weaned, the food taboos become much less restrictive. She is considered a successful mother and is generally more respected by both group members and visitors from outside. Their male partners who have not achieved a shamanic initiation before marriage often now undergo spiritual instruction and inauguration.

Elder men and women are respected, and their opinions and suggestions concerning issues of community interest are often followed. The authority of old persons, who may be aged 80 or more, depends strongly on their physical ability as well as on their capacity to speak in public. When their physical state is deteriorating, they rely on close kin for support and care.

PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES BY GENDER

The main virtues of generosity, the ability to negotiate cleverly the exchange of goods and social commitments, the enactment of force and power, and readiness to defend oneself and close kin against antagonists are the same for both genders. A sense of humor is also an attribute that is shared by both genders. In general, man's public speech is louder and more expressive than that of women, especially when village leaders engage in ritualized dialogs, like *himou*. A powerful form of discourse for elder women is the intelligent application of gossip and hearsay; however, when they feel the necessity they scold loudly. Important men and women will both make a public declaration of their opinion regarding issues of general interest, but men do so more often.

GENDER-RELATED SOCIAL GROUPS

Although stated otherwise in some ethnographies (Chagnon, 1977; Lizot, 1988), the central Yanomami are not organized in patrilineages. As noted above, the pair— be it the brother-sister pair or the married couple—is the most important unit in the social structure. Family groups are formed around these pairs. Groups of bi-gendered siblings tend to intermarry and ideally form the cluster of a local group on the basis of affinal relationships. The strongest ties of political alliances are based on affinal relations, which means ultimately on marriage between bi-gendered siblings. In daily life affinity is constantly manifested by naming each other using classificatory kinship terms.

The high value of affinal relations is explicit in the term *shori*, which means both brother-in-law and friend. Sisters-in-law are also often very close to each other. Not only are sisters-in-law married to each other's brothers or first cousins, but they are prescriptive mothers-in-law of each other's children. Accordingly, they will most probably seek to marry their respective children to each other. This position gives them considerable power in the construction of the social and political group, which should not be hidden by the fact that it is mainly their husbands who make public speeches.

GENDER ROLES IN ECONOMICS

Women and men work together in many complex activities like gardening, where men clear the sites, both genders plant and cultivate, and women generally harvest for the needs of the family. However, there are also gender-specific tasks. Men go hunting cooperatively quite often, it is mainly in groups of two or three who are often brothers-in-law. Women regularly hunt and gather on their trips through the forest together with some children. Although only men use the bow and arrow, the concept of hunting is not restricted to males. Women's crab-catching and fishing with bare hands is referred to as "hunting." Household activities are mainly the responsibility of women and their daughters, but older men or second husbands in polyandrous marriages often prepare food or clean up and other men also do so if necessary. Thus there is a strong tendency toward gender division of household activities, but there are no restrictions that would make it impossible for one sex to engage in certain activities.

As the central Yanomami are remote from markets, trading for metal tools or aluminum pots is of great importance. Exchange of commodities has a highly symbolic purpose. Whereas women were depicted as objects of exchange (Chagnon, 1977), an analysis of women's possessions identified them as being active in the exchange of objects (Herzog-Schröder, 2000, 2003). Women exchange objects with both men and women, but more so with women. Most exchange is with members of other local groups, chiefly with people they address in affinal kinship terms. In addition to economic necessity, the inherent aim of exchange is to build and reinforce social bonds on the metaphorical basis of affinity. Heritage is largely unknown to the Yanomami. To avoid reminiscence, talking about deceased persons is strictly taboo. All a person's possessions are destroyed after death.

PARENTAL AND OTHER CARETAKER ROLES

Fathers and mothers are generally concerned about their children and care for them lovingly. Mothers are more important in the first few years, as are grandmothers who take significant decisions when the mother herself is young. Children are reared in close contact with the mother and babysitters. When men are at home they spend much time playing with their little children, as do other members of the extended family. Grandmothers often care for the previous child when a younger sibling is born. Sometimes an older wife of the child's father or an aunt looks after the infant.

Beliefs about conception are essential for the definition of the genitor's role. Children are thought to be conceived during several sexual acts. Thus several fathers can be considered to have cooperated in the creation of a child. As long as the potential fathers are brothers and/or cohusbands they are all considered as fathers. If the men who are thought to have collaborated in the creation of a child are not closely related, the baby might be considered to be "disturbed" or "confused". This could be a reason for infanticide.

Fathers do not play an important role in educating their children. The mother's brother, who is also the ideal father-in-law, has much more authority. Children of both sexes are thought to be closely attached to their mothers throughout life.

LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC ARENAS

Yanomami political structure is diffuse both internally and externally. Each local community is composed of several family groups. The eldest or most celebrated man with charismatic skills represents each family in an informal council. The standing of

the leader can also change depending upon the issue. Decisions concerning the local community are made consensually. One of the family speakers usually acts as the leader in dealings with other Yanomami local groups. This spokesperson does not have the power to give orders. He articulates the will of the group and also strives to convince the members of his own group by the power of his rhetoric. The standard rhetoric device for public speech is the *patamou*, a loud address to the whole community. The rhetorical form of official talks between representatives of different village is the *himou*, a ceremonial dialog, in which political positions are negotiated.

