ENGAGING IN POLITICS: YANOMAMI STRATEGIES IN THE FACE OF VENEZUELA'S NATIONAL FRONTIER EXPANSION

by

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DEDICATION

Para aquellos que ya partieron de terra firme y tal vez se encuentren jugando con los hekura del bosque

For those who have already departed from terra firme and are perhaps playing with the hekura of the forest

In memoriam

A mis siempre recordados padres
Blanca Graciela (Chela) Arias de Caballero
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A mi “segunda” mamá
Pastorita Chirinos

A dos grandes y apreciados maestros
Timothy Asch
Daniel Nugent
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores from an historical and political perspective the rapid engagement and incorporation of the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco as citizens into the Venezuelan national dynamics. It accounts for the Yanomami’s multiple adaptive responses by which they reconcile cultural differences between their habitual ways of life and the new political structures of national society. Specifically, the major concern is to explore the influences on political organization, ethnic identities, and social relationships emerging from the linkage and interaction between the nation-state’s structures and the Alto Orinoco Yanomami. The gradual participation of Yanomami men and women in national political institutions such as the Alto Orinoco Municipality, political parties, and electoral processes has led them to develop different strategies of accommodation to these novel governmental entities.

This study examines how the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco, Amazonas State, Venezuela, react to the expansion of the national political structures through diverse strategies of accommodation and negotiation. These strategies refer to the Yanomami’s adaptive and selective responses to intercultural experiences undergone because of external agents. These indigenous responses have not just implied collective forms of organization or general consensus in decision-making among community members, but also random and individual actions asserted in order to meet their personal needs and desires within a wider context of the Venezuelan national society. By examining these actions, I analyze from an historical approach the cultural encounters and the cultural
resilience displayed by those Yanomami who have lived under the influence of missionaries, criollo groups, and other indigenous peoples.

The ultimate purpose is to reveal how Yanomami past and present behaviors challenge the assumptions that “relatively isolated” indigenous peoples are merely passive receivers of assimilation processes provoked by national expansion. On the contrary, they have been very active choosing their means of adaptation to coping with the national frontier expansion.
CHAPTER 1
MAKING POLITICS. AN INTRODUCTION

I did not understand very well how politics worked. What was politics about? I did not know about that matter before. A group of indigenes told me once that they were going to nominate me as a “political representative” and I said yes; I thought they were just going to give me a job (carguito) but they didn’t. I did not understand what being a politician means.
(Yanomami leader from Mavaca, 1999)

Framing the problem

A small group of Yanomami men from different villages met in Shakita-theri, one of the shapono settled in the Mavaca area on the Orinoco River. This group of young bilingual leaders had come together to discuss politics, though the subject was not Yanomami internal political issues traditionally related to intra-village relationships, conflicts, alliances among groups, or settlement fissioning. These men were not “doing” Yanomami politics, so to speak. They were making decisions on how to approach and involve themselves in “real politics,” as they say, and be part of the politics of the napê (outsiders).1 “We really should learn about this matter of politics,” they eloquently stated. “We want to do politics as napê do, because it will be really good for us.”

They were arguing, sometimes with amusing comments, about the advantages of joining one or another political party, the benefits to those Yanomami who might work in

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1 For the Yanomami, napê refers to all non-Yanomami people, including other indigenous peoples, criollo and “white” people. It means outsider or foreign, enemy, and by extension sub-human. Napê is the contrary of Yanomami, which means human being.
the Alto Orinoco Municipality and receive salaries, and their participation in electoral processes. They were also discussing the terms in which they were going to write letters to request goods and services from the local mayor, the regional government, and even the president of Venezuela. Furthermore, they were analyzing the organization and strategies employed by other indigenous peoples in order to obtain new economic resources and political positions in other municipalities of the Amazonas State.

It was June of 1998, and I was making a short visit to Yanomami territory in the Alto Orinoco, shaping the details for research that I was planning to carry out a year later. Throughout this informal meeting with the Yanomami that lasted a whole morning, three comments strongly caught my attention. First, one of leaders emphatically said, “In the near future we want Yanomami candidates to rule the Alto Orinoco Municipality; we don’t want candidates from any other indigenous groups to control our county.” A second statement that I also remember clearly was, “We should not try to explain napé politics (outside politics) to the elders. They would not understand; they don’t know anything about politics.” Third, an impish comment came from one well-known leader who said, “I will work with one political party, but somebody else should work with other political parties, so if I lose, some other member of our group will win and all of us will take advantage of that.”

Following indigenous representatives in Venezuela who commonly designate themselves as indigenous people(s), indigenous group(s), and indigena(s), which I will translate here as indigene(s), I will employ the same terminology to name them. These denominations have been as well officially recognized in the national constitution and other official documents. The term “Indian,” although is used by some indigenous representatives, I will employ only for quoting historical, legal, and ethnographic texts or in a critical sense.
This meeting, in conjunction with other related events, led me to think about the cultural transformations that the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco, Amazonas State were and are confronting due to the expansion of the nation-state political institutions. Considering these ongoing processes of articulation with the national society, three general questions came to my mind. First, to what extent does the current Venezuelan State influence Yanomami groups, comparing those villages right next to the mission and criollo settlements vis-à-vis other indigenous groups of the Amazonas State? Second, how have colonial and post-colonial policies affected Yanomami ways of life? Third, what kind of responses such as acceptance, challenge, or rejection do the Yanomami generate in relation to the national expansion?

These issues, later rephrased advantageously as research questions, are the main areas discussed in this dissertation. Thus, this thesis explores to what extent the rapid engagement and incorporation of the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco as Venezuelan citizens is producing multiple adaptive responses by which they reconcile cultural differences between their habitual ways of life and the new political structures of national society. Specifically, the major concern is to examine the influences on political organization, ethnic identities, and social relationships issuing from the linkage and interaction between the nation-state's structures and the Alto Orinoco Yanomami. The gradual participation of Yanomami men and women in national political issues has led them to develop different responses to these novel governmental entities. These indigenous responses not always have implied collective forms of organization or general consensus in the decision-making among the community members, but sometimes also
random and individual actions asserted in order to meet their personal needs and desires within a wider context of the Venezuelan national society.

My research, then, will determine how the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco, Amazonas State, Venezuela, react to the expansion of the national political structures through diverse strategies of accommodation and negotiation. These strategies refer to the Yanomami adaptive and selective responses to intercultural experiences with the outside world. By examining these actions, I assess historically the cultural encounters and the cultural resilience displayed by Yanomami who have lived under the influence of missionaries, criollo groups, and other indigenous groups. The ultimate goal is to reveal how Yanomami past and present responses and strategies challenge the assumptions that “relatively isolated” indigenous people are merely passive receivers of assimilation processes provoked by national expansion.

With this in mind, I ponder why the Yanomami are so particularly attracted to the national political structures when the impact of these institutions and policies might cause irreversible cultural transformations in their everyday ways of life. From an historical and ethnographic point of view, it is also pertinent to assess which elements and behavioral patterns they have incorporated or rejected from the Venezuelan socio-cultural milieu since the first encounters with the outside world.

It was quite intriguing to observe that the Yanomami, considered until recently as one of the “relatively less acculturated” indigenous groups in South America in the anthropological literature (Ramos 1995, Ferguson 1995, Chagnon 1997, Lizot 1988), were asking for and demanding an active participation in local, regional, and national
politics of Venezuela. However, these Yanomami responses would not be so surprising if we understood the nature of policies and actions carried out by the national governments in their territory in the recent years. The creation of the Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve and the Parima-Tapirapecó National Park in Yanomami land in 1991, as well as the political-territorial division of the Amazonas State in 1992 with the subsequent establishment of the Alto Orinoco Municipality in 1994, marked the official entrance of this indigenous group into the national-political domains. In fact, the increasingly direct and sustained interaction with the napê (outsider) people and institutions had already begun since the 1950s with the early presence of Protestant and Catholic missionaries in the Alto Orinoco, some scientific expeditions, and a few scattered projects conducted during the 1970s and 1980s through the Venezuelan national development program called “La Conquista del Sur.”

