

Amazonian Yanomami: A Sustainable Green Society Attacked

Written by Leslie E. Sponsel

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LESLIE E. SPONSEL, SEP 27 2023

The Yanomami are a relatively traditional Indigenous society living in the tropical rainforest of the Amazon. Their territory is about the size of Portugal and overlaps the border between Brazil and Venezuela. It is in the Guyana Highlands, a mountainous divide between the watersheds of the Orinoco and Amazon rivers. Estimates of their population size range up to 40,000 with the number of villages around 350. Village size varies from a few dozen to several hundred individuals. Each village is largely independent, although connected with a few others through an economic, social, and political network. The headman of a village can only lead by his charisma, suggestion, and facilitating a consensus.

The Yanomami have a mobile sustainable green society grounded in rotating the areas of hunting, gathering, fishing, and gardening. Independent evidence from comparative linguistics and genetics converge to conclude that the Yanomami have been an independent population for around 2,000 years. That longevity is genuine sustainability, no romantic or idealistic fantasy. It reflects thousands of years of creativity, experience, experimentation, and challenges to survive and flourish. By contrast, Brazil and Venezuela are each only around 200 years old as independent countries, just recent experiments.

Traditionally the Yanomami live in small, dispersed, self-sufficient ecovillages. Most individuals interact daily with their forest and waterways. As locavores, they eat local foods exclusively. Only fresh organic food is consumed from their organic gardening and from foraging wild animals and plants with appropriate technology. No chemical fertilizers and pesticides are used in farming. Fresh water is available in nearby rivers or streams. They pursue voluntary simplicity. Material culture is limited to satisfying basic needs, obtained from local resources, and biodegradable. Traditionally they wear only organic clothing, and very little in their tropical environment to allow for natural cooling. In short, many green initiatives in contemporary Western society are foreshadowed by the culture of Yanomami. In these respects, the Yanomami are arguably more advanced than most Western societies.

People are relatively healthy, if not exposed to diseases from outsiders. Poverty, extensive hunger, homelessness, and inequality are unknown. Yanomami are comfortable and competent in their forest home. The main dangers in the forest are jaguars and some kinds of snakes. Traditional Yanomami live in a familiar world, not one of mostly strangers. They reside in a large, round, leaf-thatched communal house with an open roof over a central plaza. No walls separate families or family members. Each family hangs its hammock around the same hearth. Thus, the Yanomami enjoy intimate daily association socially and ecologically. Reciprocity is a core ethical principle of their culture, ordinarily manifested in kindness, sharing, cooperation, and camaraderie.

Their egalitarian society is organized primarily through blood descent and marriage. Individuals are associated by kinship as well as age and gender. The only other difference in social status is with individuals who are especially skilled in humor, oratory, shamanic healing, medicinal plant medicine, or hunting.

Individuals are not differentiated by their material possessions. Men have a bow and arrow, women a carrying basket and cooking containers, both share a machete and axe, and each has a hammock. Their technology appears simple on the surface. However, it involves complex knowledge and skills. For example, any outsider could affirm this by

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trying to make and effectively use a bow and arrow to successfully hunt. Yanomami can read signs of animal prey in the forest like a book. It is truly amazing how well they can live with so little.

The Yanomami enjoy a rich oral literature with skilled story tellers and orators. Several observers independently note their humor and unusually frequent laughter. Their bodies are artistically decorated with colorful feathers and plant pigments. Their shamans communicate with spiritual beings permeating the forests. The Yanomami world and ecology engage far more than merely a biophysical space. They cultivate deep interrelationships with nature.

Some aggression occurred within and among villages, but peace prevailed in most places and times. The Yanomami have mechanisms for nonviolent conflict avoidance, restraint, and resolution. Far more serious is aggression from alien invaders, especially tens of thousands of rapacious illegal gold-miners in recent years. Traditional life is no heaven, but the miners create hell in many areas. Estimates are that around 25,000 miners have impacted 60% of the population in recent years.

Belatedly, the Brazilian government is expelling the miners and mitigating their negative impacts. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was inaugurated on January 1, 2023. As soon as January 21, he visited Yanomami in the northern state of Roraima. He was shocked by their dire health situation and established a federal commission to respond to the crisis. A huge assistance operation started. Organizations are sending food and water delivered by the air force, including through air-drops. Imported water is needed because many waterways are highly polluted by poisonous mercury from mining. Emergency medical teams are recruited to care for villagers, some establishing field clinics. Hundreds of acutely ill Yanomami are being airlifted to a hospital in Boa Vista.

