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Early contacts with Yanomami: an ignored and little appreciated history of ethnographic reports

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Abstract. In 1968, Napoleon Chagnon published his influential book *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*. Later, this book and Chagnon's other publications were widely criticized. However, even his critics frequently describe Chagnon's research as the first serious anthropological study of these Amazon rainforest people. This categorization, even if it is almost universally repeated up until this day, is far from reality. A vast and highly significant amount of information was already gathered and published on Yanomami before Chagnon even thought about starting his field research. Yet, these publications remain largely unknown, ignored, dismissed or underappreciated, perhaps partly because most were not in English. Here we review articles, scientific papers and books published before 1968, a literature essential for understanding the torturous path of anthropological studies portraying the Yanomami and reassessing Chagnon's place in the history of Anthropology.

Keywords: Anthropology, Ethnology, Chagnon, Missionaries, Amazon rainforest.

INTRODUCTION

Today the Yanomami are a universal symbol of the struggle of native Amazonian peoples to conserve their land and consequently to preserve the rainforest biodiversity.

The very existence of the Yanomami is a challenge to the ongoing process of deforestation, mining exploitation, and uncontrolled development of economic growth. This frightening trend is driven by a neocolonialist logic

based on a dominating ontology, which is causing a seemingly irreversible degradation of the Amazon rainforest environment. Over time, views and perspectives on the Yanomami have undergone many transformations. Here we review articles, scientific papers and books on the Yanomami published before 1968, the year of Napoleon Chagnon's influential book *Yanomamö: The Fierce People* (first edition).

The common voiced view is that Yanomami «suddenly» became known in the late 1960's to the outside world due to the publication of Chagnon's book. This relatively short book became an anthropological best seller and initially seen as a well written, and entertaining ethnology. It quickly became the most widely used text in introductory anthropology courses in North American universities. The book grew out of the Chagnon's fieldwork among Venezuelan Yanomami, that he had begun in 1964.

Over the years Chagnon and coworkers published many articles accompanied by a rich filmography produced in collaboration with Timothy Ash. These films show many aspects of Yanomamö life, but the best known and influential among them portrayed conflicts (*The Axe Fight*) or Chagnon's own personal encounters with the Yanomamö (*A Man Called Bee*). These films and publications made the Yanomami well known in the United States and on the world stage and made Chagnon famous.

The Yanomami (or Yanomamö as Chagnon insisted they should be called) over the years became the «object» of different anthropological representations: «fierce» people by Chagnon, «sensual» individuals for Jacques Lizot, and «intellectuals» according to Bruce Albert (Ramos, 1990, 315). Some have argued that anthropological representations and not just those of Chagnon damaged these indigenous people (Albert, 1989). Unfortunately, the Yanomami often entered into the collective imagination characterized as either brutal savages or as cheesy reinterpretations of the *bon sauvage*. They became the subject of movies (*Songs of the Forest* based on the musical *Yanomamö*), were contended among several conservation groups and quoted by members of the star system like British pop singer Sting.

In 2001 Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* was published. This book made, on a non-scientific journalistic level, a series of scandalistic accusations against James Neel and Napoleon Chagnon. An uproar followed and deeply divided the academic world. *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, at the time already republished in several editions, was transformed, from a bestseller and basic text for introductory courses of Anthropology, into a battleground. Among the blander, but long lasting, accusations was that Chagnon's description of the Yanomami as the «fierce people» presented a distorted view of the Yanomami culture. It is often asserted that the Brazilian media, owned by the political/economical establishment, used «Yanomami fierceness» as a justification to

deny them their rights. This improper use was, in part, a counterweight to indigenous movements that had begun to appear in the 1970s to protect their territorial, cultural and social integrity.

WHAT WAS LEFT OUT

Contrary to what is usually thought, information about the Yanomami available before Chagnon, was quite extensive. Many of these reports were published in German and Italian arguably in languages less accessible for North Americans, but there were also publications in English. These materials included literally hundreds of printed pages, photographs, drawings and registrations. Ettore Biocca's publications on the Yanomami alone total well over a thousand pages (see below).

We can acknowledge that one important major difference was that most European scientific expeditions were relatively brief while Chagnon (2013), between November 1964 and April 1968, spent a total of 23 months in close contact with the Venezuelan Yanomami (though it is hard to discriminate the portion of that time spent in isolated villages from the periods passed at missions, in Caracas or other towns). It is undisputed that before this time only missionaries had a more prolonged and constant contact with the Yanomami.

