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### Unopposed Genocide: The Yanomami's Fight for Survival

In August of 1993, a report came into the Brazilian government that there had been an incident with one of the indigenous tribes. A second report came in that approximately twenty Yanomami natives had been massacred by gold miners. When government officials finally made it to the Yanomami land, they found a scene of total destruction. Communal homes were destroyed by fire. Domestic tools were riddled with bullet holes. Bodies lay around in advanced stages of decomposition, rotting in the heat. A few days later, they found eight traditional Yanomami cremation piles filled with bullets and human hair and teeth. They estimated around thirty bodies had been burned, including several babies. One of the few Yanomami leaders fluent in Portuguese, Davi Kopenawa, tried to alert the government of the violent miners' return a month previous but was completely and utterly ignored. Kopenawa and other Yanomami leaders chose not to hunt down the culprits themselves because "arrows do not do well against guns" (Kopenawa qtd. by Rocha).

Shelly Kellman reports that "since Europeans landed in 1500, the native population [in South America] has been reduced from an estimated three to six million to, at most, 245,000 today" (16). This drastic drop in population is due to slavery, warfare, hunters, and colonialism. The Yanomami tribes are one of these increasingly rare cultures. These unique and ancient

people, located largely in Northern Brazil and Southern Venezuela in the Amazon Rainforest, are struggling to maintain their cultural identity. Their entire way of life is under attack as more and more self-motivated parties stake claims to their ancestral land. Ranchers cut down and subsequently destroy large swaths of the Amazon. Illegal gold miners invade Yanomami territory, spread disease, poison the water and land, and engage in violent and often fatal altercations with the natives. The Brazilian government has failed to protect the land and its people from these miners. They also continue to debate passing mining bills that would have detrimental consequences for the Yanomami. There is a dire lack of recognition of tribal land ownership. The Yanomami's voice and desires have been disregarded in favor of commercialism. Their land is rapidly being destroyed which is a tragedy in and of itself. The Yanomami do not currently have the power or authority to defend themselves and are forced to rely entirely on government programs for the preservation of culture, health, and land. Both Yanomami's unique way of life and homeland suffer immensely because of the destruction of the Amazon; it is the responsibility of the Brazilian government to genuinely support their indigenous people by ensuring the survival of the land and therefore the culture.

For years, Napoleon Chagnon remained the leading scholar on the Yanomami tribe, and his ethnography *Yanomamö* was considered groundbreaking in the anthropological field. As such, the book is still used in collegiate-level anthropology classes. Chagnon's primary theory was that "fierceness" was biologically rewarded within the tribes. He took extensive genealogies that he believed proved that more violent Yanomami men had more children (Chagnon). Frank Salamone specifically opposes this sociobiological perspective and "attempts to alter the public misconception concerning the Yanomami" (53). Chagnon's entire theory rests on the assumption that the Yanomami are an inherently violent people who thrive in warfare. Therein lies the

problem other anthropologists find with Chagnon's work. To privilege warfare as an organizing principle in understanding a specific culture is ethically questionable. Chagnon portrays the Yanomami as savage warriors rather than simply people. An assumed air of superiority permeates Chagnon's work. He approaches the Yanomami as if they are the baseline for civilization, and they have yet to make the proper advancements. Ideologies of imperialism and colonialism inevitably influenced Chagnon, and this is reflected in his work. The reality is that "modern" society might benefit from the Yanomami's ecological practices (Rifkin 303).

Shelton H. Davis explains exactly why this harsh portrayal vastly damages Yanomami's fight for survival. He asserts that

When a people is being exterminated, it is more than an academic question whether an anthropologist chooses to describe that people as "harmless" or "fierce." The images which anthropologist present of other peoples and cultures are often determinant elements in the course of human events. Some of these images touch the roots of human sentiments and lead people to struggle for the national and integration protection of aboriginal peoples' rights. Other images reinforce popular prejudices and, in the hands of more powerful elements, become convenient rationalizations for wiping native peoples off the face of the earth. (Davis qtd. by Kellman)

Chagnon unwittingly devalued the Yanomami in the eyes of the Brazilian government and reduced them to ignorant barbarians with an affinity for random and recreational violence. His direct observations remain accurate, but his conclusions are unreliable. Unfortunately, it is his conclusions that are remembered. Because of Chagnon, the Yanomami became one of the best documented indigenous tribes in the world, but also one of the most endangered (Kellman 27).

