

Anthropology of the Amazon – on-line open course resources

Module III:

### Cultures of the Amazon

There are over 400 indigenous cultures in the Amazon Basin and it is impossible to discuss all or even a majority of them in one short course. Therefore, we will focus on three groups. Of course, this does not mean that they are “typical” for the Amazon, or that their customs and beliefs differ significantly from other groups of the area – some of the traditions are similar to those of other groups while others are specific to only one group. The indigenous people I would like to elaborate on, are the Yanomami, Quichua, and Huaorani.

**The Yanomami Indians** live on the Venezuelan and Brazilian border. They represent the biggest indigenous group of the Amazon Basin and count over 20 thousand members. For years it was the least known culture of the region, but now, after more than forty years of research it is considered to be one of the best known group.

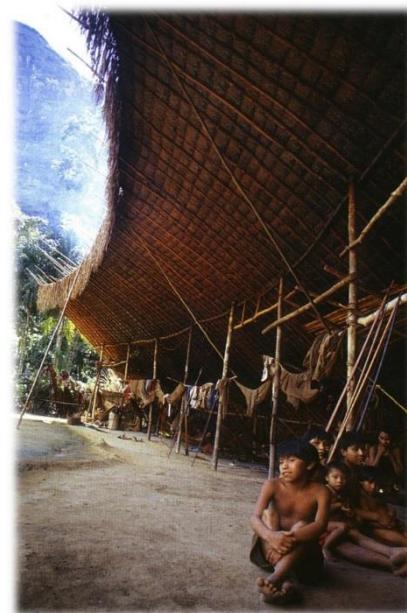
The initial contact of the Yanomami with the Western culture took place in the XVIII century, nevertheless full contact is dated to the middle of the XX century. At that time the missionaries as well as researchers reached the area the Indians inhabited.

Usually, in the Amazon Basin, the borders of a territory of a given group are specified by the names of rivers that surround it. In the case of the Yanomami these are the Erebato, Caura, Padamo, Mavaca, Demini, Catrimani, Araca, Padauiri, Uraricoera, Parima, and Mucajai Rivers that run through North-West Brazil and South-East Venezuela and encompass over 192 000 square kilometers.

The language that the people speak is an isolated one which means that it is not related to any other language – it is one of a kind. It is divided into four dialects – Sanema, Yanam, Yanomam, and Yanomami.

The Indians live in settlements along small streams. Recently, some of them moved to large river banks in order to maintain easier contact with the outside world. Their houses are built out of bamboo poles and palm leaves. Some groups live in one big family house in the shape of a circle with one thatched roof and a large central plaza. Every smaller family in the group has its own place in the house. Other groups live in smaller separate houses.

Yanomami settlement  
(Photo by B. Pawlikowska)



Each of the settlements is politically and economically independent. Some of them form coalitions which can change over time. Each village is led by a headman, who is recognized as the most respected person in a given group.

The Yanomami are horticulturalists – they hunt and gather food from the forest, and they grow bananas and plantains as well as other plants in the gardens (over sixty different crops are grown). The game is divided between group members – the hunter does not get any part of the game he catches, but in return he gets meat from other hunters. This way everybody has enough to eat and the game is distributed more or less equally.

Individuals trade goods in order to make alliances as well as to distribute the surplus of prime domesticates (as for example cotton). The Yanomami economy dramatically changed after the missionaries started their work with the group in the seventies – many plastic and metal objects took the place of handmade ones. On the other hand, nowadays, some of the Indians make handicrafts and sell them to tourists at local markets – these include mostly baskets or arrows.

All work is divided based on the gender of the worker – men hunt, prepare all of the hunting gear, and do some physical jobs – e.g. felling trees. Women take care of the house, children and food, and tend to the gardens. Some jobs are executed by men and women together – for example building houses or fishing are group activities.



Yanomami mother with child  
(photo by B. Pawlikowska)

must marry the son of their father's sister or a daughter of their mother's brother. After marriage they both live with the husband's family (marriage is patrilocal). Some Yanomamo men have more than one wife and sometimes the wives are sisters (in anthropology it is called sororal polygyny).

Very young children never leave the women's side. They are never left alone and are constantly accompanied by either the mother or other female family members. Children are taken along even when the women leave for the forest or garden, making it easier to feed them at any time.

Older children help with some of the household chores. This mainly refers to girls as they take care of their younger siblings and help the women with everyday tasks. The boys do not have as many responsibilities and spend most of their time learning hunting techniques. They often go to the forest in groups and test small bows.

The Yanomami society is egalitarian (all society members are equal), nevertheless peoples' status can differ based on age or skills.