In 2005, Robert Borofsky, an anthropologist who by his own admission had never done field work among the Yanomami, published the book *Yanomami: the fierce controversy and what we can learn from it*. This is how he frames historically the time when Chagnon published his text: «Chagnon wrote «*Yanomamö: the Fierce People*» (1968) at a critical time in the discipline's development. American universities expanded significantly in the 1960s and 1970s, and, related to this, so did the discipline of anthropology. Prior to the 1950s, American Anthropology had focused on the native people of North America and was only seriously interested in the 1950s and 1960s, to other areas of the world. The Holt, Rinehart and Winston series in which Chagnon published *Yanomamö* emphasized a broadening of the anthropological corpus» (Borofsky, 2005, 4). It should be added that North American anthropologists carried out their research related to the interests of US geopolitics and economics after the Second World War (Coello De La Rosa, 2018).

The article *Into the Heart of Darkness* by Leslie E. Sponsel (2010a) is another example of a discussion about the Yanomami «representation» that critically focused on Chagnon's perspective and methodology, with very limited references to what had been studied, written and published before him. In the bibliography the oldest study on the Yanomami listed is the second edition of *Yanomamö: the Fierce People*. Only a few hints were given about earlier works. Sponsel erroneously states that «*The first comprehensive ethnography on the*

Yanomamo was published in Spanish by Louis Cocco in 1972 after living with them as a Salesian missionary for 15 years» (Sponsel, 2010, 200).

Therefore, even in the last years the debate contributed to center all the attention on Napoleon Chagnon, neglecting to take into account what was achieved before his work. Before turning to this important task we would like to address the question of the names by which these indigenous people have been called in the past: this is necessary to have a more complete and better assessment of the extent of publications about Yanomami, without forgetting that the practice of naming is a dynamic of power and dominance.

WHAT'S IN A NAME

Robert Borofsky (2005, 4) wrote: «*The Yanomami tend to be called by three names in the literature: Yanomami, Yanomamö, and Yanomama*». This information is painfully short sighted and does not help the research on historical sources because the use of all three names is recent.

The spelling *Yanomamö* was used by Chagnon. Chagnon in a note on page 38 of his book (1977) writes: «*The Yanomamö are sometimes referred to in the literature by such designations as Shiriana, Xiriana, Guaharibo, and Waika. The first three terms are foreign words meaning «howler monkey» (sic) and have been applied to the Yanomamö by their northern neighbors, the Carib-speaking Makiritare Indians [...]. The term «Waika», however, from the verb «waikao», is a Yanomamö word meaning «to kill an animal (or man) that is already dying for a wound*». This is one of many examples of the past common practice to name a population with the name given by foreigners or by other indigenous groups, often in a derogatory way. «*Waicá*» was already used by Lobo d'Almada in 1787, and is still used in the Brazilian state of Roraima both for Yanomami and Kapon groups (Farage and Santilli, 1992, 268).

In *Into the Heart of Darkness* (2010, 201) Leslie E. Sponsel states: «*In this essay the spelling used by Chagnon is followed only because the focus is on his ethnographic case study. However, there are numerous other spellings in the literature including Yanoama, Yanomama, and Yanomami. In the earlier literature they are also referred to as Guaika, Shiriana, Shirishana, and Waika, among other ethnonyms*».

Yanoama, Yanomamö, Yanomama were names used by different authors because of the different languages spoken and their self-identifications. The name *Yanonámi* was used by Becher (1957) according to him as the auto-referential ethnic unity of «*Surára, Pakidái, Xiriána, Waiká, etc.*». (Becher, 1959, 105). The linguist Ernesto Migliazza (1964), however, refused the proposal of Becher to use the terms *Yanonámi* or *Yanoáma*, and continued to use *Xiriána* from the river Uraricaá even if he acknowledges that the terms suggested by Becher meant people in the indigenous language. Later he apparently reconsidered

the question and used the term *Yanomami* to indicate the linguistic family (Migliazza, 1967). The term *Yanomami* only began to be commonly used in the late 1980s and here we opted for this spelling. However, to research earlier literature on Yanomami you must be aware of the range of names by which they have been identified.

The existence of the Yanomami has been known by «white» people over a century, but they were well known by other indigenous groups with which the Yanomami had different kinds of interactions (Albert, 1985). In this sense the Yanomami were never really isolated and it is reported by Chagnon himself (1968) that groups that he «first contacted» often had already obtained western trade goods for daily use.