Women are regularly present at public debates; their influence in communal decisions is informal but persuasive. They often interrupt the men's speeches to give their opinion and they are listened to respectfully. Older women also make public comments concerning local scandals or worries. In addition, older women have a considerable influence in relationships with other local groups. At times of intergroup conflict, when few people are willing to risk meeting the enemy, they are often the main participants in political negotiations. Women who have been abducted in earlier years may also initiate contacts with their original group and thus the making of new alliances.

Boys practice the skills of "talking," which is essential for persons of influence. With her change of status after having completed her maturity ritual, a woman is expected to be competent to "talk." In men, rhetoric is mainly expressed in the ceremonial dialogs (*wayamou* and *himou*). The *shapori*, "shaman," also uses speech in a powerful way. Speech and chant are the most significant capabilities of a spiritual specialist, a role that is taken only by men. Obviously speech is more important in men's lives, but it is also an important aspect of women's expression, although not quite as clearly ritualized as in men's ceremonial discourses.

GENDER AND RELIGION

Among the central Yanomami, religion is mainly practiced in the form of shamanism. Only men achieve the status of a shaman and most men will go through the process of the initiation at some point. Only a few aspirants attain the ability to keep their spiritual power. In most villages there are several shamans with different abilities and domains. Women do not engage in shamanic ritual practices, although these are not prohibited for them. Women have their own access to magic and ritual spheres, for example, in the *yipimou* ritual. Older charismatic women generally act first in the contexts of some illnesses, such as loss of soul; during their maneuvers to recover the vital principle, they cooperate with the shamans and thus contribute to healing.

Both genders have their own symbolic representations: for men it is more the bigendered spirit-helpers of the shamans, whereas for women it is more the wild forest spirits they control and handle in direct contact with the principles of nature. However, the vital forces, which are dealt with in spiritual contexts, are never gender antagonistic. As mentioned earlier, entities in the external universe—like the sun and the moon or the beings of the nonvisible world—are commonly bigendered, which supports an ideological gender accommodation for the Yanomami.

LEISURE, RECREATION, AND THE ARTS

The Yanomami are a leisure-intensive culture. Work is seldom considered to be arduous and laziness is morally accepted. For both genders, achievement of economic activities fills people with pride and satisfaction. While most work is done in the mornings, the afternoons and the long evenings are generally spent with the closest family members, with friends from the neighborhood, or with visitors. In the afternoons men frequently gather communally, take the *epena* snuff-drug, and engage in shamanic activities like singing, dancing, and telling myths. Women do not engage in spiritual activity as a form of socializing. Rather, they socialize informally, talking and exchanging news when they visit each other.

Handicrafts are made by both genders; men prepare weapons and lead in the construction of buildings. Artistic expression involves decorating artifacts like baskets, quivers, or arrows, or in adorning the bodies with fibers, cotton, or vegetable dye, which is also done by both genders.

RELATIVE STATUS OF MEN AND WOMEN

Men and women are generally relatively equal in status. Fundamental to the rank of a person is his or her security in the social network, which is based on kinship and the ability to talk. Individuals without close kin are rarely respected. Boys or young men are teased, and at times tormented, before they have established in-law relations. Younger women who arrive in a village alone are aware that they may be subject to rape. This is mainly the case when a woman is captured on occasion of a raid or if a woman leaves her village to join an unrelated group on her own. Here she cannot count on the support mechanisms of the kinship system—mainly a husband or brothers—to protect her. The act of "incorporating" the new member can be violent unless some powerful persons—often women—protect the isolated woman. The danger of rape for an incoming female has led to the idea that Yanomami society is male centered and that women have exceptionally low status. But in fact this idea results from the focus on warfare and aggressive behavior in certain ethnographies (Chagnon, 1977). In war, men are usually killed. Women are sometimes abducted, but they generally are allowed to live.

As far as the *waitheri* complex is concerned, the notorious ferocity (*waitheri*) is not restricted to males. Aggression is not only directed against women but also against both sexes by both men and women. Men might fight men and sometimes men fight

women in intergroup conflicts. Women also fight women with sticks or with bare fists. However, women seldom attack men. They find other ways of penalizing or scolding men, or they may enlist help from kin, especially brothers, to defend them.

SEXUALITY

Sexuality is an open topic. Much joking, comment, gossip, and teasing involves erotic allusions. Accusations of failure also sometimes focus on sexual themes. Therefore children become acquainted with sexual practices and rules in a frank way, although it should be noted that sexual acts are mainly performed in privacy outside the village.

To practice sex, which is taboo before reaching puberty, a girl needs to be prepared by the mother or grandmother some time before adolescence. In some areas the older woman will remove the hymen and thus "open her channel." This act is in accord with the principle that women control the reproductive domain, as has been described in the context of the first menstruation ritual and which is also true for all circumstances of childbirth. Young children are seldom rebuked for sexual play. However, at the age of 6-10 boys are told to bind up or hide their penis and girls are admonished not to expose their private parts and sit or move with caution so as not to allow indecent views.