The ongoing expansion of the national social-political structures among the Yanomami in Venezuela is therefore examined through the recent impact of the local Alto Orinoco Municipality, the regional Amazonas government, and the national policies carried out by governmental institutions including the changes in indigenista (indigenist) policies fostered by the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías (first time elected in 1998). In addition to these bureaucratic structures, the influence of national political parties, the official and non-official commissions on indigenous rights, and programs of non-governmental organizations have promoted a rapid engagement of the Yanomami in local, regional, and national political processes. Moreover, the new 1999 Venezuelan constitution with its articles on indigenous populations subscribes to the official
involvement of the indigenes into the national sphere regarding their rights on land, education, self-determination, and health. All of these national structures in conjunction have strongly influenced the Yanomami of the Venezuelan Amazon in the last decade.

In order to contextualize these social phenomena, I place the interplay between these indigenous people and the Venezuela national society in a historical and political frame of cultural encounters, forms of representation, and the intercultural relationships. The incorporation of the Yanomami into the national cultural order is not an out-of-the-blue incident; instead it is the outcome of a gradual process of the national frontier expansion promoted historically by several external agents such as explorers, governmental personnel, missionaries, scientists, miners, and political parties, among others. Yanomami reactions to these foreign elements are assessed through their gradual engagement and participation in the national structures that are shaping their social and political organization. How these “out-of-the-way” people have employed certain strategies for coping with state institutions at the national, regional, and local levels constitute the core of this work.

Taking into consideration the many ways by which the Yanomami have been historically and ethnographically represented, my research suggests four areas of interest relating to the political processes currently experienced by these Amazonian indigenes. First, what are the dominant practices exercised by Venezuelan State institutions and to what extent do these structures co-opt and integrate the Yanomami into the national system? Second, what are the explicit Yanomami responses and accommodation strategies, individual and collective, to those national political structures and national
ideologies? Third, how is Yanomami participation in the municipal, regional, and national contexts shaping and transforming their political organization, ethnic identities, and gender relations? Fourth, to what degree do younger Yanomami generations promote the incorporation of national and _criollo_ models into their ways of life vis-à-vis the elder groups?

Through the discussion of these questions within a historical-ethnographic frame, the research assumptions that I examine throughout the dissertation foresee the following:

1. With the intervention of the national political structures, those Yanomami settled next to the _criollo_ and missionary posts are facing the highest degree of incorporation into Venezuelan society.

2. The Yanomami responses to these cultural changes are seen not only in Yanomami terms (meaning according to their habitual cultural order) but also by their adaptation of different _criollo_ models in order to achieve their personal and collective goals.

3. The gap between the formerly monolingual elders and the young bilingual generation, which promotes cultural transformation, also results in new social and political inequalities within and among the communities.

4. The Yanomami responses contest the common assumptions that "relatively less acculturated" indigenous groups are merely passive recipients of assimilation processes. In spite of the changes experienced due to the expansion of the national political structures in their territory, the Yanomami are not submissive victims of these
transformative experiences, but rather active individuals capable of striving for their rights and interests both as indigenous people and as Venezuelan citizens.

The Yanomami, an ethnographic overview

The anthropological literature describes the Yanomami as a semi-nomadic (or semi-sedentary) society that dwells in the tropical rain forest of the Amazon. They live on both sides of the border between Venezuela and Brazil in lowland areas along the Orinoco River and Rio Branco basins and in the highland of the Parima Mountains. Their economic subsistence practices include horticulture predominantly of plantain and root crops, hunting, fishing, and gathering activities. The villages called *shapono* are fairly autonomous and independent entities; they are relatively small and might hold from 20 to more than 300 Yanomami with an average of 65 inhabitants per *shapono* (Venezuela, OCEI 1993). Their social organization is based on strong kinship ties that include intervillage marriages; and individuals are classified mainly by patrilineal descendant categories. They regularly perform shamanic practices for healing and religious purposes, and are considered a relatively egalitarian society in terms of their political organization and economic autonomy.

This very brief ethnographic characterization of the Yanomami groups, which may be found in many text books, has the simple purpose of presenting some common cultural patterns that can be distinguished in any of the four linguistic sub-groups that make up the whole ethnic group. However, as I argue later, in spite of these shared cultural similarities, there are particular cultural features of each Yanomami sub-group
that are related to their location, the outside influence, their socio-historical processes, and the different ethos articulated according to their linguistic and social distinctiveness.

The Yanomami linguistic family has been considered an independent language group without any type of affiliation to the rest of the Amazonian languages. The Yanomami ethnic group\(^3\) is made up of four linguistic sub-groups: Sanemá (Sanumá), Ninam (Yanam)\(^4\), Yanomam, and Yanomami (Migliazza 1972) (Figure 1). This last subgroup is the largest of the four and the focus of the present study. They dwell in the Alto Orinoco area in the southeast corner of the Amazonas State, Venezuela, between the Cuntinamo-Matacuni-Padamo-Ocama River basins, the Orinoco-Mavaca-Siapa River basins and its watersheds, as well as in the Parima, Unturán and Tapirapecó Mountains range. The Yanomami is the largest indigenous group of the Amazonas State in Venezuela. They represent 30 percent of the indigenous population that live in this regional entity and occupy approximately 20 percent of this territory.

In the last few years, for both practical and political reasons, the “Yanomami” name has been used as a generic term identifying the complete linguistic group.\(^5\) In the past, some writers have also used “Yanomama” or “Yanoama” to label the ethnic group

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\(^3\) The reader should be aware of the differences between the similar-looking spellings of the terms Yanomami (the ethnic group as a whole) and Yanomami (the linguistic subgroup).

\(^4\) According to Migliazza (1980), the Ninam are subdivided into three dialectical groups: the northern Ninam or Xiliana (Shiliana), the central Ninam or Xilixana (Shilishana), and the southern Ninam.

\(^5\) As Ramos points out, “The word Yanomami is a blanket term we use to refer the language family as a whole” (1995:21). Thus, in the academia as well as in the public domain, “Yanomami” is the term that has been standardized to identify any of the linguistic subgroups.
Figure 1
Yanomami Linguistic Groups

Source: Roberto Lizarralde. In: Lizot 1988
as a whole (Migliazza 1980, Lizot 1988) while the term Yanomami [Yanomami] has been used to identify the linguistic subgroup that live only in the Venezuelan Amazon.⁶

The current Yanomami population in both countries is estimated at 25,000 people. In Brazil, Ramos (1995) estimated the Brazilian Yanomami to number slightly less than 10,000 individuals. These people live in an area of 94,000 square kilometers in the States of Roraima and Amazonas (Ramos 1993). In Venezuela according to the last indigenous census of 1992, there were 15,193 Yanomami: 1,977 Sanemá living in the Bolívar State and 13,216 Yanomami in the Amazonas State (Venezuela, OCEI 1993).⁷ This last group holds an area of approximately 45,000 square kilometers that constitute the current area of the Parima-Tapirapecó National Park in the Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve, Amazonas State (Figure 2).

Throughout history several names have been used to identify the Yanomami. These multiple denominations have caused confusion and misunderstanding regarding the location of the subgroups. The most common terms used in the historical and ethnographic accounts have been White Guahibas, Waica (Waika, Guaica, Aiká), Guajaribo (Guaharibo), Xiriana (Shiriana), Kirischana, Shirishana, Yanomamö (Yanomamo), Yanoama (Yanoáma) and Yanomami, among others. At different moments

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⁶ Because of the orthographic similarity between Yanomami, the whole ethnic group, and Yanomami, the linguistic subgroup (with the "i" umlaut [i]), I will specify whether I am referring to the whole language family or to the linguistic sub-group located in the Venezuelan Amazon.