For a long time, the Yanomami were known as fierce warriors and the notion is nowadays discussed (please refer to the articles in the “ethics of research” section in this course). Nevertheless their practice of combat is still described as culturally important. Alliances between villages are usually created in order to wage joint war against other groups. to avenge previous attacks.

Religious practices of the Yanomami were centered around the belief that spirits dwell in the forest and they are able to harm peoples' souls and bodies. Shamans enter a trance state in order to negotiate or fight with the spirits. Shamans also can command some of the spirits as they obtain control over them. These spirits can help the shaman to cure illnesses (or in some cases to cause them). In order to reach the trance state, which allows for communication with the spirits, the shamans use hallucinogenic substances. They also use some herbal remedies in their practice to heal minor discomforts.

In the Yanomami culture, only men can serve as shamans and they must complete training in order to obtain necessary knowledge and practice.

In the 1950s, the missionaries arrived in the area, but there still are not many converts and the Yanomami continue to practice shamanism.

Many aspects of the Yanomami culture started to change as the influence of the Western culture and industry became more pronounced.

The culture suffered from the gold rush and mining activities, the diseases brought by outsiders, as well as from the politics led by the countries they happened to live in. For example, the Brazilian government decided to carry out an industrial development project in the Amazon region in the late seventies. In effect, many mines were opened and more than 40 thousand miners entered the Yanomami territory within the next ten years. What is more, in 1988 the government decided to divide the territory into 19 separate districts to make mining management easier. The districts were connected by “corridors” used by travelling miners and for the transport of the heavy machinery. One of the outcomes of this was the lack of communication between the Yanomami settlements, which led to the disappearance of many traditional rituals. Social and religious disruptions in turn led to further cultural changes.

The industrial progress also resulted in the pollution of land and water, what in turn influenced the health of the people living in the forest settlements.

Many NGO's and other activists are currently working with the Yanomamo groups to provide healthcare and education. The latter is extremely important as it enables the indigenous people to fight



Yanomami shaman  
(Photo by B. Pawlikowska)

for their rights. The Venezuelan and Brazilian governments make it difficult for the organizations to implement any changes and therefore the work is still ongoing.

(Please refer to the movie clip *The Mountain of Mystery*, attached to this section in order to see the a Planet Doc full documentary published on You Tube; you can see how the Yanomami Indians live, what they do every day and so on).

**The Quichua Indians** represent a majority among the indigenous people of Ecuador. They are a diverse group usually divided into subgroups according to the territory they occupy (for example: the Napo Quichua or Puyo Quichua). However, these terms may refer to a subgroup inhabiting a larger region (as in the case of the Pastaza Quichua). The Indians use the ethnonym 'Runa' to describe themselves, consequently terms such as Sacha Runa or Napo Runa are formed. Despite this, most of the subgroups do not differ significantly, therefore we can refer to them as the Quichua of the Oriente (in contrast to the Sierra Quichua, who inhabit the Andes region of Ecuador).



Quichua contemporary house  
(Photo by A. Wierucka)

The first contact with Western culture occurred at the beginning of colonization, more than 400 years ago – the Quichua culture that we know at present is an effect of many changes that took place over the years.

The Indians used to live in oval houses with thatched roofs. Modern houses are usually rectangular, made out of wooden boards with roofs made of corrugated iron. The population of this group is estimated to 60 000. The Quichua language used to be *lingua franca* in

Ecuador and many people speak it to this day.

The Quichua are horticulturalists as most of the indigenous groups of the Amazon – they hunt and gather in the forest as well as tend to gardens (crops such as manioc, plantains, beans, tomatoes, and peanuts are grown). The division of labor is based on gender – women work in and by the house, raise children and tend to gardens, while men hunt and undertake paid jobs to earn money. The trade and exchange of goods were practiced for hundreds of years – the Quichua had contact with their neighbors, the Zaparoan and Jivaroan groups, and since the XVI century they also interacted with Europeans.

The Quichua society is divided into *ayllu* – extended family units where kinship is traced on both the mother's and father's side of the family – men recognize their descent through the male shamans, women through feminine master potter.



Quichua shaman preparing for the ceremony  
(Photo by A. Wierucka)

Shamanism is still practiced by the Quichua people although they also widely seek the help of Western medicine doctors. As for religious practices, the missionaries that arrived into these areas a few hundred years ago converted many Indians to Christianity.

Shamans are respected as they possess vast knowledge and experience. Their practices are sought after. In order to get into a trance state they drink *ayahuasca* – a brew made out of

*Banisteriopsis caapi* cooked with other plants. This strong hallucinogen enables them to enter an altered state of consciousness and communicate with the spirits.

