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Tales of the Yanomami

Daily Life in the Venezuelan forest

JACQUES LIZOT

Translated by Ernest Simon



& Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme
Paris

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

Originally published in French as *Le cercle des feux: Faits et dits
des Indiens yanomami* by Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1976
and © Editions du Seuil 1976

First published in English in 1985 by the Cambridge University Press and the
Maison des Sciences de l'Homme as *Tales of the Yanomami: Daily Life in the
Venezuelan Forest*
Reprinted 1986, 1988
Canto edition 1991
Reprinted 1997

English translation © Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and
Cambridge University Press 1985

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Lizot, Jacques.
Tales of the Yanomami.
(Cambridge studies in social anthropology; no. 55)
Translation of: *Le cercle des feux*.
1. Yanoama Indians. I. Title, II. Series.
F2520.1.Y3L592 1985 306'.08998 84-23175

ISBN 0 521 40672 2 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

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The publisher is especially grateful to Professor Timothy Asch for his invaluable assistance in preparing this edition.

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Foreword

by Timothy Asch

This ethnography is novel both in form and content. Whereas most American ethnographers have presented analyses drawing on field data to support their arguments, Lizot simply presents the data, in story form, and rarely uses analysis. The absence of explanation of his intent and absence of his field methods forces the reader to search for interpretation within the stories themselves. At first glance, Lizot's stories resemble the ethnographic texts that anthropologists record in the field rather than any of the many kinds of syntheses they have published as ethnographies.

This book can be read at many levels: It can simply be enjoyed, much as a loosely woven novel about a strange group of people may provide an interesting diversion; it can be explored as a challenge to our definition of ethnography and our view of how best to transmit knowledge about the lives of one group of people to members of a very different group; and it can be read as a source of information about the society and culture of the Yanomami.

Lizot's narrative style is easy to read and entertaining. He introduces the reader to many unforgettable individuals and to the affections and tensions that may either bind or divide them. An unusual dimension is Lizot's emphasis on sexual liaisons, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The thoughts, dreams, and attractions of the characters are interwoven in stories about their affairs. Sexuality as experienced by Yanomami from childhood to old age, particularly Yanomami men, is revealed through dozens of incidents.

Another feature of this book is Lizot's translation of many of the endless practical jokes, taunts, and innuendos that amuse the Yanomami. Joking, often related to sex, seems to be a typical ingredient of Yanomami interaction. Inclusion of jokes is unusual, perhaps because humor is so difficult to translate, depending, as it often does, on a subtle knowledge of the language and the personalities involved. A joke devoid of context often loses its humor. Lizot's narrative provides sufficient context for us to recognize the joke, though not always enough to share in an appreciation of its humor.

The book begins with a prologue on the ethnocentrism of the Yanomami;

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this is followed by stories, roughly divided into those focusing on sexuality in Part I, on ritual and myth in Part II, and on warfare in Part III, although these themes are interwoven throughout the book. Through the stream of anecdotes, myths, and oral histories emerge Lizot's central concerns about the way the Yanomami think and act within their social universe: who lives with whom, who supports whom, who fights with whom and why; how people explain why they choose to do something or the causal links they make between events; and how myth is incorporated into action. Parts of the book appear to be direct translations of texts Lizot recorded in the field, such as the myth and oral history included in the prologue. The sources of other stories are less clear, containing the purported thoughts, dreams, and emotional reactions of protagonists, as well as descriptions of time, place, and action. By not revealing his own role as selector and interpreter, Lizot leaves the source of creativity ambiguous. Lizot's blurring of the traditional distinctions among fiction, biography, and ethnography is an intriguing aspect of this book.

Lizot does not place himself in his accounts, either as participant or as observer. Only occasionally does he step outside the framework of the stories to provide background or interpretation, and rarely does he include direct reference to his own perceptions or judgments; but when he does, he seems to be reminding the reader that this is not a novel but an ethnography and should be read in a particularly reflective way. Lizot opts to use the approach of the novelist to reveal what is really important to him about the way people interact: their experiences with one another, their dreams, fears, attractions, hates, myths, and oral histories. He does not want us to draw out rules so much as to respond affectively to the material, much as we respond to our own primary experiences.

It is in the shifts from narrative to brief reflection on the events, as well as in the wider organization of the book, that Lizot reminds us that the stories (which seem to reveal ways that Yanomami experience their world) have all been filtered through Lizot. His book suggests that if one lives long enough among a group of people, it becomes increasingly difficult to be sure what impartial observation means or which ideas originate with whom. Lizot and the Yanomami with whom he has lived have influenced one another in profound ways. He does not try to undo that integration; he rarely separates and identifies the sources of ideas and perceptions. Perhaps he hopes that readers will respond to the tales in the book in an unconscious as well as a conscious way and that they too will come to appreciate the substance of ethnography, that subtle interaction between observer and observed in which both are changed.