⁷ This number of 13,216 Yanomami was an estimation of the 1992 Census. The reality is that only a little over half of the Yanomami of the Venezuelan Amazon were really counted. The rest of the population was estimated due to the logistic difficulties in reaching the Siapa and Matacuni areas and of gathering census data in each of the villages located there.
Figure 2
National Parks in the Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve, Amazonas State
in the course of history each of these designations has been preferred over the others by the explorers and ethnographers who have ventured into the Alto Orinoco.

Other denominations that are still in use by the Yanomami themselves such as shamathari, waika, barafiri (parahiri), and shiithari (shitari) describe only referential and regional classifications. By no means do these terms indicate ethnic self-denominations (Lizot 1974). However, the Yanomami employ these names as positional categories to identify other Yanomami communities and people located away from their centered social-political space. Due to the scarce and dispersed information on Yanomami culture and language, it was only after the middle of the twentieth century that the name Yanomami began to be used by missionaries and later by ethnographers.

The complexity and diversity of the whole Yanomami group can only be understood through broad and long-term ethnographic research among a specific linguistic subgroup. In fact, within this subgroup it is essential to discern geographical, ecological, social, and historical influences that generate variations in traditional patterns and cultural adaptations to the nation-state structures. The large amount of ethnographic literature produced concerning the whole Yanomami linguistic group is indicative of that complexity and cultural differences. The ethnographic works have concentrated on different levels of the Yanomami culture explaining their ways of life, highlighting their subsistence patterns and economic activities, warfare, social and political organization, linguistics, demography, shamanic and healing practices, and mythology.8

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8 Among some relevant references that address these issues, see the following: for Yanomama subsistence patterns and economic activities see Chagnon 1974; Lizot 1977; Chagnon and Hames 1980; Good 1995; Colchester 1984, 1991. For warfare see Chagnon 1968, 1983; Harris 1977, 1984; Ferguson 1995; Lizot 1988. For social and political organization see Ramos 1972, 1995; Albert 1985; Chagnon 1983;
Nevertheless, in the last two decades due to the internal political, economic, and social dynamics of the Brazilian and Venezuelan nation-states, the Yanomami have been facing rapid and dramatic cultural changes that are affecting them physically and culturally. These current processes of cultural transformation require a critical assessment from an ethnographic and theoretical perspective as well as from the Yanomami’s own perspectives.

In Brazil, the Yanomami have been exposed to drastic and devastating changes because of the national development programs that began in the 1970s and especially with the outbreak of the gold rush during the 1980s. For the Brazilian Yanomami, the impact of the state and of the national society has been particularly unfortunate. First, the presence of hundreds of workers employed in the construction of the North Perimeter highway (Perimetral Norte) across the northern Amazon between 1973-1976 caused repeated and devastating epidemics of flu, tuberculosis, and measles. Social degradation, diseases, and persistent conflicts with Brazilians workers became the common scenarios. Second, the outbreak of the gold rush at the end of the 1970s and during 1980s dramatically affected the lives of these indigenes. Again, the proliferation of epidemic diseases and the ruthless acts of violence carried out by the gold miners (the notorious garimpeiros) changed dramatically the condition of this indigenous society. These two episodes are regarded as having been extremely traumatic periods for the Yanomami in Brazil (Ramos 1995, Rabben 1998, Albert 1992, Sponsel 1995, Peters 1998).

Lizot 1988; Melancon 1982; Saffirio 1985; and for linguistics and mythology see Migliazza 1972; Lizot 1975a, 1975b, 1989.
In comparison to the Brazilian situation, in Venezuela the Yanomami have experienced less severe impact from the State political and economic expansion. Nevertheless, the Yanomami in Venezuela have also undergone progressive cultural transformations due to the State intervention, particularly since the end of the 1980s and as a result of other external agents such as the Protestant and Catholic missions settled in their territories since the 1950s. With the outbreak of the gold rush in Brazil, many garimpeiros began to cross the international border, penetrating Yanomami Venezuelan territory. Because of these incursions of the miners by the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, military posts were built in Platanal, Ocamo, and Parima B, and La Esmeralda.

Aside from the impact of missionaries, military posts, the incursion of miners, and other external agents in the last thirty years, the Yanomami have also faced the periodic penetration of tourists, scientists, and journalists. The impact of these external agents has been the center of recent debates on ethical issues in anthropology and other disciplines, and was denounced in the controversial book *Darkness in El Dorado. How scientists and journalists devastated the Amazon* (Tierney 2000). In spite of the cultural transformations spawned by these outsiders, I believe that the creation of the Alto Orinoco Municipality and the politicization of this indigenous region have accelerated more than any other foreign phenomenon the cultural change processes among the Yanomami of the Venezuelan Amazon.

The establishment of the municipality in the Alto Orinoco region is a recent event in comparison to the impact of the missionaries and other state institutions, and there are few references that adequately address the current situation of the Yanomami within a
broader regional and national context in Venezuela. In this sense, as a consequence of the increasing national frontier expansion, there is a need to explore comparatively not only the different levels of cultural transformation but also the intercultural processes and types of negotiation being established between the Yanomami and the national institutions.

This work also proposes to emphasize the Yanomami's contemporaneous condition, considering them as coeval social actors (Fabian 1983) within the larger national framework. The Yanomami have filled a central place in the modes of representation of the Amazonian peoples. The image of "pristine Indians" who live in a harmonious relationship with nature has been reproduced in numerous articles, books, and films presenting them as an exotic symbol of a supposed cultural purity. This image has anchored them in a timeless and monolithic perspective that conceals the Yanomami present-day existence and neglects their actions and rejoinders in broader national and transnational arenas. This type of ethnographic representation has also reified the Yanomami as inevitably passive victims, whereby in the best of cases they end up portrayed in the media and academic circles as an "endangered" and inert people. These images also neglect the consideration of Yanomami's actions and responses as strategizing people.

Furthermore, it would be inappropriate to think that the current situation of the Yanomami is homogeneous or that their degrees and types of assimilation, autonomy, and responses are similar throughout the whole ethnic group. This generalization should be discarded once and for all. There are many important reasons for challenging this
totalizing perception. First, the Yanomami live in the frontier between Brazil and Venezuela, and depending on their location they are subjected to each country’s own national policies that legally control the indigenous populations and the environment where they live. Second, even in the same country, Brazil or Venezuela, the processes of incorporation vary according to the nature of the relationship with the external agents, the location of the Yanomami villages with respect to the criollo settlements, and the development programs carried out by the two nation-states in indigenous territories. These variables determine the way in which the Yanomami shape and articulate their forms of social and political organization with the national society and how they redefine their ethnic and national identities.

A close up of the inquiry

After that meeting held in the village of Shakita, this group of young leaders went down the river to join another group of Yanomami to discuss possible actions regarding local and regional elections and the acquisition of manufactured goods. In this village called Hatakoa, they complained about the unclear role played by the major and the five councilmen (concejales) of the Alto Orinoco Jurisdiction (alcaldía). All members of this municipality were indigenes, and only one of them was Yanomami at that time (1998). The people from Shakita and Hatakoa were unhappy with the performance of the mayor and his team, and above all very disappointed with the work of the Yanomami concejal (councilman), for several reasons, as I discuss in Chapter 5. While they drank yucuta (crude manioc flour with water) in one of the sections of the shapono, the discussion
turned to other issues. A representative from the village of Koparima pointed out the need to consider other options besides the alcaldía to obtain resources and services. One of these alternatives was the regional headquarters of the national political parties:

How can we join one or another political party? Which of them are willing to give us more manufactured goods (*matohi*)? When I was in Ayacucho, I saw members from Convergencia, Acción Democrática, Copei, and ORA parties giving paychecks to many people. They will promise outboard motors to all of us. I saw the outboard motors there. They are all Yamaha 40 Enduro.

A young leader from Shakita replied:

I am going to meet pretty soon people from the AD party; all of them are the same blood, the same skin, and they are like brothers. You know guys, the priests at the mission have something called Internet, and I heard that they send messages with that thing; we can ask the priests to send messages to Ayacucho and ask about those outboard motors, don’t you think?” “Hortensia, how does the Internet work, could you explain it to us...?”