There finally appears to be hope for seriously dealing with this terrible catastrophe and relieving widespread suffering. Yet malaria persists after spread by mining, communities suffer food insecurity, health care remains inadequate, people are dying from treatable diseases with children most impacted, many communities are terrorized, pockets of armed miners and criminal gangs persist, and the crisis continues. Many Yanomami must suffer also from solastalgia, grief and despair over the degradation and destruction of their familiar environment.

Estimates are that more than 570 children alone avoidably died in recent years because of water contamination, introduced diseases, and severe malnutrition. Probably many more will die. The Yanomami subsistence economy is significantly compromised in mining areas because of scarcity of game animals and illness. Spreading diseases include malaria, tuberculosis, African river blindness, and even COVID-19. Sick Yanomami cannot harvest food as usual, thus malnutrition plagues entire communities impacted by mining.

During his term as president (2019-2022), Jair Bolsonaro complained about the size of Indigenous reserves and said he would open some to economic exploitation like logging and mining. He weakened government agencies previously protecting Indigenous and their environment. He made hateful racist remarks like "It's a shame that the Brazilian cavalry wasn't as efficient as the Americans, who exterminated their Indians." His rhetoric and policies facilitated genocide, ethnocide, and ecocide. Bolsonaro ignored numerous pleas for help by Yanomami leaders and others; among the latter the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights and the International Criminal Court. Now Lula even publicly accuses Bolsonaro of committing genocide against the Yanomami. Another former president, Dilma Rousseff, also accused Bolsonaro of genocide. Bolsonaro tries to dismiss such allegations as a "left-wing farce."

The human rights organization, Survival International, headquartered in London has campaigned to help the Yanomami since 1974. It promotes self-determination, land rights, health care, and other vital initiatives. On January 24, 2023, Survival International posted on their website the following specific recommendations to assist the Yanomami: remove the illegal gold miners, send in desperately needed medical teams to deal with the health emergency, prosecute agents of genocide, prosecute violent criminal gangs who have attacked and murdered Yanomami, and ensure that such catastrophic invasions and land theft never happen again through adequate sustained protection and monitoring of indigenous areas. News reports and ways to help the Yanomami can be found on their website.

Tragically, the current crisis goes back fifty years. The southern territory of the Yanomami in Brazil was invaded by

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the construction of the Northern Perimeter BR-210 highway in the 1970s. It penetrated 225 kilometers into the southern portion of their territory. Then in the 1980s, Yanomami territory was invaded by miners. The number of miners peaked at around 40,000 by 1987. Both incursions were devastating for the communities contacted; most of all from introduced diseases. Estimates are that up to 20% of contacted Yanomami died as a result of the invasions. The Yanomami who lack sustained contact experience have not developed immunological resistance against many western diseases, thus often they quickly grow to become devastating epidemics.

The award-winning Brazilian photojournalist Claudia Andujar collaborated with others, including Survival International, in decades-long campaigns to establish an official protected reserve for the Yanomami. In 1990, President Fernando Collor de Mello sent the military to expel most miners. Finally, a reserve was demarcated in 1992. However, it has not been administered effectively. Sustained political will and vigilance is essential to protect and advance the human rights of the Yanomami.

Mercury requires more consideration. The miners use it to amalgamate with the finer particles of gold for more thorough extraction. It contaminates the air, soil, and waterways including their sediments. It is highly toxic. It becomes concentrated as it is absorbed increasingly higher up the food chain. In animals it causes reproductive failure. In humans the symptoms of mercury poisoning develop gradually. By the time the poisoning is noticeable, irreversible damage already occurs. Among the many symptoms of chronic poisoning are skin irritations, low fever, headaches, nausea, diarrhea, fatigue, insomnia and irritability, marked decline in sensory acuity (vision, hearing, smell, touch) and eventually blindness, loss of ability to speak properly, memory loss, premature senility, manic depression, kidney problems, crippling, severe tremors, brain damage, and death. In the case of chronic poisoning, the deterioration gets progressively worse. With less frequent or chronic exposure and lower doses, the symptoms appear more gradually. The contamination persists for decades or even centuries in the environment, and thus it continues to be a very serious environmental and health hazard.

Pregnant women are a special case. They may be spared from poisoning because the mercury rapidly crosses the placenta to accumulate in the fetus, which reduces the level in the mother. Thus, mercury concentrations can be higher in the fetus than in the mother, and in the latter may even appear normal. Still births, spontaneous abortions, gross birth defects, paralysis, physical impairment, and mental retardation are among the abnormalities that result from mercury poisoning of the fetus.