EARLIEST REPORTS

Koch-Grünberg in his book *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco* (1923) offers considerable information on the Waika, Guaharibo and Shiriana peoples, he encountered in 1911-13. He describes the «Scirishana» as an «isolierte group», an isolated group not related to other native population. The description Koch-Grünberg made of the «Schirianá» and «Waika» he encountered in the expedition of January 1912 were highly derogatory. He states that their culture is so extremely poor that it is difficult to put them on the same level as Europeans or even as neighboring tribes such as the intelligent Taulipáng or Makuschí (1917). In 1923, when he made his last visit to these people he died of malaria.

George Salathé along with the naturalist Karl Lako and the Benedictine Dom Alcuino Meyer conducted an expedition between September 1929 and February 1930. They went up the Catrimani river and encountered a group they called «Karimé», distinct from the Paushiana which inhabited the middle and lower reaches of the river (Salathé, 1932; Meyer, 1956). During this expedition, Meyer collected ethnographic information and an interesting glossary of the language of his hosts which, consulted today, leaves no doubt that they were speakers of one of the Yanomami languages (1930, unpublished manuscript preserved in the archive of the Diocese of Roraima).

Two years later, from May to November 1932, the geographer Desmond Holdridge explored three effluents of the Branco and Negro Rivers (Catrimani, Deminí e Aracá). He reported on the presence of many groups of «balata bleeders» along these rivers, which had tense contact with the savage «Paitiri Indians». Holdridge (1933) writes about the contact of the «balata bleeders» with the Uaikás indians near an affluent of the Catrimani (Pacú River): «[...] the Uaiká Indians were around the interior camp but were confining themselves to a teasing campaign that consisted in hiding near a man high on a balata

tree and shaking the branches of low bushes» (Holdridge, 1933, 376). No doubt both the Pairitiri and Uaikà were Yanomami. On another occasion Holdridge was accompanied by some «Shirianas» and crossed gardens with many banana trees. They heard the «savage yells» of the «Uaiká» greeting: *«we were led to a great trough of banana stew and invited to eat»* (Holdridge, 1933, 381). It is also notable for this report on «dangerous» Yanomami known by the name «Uaiká» that evidently they maintained contact with other indigenous groups in the area, extensively used agriculture, and even at least on this occasion welcomed outsiders by generously offering food.

In 1955 and 1956, Otto Zerries, another German scholar, published the results of the 1954/55 Frobenius-Expedition in South Venezuela. In 1954, at the XXXI International Congress of Americanists in São Paulo, he defined that object of his expedition in the following words: *«in order to study the still existing primitive jungle tribes, especially the Waika, Guaharibo and Shiriana Indians which apparently may form an identical group»* (Zerries, 1955, 73). Zerries mentions a close encounter with the «Waika-Indianer» also referred to as Waika-Shiriana. Only at the end of the article he reports the term *Yanoáma* with which the indians call themselves: *«Auch die Sprache der Shiriana weicht nur leicht dialektisch von der Waika ab. Beide Gruppen empfinden sich mit Recht als zusammen gehörig, was in dem gemeinsamen Namen «Yanoáma», mit dem sie sich selbst am liebsten bezeichnen und angesprochen hören, sinnfällig zum Ausdruck kommt»*: *«(Even the language of the Shiriana differs only slightly dialectically from that of the Waika. Both groups rightly feel that they belong together, which is clearly expressed in the common name «Yanoáma», with which they prefer to call and hear themselves addressed)»*. A few years later Zerries consistently used the term «*Yanoáma*», but various subgroups were still indicated as «Waika» (1964).

In 1956 Hans Becher after an anthropological expedition on effluents of the Rio Negro, enumerated many local group of Yanomami, «Surára», «Waiká», «Xiriána». As noted above Becher used the term Yanonámi, the name by which these people referred to themselves. At this time outside of Germany, the Yanomami were still commonly called «Waika», as stated in *Blood Group Antigen tests of the Waika indians of Venezuela* by Layrisse *et alii* (1962). It is interesting to observe that a good number of years before Chagnon's first encounter with the Yanomami, some anthropologists were using this indigenous people own name and that their blood had already become the subject of biomedical research.

MISSIONARIES AND ANTHROPOLOGIST

The role of missionaries, often among the first to encounter the Yanomami, was quite important because they gathered earlier information and were often

among the first people to write about them. Albert (1985) gives a detailed description and chronology of all the missions established in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s. Lizot (1984) reports on the foundation of an Evangelical mission among the Venezuelan Yanomami already in 1950.