I was astonished with the whole political discussion and the diverse information managed by them. By that time (1998) many Yanomami had been exposed to the *napê* world in many ways. Some of them had stayed in Puerto Ayacucho and in Caracas several times and a very few of them had been taken by researchers and missionaries to visit the United States and even Europe. Many of them know how to use short-wave radios, repair outboard motors, and run the craft cooperative in their *shapono* (village). Those Yanomami that have attended the intercultural bilingual school speak fairly good Spanish and know how to read and write in Spanish as well as in Yanomami. Others had already participated in conferences regarding land demarcation issues, and in health and bilingual education workshops inside and outside their territory. But dealing and negotiating with political parties and talking about the Internet definitely took me by surprise.
This meeting, held in the village of Hatakoa, was mainly organized by and for bilingual male leaders from different villages. Meetings like this constitute one of the most frequent settings in which the Yanomami argue about political strategies to be applied in relation to the outside world, the napé world. These strategies interplay at the same time with the patronizing offering, distribution, and allocation of economic resources, services, and commodities given by national political entities such as the municipality and political parties, which together determine the Yanomami’s cultural adjustment and incorporation into the national system.

There were three other interesting issues that came up in that meeting at Hatakoa. First was their clear desire to participate in the local and regional elections. Secondly was the need to obtain, by members of different Yanomami villages, of Venezuelan identification cards, an official prerequisite for voting in any election. The third related to this last issue and arose when one of the men from Hatakoa stated, “Our women should also obtain identification cards so we can count on their votes for elections.” Thus, a gender issue was highlighted in this kind of political meeting that was dominated by bilingual men. Although the pattern of male domination in Yanomami society is maintained, the idea of incorporating women in larger political processes hitherto confined to men sets up unusual criteria in which gender tropes were becoming part of the general political actions and discourses. The Yanomami have therefore rapidly engaged in the last few years in political activities such as voting in regional elections, holding political positions at the local county level, participating in intra and inter-ethnic
meetings, and redefining gender relations as a result of their need to participate in national institutions.

However, these current processes of cultural engagement with the national political structures constitute an extension of previous and ongoing intercultural relationships established with the Catholic and Protestant missions, health institutions, governmental institutions, and other external organizations. Therefore, it is necessary to place the recent Yanomami incorporation to national politics within a historical political frame of the Venezuelan State formation. At the same time, it is essential to differentiate between earlier forms of interaction with napë people and institutions and the present encounters with governmental structures. Although in both cases the experiences with the outside world have transformed them culturally, and in both cases, these changes had relatively speaking “Yanomami endorsement,” I believe there are particular differences between their associations with national political structures vis-à-vis the civil and religious institutions. These diverse responses have relied, first, on the type of relationship (continuous or transitory) established with the governmental personnel of each national institution and criollo groups; and second on the scope of the Yanomami decision making that fluctuates from individual to village-centered that entails more collective point of views.

Besides the nature of the relationships with external agents and community decisions among members of diverse villages, there are also spatial and temporal dimensions that contribute with the understanding of Yanomami past relationships with national institutions in comparison to their current affiliations with political structures.
For spatial and temporal dimensions, I refer to the variables of *where* and *when* Yanomami intercultural relations have occurred with these diverse foreign structures within an historical continuum.

In order to identify and contrast the current Yanomami strategies of accommodation to the national frontier expansion, I examine three main issues that I have already suggested in the course of these first introductory pages. First, I explore their political organization as it has developed through the emergence of new political leaders who are involved with the structure of the municipality and with national political parties. A comparison of the degrees of their participation at the municipal level and the type of affiliation with the national political parties reveals different viewpoints that vary according to: a) individuals and family groups who may or may not agree with the policies of the municipality and political parties; b) the villages themselves, acting as collective groups that follow one or another political tendency represented by those "new leaders"; and c) the local cooperative SUYAO (*Shaponos Unidos Yanomami Alto Orinoco*) made up of members of different villages.

In the first stages of my dissertation fieldwork, I presumed that the new forms of Yanomami political alliances affiliated with national political parties do not necessarily correspond to their local patterns of fusion and fission based on kinship relationship. I thought that this group of Yanomami was insisting on adopting *criollo* models, as they frequently stated. I was wrong in part because they constantly used kinship ties and long-established relations with other villages to engage in politics. On the other hand, I confirmed that their affiliations to political parties were changeable, inconstant, and
without any kind of fidelity to those political institutions. When it is a matter of dealing with outside national institutions it seems that they utilize crosscutting stances that reflect trial and errors processes until they find the way to satisfy their personal and collective needs.

Secondly, I analyze the transformations of Yanomami gender roles in a society that has been characterized by asymmetric gender relationships. The new scenario is that men are engaging increasingly in regional and national politics, while women are participating more extensively in activities at the bilingual school and at the craft cooperative, activities that used to be carried out by men before the establishment of the Alto Orinoco Municipality. The participation in local and regional politics is producing changes in Yanomami gender roles in which women are carrying out new activities related to the criollo world. A legitimate concern in this case would be to assess if these new opportunities for women, in non-Yanomami contexts, provide as well sharing of information of the outside milieu, as is the case for the men who have constant access to political meetings and activities.

I believe that these alterations in gender roles are in fact modifying local gender ideologies in which male domination has mainly prevailed (Shapiro 1972, Ramos 1979). Yanomami gender relations are revealed in a conjunctural process where cultural transformations are taking place due to the expansion of the Venezuelan national institutions such as the Alto Orinoco Municipality. Combining ethnographic descriptions with individual narratives, I explore Yanomami current gender relations shaped by the
adaptation of napê models that allows women to participate in national elections and to play new roles at the school and the craft cooperative.

Finally, I investigate Yanomami ethnic identities, which are being transformed and redefined because of the socio-political impact of regional and national institutions and outside agents. This indigenous group is experiencing an ethnic awareness of who they are vis-à-vis the rest of the national society including other indigenes of the Amazonas State who are also dealing with the municipal structures. With this, I am not suggesting that they were not previously aware of the cultural differences with respect to other people. What I propose is that as a consequence of the municipality and the national expansion, they are setting up ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969) and, at the same time, ethnic alliances with other indigenous groups that in some cases might transcend the traditional interethnic systems and symmetric/asymmetric relationships established among indigenous peoples (cf. Cardoso de Oliveira 1964, Ramos 1980).

The rise of this indigenous ethnic consciousness as a result of their ever-increasing incorporation into the nation-states is described as “becoming Indian,” (Abercrombie 1991, Jackson 1991, 1995) and will be analyzed through the identity politics framework (Hale 1997, Schiller 1997). Identity politics refers to the actions and local experiences that contest totalizing identity categories “that tend to subsume, erase, or suppress” social and cultural particularities (Hale 1997:568). Due to the nature of the intercultural relations established between the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco and mainstream society, it would appear hasty and perhaps naive to think that they have constituted well-organized forms of resistance that challenge the unified notions of the
Venezuelan national project. However, they have certainly developed particular
responses questioning issues on citizenship, political participation, national constitution,
municipality, and health and schooling systems that have attempted to homogenize their
cultural differences.

In this case, the assertion of Yanomami identity politics reveals a wide gamut of
experiences that do not necessarily denote resistance or struggle (at least in the
Venezuelan case) towards the national structures but negotiation, deception, and
agreement between the parts. This includes the many ways they negotiate and link their
ethnic identities with regional and national icons as a strategy to gain access to the
resources offered by national institutions such as the municipality and the National
Guard. It is clear that all of these intercultural experiences with the outside world have
guided them to rethink and be aware of their ethnic differences. The question here is how
these indigenes takes advantage or not of their Yanomaminess, and by extension of their
Indianness as a general category, to fulfill their local needs and expectations. The
emergence of these forms of interethnic relations leads me to examine the many ways the
Yanomami configure their identities in settings such as the discussion of the national
constitution, at political meetings in their villages and outside their territory, and in the
implementation of the National Guard's program called Casiquiare 2000. Through these
examples, I intend to analyze the semantics of the state symbols such as the national flag,
the military forces, and the identification cards, among others, in the constitution of novel
national identities and in the rise of a supposed ethnic consciousness.
Visualizing historical and conceptual frames

The relationship between agents of the nation-states and indigenous peoples in Latin America is a key analytical frame in the understanding of the cultural continuity or discontinuity of these native populations. In order to recognize the degrees of assimilation, resistance, and incorporation of indigenous groups into the national contexts it is necessary to consider historically and ethnographically the transforming effects of the colonial expansion of the European states and the impact of post-colonial or post-independent national systems.