Pottery is an important part of the Quichua culture. Clay vessels are made by coiling, and are then baked in bamboo fire, and painted in tricolor patterns with brushes made of human hair. The production of this handicraft serves an important social and symbolic role.

The life of modern Quichua people is very diverse. Some of them live in the forest along the rivers, some in small settlements while others moved to the cities and work there. They also face some threats connected with oil companies' activities as well as logging that takes place on the land they occupy.



Quichua ceramics  
(Photo by A. Wierucka)

**The Huaorani Indians** inhabit the Ecuadorian part of the Amazon. This area differs from a typical tropical forest as it is hilly (due to the proximity of the Andes). Currently, similarly to other ethnic groups of this region the Huaorani live alongside rivers. Prior to acculturation they used to build houses on hilltops, in remote areas far away from main communication routes and adapted to living in different environmental conditions. The settlements used water from small, local streams, the diet consisted mainly of meat (of hunted animals) and was complimented by vegetables and fruits that were cultivated in gardens or gathered in the forest.

For centuries the Huaorani have been reported to be fierce warriors, who did not hesitate to kill anyone who entered their territory. This may have been a reason for the long-lasting partial isolation and delayed the influence of the Western culture. Settlers, officials, and oil company employees feared the Huaorani and did not enter their lands allowing the Indians to remain secluded. Despite many changes this culture underwent within the last fifty years (since the official peaceful contact was made

in 1958) and war traditions being only one aspect on this group's complex culture, the image of the Huaorani as fierce people is still common in Ecuador.

As I mentioned before, Huaorani settlements were located on hilltops. Settlements consisted of

Part of the Huaorani *nanicabo*  
(Photo by A. Wierucka)



single kin groups that were often at war with each other. People of different ethnicity were considered 'non-people', 'outsiders', 'cannibals' (*cohuori*) and contact with them was not maintained.

The Huaorani language (Huao Terero) is also a unique element of this ethnic group as it has been classified as an isolated language.

The social organization of this ethnic group is based on a social unit called *nanicabo*. It consists of a kin group inhabiting the same

settlement. Members of a *nanicabo* unite through every-day tasks, ceremonies as well as rituals, and are bound by many social responsibilities and commitments.

The Huaorani culture is egalitarian. There were never any leaders or people in power among this ethnic group and every member had to rely on their own knowledge and experience. Furthermore, no one was allowed to intrude their opinion upon another Huaorani. Trying to convince to a different point of view was permitted, however one could not force another member of the group to act against their will.

Labor division is similar to other described groups – women usually take care of the house, children and food, and men hunt. Nevertheless this group does not have a strict division and the tasks are often shared.

The Huaorani are perceived in a particular way by the Ecuadorian society. Following the incorporation of this ethnic group into the Ecuadorian nation, the fierceness ('savagery' expressed by killing raids) of the Indians was often discussed. Opinions that 'people from the stone age' found themselves in 'civilization' were also common. Although these statements were clearly preposterous, the image of the Huaorani is still largely based on stereotypes. In Ecuador, instead of 'Huaorani' – the correct ethnonym of this group, the term *Auca* is used. This word (of Quichua origin) means 'savage, barbarian'. The term is widespread and people who do not speak Quichua most probably do not even realize its offensiveness. The name *Auca* is used by the

Huaorani woman preparing hunted peccary  
(Photo by A. Wierucka)



general public as well as travel and advertising agencies, oil companies, and officials. A good example is *vía Auca* (in direct translation - ‘road of the savages’) – a road built at the end of the 20th century by an oil company. It cuts through Huaorani territories and serves primarily as a route for oil transportation. This is only one of the many examples of the widespread use of the pejorative term. The term ‘Huaorani’ is becoming more prominent in the media and of course the offensive name is not used in research articles.

Shamanism is still an important part of the culture. There are not many shamans left but there also were not many ‘real’ conversions to Christianity despite the efforts of the missionaries who worked with

Huaorani shaman  
(Photo by A. Wierucka)



the Huaorani groups since 1958. Most shamans do not use hallucinogenic substances in order to enter trance – they usually use chants to connect with the spirits. During the session they can predict future events, find cures for the sicknesses of patients or explain past events.

The situation of the Huaorani is undoubtedly complicated, especially considering that reports from times before the full contact was made are still cited around the world (especially in the United States of America as Ecuador has strong economic ties with this country). Very often, past events have not been forgotten and continue to cause difficulties for the Huaorani to be fully accepted by the Ecuadorian society.

The three cultures described above represent just a small fraction of cultural practices of the people living in the Amazon. Also, their description is simplified as it seems impossible to present them with enough detail in just few pages of the manuscript.

Please refer to the bibliography attached below for additional information and deep cultural analyses.

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