One of the flaws in Chagnon's theory is that he completely failed to take historical events into account when evaluating behavior. The generally accepted hypothesis is that there were

elevated tensions due to an intense measles outbreak. Other anthropologists have described the Yanomami people as warm and affectionate. In addition to this, Chagnon experienced a considerable dose of culture shock that influenced his perception of violence. He did not understand that the Yanomami are generally more openly accepting of physical violence. They view it as a way to let off steam instead of bottling it up (Kellman). Before violent miners introduced firearms into the population, skirmishes usually did not involve weapons and rarely resulted in fatalities (Rocha 42). Chagnon also proposed that women were horribly mistreated and battered, but the reality is that women engage in altercations just as much as the men and are just as well respected (Kellman).

The Yanomami's damaged reputation would not be such a critical factor in their survival if developers did not covet their land. In 1983, decree No. 88985 went out establishing that Brazil could not afford to jeopardize the country's future development for the sake of indigenous peoples. Some politicians continue to conspire to spread the idea that the Yanomami only care for the land because they do not have the technology to exploit their resources themselves (Milliken 240). However, the truth is that Brazil cannot afford to jeopardize their greatest natural resource: the Amazon rainforest. Attempts at colonization have stripped the topsoil of its forest anchorage, resulting in it being washed away or becoming infertile. Corporate farms are even worse, as they defoliate and deforest to raise beef for export. They utilize the same chemicals used in "Agent Orange" which are then dumped into the ecosystem and streams running through native lands. The farmers have collectively cleared a patch of land that is approximately the size of Connecticut. To make matters worse, this method of ranching is completely unsustainable. Ranchers either go out of business or steal new land because they destroy their own land. Around eighty percent of ranchers abandon the venture in favor of a short-term profit: "what the owners

leave behind are: semi-desert conditions, a monotonous expanse of unproductive secondary growth, lateritic sandstone, and rock" (Rocha, 38). Nothing has been done to stop or even regulate this wasteful, destructive commercialization. This issue extends beyond Brazil. It has been estimated that the loss of one to two percent of the earth's trees will result in insufficient oxygen to support human life. The Amazon contains a third of the earth's forest and contributes half of the yearly supply of oxygen. Twenty-four percent of the Amazon was cut down between 1970 and 1980 alone. The pattern continues as over a million trees are cut down each year.

While development is generally viewed as a form of positive progress, the parties primarily benefiting from the economic boom are corporate giants; meanwhile, the working class supports the costs of developmental policies. Robert Wasserstrom argues that "it cannot be said that Brazil cannot afford to worry about such niceties as environmental protection and the survival of archaic ways of life. On the contrary, the real wages of working people in Brazil have declined steadily since the economic miracle began while infant mortality- a finely-tuned indicator of general social welfare- has risen" (Wasserstrom qtd. by Kellman 41).

Various motions and programs such as the Committee for the Creation of a Yanomami Park, or CCPY for short, have been implemented to try to alleviate the burden on the Yanomami and the forest without lasting impact. This is due in part to instability and persistent corruption in government branches such as the Fundação Nacional do Índio, also known as FUNAI. FUNAI is Brazil's protection agency for indigenous peoples. This central branch has had varying levels of success in the past depending on the leadership at the time. FUNAI's shortcomings first became evident when construction began on a road that would cut directly through Yanomami land. The road construction began the assault on the Yanomami's way of life. It was a path of pure destruction that brought with it disease, deadly weapons, and perhaps most significantly, the

violent goldminers known as *garimpeiros*. These invaders pose a threat not only to the tribe's physical well-being but the well-being of their land. The Yanomami have formed a deeply interdependent relationship with their forest. They require massive amounts of land to sustain themselves properly while also maintaining the forest, but these recent developments have resulted in the annihilation of thousands of square mileage. Commercial factors, in addition to other outside influences, have forced the Yanomami to adopt a more sedentary lifestyle which is detrimental to the endurance of their ancient culture and the Amazon. The Yanomami do not currently have any economic means to sustain themselves should they be unable to extract what they need from the forest. Their survival remains solely dependent on the survival of the Amazon Rainforest and vice versa.