Also beginning of the 1950s, Riccardo Silvestri (a Consolata Missionary who drowned in the Rio Branco river in 1957) had established contact with several Yanomami groups in the Apiaú region, in part with the help of loggers. Silvestri's descriptions of the Yanomami are more pacific than others of his time (1953, 1954). He even describes amusing and comical events. Silvestri returned to Boa Vista with four Yanomami who insisted on seeing first-hand the lands of the whites.

The arrival of the Yanomami had considerable local media and national impact. As a consequence of these continued missionary contacts with the Yanomami, the 1960s saw the publication of several articles and books in Italy. In 1965 Mario Forno, an Italian ethnologist, published in the *Rivista di Antropologia* the article *Contributi ergologici di una recente collezione torinese alla conoscenza degli amerindi Guaica (Yanoama)*. It was a study of more than one hundred objects collected by Luigi Cocco, a Salesian missionary who founded the Catholic Mission of St. Maria de los Guaicas, on the Orinoco river (Venezuela). Cocco worked among the Yanomami for more than 20 years and in 1973 published a book on his experience. In 1966, Forno wrote also two articles (1966a, 1966b) in *Universo*, the journal published by the Italian Geographical Military Institute *I Guaica: Attività economiche* and *I Guaica: Vita sociale*. Forno describes Yanomami material collected by Cocco, and adds reports and correspondence of missionaries working in the areas of Puerto Ayacucho (Venezuela) and Boa Vista (Brazil). Forno consulted «*photographic libraries and confidential archives of the Salesians and the Consolata Missionaries of Turin (Italy): an abundance of correspondence, memoranda, diaries, articles, notes and various writings*» (Forno, 1966a). The Consolata Missionaries provided ethnographic material published in magazines, and reports from Bindo Meldolesi and Silvano Sabatini (Meldolesi, 1960). In April-May 1964 they had organized an expedition to the Rio Apiaú visiting a sub-group of the Yanomami (Sabatini, 1967).

Forno's article underlines: «*It is the embryonic stage of «doing mission»: preparing the means for survival, studying the language, earning the confidence of the natives. The missionaries' work unfolds among great difficulties, especially the great distance between mission posts. Consider, for example, the mission of Santa Maria de los Guaicas, one of the nearest one: it takes about 10 days to be reached (with a canoe and an outboard motor) from the nearest «civilized» town of Puerto Ayacucho, founded years earlier by missionaries. The situation in Brazil is worst. In the so-called «green hell», surely one of the wildest regions of the world, mission centers were built*

in the most remote and isolated places, partly unexplored. It is understandable that the path of civilization proceeds at an extremely slow pace» (Forno, 1966b, 459-460).

Sabatini, frequently mentioned by Mario Forno, is the author of the book *Tra gli Indios dell'Apiàù*, published in 1967. He recounts his first encounter with them in 1964, the very same year Chagnon began his research in Venezuela. Sabatini calls them *Vaicà*, which is the Portuguese spelling of *Waikà*. Sabatini reports the old defamatory platitude that the Indians are poor «savages» in need of everything. It is worthy to point out that 45 years later, in 2011, Sabatini makes a totally different evaluation in his book *Il Prete e l'Antropologo* of the Yanomami living on the Catrimani river (Brazil), where the Consolata Missionaries established a permanent mission in 1965.

Without doubt Chagnon benefited from the help of both New Tribes missionary James Barker, and the Salesian missionary Luigi Cocco in his first contacts with Yanomami. Indeed, Barker introduced Chagnon to the Yanomami and accompanied him to the village, which became his base of operations (Chagnon, 1968).

ITALIAN SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITIONS IN THE EARLY 1960s

In addition to the missionaries' earnest attempts to contact the Yanomami, Italian scientific expeditions to the interior of the Amazon rainforest were on the rise. In 1954 Alfonso Vinci, an Italian geologist and explorer, organized an expedition to the Amazon Rainforest of Brazil and Venezuela. In his book *Samatari: Orinoco-Rio delle Amazzoni* (1956), he identifies the Yanomami with different names: «Scirisciana, Samatari and Guayca». Vinci states: «*Guayca, this is the generic name used by Scirisciana to indicate the wildest among them – Guayca in their language means precisely wild. They are sometimes identified with Samatari and other times with Ukumatari*» (Vinci, 1956, 101).

