THE YANOMAMI

The Yanomami live in the tropical rainforest of the Amazon, between the countries of Venezuela and Brazil. Their land covers an area of approximately 130,000 square miles. To give you an idea, the town of Greenwich is about 50 square miles. So the Yanomami live in an area that is the size of 2,600 Greenwich towns. The land of the Yanomami is between Brazil and Venezuela in South America. They live around the Orinoco River. All the Yanomami speak a similar language. The total population of the Yanomami in Brazil and Venezuela today is around 26,000 people. Compare to Greenwich, with 65,000 people!
VILLAGES, HOMES AND OUTSIDERS

The Yanomami live in communities. Sometimes one large extended family makes up a community (parents, children, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, etc). Sometimes up to 300 people live in a community. Communities sometimes trade with other nearby Yanomami groups. The Yanomami are suspicious of outsiders, who they call nape which means people who are foreign and dangerous. They often war with other Yanomami tribes, killing and stealing from each other. Most wars are because of revenge. A member of one tribe has insulted or stolen from another. Sometimes communities fight each other over food and other possessions.

Most of the time, the whole community lives in a large round structure called a yano or xapono. Each family or (small group of a family) builds a lean-to with a roof and a back wall. The lean-tos are placed next to each other to form a circle. When a Yanomami man sits in his hammock, he can look right or left and see his next-door neighbor. If he looks straight ahead, he sees the home of other neighbors in the village. The walls are held up with poles and the village roof is made of thatch (dry
leaves and branches), so after a few years it rots and fills with insects and rodents. Then the Yanomami build a new village, sometimes next to the old one. Yanomami move every five years or so to find new land to grow food in.

The Yanomami hunt, fish, gather wild plants and grow crops. They grow cotton and Corn, but their main crop is a type of banana called the plantain. They also grow plants for seasonings and medicine. Each year, the Yanomami travel in the forest for several months to hunt, fish and collect wild plant foods. They hunt peccari, tapir and monkeys. They also catch crabs, fish, frogs and caiman (a type of alligator). They collect wild plants that they can eat.
like the fruit of the Peach Palm. They use bows and arrows for hunting, hooks and line for fishing.
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE

Each village makes its own decisions and rules. There is one or more headmen. The headman must be able to settle fights, make friends with other tribes and lead his village in wars. Some headmen rule by convincing others. Other headmen are bullies. When a fight breaks out between men in the village the headman settles the argument. Sometimes, there may be a duel, or formal fight.

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Orinoco. [link]
Encyclopedia of Indigenous People. [link]
The headman manages the fight so no one gets very hurt. Men get respect from courage in battle, story telling and shamaism. Men dominate the positions of authority and religion.

**Contact with Outsiders**

In 1950 (a little before your parents where born) white people began to enter Yanomami areas. However, some Yanomami did not see an outsider until 1990. That is only 16 years ago! At first, the Yanomami thought that white men were ghosts that had come back from death to live among the living. The first non-Yanomami people they met were hunters, foresters, soldiers, scientists and missionaries (priests). The outsiders built roads and farms on Yanomami land. Recently, outsiders have come to Yanomami land looking for gold. These men are called gold miners. They build mines to dig for gold. They have created many problems. They fight and kill Yanomami, spread diseases, kill many wild animals that the Yanomami eat and pollute the rivers. The pollution poisons the fish that the Yanomami eat.

Contact with outsiders has brought problems for the Yanomami. Many have died of diseases they did not know before. Their land has been destroyed and

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there are less of the animals that they hunt in the forest for food.
This landing strip near a mine in Yanomami land is only 2 hours walking distance from the village below

But not all contact with outside people is bad. Because they live can travel to nearby missions. The Yanomami now have better health care. The Brazilian air force often flies sick Yanomami to hospitals. And the missions trade tools, baskets, arrows and bows with the Yanomami.
Brazilian Air Force pilot taking a sick Yanomami to a hospital

**ECONOMY**

The Yanomami mainly hunt, fish, gather wild plants and grow crops. They spend more time hunting and gathering than growing crops. They weave baskets and make hammocks or *chinchorros*. When you compare the day of the Yanomami with that of other people, they Yanomami spend less time working than most other cultures. They like to rest in their *chinchorros* and tell stories. In the past, there was only a little trade with friendly tribes that lived nearby. These days the Yanomami sell some baskets, *chinchorros*, bows and arrows for tourists. They now depend on the outside world for axes, machetes, fishing line and hooks.