The Yanomami culture is radically different from that of the United States and mainstream Brazil. It makes up a fundamental portion of the tribe peoples' identity. This is true of any culture. Its influence integrates into the core of those it touches. It determines how its members interpret the world around them and how they interact with the rest of the world. Separation from culture traumatizes and causes disassociation. Culture remains a natural human right that deserves protection. It cannot be purchased or manipulated; it is invaluable. In the case of Yanomami, who only recently developed a written language, it holds the entirety of their historical memory. The culture possesses a life of its own that grows with its people, and like any living thing, it can die.

The Yanomami are one of the last people groups to carry on the hunter-gather tradition in the world. They practice slash and burn horticulture and grow approximately sixty different crops, but their primary crops consist of manioc, plantains, and bananas. They are considered to

be semi-sedentary in that they migrate over large expanses of land while maintaining gardens in various locations to ensure a steady growth of produce. This migration is initiated for several different reasons: a scarcity of wild plants and game, the need for a new garden, epidemics, and political differences (Peters). Upon arriving at a new, adequate location the Yanomami work together to construct a new village. Men build large, circular homes called *malocas* from poles and woven leaves. These shelters are water tight and have closed roofs that must be replaced every few years due to infestation. Each structure houses multiple families and varies in size depending on the village's population. In a small village, a single home might house between twenty to eighty individuals, but a larger home can house anywhere from one hundred and fifty people to three hundred people. Nuclear families stay together on a given portion of the inner wall where their personal belongings are stowed (Kellman 31). These villages, or *shapunos*, are the most important social unit. The Yanomami have strong egalitarian values, and while they do have a leader, they vote on most issues. This primary leader is the only patrilineally inherited position (Peters).

The Yanomami's sociocultural norms differ from those of the United States. Marriage is mostly monogamous though leaders might have more than one wife. Marriage ceremonies are informal and simply consist of the two individuals choosing to commit to each other. The husband is required to work for his in-laws for several years to honor this commitment. Divorces are equally informal, and extramarital affairs are generally more accepted but can still cause trouble. Children from extramarital liaisons are usually accepted by the spouse but take the lover's name. Children are highly valued and are given the best food and supplies. Abortions and infanticide is uncommon but occur if there is no man to care for the infant or if sharing resources jeopardizes older children. Violence as a whole holds a specific role in Yanomami society. It is

used to solve grievances, break ties, or change a relationship. They use this violence as a form of conflict resolution. It is not born of a love for ferocity or brutality. Bloody duels are rare but are controlled and regulated. The Yanomami do not hold grudges: as soon as the violence has dissipated, so has the anger. When duels do take place, they usually occur during feasts when large groups meet together, and tensions rise. Villages gather for feasts on a monthly basis and participate in dancing, face painting, and a ritual called *reabo*. *Reabo* is “believed to liberate the person's spirit so that it can go on to a happy afterlife of eternal youth. If the ritual is not performed, the spirit is said to wander, restless and miserable” (Kellman 32). The charred bones and ashes of the deceased are mixed with powdered bananas into a soup and consumed. One of the most serious threats a family member can make is to refuse to consume the remains of whomever they are quarreling with. *Reabo* remains one of the most important practices of the tribe and can go on for hours. A group of shamans perform this revered ceremony (Kellman 33). The Yanomami’s variety of Shamanism influences almost every aspect of daily life. They believe that everything has a spirit that can be collected and manipulated. Shamans are responsible for curing illness, warding against evil, manipulating the forest spirits, blessing hunts, and spiritually attacking enemies. In recent decades, the Yanomami have come to understand how sickness spreads but still attribute major illnesses to spiritual attacks. Shamanic rituals are aided by a hallucinogenic snuff called *epena*. The snuff is derived from the bark of the Yopo and Virola trees; because these trees do not grow everywhere, the bark is highly valued in trade. Once intoxicated, the shamans prepare to engage in spiritual warfare. This intoxication is not an everyday occurrence and is only utilized on specific occasions (Rifkin 305).