For decades the anthropological research on Yanomami revolved around the theme of their fierceness and violence, as in Vinci's book «*Samatari*». Vinci describes them as the most «savage» among the native tribes of the region. He also reports violent clashes between different tribes and their discontent with the invasion of the rainforest by *garimpeiros* (diamonds and gold miners). Vinci seems to agree with the point of view of «white» and «civilized» people who call the Samatari-Siriana «savage». He reports they were considered as «bizarre ape-men».

Between 1962 and 1963 an Italian team directed by Ettore Biocca sponsored by CNR (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche) contributed significantly to the «discovery» of the Yanomami both for the length of time (seven months) and for the scientific approach used. An enormous quantity of information was gathered including a great number of photographs and recordings. At

that time, the «personal story» of Helena Valero, later recounted by Biocca, became sensational news. In 1937 Helena, a young girl from Rio Tiquié, had been kidnapped by the Yanomami. After many years (23) living in different villages, she escaped to a non-Yanomami village, on the river Orinoco. Biocca interviewed her and recorded her memories. Valero's interview was supposed to be just a preliminary study on the Yanomami, but Biocca was so impressed that decided to give her story more visibility. Valero's personal story became the book *Yanoáma: dal racconto di una donna rapita dagli indi* (Biocca, 1965), later translated and published in English (Biocca, 1969b).

In the mid- 1960s, the Yanomami's culture was starting to be known, but their language was almost an insurmountable obstacle. Valero was supposed to be the breakthrough into the Yanomami world. She became the most influential informant and the main translator of the material collected during the expedition. In the account published by Biocca, Helena Valero recounted many violent fights that occurred while she was living among the Yanomami, but also a peaceful everyday life and caring relationships. However, especially in the last chapter «*Il mondo cattivo dei Bianchi*», she stresses (and Biocca underlines) that the non-Yanomami society is not peaceful. After she returned to the «civilized» world, she was quite disappointed: «*I had imagined that among the White people everything would be different*» (Biocca, 1965, 350). At the end of her life, she went back to the forest, living with her children and grandchildren.

Ironically, while the story of Valero was translated and published in English, and has been widely cited, the scientific results of the Biocca expedition (1962-1963), his most valuable achievement on the subject, were published only in Italian and mostly ignored. *Viaggi tra gli Indi: Alto Rio Negro-Alto Orinoco: appunti di un biologo* was published in 1965-1966 in 4 volumes and 15 vinyl records. Volumes II, III and IV are devoted to the population called today Yanomami (a total of 819 pages plus appendixes). The following quotations from Biocca were translated from the Italian into English by the authors of this paper. Biocca explained that «*(t)he huge territory that stretches from Rio Branco, Rio Negro and Upper Orinoco Casiquiare channel, covered with equatorial forest and interrupted by gigantic mountains has remained until now largely unexplored. It is inhabited by the Yanoáma or Yanomami, a large Indian group, aggressive and wild, formerly called by different names: Waika, Guaharibo, Sciriana, Scirisciana, etc..*» (Biocca, 1965, 3). Following Schuster and Zerries, Biocca chooses the name Yanoáma and in the acknowledgments, he gives credits to the German scholar Otto Zerries and the Salesian missionary Luigi Cocco.

Many topics are covered in the second volume (563 pages). Biocca overviews: «*Legends, achievement and scientific discovery*», a broad historical survey of what it was first imagined and later discovered; «*White Men and Yanoáma*» with

chapters dedicated on mutual misunderstanding, massacres, first friendly contacts in Rio Cauaburì, prisoners of Yanoáma, Helena Valero's story, and finally *«The expedition: Rio Negro and Rio Orinoco»*. There is a discussion on violence suffered by non-Yanomami populations and violence between Yanomami themselves. The section *«Attempts of Classifications»* describes language aspects, physical and cultural characteristics. More than 130 pages are devoted to the Yanomami *«material culture»* with a detailed description of artifacts, bridges, houses, utensils, ornaments, weapons, preparation and use of curare, hunting techniques, ways to start a fire, use of hallucinogenic powder during shamanistic rituals and legends related to animals and plants. The fourth part looks into family and social organization, sexual behavior, abortion, infanticide, witchcraft, shamanism, and finally the Yanomami behavior in their contacts with non-Yanomami. The fifth part dealing with *«Ritual Parties, Struggles, Wars»*, describes among other aspects, ceremonial gatherings (*rehao*), revenge as a duty, ritual fights, warriors' behavior, raids and death. The last section, *«Endo-cannibalism»* is devoted to «supernatural beings» and religious funeral practices (a theme already introduced at the end of the previous section) with a wide account of myths related to the spirits' world.