Each act of sexual intercourse is considered a contribution to a future birth. Therefore, sexuality is closely linked to reproduction. After birth, a post-partum taboo is obeyed for about 15-18 months, the time a Yanomami child needs to learn how to walk. After sexual relations are resumed, the next child is hoped for after about another year. Shamans have to obey a sex taboo after initiation as the spirits dislike erotic sex.

Extramarital relations are frequent and in many cases they are accepted, if the kinship system favors the bond. In visiting events it might even be considered a gesture of generosity to allow sexual relations between the guests and the hosts. However, at times of intergroup conflict, love affairs are taken as a justification for the fission of a village community.

Homosexuality seems to be exceptional. It may be acted out, especially in play situations among young boys or girls, but it does not exist as a form of cohabitation.

COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

Young people are generally matched for marriage long before they reach adulthood. Young girls are sometimes married to much older men. If the girl dislikes the assigned partner, she is seldom forced into the union.

There is no clear dictum concerning postmarital residence; it depends on the age of the marriage partners and their circumstances. A young married couple will most likely—in the context of the groom's brideservice—live with the family of the bride initially and later move next to the husband's family. If the marriage partners come from the same local group there is no noticeable residence distinction.

An in-law relationship functions as a source of social protection. A young man who does his brideservice is obliged to hunt for the bride's family, work in their garden, respect and fear his mother-in-law, and to adhere to many avoidance rules. But brideservice also gives him the confidence that he will be supported in situations of conflict and be supplied with food and tobacco.

Forced marriage as a result of abduction is highly spectacular as well as speculative. This practice has been explained as being due to the lack of women because of an imbalanced sex ratio in some villages. Reports of the numbers of abducted women among the Central Yanomami differ from less than 2% (Lizot, 1988) to 17% (Chagnon, 1990). This marriage practice is unknown in other Yanomami areas (Alès, 1984). Women are "stolen" in many different circumstances. They may have been seduced, deliberately left to live with a lover, or have refused to marry a man and were unable to overcome the will of their family. Also a woman is sometimes considered to be "stolen" when she comes from another village and relations between her home and her present village are no longer peaceful. Occasionally, she may have been abducted forcefully. But even under these conditions, the victim will find a way to return to her home groups if she does not want to stay. If she stays, she subsequently accepts the seizure. In essence, the capture of women is an institutionalized form of marriage for the Yanomami. It mainly represents a union for which no brideservice has been performed for the woman's family and group. Older women, who are almost invariably widows, can get married without the groom having to fulfill family obligations, but brideservice is essential to marry a young woman.

HUSBAND-WIFE RELATIONSHIP

Most marriages are characterized by solidarity. Loving affection is seldom shown in public by older couples. Young people often try different matings before they find the right partner, unless they are required to marry to strengthen a political alliance.

The couple eat and sleep together, often work in the garden jointly, and generally make family decisions together. Disagreements are discussed in the open as showing one's temper is considered positive.

Polygyny is common, mostly in the form of sororal marriages. Polyandric unions are not unusual. The latter are more often of transitory nature compared with polygynous unions. Lizot (1988) claims polyandry to be at least as common as polygyny. This high occurrence is not supported by data from other authors, but unquestionably polyandry is a customary family setting

(Herzog-Schröder, 2000). If the cowives are sisters, their relationship is generally harmonious, but jealousy is not unusual between multiple wives. The difference in time spent with the husband and the imbalance in receiving presents from him often trigger conflict within polygynous families. Older wives are frequently abandoned as sexual partners, but even then they are very powerful in making decisions about the children and family. Divorce is not considered scandalous and can be initiated by either a husband or a wife. Apart from young couples, more marriages end through the death of one partner than through divorce. Among the Upper Orinoco Yanomami, children generally stay with their mother after divorce or with the mother's family after the mother's death. In contrast with this rule, among the eastern Yanomami (Brazil), where patrilineality is evident, children commonly stay with the family of their father (Ramos & Albert, 1977).

CHANGE IN ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, AND PRACTICES REGARDING GENDER

Contact with the Venezuelan society is increasing and the need to interact with non-Yanomami has become unavoidable in accessible areas. Names are traditionally tabooed, but it has become customary to use Christian names to address others in the context of the mission stations or schools. This is a decisive step toward a cultural change. Traditionally, every person is placed in particular relationships within social interactions by referring to one another using kinship terms. These are intimately linked with gender meanings, as every term specifies a certain form of conduct and commitment. Now other forms of social distinction have been introduced, like jobs with different salaries or diverse access to modern resources; these will inevitably lead to a higher level of social inequality.

In some parts of Brazilian territory the Yanomami have suffered tremendously from the intrusion of illegal miners. Again and again the Yanomami are being threatened by the presence of prospectors as well as by the Brazilian Armed Forces. Sexual relations between foreigners and Yanomami women result in the spread of venereal disease. Sexual relations, which are traditionally a form of generosity embedded in a complex of friendship and alliance, now threaten death and social instability on a large scale.

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