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The Yanomami house–village forms a series of circles. The first circle on the Yanomami home, then there is a circle for gatherings of women, fishing alone in the summer, fishing in groups using poison (timbó) or short hunting trips and farming. A bigger circle around that is the area of longer hunting trips and food gathering for the families. The fourth circle is the area used for group hunting expeditions (henimou) that last one to two weeks, and longer trips to gather food. The Yanomami spend almost half of the year in shelters in different areas of the forest away from their main house or village.
The women do most of the work. Women raise children, find wood, cook, fish and gather wild plants. Men cut trees to burn, make houses and do most of the hunting and fighting. Both women and men plant and harvest food. Children work with their parents from an early age, but work less hard. Boys spend about 3 hours a
day playing with bows and arrows, tracking and stalking. These skills are needed for hunting.

**Religion**

The Yanomami word *urihi* means the forest or the world. It also means territory. Yanomami’s *thëpë urihipë*, 'the forest of human beings,' is the forest that Omama (Yanomami god) gave to the Yanomami to live in generation after generation. The forest is not just a setting for the Yanomami. It is a living image with breath, babies. Animals are believed to be humans from long ago that were made into animals because of their bad behavior.

The spirits are known as *xapiripë*. Xapiripë are tiny human images painted in bright colors. There are xapiripë of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles, lizards, turtles, crabs and insects. There are spirits of various trees, leaf spirits, vine spirits, wild honey spirits, water, stone and waterfall spirits... as well as the moon, sun, storm, thunder and lightning. There also household xapiripë, such as the dog spirit, the fire spirit or the clay pot spirit. Finally, there are the spirits of 'whites', the napënapëripë, and their domesticated animals (chicken, cattle, horse).
The shamans call and respond to the calls of the xapiripë. They do so in lively and noisy dances. Other friendly tribes may be invited.

The shamans’ work is very important. They call the xapiripë to cure the sick, keep illness away, provide enough rain, tame the force of thunder and lightning, kill the tribe’s enemies, strengthen the tribe’s warriors and protect the tribe from enemies, real and spiritual.

Yanomami with ashes of their families.
To become a shaman, a young man spends several days with older shamans breathing in a powder made from tree bark from a tree called the Virola tree. This powder is called yãkõana powder, and considered the food of spirits. The powder makes the young shaman nauseous, numb, dizzy, and sleepy. It also creates a humming in the ears and visions. The Yanomami believe the powder makes the young man’s eyes die and, instead, the young shaman acquires a new vision that lets him see the spirits. In this way, the young shaman will be able to answer the calls of the xapiripë on behalf of his tribe. Shamans are very important people in the Yanomami society.

Shamans inhaling yãkõana powder

Encyclopedia of Indigenous People.
http://www.socioambiental.org/website/pib/epienglish/yanomami/yanomami.shtm
When a person dies, a group of Yanomami men go on a special hunting expedition called a henimoyu. That evening there is a noisy party. Teenagers dance and chant special poems. The ashes of the dead are eaten by the community in a plantain soup. The women cry as the friends and family drink the soup.

OTHER CUSTOMS

The Yanomami live without clothing other than very small loincloths. Men and women wear the same round haircut. They paint their bodies with a variety of natural dyes. When men go to war, they wear black body paint to represent night and death. When a person dies, his wife wares black paint on her cheeks for a year. Men wear bracelets made from colored feathers or flowers. They pierce their noses with thin bamboo sticks. Women wear flowers or nice smelling leaves in holes in their ears.