The book tackles a key issue of relations between non-Yanomami and Yanomami: *«The Whites and Yanoáma. Mutual incomprehension. The region of slow penetration of white in this forest, Upper Rio Negro and Upper Orinoco must be searched not only in the nature of places, but also in the misunderstanding between «civilized» and Indios, and in the Yanoáma invincible feeling of freedom. On the other hand, the documents left about the first contacts between White and Yanoáma show us the ferocity and cruelty the «civilized» were able to use»* (Biocca, 1965, 25). On page 27, the issues of recent fights with non-Yanomami populations are dealt with: *«People residing on the Rio Negro river, between (the cities of Barcelos and Uapés, recount violent fights against the savage Yanoáma indians. In my first trip, I heard countless horrific stories. I will recount few of them that show the warlike behavior of these indians»*. But on page 33 Biocca adds: *«Moreover, it is already a few years that Yanoáma groups residing on the Cauaburì e Marauyá river live peacefully with missionaries and government agents for the Indians' protection (SPI). However, (some Yanoáma) persist in fighting against enemy groups with the purpose of stealing women or retaliating old raids»*.

Volume III, 335 pages long, is titled *Yanoáma Indians: added material*. It shows many pictures of Yanomami Indians, lists a Yanomami glossary with translation of entries in English and Italian, describing plants and animals and how the ethnographic material was recorded. There are 15 vinyl records, 13 of which originally recorded inside Yanoáma villages on Philips and Uher magnetic tape recorders. The first eight records hold recordings done

among the Kohorosciweteri and Wawanaweteri villages on the Cauaburi river: they are rhythmical nocturnal dialogs, talks, solemn utterances both said and sung, mourning songs, songs performed during ceremonial dances, shamanistic songs, rhymes sung by a soloist and repeated by men and women dancing, some of which were sung by Helena Valero herself. Records 9 to 13 are registrations of shamanistic songs, rhythmical talks for bartering purpose between two men at the end of a feast, fights, and mourning songs recorded mostly in the villages of *Igneweteri* and *Witukaiateri* (Bacino Alto Orinoco). Pictures and ethnographic data accompany the contents of each disc.

Biocca strikes an even handed comparison between the «braveness» of the Yanomami and the «brutality» of the so-called «civilized» western society. Biocca reports that Yanomami make war among themselves and attack the non-Yanomami, but also stresses that «civilized» westerners are not less violent and cruel than the Yanomami. Beside they destroy the rainforest, abuse its bounties and are not even a little bit concerned with the damage they cause to the environment. Biocca perspective often seems surprisingly modern: *«The concept that the absence of objects [...] constitutes a primitive, miserable and degrading culture is a consequence of our ethnocentrism, which renders us unable to imagine life in a totally different environment [...] the life and culture of these Indians is closely tied to the equatorial virgin forest habitat. It will survive as long as the forest survives which is everyday threatened by the destruction brought about by the irrational and primitive action of white «civilization» (Biocca, 1966, 126).*

In 1969 Biocca published a more accessible monograph on the Yanomami population: *Biologist's Notes on the Yanoáma World (Mondo Yanoáma: Appunti di un Biologo; Biocca, 1969a)* citing Chagnon's work, especially where he reports genealogies found in some Venezuelan villages. An interesting side note is the contribution of Ezio Ponzo, a psychologist who was a member of the Biocca expedition.

In 1966 he published a paper on the Yanomami «acculturation» based on the analysis of a conversation between a youth and an elder. This article shows that the impact of foreigner contact of at least some Yanomami populations was well underway by the time Chagnon started his fieldwork.

JUST STONE AGE HUNTERS AND GATHERERS?

Lizot (1984, 8, 11), claims that until Chagnon (1968) the Yanomamö/Yanoáma were considered only hunters and collectors and that Chagnon was the first to describe their use of cultivated plants. The idea that the Yanomami are essentially hunters and gatherers reinforces their attractiveness as a model for human social organization before the Neolithic revolution.