The situations of contacts are complex historical processes in which the political, ideological, and economic penetration of the colonial and post-colonial systems has been critically assessed. From an anthropological historical perspective, scholars suggest that “the colonial encounter” (Asad 1973) or the “colonial situation” (Balandier 1951, Cohn 1990) should be placed within the power relationships established therein by dominant and dominated groups. The deconstruction of “official” colonial discourses has allowed considering and exalting the silenced voices of the dominated subjects contesting the misrepresentations of colonial encounters and emancipating the “vision of the vanquished” (León Portilla 1989, Wachel 1977).

On the other hand, post-colonial theories (Said 1978, Bhabha 1994, Spivak 1988) analyze the cultural encounter not only in terms of the mechanism of domination and oppression but also in terms of the responses and actions of the “colonized subjects” from a more pragmatic approach. They propose that the colonized subjects contribute as well
in the configuration of identities, articulating with the colonizers a hybrid or mixture experience within the “contact zone.”

The situation of contact or the “phenomenon of contact zone” (Pratt 1992) is therefore not a concluded process once different cultural groups interact and one of them tries to control and dominate the other. It is an historical process that intertwines different interpretations and meanings from both sides, from the dominant groups and from the subaltern peoples, in which new spaces of interaction and “transcultural forms” emerge through various modes of representation and cultural practices.

Simultaneously, anthropologists and historians have developed conceptual interpretations and social typologies in order to account for these situations of contact examining the degrees and modes of cultural transformation of indigenous peoples. From an historical perspective, Bitterlli (1982) argues that four types of cultural encounters between Europe and overseas areas (the Americas) can describe the colonization process up to the end of the eighteenth century: cultural friction, cultural contact, cultural clash, and cultural interweaving or assimilation.

From an anthropological view, Ribeiro (1968, 1970) argues that the assimilation processes of the indigenous peoples in Brazil consist of five stages of cultural relationship: isolation, intermittent contact, permanent contact, integration, and extinction. In a wider sense, Santos Granero (1996) analyzes the cultural transformation of indigenous groups of the Amazon basin combining historical and ethnographic categories. He states that three types of waves of changes can distinguish the effects of cultural contact: the colonial encounter, the capitalist expansion, and the globalization
processes. This author proposes to analyze the particular effects of each of these "waves of changes" through the demographic, territorial, economic, political, cultural, and identity dimensions of each Amazonian peoples group. In spite of the fact that the missionary expansion began with the colonial encounter, missionization has continued to spread among indigenous peoples until recent times. In some cases, the missionary expansion should be considered as an additional wave of change due to its particular impact to certain populations such as the Yanomami.

Besides the critical assessment on cultural contacts among different societies and the transformative influences of dominant systems considered by the first two approaches of cultural encounters, this last proposal also stresses the local adaptations and indigenous perceptions to these new models at the level of daily life. These processes of cultural resilience and interethnic contacts are the key sources in which encounters, linkages, and relationships between the Yanomami and the outsiders are examined historically and ethnographically.

The intercultural perspective

The intercultural experience between the Yanomami and the outside world is the analytical stand where social transformations and processes of cultural engagements take place. In this sense, the notion of cultural change (transformation, shift, or clash) within a historical-political frame is particularly relevant in the development of this work. However, the cultural change processes are not understood here as merely acculturation forms experienced by the so-called “culturally uncontaminated people” or the result of
assimilation practices coming exclusively from the state apparatus. I agree with the early questioning made by Ortiz (1978 [1940]) and later by Cardoso de Oliveira (1964) who asserted that “acculturation theory” did not consider the actions of the living indigenous populations. More recently, other scholars have pointed out that studies on acculturation and social change simply have neglected the processes of interaction among societies asserting that those were unimpressive terms used to depict “amorphous processes” (Viveiros de Castro and Carneiro da Cunha 1993).

Taking into account these asserted questionings, I instead understand the cultural change processes as an expression of intercultural forms and relationships between the indigenous groups and the whole national society with its different institutions, ideologies, and social groups. The intercultural relationship is a phenomenon generated from and within local groups considering national and transnational contexts. It is not just a cause-effect relationship established between powerful external agents and the so-called traditional, minority, marginal, subaltern, or isolated peoples who were passively dispossessed of their cultural capital due to the colonial and state expansion.

The intercultural contacts are by all means a dynamic process that considers the actions and forms of contestation of culturally distinct groups such as the indigenous peoples within larger socio-political systems. These forms of performing or initiating actions in engaging or contesting state power are displayed while people assert their agency through the use of their languages, in the articulation of social and religious systems, the spatial redefinitions in the use and appropriation of their territories, and the combination of different political systems, among others. With this, I am not concealing
at all the transformative effects of dominant agents or the questionable impact of the colonial and neocolonial expansion among indigenous peoples. Rather, I am arguing for a broader perspective in which indigenes are actually playing an active role within these engaging socio-cultural experiences.

The deconstruction of earlier notions of cultural change leads me to understand these shifting processes within a paradoxical model of the events. This paradoxical approach accounts for inconsistent actions carried out by individuals and collective groups, oxymorons in public and private discourses, and contradictions in governmental policies as well as in the decision-making of the local communities. These are the quotidian expressions observed in the interaction of divergent cultural and language systems like the national Venezuelan society and the Yanomami society. An example of these paradoxes is that indigenous peoples have had to get closer to the national mainstream, learn and use the state’s legal mechanisms, and almost culturally immolate themselves in order to claim rights as ethnically different people attempting to preserve their “traditional” cultural practices.

Cultural shifts are therefore seen in relationship to the processes of cultural engagement experienced by the Alto Orinoco Yanomami. That means the consideration of approaching forms and responses coming from the local groups to the national frontier expansion. Rather than seeing the incorporation of indigenous people into national systems as a unidirectional consequence coming from the capitalist expansion or the hegemonic policies of the state, the notion of cultural engagement reflects the desires and
aspirations of these people to become involved alternatively with different socio-cultural orders.

In the case of the Yanomami, cultural engagement accounts for the negotiation and conciliation strategies employed by “out-of-the-way groups” (Tsing 1993) in order to access the allocation of resources, services, and information through the national structures and other external agents. In the course of the intercultural relationships with the national society, decision-making processes and individual and collective actions carried out by the indigenous groups in order to approach national discourses practices constitute the ground to explore how they redefine and reinterpret their local identities and social relations. The Yanomami strategizing practices are analyzed within their accommodation processes to the national system. In particular, these responses are examined through the selective approach of the bureaucratic structures such as the Alto Orinoco Municipality, the political parties, the regional institutions, and national government.

*Indigenous peoples and the national expansion*

The current nation-states of Latin America have employed different policies of assimilation and domination by which indigenous groups have been forced to be part of the economic, social, and political life of each nation. One of the relatively recent and most successful mechanisms of indigenous incorporation is that nation-states have transformed the indigenous groups into citizens while gaining sovereignty at the same time over their lands (Maybury-Lewis 1991). The appropriation and division of their lands, the
marginalization and impoverishment of indigenous communities, and the imposition of national policies and development programs without indigenous consent and participation represent some of the most common scenarios where the processes of indigenous incorporation have taken place in the last decades. However, this is not a linear process that has been simply imposed over the local populations by the state apparatus; rather this is an intercultural experience, in which indigenous peoples also assert, transform, and contest the hegemonic discourses of the national structures. As Urban and Sherzer have stated on the national expansion, “The effects of linkage with the outside world are evident in numerous phenomena, from indigenous movements and projects to political protests to forms of discourses” (1991:1).