Not only is Lizot's book challenging in its own right, it is an important contribution to the resources available on the Yanomami, a resource unavailable in English until recently. The Yanomami (known in American ethnog-

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raphy as the Yanomamo) live in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. They number from 12,000 to 15,000 people and live in approximately 125 villages, which is the world's largest population isolated from the penetration of Western or Asiatic national culture.

I met Lizot on his first trip to the Yanomami in 1968 while I was on a filming expedition with Napoleon Chagnon. Lizot, a student of Lévi-Strauss, had come bearing Chagnon's thesis. He arrived at a Catholic mission across the river from the Protestant mission where Chagnon had begun his research in 1964. When we first met I acted as translator until Chagnon and Lizot realized that their Spanish was better than my French. They agreed to live in different but adjoining areas, which meant they would be working with many of the same people. This overlap has reinforced the complementarity of their writings. Since 1968 Lizot has spent a major portion of his time living among the Yanomami. He speaks their language fluently and shares daily in the pleasures and discomforts of such a life. Perhaps it is this familiarity, as well as a tradition among French anthropologists to emphasize people's thoughts and conceptions of the universe, that challenged Lizot to present his material in its present form.

In 1978 Jean Rouch organized a unique ethnographic film conference in Paris in order to bring together filmmakers and anthropologists who had worked among the Yanomami. Films by Japanese, American, French, Italian, and British filmmakers were shown and discussed by anthropologists from different countries. It became clear that the Yanomami had been used as a mirror for presenting themes central to the foreigners – filmmakers and anthropologists alike – who had worked among them. These works, including some excellent studies by graduate students, reveal considerable differences in perspective. For example, Otto Zerries's work, begun in the early 1950s, represents the systematic tradition of German scholarship. Unfortunately for English speakers, his extremely rich and elegant works on the Yanomami, which contain detailed information on many aspects of their culture largely ignored by other ethnographers, are not available in translation; nor, because of the expense, are they likely to be made so. Napoleon Chagnon, on the other hand, is concerned with revealing Yanomami principles of social organization, particularly of kin, economic, and political relationships, and he overtly characterizes the Yanomami as aggressive and warlike. By contrast, Lizot refrains from any overt characterization and presents the fabric of daily life, the texture of experience, not the abstracted patterns. For example, whereas Chagnon emphasizes the structural bonds between brothers-in-law but leaves the reader to imagine how they actually behave toward one another, Lizot recounts numerous specific interactions between particular brothers-in-law and leaves it to his readers to abstract structural principles. What is exciting is that these two approaches complement one another.

With the publication in 1968 of Chagnon's *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*,

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which was written primarily for a student audience, and with the production of a series of thirty-seven ethnographic films by Chagnon and myself, the Yanomami have become one of the societies most frequently studied by American undergraduate students of anthropology. Like all ethnography, that of Chagnon reflects the interests of its author, so Lizot's is extremely valuable, giving students an alternative perspective in English. An in-depth ethnography of the Yanomami from a woman's viewpoint would provide another important perspective; unfortunately, one has yet to appear.

Any study of the Yanomami offers more than a glimpse of the oddities of another social system. Lizot's endeavor is to get the reader to appreciate the ethnocentrism of another set of viewpoints, those of his protagonists, and to encourage readers to extrapolate and reflect upon their own ethnocentric views and upon the human propensity to divide the world into "people like us" and "others." He writes in the Prologue: "The ethnic group is the central focus of the human universe; it is humanity par excellence, around which everything must necessarily converge or gravitate." Lizot's choice of a genre characteristic of fiction encourages us to relate what we have previously read. We often respond to fiction affectively and incorporate insights and ideas gleaned from the interactions of fictional characters into our own view of the world. This is even more likely if we believe that the author has managed to distill important aspects of reality, as Lizot seems to have done for the Yanomami. Chagnon, too, asks us to go beyond a simple examination of the Yanomami: He suggests that their society can be viewed as a model of the way human beings may have lived for thousands of years, a model that contrasts with the more romantic and widespread view of the noble primitive.

Perhaps the main attraction of the Yanomami is that their society can serve as an analogy for our own. For example, the taken-for-granted ways that some Yanomami men feel compelled to respond violently to any challenge or threat is not unlike the "macho" reactions of some men at many levels of our own society or, more importantly, the warlike stance between national governments. We have only to read a newspaper to know that we are easily as violent as the Yanomami and that violence is present at every level of our society, from the prevalence of incest among all economic groups to the development of ever-more-violent ways to destroy life on earth – ways rationalized as responses to the aggressive threats and expansionist tendencies of others.

Our world often seems too complex to understand; the individual may seem impotent. However, Lizot's account of a small society can provide some understanding of the human condition. Through his stories we can appreciate the strength with which love and attraction hold kin and affines together, as well as the ways in which antagonism toward another group can be used to strengthen social cohesion within one's own group. Lizot's accounts of the tensions created by incest and adultery, of the use of religion as

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an aggressive weapon against one's neighbors, and of the ways warfare can escalate can be taken as an analogy to some of our own problems. He reveals how locked we are within our own perceptions of what is possible and what is inappropriate at the human level and at the level of social relationships.