However, there are reports of Yanomami use of cultivated plants even in the very first reports. Koch-Grünberg discussed agriculture among the Yanomami he contacted, but he still considered them as hunter-gatherers, because he claimed that they had only very recently acquired agriculture from contact with other groups. Silvestri (1953, 1954) clearly reported that the Yanomami had gardens in which they at least cultivated manioc, banana, and sweet potatoes. Silvestri also reported the story of a Yanomami man who travelled to Boa Vista (Roraima). He took beans seeds back to his village. The next year Silvestri was served beans in that same village. This story reinforces two conclusions: first that the Yanomami had a very good idea about cultivating plants, second that they were not so isolated and definitely not hesitant to adopt cultural elements from outside.

Zerries, despite the usual definition of this people as hunter-gatherers stated that the *«Waika [...] formerly reported as a hunting and gathering tribe by visitors who had only superficial contact with them, are actually horticulturists»* (Zerries, 1955, 78). He reports that they cultivated different types of banana and had no memory of learning agricultural practices from other, nearby peoples. *«Almost all groups of the so-called Yanoama have deserted the status of having an exclusively foraging way of life. For most of them crop farming is however still in its beginnings and is mostly recognizable as a younger foreign import and has in the meantime led to the owning of land. Along with this, gathering as a way of life is of great significance. In contrast, hunting and fishing is decreasing»* (Zerries, 1964, 285). Zerries concluded that the Waica horticulture goes back to the introduction of the banana in the New World.

Becher (1957; 1959) also reports on the existence near the habitation of the Surára (another group of Yanomami) of ample gardens of banana, *«pupunha»* palm (*Guilelma utilis*), manioc, taro, sweet potato, tobacco and cotton. He also reports on a Yanomamo myth on the origin of banana cultivation.

Biocca (1966) also clearly stated that Yanomami agricultural practices were variable and handed down from generation to generation. He concluded that the classification of these people as hunter-gatherers is substantially incorrect and added that their survival in the Amazon rainforest depended on an adequate agriculture.

WHAT IS WAITERI

As reported above, detractors have criticized Chagnon for using the word fierce to describe the Yanomami. *«Fierce»* was his English translation of the Yanomami term *«waiteri»*. However, Chagnon in a certain sense was only emphasizing a long held stereotype which was probably marked by a projection of the anthropologists' own society or whether they wanted to

meet. In one of the early contact with Yanomami, Rice (1921) described the Yanomami as fierce cannibals. Vinci's (1956) reported the Scirisciana term «*uaikildoni*», as cruel, violent. However, Biocca (1966) translated *waiteri* as brave, courageous. Sponsel (1998) remarks that «*Chagnon derives the label «fierce» from only one meaning of the word «waiteri», something that reflects his focus on conflict and aggression*». Ernest Migliazza, who spent many years with the Yanomami as a missionary, explains: «*The term waitiri has a semantic range from brave, courageous, daring, fearless to savage, furious, wild, aggressive, and fierce, depending mainly on the context and situation*» (Migliazza, 1972, 421-422). Lizot (1975) translates the term «*waitiri*» as fierce, valiant, proud and (1999) reports that the term «*waitheri*» implies a stoic resistance to pain, but also generosity: two characteristics needed in a leader. The linguist Henri Ramirez in *Iniciação à Língua Yanomami* (1994) gives two variations of the same term: «*waitheri*» and «*waithiri*», translating them in Portuguese as «*valente, corajoso*».

It is interesting to point out that Biocca and Chagnon choose for the term «*waiteri*» the two meanings at the opposite end of the spectrum. Perhaps for Chagnon it was a choice coherent with his focus on violence and aggression in Yanomami society. The harsh debate between Chagnon and his detractors is mainly cultural; the wider context was not taken in consideration. Probably, for some authors, aggression and war aroused more interest than the cooperation, peace, care and consideration that were highlighted in later ethnographies (for instance Alès, 2006; Kelly and Matos, 2019). It is clear from newspaper headlines that «aggression» sells much better than «cooperation», but we cannot ignore the wider picture of scientific interests of the period. This theme, already important for Darwin and T.H. Huxley, was reinforced by Freud through the conflict between the conscious and unconscious, and became central in the post-World War II period.