For the analysis of cultural transformations and the individual and collective Yanomami’s engagements to those novel political situations, the historical political economy perspective (Roseberry 1994, Wolf 1992, Mintz 1985) contributes as a general template for the understanding of these intercultural experiences. The main postulate of this conceptual frame, which I intend to readjust here, is that the so-called “isolated communities” are no such thing. On the contrary, they have been linked in one way or another to wider historical processes related to state formations and global systems that have been ethnographically mistreated. Although this premise looks pretty obvious in current anthropological analysis, this basic postulate has been neglected in researches on the Yanomami, which has been recurrently portrayed as one of those isolated, untouched or locally bounded societies apart from national and global effects.
I recognize as well the limitations of the political economy approach that tends to subordinate cultural practices into an "epiphenomenal structure" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:84), which purportedly determines all social relations and human behaviors. Going beyond these limitations and recapturing the core of this approach, I argue that small and relatively out-of-the-way societies like the Yanomami have historically negotiated the linkage of their local ways of life with new regional and national structures in "cultural flow" contexts (Hannerz 1992).

This frame guides me to consider as well the studies on state formation that stress the hegemony of the state's institutions and national dominant discourses (Anderson 1991, Corrigan and Seyer 1985, Gramsci 1971, Foucault 1991, Joseph and Nugent 1994, and Alonso 1994) imposed historically among indigenous peoples in Venezuela. It also considers the ideological implications of the modernization and *criollization* models fostered by the Venezuelan nation-state and the "Westernized" mimetic behaviors displayed by indigenous peoples in order to gain access to the bureaucratic power structures.

Rosaldo (1993) has argued for the constitution of an agenda of social analysis that highlights political processes, social changes, and human differences in which the objects of analysis are also analyzing subjects who critically question ethnographers. The current social reality lived by the Yanomami in Venezuela and by many Amazonian indigenous groups requires also the conformation of different agendas. Therefore, the aim will be to interconnect processes of cultural transformations with political participation and cultural
differences in an effort to understand what the indigenous people think about their becoming part of national socio-political systems.

**Gathering the data**

The fact that the Yanomami have been portrayed in academic circles and the media as one of those groups that still live “in relative isolation” and “in harmony with the environment,” might lead the ethnographer to assume in advance a biased methodological stance on how to carry out research among these people. As many texts on research methods in anthropology suggest, one of the first steps is to decide on the unit of analysis that is going to be applied in a research project (Bernard 1994). Taking into account Yanomami cultural particularities and their location in the rainforest, it seemed that the ideal research unit of analysis for exploring the cultural facts of this population was the “community” or “village.” However, as we will see later on, this approach would reinforce the old notion of a self-contained and isolated society that I intend to deconstruct throughout these pages.

When I began my fieldwork among the Yanomami, I also thought that the most appropriate unit of analysis for this dissertation was the community (*shapono*). In fact, as I stated in my proposal, “the units of analysis for this research will be the villages settled close to the missionary posts on the Orinoco River in Mavaca, Ocamo and Platanal and the villages located on the Mavaca River.” Although I recognize that the village itself establishes a referential and spatial frame in which ethnographic data are gathered, I realized while I was doing fieldwork that the selection of “community” as an all-
encompassing unit of analysis was not the most suitable for the aim of my research proposal. Despite this methodological and conceptual self-clarification, I did live and spend time in several villages for obvious and practical reasons.

Gradually, I understood that rather than using the “community” as a unit of analysis by which I was going to separate the major components of Yanomami culture, I had instead to recognize their processes of interaction and forms of linkage experiences with the outside world and across villages. In a broad sense, my main concern was and is the comprehension of the many ways whereby the Yanomami have related to Venezuelan national society and, in a specific sense, their forms of participation in national politics. Thus the original idea of focusing only on village(s) or community(ies) as encapsulated systems was definitely going to constrain this purpose.

Contesting the static approach of the “ethnographic present,” Colson and Kottak argue instead that ethnographies “should focus on the adjustments that occur continuously as people meet different challenges” (1996:107). For these authors, the premises of the historical political economy perspective induce the ethnographer to constantly reformulate the research unit of analysis as much as the local populations are experiencing social and cultural transformations. In this case, if the core of the analysis is the Yanomami village, this has to be conceived not as an inclusive and integrated system but rather in relation to historical events and linking their local processes with other foreign systems. Hence, the study of Yanomami cultural transformations required placing Yanomami individuals, families, and villages in a wider historical national framework, in which bureaucratic procedures, electoral campaigns, and the establishment of new
information networks constitute important issues in the intercultural relations with the outside world.

My dissertation is grounded mostly on ethnographic research conducted among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco, complemented by documentary research carried out in Puerto Ayacucho, capital of the Amazonas State, and in Caracas, Venezuela. I visited the indigenous territory from the middle of 1999 to the end of 2000, with an early visit in 1998 and two short stays, one in July and one in November of 2001. This project has also been nurtured by previous field research among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco and archival investigations completed in different periods during the last twelve years. For the dissertation research itself, I spent almost fourteen months among the indigenous groups who have been in contact with the national society for at least the last twenty years and who live close to the criollo and missionary posts on the Orinoco River. Documentary research in Puerto Ayacucho and Caracas provided information about the new national Venezuelan constitution and the political-administrative division of the Amazonas State.

During my fieldwork, I collected data in Spanish and in Yanomami language on indigenous participation in national politics through different techniques such as surveying villages, interviewing people, collecting life histories, and holding focus group discussions. I also paid particular attention to the national debates on indigenous affairs and to the indigenist policies applied by national institutions regarding the decision-making processes on indigenous rights at the constitutional context.

The surveys of the villages allow me to compare the degree of cultural adaptation considering the use of foreign technology and Western manufactured goods. Open-ended
interviews and life-histories were collected among those Yanomami representatives who participate in regional voting processes, hold political positions at the municipality, work at the cooperative SUYAO, and develop guidelines promoting alliances not only with national institutions but with other ethnic groups. I conducted in-depth interviews among the old and young leaders (most of them fluent in Spanish) in order to contrast their perceptions regarding the influence of the nation-state policies and their participation as councilors, mayors, and representatives in the municipality. I also conducted in-depth interviews and life histories among women who work at the bilingual school and at the craft cooperative, as well as with those elder women who have certain status as the headmen’s wives. The focus group discussions were achieved with the villagers that participate more directly in decision-making regarding municipal issues and through workshops on the political administrative division of the Amazonas State.

Most of my fieldwork took place among the members of the communities of the Orinoco-Mavaca area. However, I also carried out short field trips to nearby areas such as Ocamo, Platanal, Padamo, and La Esmeralda, a non-Yanomami town (Figure 3). The primary reason for this choice is that Mavaca is where the majority of the political events in relation to the national political structures take place. For example, Mavaca is the voting center for all the registered Yanomami voters that live near the Orinoco, Mavaca, Ocamo, and Padamo Rivers, making up 248 voters by December of the year 2000. The other Yanomami voting center is located in Sierra Parima, next to the Brazilian border, with 291 voters at that time (2000).
Figure 3
Study Area
Alto Orinoco, Amazonas State, Venezuela
For practical reasons, I geographically divided the Mavaca area into two zones: the Central Mavaca in the Orinoco River, and the Upper Mavaca on the Mavaca River. By the end of my dissertation fieldwork there were eleven Yanomami villages (shapono) with nearly a total of 660 inhabitants in the Central Mavaca zone. These villages were Mosho, Koparima, Piedrita, Motorema, Purima, Hatakoa, Payarita, Puerto Ceiba, and Shakita in the Orinoco River; Warapana on the Mavaca River; and Karohi on the Manaviche River. In the Upper Mavaca zone, there were six villages (shapono) located at a distance but still under mission and criollo influence with approximately 420 inhabitants. These communities were Cipoi, Witohipiwei, Mavakita, Mavakita Vieja, Mrakapiwei, and Washēwē. I have to say that although many villages of the Central Mavaca are relatively permanent in this area, I observed several villages splitting apart and having to move to other places in the Upper Mavaca. The Orinoco-Mavaca area is where the main bilingual and intercultural school is located and is the main center for the collection and storage of crafts and goods for the cooperative SUYAO. It is also the headquarters of the Salesian Missionaries and the site of a health post of the Health Ministry. Furthermore, this region is also where the largest number of leaders involved in regional and national politics dwells.