The Yanomami rely completely on the Amazon forest to provide their daily materials and supplement their diets: “the Yanomami have a huge botanical knowledge and use about 500



plants for food, medicine, house building and other artefacts” (International). It is undisputed that they need the Amazon for survival, but it is also imperative that they have access to, at the very least, the current expanse of land they occupy if not more. On the social level, having an abundance of land allows them to solve feuds without violence by breaking off and starting a new village. From an ecological viewpoint, it prevents too many people from competing for the same resources. They have found a perfect equilibrium despite a fluctuating population. This equilibrium is the result of their nomadic lifestyle; however, mobility of this magnitude requires significant space to roam. Fortunately, they have had thousands of years to perfect this technique, and now they live in symbiosis with their environment. The Amazon provides for the people, and they, in turn, care for and protect the forest. Their expansive and unique history of living in unity with the forest makes them uniquely qualified to maintain their biome. When they supplement their gardens with food from the forest, they "take from the forest only what they need; they clear no more than the space required to grow food [and] are so well adapted to local eco-systems that [their work] is often indistinguishable from nature" (Rocha 32).

The Yanomami follow a “cycle of felling, burning, cultivation, abandonment, and reuse of regeneration to return [the land] to a forest landscape” (Nilsson 236). This process produces successive vegetation that contributes to local biodiversity and allows for renewal of the forest. Yanomami use impeccable discernment when choosing a new area to cultivate allowing both the people and the land to prosper. The natives’ agriculture causes small disruptions in the forest causing it to regenerate as natural growth patterns resume, and the Yanomami move on to a new area. This patchwork cycle allows for a regulation that mirrors what happens naturally. In this way, the Yanomami maintain not only the flora but also the fauna. The villages are constructed where game is readily available. When the animal population begins to decline, the village

relocates to prevent the animals from being overhunted; it is this adaptive response that maintains a balance in the forest. The Yanomami's existence is so ingrained into the ecosystem that their absence is detectable in the landscape itself. Nilsson explains that "following contact with state-based societies there has been significant sedentarization and changes in patterns of mobility" (236). Despite their absence in the forest, there has been an escalation of land use resulting in lack of vegetative regeneration. These changes are the product of the permanent establishment of religious missions, government outposts, and relentless invasions that prevent the Yanomami from regulating the land like they have in the past. The intrusions continue despite direct legislature against it set in place by The Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988. The illegal *garimpeiros* brought a wave of disease that caused the Yanomami to flock to government health posts. Larger groups are less mobile and require significantly more timber. The introduction of motor boats has allowed hunters to travel far away from home to acquire game rather than moving and allowing the population to regenerate. The common hypothesis among sociologists and anthropologists is that continued interference will cause groups to continue to grow and remain relatively stationary. To be near healthcare, the Yanomami have begun developing permanent residences and making secondary residences in various locations to obtain resources. Outside influences and the introduction of modern products like stone tools contribute the demobilization of the Yanomami and thus the degradation of the Amazon. It comes down to the fact that the Yanomami must remain mobile to survive. Should they remain in the same place, their population growth will become unsustainable. Not only will the tribe suffer, but the cycle of renewal in the forest will be shattered.