During 1960, a number of ethologists such as Konrad Lorenz turned their attention to the question of aggression (Lorenz, 1963). Scientists of the time had concluded, like many before them, that conflict, aggression and war were part of human nature, a fundamental aspect of human sociality. In parallel it was thought that aggression and other «negative» aspects of humans reflected their animal past, rooted in biology, while goodness was something uniquely human, the result of (advanced) cultural evolution (de Waal, 2006). Of course this was also the kind of research that at the time was receiving good funding, Chagnon was producing articles on a subject with proven appeal both in the USA and in the international scientific environment. It might be argued however that over time the focus of interest gradually shifted. Scientific interests have now turned more to better understanding the social underpinning of cooperation and empathy, which were previously often considered a thin veneer covering our inherently nasty and aggressive

character. Ethics and morals were considered a victory of civilization over evolution.

However, in his 2013 book Chagnon continued to reinforce his imagine. For Chagnon, Yanomami showed a wild look in their eyes and they are still represented as substantially stuck in the Paleolithic, despite the fact reported by the same author that the «isolated» villages he visited had already metal machetes, axes and aluminum cooking pots.

These stereotypes continued to be repeated in other publications. An article by Clemente *et alii* (2015) stated that their research was conducted on Yanomami from isolated villages still in the Paleolithic, practicing only hunting and gathering and with no outside contact: «*Yanomami [...] who continue to live seminomadic hunter-gatherer life-styles in the Amazon jungle [...]. These remote populations of hunter-gatherers have life-styles similar to those of our human ancestors, and are unexposed to modern practices known to exert antimicrobial effects*». Then we learn from the same authors that they had machetes, cooking pots, cans, western shorts and t-shirts. We might rightly ask: isolated from who? The answer might just be: isolated from the researchers until they showed up in the village to make the Yanomami part of their dubious, experimental protocol that required sampling an «untouched, virgin» population and contributing to the construction of a narrative that confirmed prejudices, ignored complexity, and rejected history.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we reviewed and compared different narratives about Yanomami culture. First we wanted to evaluate the anthropological/ethnological research and perspectives on Yanomami available before Chagnon went into the field up to the publication of his 1968 book. We evaluated and compared the vast amount and depth of information already gathered on Yanomami before 1968, but still today largely unknown and unacknowledged. Perhaps this lack of appreciation can be explained because many of these publications were not in English. Nevertheless, without taking these publications, hundreds of photographs and recordings into account it is impossible to formulate an informed historical perspective on Chagnon's contribution. Perhaps the controversy surrounding Chagnon has impeded an adequate consideration of these materials as many anthropologists focused solely on either attacking or defending his opera and little else. However, in the years before Chagnon, missionaries, ethnographers, anthropologists and biologists had already encountered and studied the Yanomami, sometimes in great detail. A critical role played from the very beginning was the presence of missions. The missionaries – without getting into the pertinent

polemics about their actions – were usually among the first foreigners to contact the Yanomami, often providing not only logistical support, but also anthropological and linguistic information essential for scientific expeditions that followed in their footsteps. Since the 1970s the lines between anthropologists and missionaries have often blurred. Many missionaries undertook regular academic studies and played a double role as missionaries and anthropologists (Bigoni, 2019).

An appreciation of these important publications is essential for better understanding the torturous path of anthropological studies portraying the Yanomami people and Chagnon's place in the history of Anthropology. Our research allowed us to deconstruct the often-stated claim that before Chagnon's fieldwork little was known about the Yanomami. It is our contention that both supporters and detractors of Chagnon, have neglected to sufficiently take into account the importance and extent of previous contact with and reports on Yanomami. From the early 1950s to the 1970s the Yanomami literature highlighted the interest of German and Italian scholars in the exploration of the Amazon and especially the research on the Yanomami. The Italian expedition led by Biocca produced abundant materials that are still of great interest. The approach in «reading» the Yanomami culture was very modern for its time and still offers some significant insights. Biocca's enormous contribution to early Yanomami studies should be acknowledged. All these scientists were important scholars who provided valid contributions to the ethnological knowledge of the Yanomami before Chagnon started his fieldwork. These contributions included not just written words and photographs, but also collections of artefacts witnessing the material culture of these communities that are now found in many important Italian and German museums. It is a too complex subject to be added in this article, but we need to cite at least the important collections of Biocca in Italy (Blasetti and Magnoni, 2010).

Since 1968 the alleged fierceness of Yanomami portrayed by Chagnon divided anthropologists into two opposite camps, defenders and critics of his work. Unfortunately, the clash of opinion on the subject overshadowed twenty years of former European studies focused on important features of the Yanomami culture such as the sophisticated network of alliances and economics between villages, the Yanomami adaptation to a forest environment, and their spiritual life.

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