

# THE YANOMAMI BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**The Yanomami are the largest isolated tribe in the Amazon, with a population of 32,000.**

## TERRITORY

Their homeland straddles the border of northern Brazil and southern Venezuela. At over 9.6 million hectares, the Yanomami territory in Brazil is four times the size of Switzerland. In Venezuela, the Yanomami live in the Alto Orinoco – Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve, which is over 8.2 million hectares. The combined area inhabited by the Yanomami in Brazil and Venezuela make it the world's largest indigenous territory in tropical rainforest anywhere in the world.

## HOME

The Yanomami live in large communal houses known as *yanos* or *shabonos*, which house up to 400 people. They are built in a large ring shape, with a wide open space for dancing and ceremonies in the centre. Each family has its own hearth around the edge of the *vano*. There, they sleep in hammocks around their fire, which usually burns both day and night.

## LIVELIHOOD

The Yanomami live by hunting, gathering, fishing and by growing crops in large gardens cleared from the forest. As Amazonian soil is not very fertile, a new garden is cleared every two or three years. The Yanomami use 500 species of plants for food, medicine, artefacts, and house building. Wild honey is highly prized and the Yanomami harvest 15 different kinds. They grow around 60 crops, which account for about 80% of their food. Fishing is often a communal activity. Groups of men, women and children pound vines into a liquid which is used to paralyse fish – they use nine species of vine alone for this purpose. When paralysed, the fish rise to the water's surface and are scooped up into baskets.

The Yanomami hunt with bows and arrows, the arrows often tipped with *curare* poison. Although hunting accounts for only 10% of Yanomami food, amongst the men it is the most prestigious of skills. No hunter ever eats what he has killed, but shares it out among friends and family; in return he will be given meat by another hunter.



Yanomami family, Brazil

## SOCIETY

It takes the Yanomami on average less than four hours work a day to satisfy all their material needs, leaving most of the day for leisure and social activities. Visits between communities are frequent. Ceremonies are held to mark events such as the harvesting of the peach palm fruit, and *reahu* (a funeral feast) which commemorates the death of an individual.

The Yanomami are an egalitarian people. Each community is autonomous and they do not recognise 'chiefs'. Decisions are made by consensus, frequently after long debates where everybody has a say.

## SPIRITS

The spirit world is a vital and fundamental part of Yanomami life. Every creature, rock, tree and mountain has a spirit. Sometimes these are malevolent and attack the Yanomami, and are believed to cause illness. Shamans control the spirits, or *xapiripë*, by inhaling a hallucinogenic snuff called *yakoana* and entering a trance-like state.



YANOMAMI DRAWING OF A SHAMANIC SPIRIT

**COURAGE:** 'The jaguar is the spirit of strength and courage.

People who are brave have this spirit inside them, it lives inside their chests. The shaman can summon the spirit to people who are weak and ill, it gives them strength to fight their sickness.

It can even save them from too early a death.' Drawing by Joseca Yanomami.

**'I want to talk of urihi. Urihi for us means "our place", "our land". It is not for sale. Urihi has no price at all.'**

Davi Yanomami, Brazil, 1992

## LAND INVASION

During the 1980s the Brazilian Yanomami suffered immensely when 40,000 goldminers invaded their land. The miners shot them, destroyed many villages, and exposed them to diseases to which they had no immunity. Twenty percent of the Yanomami died in just seven years. In 1992, after a long international campaign – led by Davi, Survival and the Brazilian NGO, CCPY (the Pro-Yanomami Commission) – the Yanomami Park was created, and the miners were expelled.

In spite of this historic success, Indians in Brazil still do not have proper ownership rights over their land. The government refuses to recognise tribal land ownership, despite having signed the international law (ILO Convention 169), which guarantees this right. Furthermore, there are many within the Brazilian establishment who would like to see the Yanomami Park reduced in size and opened up to mining and ranching. The threats to the Yanomami are multiplying:

### Mining

The Brazilian congress is debating a draft bill which, if approved, will legalise large scale mining in Indian lands – a move which is bitterly opposed by many indigenous peoples including the Yanomami. Sixty percent of Yanomami territory is covered with requests for mining.

Five years ago, goldminers started to re-invade the Yanomami area. It is estimated that there are now up to 1,000 working there illegally. The Yanomami are lobbying the government to remove the miners, but so far it has taken no action. Concerns are mounting that there will be a new gold rush, with disastrous consequences for the Yanomami, who fear a repeat of the fatal malaria and flu epidemics spread by the miners during the 1980s.

### The Army

The army is also stepping up its presence in the area, and has plans to build more barracks and enlarge its main airstrip in the Yanomami heartland. The Yanomami fear this will bring in more people and equipment, and destroy more forest. Soldiers have already prostituted Yanomami women, some of whom have been infected with sexually transmitted diseases.



Goldminers on Yanomami land, Brazil

## HEALTH AND EDUCATION

In 1999, a new health initiative – *Urihi* – was set up. Independent medical staff were recruited to work alongside traditional Yanomami healers. This programme – supported by Survival and CCPY – reduced the number of deaths by half. It ended in 2004, when the Brazilian government took it over by decree. Spending was doubled but disease rocketed. According to the Yanomami, much money is now wasted on bureaucracy and infrastructure, and some Yanomami communities are receiving dangerously inadequate medical care.

As a result of their increasing contact with outsiders, the Yanomami and CCPY decided to set up an education project. Yanomami are training to teach reading, writing and maths in their own communities. Another of the project's main aims is to raise awareness amongst the Yanomami of their rights.

In 2004, Yanomami from 11 regions met to form their own organisation, *Hutukara* (the part of the sky from which the earth was born) to defend their rights and run their own projects. This empowering move has helped strengthen the Yanomami as they face a difficult future.

**'I am not saying I am against progress. I think it is very good when whites come to work amongst the Yanomami to teach reading and writing and to plant and use medicinal plants. This for us is progress. What we do not want are the mining companies which destroy the forest and the miners, who bring so many diseases. These whites must respect our Yanomami land. The miners bring guns, alcohol and prostitution and destroy all nature wherever they go. For us, this is not progress.'**

Davi Kopenawa, Yanomami leader and shaman, Brazil, 2003