For the Yanomami, the forest is so much more than the means for survival. It is interwoven in the very fiber of their culture. Alcida Ramos describes how the landscape reflects the Yanomami themselves. She says that

The waterways are, as it were, the veins and capillaries that irrigate not only with water but also with memory and cultural meaning the practical and symbolic body of the communities. Along their courses, news flows from village to village as people... Just as important are the trails that connect various villages. More direct than the streams, they trace routes that are permeated with memories and tales that the Yanomami recall on their short or long trips through the forest in search of raw materials and food or when visiting other villages... These trails are like conveyer belts carrying the social impulses that keep alive the great chain of relationships between communities... They are, in other words, like nerves constantly transmitting the flow of social meaning that underlies villages, gardens, the forest and the relationship between humans and spirits, that is, the supernatural. (Ramos qtd. by Rocha)

The trails connect over three hundred communities and approximately seventy-three thousand square miles. Their tradition and relationship with the land makes up for a lack of archaeological history. The interaction with the forest is some of the only evidence of their history; it is an integral part of their identity. When the Amazon is commercialized and destroyed, so are the Yanomami.

The widespread commercialization of the Amazon began with the government's construction of the Northern Perimeter highway directly through Yanomami territory. The road's purpose was to occupy the Amazon Basin, strengthen borders, provide infrastructure for future resources, and supply jobs to the poor without altering basic economic or political systems. Unfortunately, the construction workers had no form of vaccination and as a result, a tremendous outbreak of measles, flu, tuberculosis, and African river blindness infected the Yanomami none of which do they have natural immunity for. Thirteen different communities were affected with up to seventy-percent of the population being wiped out in each one. Lack of community left

natives begging at the side of the road or offering their bodies as prostitutes (Rocha). Kellman describes how "many of the survivors developed a consuming fascination with the road, becoming nomads who hitchhiked from construction site to construction site, begging or trading their labor for food and goods " (17). Almost all cultural practices were abandoned including farming, feasting, and shamanism. Professionals have described the phenomenon as a combination of psychological trauma and shell shock. There was practically no assistance from FUNAI. The organization only took the seriously ill to Boa Vista which, in turn, exposed them to further disease. They even went so far as to punish some of the women who they had treated for venereal diseases (Kellman 18). The road only went for about one hundred and twenty-five miles before funding ran out, and the land was taken over by cattle grazers (Rocha 38). The presence of the road enabled garimpeiros to have easy access to gold ore. By the mid-1970s gold miners began appearing in the thousands eventually leading to a full-on gold rush in 1987. A large portion of the miners consisted of murders and criminals who could not find work elsewhere. They brought with them, "noise, pollution, mercury contamination, violence, guns, alcohol and prostitution" (Rocha, 38). They also brought additional diseases, most prominently venereal diseases and AIDS. This explosion of new culture came as a nasty shock to the Yanomami who went from the quiet of the forest to the racket of industry. Ramos envisions the Yanomami's perspective when she describes a "pandemonium of frenetic machines and airplanes spitting out noises of hell and halation of plague...and a climate of apocalypse, in this scenario most of the Yanomami had their first encounter with the white man" (Ramos qtd. by Rocha 40). To the Yanomami, the miners were otherworldly and demonic. Rocha reports that, "between 1987 and 1990 it is estimated that 1,500 Yanomami, 15% of the Yanomami population in Brazil, died from disease and malnutrition as a direct result of the gold rush" (64). Meanwhile, pro-mining

government officials managed to get on the Congressional Committee of Indian Questions and sabotage attempts to help the natives, and in return, they offered harmful legislature.

It is Brazil's responsibility to ensure that all its citizens are well cared for; the Yanomami, and all indigenous peoples, have the full rights of individual citizens, but the collective right to their traditional land has been stolen from them. Rocha explains that "Indian policy is still decided in Brasilia by the Government of the day without consultation. Laws affecting Indian communities are passed in a congress that has no indigenous representatives" (64). The constitution of 1988 recognized cultural rights, but their traditional land rights only allow them to benefit from the fruits of their land while the actual ownership still belongs to the federal government. Despite claims, there has been no substantial effort to demarcate Yanomami land. Much of this neglect and mistreatment is due to corruption in the Brazilian government. A significant number of officials designated to help the Yanomami were appointed because of various political connections rather than experience. Thirty-six of these positions were previously held by indigenous leaders who were murdered after a shift in government. There were no trials held. When a beneficial proposal is drawn up, it frequently and mysteriously goes missing or is outright ignored. After work began on the Northern Perimeter highway, there was international cry to help the Yanomami which pressured president Sarney into recognizing an area of eight million hectares to be protected Yanomami land; however, as soon the price of gold went up, Sarney repealed his decree, allowed the garimpeiros back, and reduced the land given to the Yanomami by seventy percent. Ironically, the man who crafted this plan was also the head of FUNAI.