I selected and defined these two groups of villages in order to compare the degrees and levels of political participation in the regional and national context. The first group of villages has been exposed to national expansion since the 1950s, especially to the influences of the Protestant missions and, later on, of Catholic missions. This group of villages has had access to health care, the bilingual education system where many of
them have learned Spanish, and to the national economic market through the craft cooperative. Since they have been exposed in one or another way to national society, the Yanomami who live close to these areas are the most affected by the impact of the municipality, and the regional and national governments. The second group has also been under the influence of external agents, but to a lesser and more sporadic degree. Although these villages also have extension schools, participate in the craft cooperative, and receive medical attention, these services (especially the latter) are very inconsistent. Those villages are, relatively speaking, less dependent on missionaries and foreign agents, although they are increasingly migrating closer to the missionary and health centers.

In this dissertation I decided to use the real names of the Yanomami villages and describe where they are located. This information is public and is displayed in national censuses and official records. I decided to keep the current Yanomami village names for an easier location in their territory. Because of their periodic relocations and name changes, the use of substitute names for villages would only confuse the readers, and even myself if I tried to identify later each *shapono*. The use of this type of data is mainly to place the reader in a geographical frontier space of the Amazonas rainforest; by no means does it intend to reveal confidential information that would make uncomfortable the members of the communities. Regarding the personal names of people, these have been changed to preserve informants’ confidentiality. Although several ethnographic works on the Alto Orinoco Yanomami (e.g. Chagnon 1983, Lizot 1978, Good with Chanoff 1991) have employed the real names of the individuals either in Yanomami or in
Spanish, I prefer the use of pseudonymous in Spanish due to the political nature of this research.

**Organization of the chapters**

Although divided in seven chapters, this dissertation is conceptually articulated into three major thematic areas. The first section combines this introductory chapter in which I describe the research guidelines of the dissertation with Chapter two that raises important questions on the anthropological implications of doing ethnography and writing about an indigenous people such as the Yanomami. In particular, I critically assess the contradictions and challenges of the fieldwork experience, the theoretical backgrounds used to account for the Amazonian indigenous peoples, and the ethical issues on how to carry out field research among indigenous groups. I argue that due to the constant cultural transformations experienced by the indigenous groups, anthropologists should move from the rigid perspective of the “ethnographic present” to a wider approach that accounts for the cultural flow and the many changes experienced by the Yanomami in an “ethnography of the present.”

The second section consisting of chapters three and four intends to place the Yanomami intercultural experience into an historical political framework of the Venezuelan State formation. Chapter three places the Yanomami in an historical and spatial context. It accounts for the historical contact situation between the Alto Orinoco Yanomami and the colonial and postcolonial frontier expansion through the explorer and travelers who tried to reach the headwaters of the Orinoco River. This chapter intends to
disclose how the images of isolated and "belligerent Indians" have been recreated in the historical account of the explorers. It also gives an interpretation on how the Yanomami conceptualize history through mythical stories and personal narratives.

Chapter four addresses the controlling discursive practices of the Venezuelan State apparatus applied among indigenous peoples in general and among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco in particular. The Yanomami "contact situation" is analyzed in relation to the national frontier expansion. Specifically, the rhetoric of the state is examined though the national legislation, the political location of the Amazonas State, and the impact of territorial regulations enforced among the indigenous populations at the border zones. In this chapter, I analyze the different types of encounters between representatives of the national society, including the missionary orders, military personnel, and scientific expeditions with the Alto Orinoco Yanomami in the last fifty years.

The third section (Chapters five, six, and seven) deals with the notion of culture in transformation, in which the Yanomami individual and collective responses to the national political structures and national ideologies are reflected in their active participation in local, regional, and national political arenas. Chapter five concentrates on the emergence of new political leaders who act as liaison representatives between their habitual ways of life and national institutions and on the novel forms of participation in national elections and political meetings. It also focuses on the transformative effects of the Yanomami political engagement on gender roles and ideologies by which women
participate in new practices related to the napé world, including learning about the voting process and taking active part in the electoral processes.

Chapter six focuses on how the Yanomami are experiencing an increasing awareness of their ethnic identity with respect to the national society, in which they construct ethnic boundaries and ethnic alliances with other indigenous groups. The seventh and conclusive chapter will integrate the main ideas developed in the dissertation with a particular ethnographic event, the National Yanomami Conference held in Mavaca in November of 2001. Through the description and examination of the organization, the major political components of this meeting, and the interaction of the many social actors that participated in this intercultural conference, I intend to draw some conclusions regarding Yanomami responses to the outside world. This public event represents an interesting example of social interaction in which the Yanomami are forging common spaces to culturally engage with the national Venezuelan society.
CHAPTER 2

DOING ETHNOGRAPHY, (RE)WRITING CULTURE

So far it is my eyes, my judgments, and my searching
that speak these words to you.
Herodotus (1987:171)

The ethnographic encounter

When I arrived at Mavaca on July of 1999 with a dissertation proposal on Yanomami social changes and participation in the national political structures, I inevitably began to reconstruct my experiences living with and among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco over the last years. A mix of dialogues, jokes, and melancholic, funny and surrealistic stories about Yanomami, missionaries, and other anthropologists mingled, capriciously evoking past incidents. The typical logistical struggles in carrying out field research in the Alto Orinoco, the thrilling trips on the Orinoco and Mavaca rivers, the risky flights on helicopters and small airplanes from Puerto Ayacucho to La Esmeralda, the intense field conversations in situ with other napê over coffee, and the recalling of Yanomami splitting their sides laughing over some recent prank were intertwined in my mind. These retrospective flashes constituted the memoirs in which I was linking past experiences with the new enterprise of doing fieldwork for a doctoral dissertation on the Yanomami. I still recall my first trip to the Alto Orinoco:

The sun was setting over the Orinoco River. Night was approaching very fast and everyone was tired after several hours of sluggish navigation on that heavy metal cargo boat. The only sound that had accompanied us during the whole trip was the roar of an old strident outboard motor that had suffered mechanical problems ever since we left. The cargo boat was ferrying gasoline, local handicrafts, and some passengers: a few Yanomami, a mission employee, the motorist and us, two
anthropologists. This initial trip, that years later would take me an hour and a half with a fast aluminum boat and an outboard motor in good shape, took us a whole day.

We had started from Mavaca early in the morning and our goal was to reach Platanal, the last mission post in the Alto Orinoco. I knew that Platanal and its surroundings were going to be the place where I would spend most of the six weeks of my visit. We had left Caracas three weeks ago and were pretty impatient to reach Platanal, where Jesús, the other anthropologist, was doing his fieldwork. It was unbelievable that we had spent over two weeks in Puerto Ayacucho trying to find a small airplane to take us to La Esmeralda and almost a week waiting for a means to travel from La Esmeralda to Platanal. We were students with limited resources so we had had to wait for someone to give us a ride to this remote post on the Orinoco River. Jesús had already spent several months working with the Yanomami of the Platanal area. This was to be my first visit to the area.

Finally, we arrived at the Platanal mission in the evening; we were exhausted and very hungry. We cooked some rice to eat with canned sardines. After the missionaries finished talking over the two-way radio we chatted for a little while. Shortly after, we hung up our hammocks in one of the old rooms at the mission, and fell asleep almost immediately. The next day, two missionaries planned on catching an airplane that for some fortunate circumstance was going to land there. Of course if we had known this before, we would have tried to get a ride on that airplane from Puerto Ayacucho, but as I realized afterwards, things in the Alto Orinoco are always unpredictable. Later on, I understood a popular expression frequently quoted there, "Two plus two can be anything but four in the Alto Orinoco."