Almost every aspect of Yanomami society, culture, and ecology in many communities has been affected by the mining. The sustainable green society of the Yanomami is being attacked by societies that are the opposite. Among other sources, this is revealed by the benchmark book *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* by Davi Kopenawa Yanomami and anthropologist Bruce Albert. Perhaps communities that have not been impacted by mining may serve as reservoirs for revitalization of the Yanomami as a whole in the future.

At the same time, the Yanomami are not passive victims. They are fighting back, but rarely with violence. Instead they appeal to federal and state authorities and to international agencies. However, in the past most government officials have proven apathetic or incompetent. Some have even been complicit with alien invasions and degradation of Yanomami territory. Consequently, the Yanomami are developing a new level of political organization beyond the village and its few alliances to deal with recurrent crises. They are mobilizing, including with developing counter-cultural strategies. For instance, they established the Hutukara Yanomami Association in Brazil and Horonami Yanomami Association in Venezuela.

Kopenawa in Brazil became a leading spokesman for the human rights of the Yanomami, traveling internationally with the support of Survival International. He addressed the British House of Parliament and the United Nations among other venues arguing for the territorial integrity, self-determination, civil and human rights, and ethnic identity of the Yanomami nation.

Another exemplary Yanomami is artist Joseca Yanomami who is documenting his culture with exhibits at museums in Brazil, England, France, and elsewhere (see the book *Our Forest-Land* with his numerous paintings and an accompanying text contributed by Albert and others).

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Yanomami culture like others is a dynamic system, not any static survival from antiquity. They have experienced centuries of indirect contact, and then recent decades of direct contact, although this varies markedly among communities. Also, they are not a homogeneous society. A few individuals are involved in mining. Yet many Yanomami are proud and wish to maintain their territorial integrity and cultural and linguistic identity. Their culture is not destined for extinction, but change is occurring in many aspects. The population is large enough to survive and rebound, as happened with many other Indigenous societies. They are resilient (two inspiring books stand out on this subject: Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Extinction* and Linda Tuhiawa Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*).

The degradation and destruction of forest and aquatic ecosystems with the reduction of biodiversity should also be of serious concern to the world, given the vital role of the Amazon in global ecology. It has been referred to as the lungs of the planet. Satellite images demonstrate that most Indigenous territories maintain intact forests, unless invaded by outsiders. Environmentalists concerned with conservation should also be concerned with the protection of the Yanomami.

Tragically, Venezuela is quite another matter. Information about the Yanomami situation there is relatively limited compared to Brazil, although in recent years increasingly surfacing. (See Amnesty International, Embajadores del Orinoco, Infoamazonia, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Provea, SOS Orinoco, UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Venezuela Program Education-Action on Human Rights, and Wataniba Amazon Socioenvironmental Working Group). What emerges from public media and personal communications indicates that the Yanomami situation in Venezuela is just as horrific and reprehensible as Brazil. Indeed, in some respects it is even worse, if that could be conceivable. For instance, the Venezuelan government supports the development of extractive industries as in the 2016 initiative Arco Minero del Orinoco. It is has repeatedly proven apathetic about Yanomami concerns and rights. In Venezuela, as in Brazil, mining demonstrates that greed can disallow nature, humanity, and morality.

The new president of Brazil allows some hope for a better future. Currently Venezuela leaves little hope. Since 2015, seven million Venezuelans have fled the country. According to UN statistics, Venezuela's population declined from 30.08 million in 2015 to an estimated 28.25 million today. In 1974-1981, when I lived and worked in Venezuela at length on several occasions, a beautiful land and people, it was a relatively flourishing economy and democracy, although no utopia. In recent decades, it has degenerated into dystopia.

Lula da Silva is revitalizing Brazil after the disaster of Bolsonaro. Perhaps the same might transpire in some future for Venezuela. The universe is ruled by change, not stasis. Most certainly, the Yanomami and their environment deserve every protection in both Venezuela and Brazil. Their rights must be defended and advanced both nationally and internationally.

About the author:

Leslie E. Sponsel is Professor Emeritus at the University of Hawai'i. He holds a B.A. in Geology from Indiana University and M.A. and Ph.D. in Biological Anthropology from Cornell University. His doctoral dissertation was based in part on field research with the Yanomami during 1974-1975. It focused on biological and cultural aspects of their predator-prey ecology. Since then he has continued to follow the literature and news about the Yanomami and publish about them as well. Sponsel's recent book is *Yanomami in the Amazon: Toward a more Ethical Anthropology beyond Othering*. All royalties are donated to Survival International on behalf of their continuing vital help with the Yanomami. An interview about the book with Ricardo Lopez is available at The Dissenter #751.