The Yanomami seem trapped by their ideology of aggression coupled with a weak political system that lacks the means to hold large numbers of people together. We Westerners – democratic and communist – with our highly developed social and political systems still behave as though we, like the Yanomami, require hostility toward other groups (in our case other nations) to maintain group cohesion and identity. By examining the Yanomami (among other groups whose lives are very different and yet not so different from our own) we should be encouraged to examine the choices we, in our society, really have, and their probable consequences.

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Timothy Asch

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Preface

to the English edition

The educated reader is apt to criticize social anthropology for its excessive abstruseness – and not always without good cause. Yet we must realize that every scientific discipline must express itself through its own vocabulary, its own rules and specific methodology. Admittedly, however, the human sciences in general have needlessly indulged in the excessive use of jargon. Perhaps it is time now to think of improving clarity without sacrificing rigor: Ethnology is often quite needlessly forbidding and opaque, increasingly restricted to specialists and discouraging to the uninitiated.

Such a situation is regrettable. At a time when the last primitives are in danger of extinction – some even say, somewhat prematurely, that there are no longer any primitive societies, and in Brazil the government has made provisions for the deportation and concentration of the Yanomami – an ethnologist should become, temporarily if need be, a spokesperson for and defender of the peoples among whom he or she sojourns; it should be the ethnologist's duty to educate and inform the members of his or her own society and to show in an accessible vocabulary what priceless values are being destroyed forever. Yes, "savages" live worthy lives – neither more nor less worthy than ours. To learn from "primitives" does not mean that we want to imitate them at all costs, nor that we want to go back to a style of life that perhaps we can no longer accept; it means learning respect and deriving lessons that could prove salutary at a time when our own civilization – *Civilization*, as we like to call it – is beset by difficulties that may ultimately be fatal.

This book was written in the field, in 1975, at my encampment of Tayari among the Indians; it is the result of six years of almost constantly sharing the life of the Yanomami Indians of Venezuela. It attempts to fulfill three related concerns: to describe meticulously the material, social, and religious life of an Amerindian society that is still entirely traditional, while reducing sociological interpretation to a minimum by suggesting rather than stating it; to speak of the Indians and only of them; to draw a multifaceted picture, as alive as possible, and rich in clearly expressed ethnographic information. I

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could of course have evoked my own experience of life among the Indians, but I wanted to speak of other things, for strictly personal reasons: I am not yet ready to speak of the terrible shock that this experience was for me, nor of the price I had to pay to become closely acquainted with a civilization so radically different from my own; perhaps I will never be able to speak of these experiences, for I would have to evoke so many harrowing things that touch my inner being. There is a wound that first must heal. Besides, introspective narratives by field researchers have rarely been carried out successfully, and it is as a reaction against excesses in that genre, particularly in France, that I wanted to recede into the background as completely as possible. Nevertheless, it is an obvious fact that I am the one who is observing, reporting, describing, organizing the narrative; the same events could have acquired an entirely different cast had they been observed and told by someone else. Objectivity is at best a relative matter.

It is because I shared for a long time the life of the Yanomami that I was able to write my narrative, in a way and to a degree, from a point of view *inside* their culture. The reader is thus a direct spectator whose opinions are grounded in his or her feelings. This kind of book naturally does without notes and references; it conveys only what I have seen and heard, what was told to me, and what I inquired about. During such a long stay among them, I was able to establish bonds of friendship with these men and women, and they confided in me; I was a go-between in most of the love stories I set down, and sometimes I was a witness. All the ethnographic details, all the beliefs I report have been carefully verified, and even now, four years after writing the book, I find nothing of any importance to change. I was a direct witness to most of the incidents I relate; the conversations, the recollections, the personal secrets, I set down from memory soon after hearing them, or I wrote them down on the spot, or else I tape-recorded them, as in the case of the shaman's initiation and the dreams and dialogues that follow. I did not correct or modify the sometimes personal or passionate interpretations of the protagonists: The way of presenting an incident or a story and of arranging it according to one's fancy is one form of ethnographic reality. Moreover, I purposely refrained from eliminating through some literary device or other the breaks that from time to time disturb the continuity of the narrative; these sequences of life can, without any disadvantage to the reader, give the impression of having been caught by the prying and necessarily selective eye of a camera, a situation that corresponds to the position of any observer, who never receives but an imperfect picture of communal life.

I would like my book to help revise the exaggerated representation that has been given of Yanomami violence. The Yanomami are warriors; they can be brutal and cruel, but they can also be delicate, sensitive, and loving. Violence is only sporadic; it never dominates social life for any length of time, and long peaceful moments can separate two explosions. When one is

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acquainted with the societies of the North American plains or the societies of the Chaco in South America, one cannot say that Yanomami culture is organized around warfare. They are neither good nor evil savages: These Indians are human beings.

Tayari

Jacques Lizot