Almost every time the federal government has ruled in favor of indigenous peoples, it has been a direct result of international pressure. Foreign governments have been far more valuable

while Brazil continues to turn a blind eye. In 1989, there was an international outcry when federal police resisted a Judge's decree to remove garimpeiros, and there was enough pressure to push the decree through. The only thing that prevented the government from going back on their word was another public outcry. President Collor de Mello wanted to be seen as “ecofriendly” and tried to break this pattern. He took initiative by mobilizing the military against the garimpeiros, and had limited success. The miner’s airstrips were destroyed, but the rivers were contaminated with mercury and other toxic substances. Despite this setback, Collor de Mello made a grand presentation of restoring much the Yanomami’s land and returned approximately thirty-six thousand square miles despite resistance. However, the damage had been done: “a geologist reported that they had left behind them in the Yanomami reserve over 600 tons of waste, in the form of broken machinery, pumps, generators, spare parts and even planes, which provided breeding grounds for malarial mosquitoes” (Rocha 73). Absolutely nothing was done to try to restore the land. The Yanomami’s situation did not improve, and in 1995, a survey was publicized announcing that over one third of the native population was facing malnutrition. More international push to help the Yanomami opposed plans to run power lines, highways, pipelines, and industrial water pipes through the territory. When eighty leaders representing thirty-five thousand natives outlined exactly why the land should not be industrialized, President Cardoso launched a human rights plan claiming to give a voice to indigenous people. Almost immediately after the announcement went out, a website went up sponsored by the Brazilian government offering investment in Yanomami land entailing plans of industrialization. There was no mention of the thousands of people who currently lived there or suggestion that they should be involved or consulted. The Brazilian government has completely neglected their responsibility and moral obligations to the Yanomami. The Yanomami are legally considered Brazilian citizens and yet

are living in horrific conditions with no actual federal help despite the fact that their condition is the fault of the federal government. It is their responsibility to repair the pain that has been inflicted on the Yanomami.

So far, the most effective method of inspiring the Brazilian government into taking sincere action to help the Yanomami has come from international pressure specifically from European countries such as Sweden and Norway. It is possible for anyone who values humanitarian rights to get involved. Anyone with compassion, who cares for the wellbeing of others, who believes that there is value in diversity, and that people of all backgrounds deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, has the power to intercede on behalf of the Yanomami. Monetary donations are helpful, but spreading word of the Yanomami's plight is even more beneficial. Survivor International suggests several different methods to get involved. Writing a letter to various government branches is the most recommended strategy. Some of these branches include the Brazilian government, senators and members of Congress, and the local Brazilian embassy. All of this can be done directly from the Survival International website.

The Yanomami and their culture deserve protection and respect. Kellman expresses the opinion that "development threatens the Indians physical and communal survival; it deprives them of the right to determine their own futures, and it would deprive humanity of the benefits of cultural diversity, particularly of the Indians' special knowledge of how to live harmoniously within natural ecosystems" (40). The Brazilian government has monumentality failed their people in this regard. When an incident is reported, there is a flurry of government denials and general confusion that occasionally results in the perpetrator being removed. Not only are they risking the lives of their own citizens by neglecting these issues, but they are willingly destroying

one of the most precious natural resources in the world. Living off of the natural abundance of the forest is the only way the Yanomami can support themselves. They have no other financial or economic resources to rely upon. The only hope for the Yanomami and their culture to survive is if the Brazilian government steps in to protect the tribe and the forest from those who wish to commercialize it.



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