Early in the morning, several Yanomami from the village of Mahekototheri, located behind the mission grounds, arrived at the house. I knew that the Yanomami from Platanal had been in close contact with outsiders since 1950 with the foundation of a former Protestant (New Tribes) mission there. The Yanomami visitors wanted to say hello to the missionaries, to Jesús, the anthropologist that had already spent some time with them, and to find out about the new "napëyoma" (foreign woman) who had arrived with him.

"Jésu, Jésu, who is she?" "She is Hortensia; remember I told you that she was going to come to visit you." "Yes, sure," Pajarito Yanomami said with a big smile on his face. Pajarito and the rest of the visitors began to talk in Yanomami and started laughing in an impish way. In a sort of complicitous and playful manner they were making the connection between Jesús and me, and when they realized that we were a couple they made good-humored comments about me as Jesús’ pë suepì “wife.” Micanor, a particularly friendly young guy, said to us in Yanomami, "When you have a baby girl, I would like to marry her." I could not
understand what he was saying but Jesús, following his mischievous comment, said, “Yes sure, but if you want our daughter, you must work very hard as a siyoha (son-in-law) and perform a good siyohamou (bride service) for us, otherwise you won’t have our girl.” Of course, everybody began to laugh and make fun of Micanor imagining how funny and weird it would be for a Yanomami to perform bride services for napé in-laws. From then on and in spite of this peculiar idea of having foreigners as relatives, Micanor began to use kin terms to name us: “shoape” (my father in law) and “yapemi” (my mother in law). Consequently we reciprocated using in-law terms; Jesús started to call him “hekamaye” and I called him “siyohaye” (my son in law), respectively.

While we chatted about our potential new kinship relations, some of the Yanomami began to perform a general inspection of me. They touched and smelled my hair, my skin, my hands, and my clothes. They even touched my breast. I knew they were going to do this body-examination because Jesús had already informed me about this common initial interaction with the “napé” and “napéyoma” through the senses of touch and smell. What I did not expect was that this “introduction” to the Yanomami in Platanal would be repeated frequently and every time I arrived at a new village, and this was not entirely pleasant. They spent a good amount of time examining me, talking to me, and asking me right away for “matohi” (manufactured trade goods). Because I was a “foreign woman,” they expected me to bring a lot of goods to share with them. I think they were quite disappointed because the few goods I had brought were not enough to meet their expectations.

This initial interaction with the Yanomami made evident to me how quickly the observer could become the observed. This was a reversal in roles that I was not consciously prepared to handle. Later on, I understood that this was one of the many ways in which the Yanomami interacted with outsiders, approached the “others” (napé), and dealt with cultural and bodily differences.

It was the beginning of rainy season (May) of 1988 when I went for the first time to Yanomami territory. I had just received my licenciatura-degree in cultural anthropology at the “Universidad Central de Venezuela” in Caracas and had begun a Master’s in Venezuelan History. I was searching for an indigenous group in the Venezuelan Amazon to work with for my Master’s thesis. Several random circumstances
drove me to the Alto Orinoco, and I was not sure if I was going to immerse myself in a
depth fieldwork experience among the Yanomami, or if I was just going to enjoy the
experience of being in the jungle, navigating the Orinoco River (my childhood dream),
and spending some time with the Yanomami. During that first trip, I decided on the
second option. Consequently, my “first encounter” with the Yanomami was not
necessarily determined by a mandatory fieldwork assignment research to gather basic
data and write a dissertation, essay, or report on a specific cultural feature. To be sure, I
was thinking of the possibility of doing a thesis about the Yanomami, but I was in a
History Department, and it was not a requirement to spend a period of time doing
fieldwork among an indigenous group in order to write a Master’s thesis in History.
Although I realized that I had had a cultural clash during this exploratory visit to
Yanomami territory, I was definitely seduced by the cultural practices of the Yanomami
and by the natural scenery of the Alto Orinoco. It is particularly easy to be enchanted and
“bewitched” by the cultural differences found in an indigenous group that lives in such a
unique ecological setting.

Thus, when I arrived back in Caracas to continue my course work for the
Master’s, I decided to go back to the Alto Orinoco to start research among the
Yanomami. In the meantime, I began to get involved little by little in self-determination
projects for the Yanomami. After that first trip, I went almost every year to the Alto
Orinoco area for at least a couple of weeks as I began taking doctoral courses in the
Department of Anthropology at the University of Arizona. I worked on several issues
regarding intercultural education, health programs, and self-management projects through
the Venezuelan Foundation for Anthropological Research (FUNVENA), a local NGO. I carried out research on the situation of the Yanomami child and woman for UNICEF (Cardozo and Caballero 1994), and the history of the expeditions to the Alto Orinoco and the contacts between Yanomami and outsiders from the mid-18th to the mid-20th centuries for my Master’s thesis (Caballero-Arias 1996).

I participated in and advocated for the creation of the Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve and Parima-Tapirapecó National Park, decreed in 1991.9 Over the years, together with other anthropologists and in interdisciplinary teams, we coordinated workshops for the Yanomami on territorial management plans, the handcrafts cooperative, and local and national political issues through the Yanomami grassroots organization, SUYAO (Shaponos Unidos Yanomami Alto Orinoco). More recently, as a member of the Coordinating Committee, I closely supported the Yanomami in the organization of the National Yanomami Conference that took place in November of 2001 in Shakita, in the Mavaca area. This conference addressed issues of health services, education, land tenure, and political participation. Throughout these interactions over the years I established long-term relationships with some elders, women of different ages, young leaders, and children from diverse villages who have been the motivation to continue working with and accompanying the Yanomami in their historical process.

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9 In December of 1990, the Venezuelan Foundation for Anthropological Research (FUNVENA) organized the first “International Conference on Yanomami Habitat and Culture.” The main purpose of this event was to exchange information between Yanomami representatives and governmental personnel of national institutions in order to promote the creations of the Biosphere Reserve and the National Park. The results of this conference were published in La Iglesia en Amazonas No 53, 54-55 (Caballero and Cardozo 1991).
The purpose of listing these tasks and activities that I have carried out among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco, is not to boast about what I have done, but rather to display my personal engagement and commitment with this indigenous group considering self-reflective processes and individual experiences. I believe that the ethnographer’s distinct and previous encounters with the people that we work with will determine our ethnographic approach, interaction with, and depiction in a textual style of the local group. The ethnographer’s background, the nature of the relationship with the people with whom we work, the intermingling and enactment of multiple ethnographic subjectivities, and the procedures employed to manage the participant observation anthropological method constitute key points in the construction of discursive plots. These personal, or I should say perhaps, “political” engagement will influence how the anthropologist employs certain strategies to portray the social phenomena of local societies in a way we hope will appear convincing to our colleagues.

Subjectivities and the poetic pragmatism of fieldwork

Ethnographic writing comprises not only anthropological theories and analyzed field data, but also in many ways conveys personal stances including gender and ethnic identities as well as the individual adaptations to the social and environmental conditions of the field site. If ethnographies reflect personal standpoints of the writer while “observable facts” are filtered through the looking glass of individual experiences and subjectivities, I wonder first, which are the more noteworthy personal features and background that shaped my fieldwork encounters with the Yanomami. I also wonder how
local events, Yanomami everyday life expressions, and people’s receptiveness permeated my fieldwork in a sort of poetic pragmatism of doing ethnography.

Regarding the first concern about individual characteristics, I would say that a combination of attributes related to nationality, ethnicity, and gender played a significant part in my approach, interaction, and exchange. There is a sense of shared nationality that I unconsciously assumed even before I went to the field. The Yanomami, as well as the rest of the indigenous groups that live in Venezuela, constitute a component of the personal conceptualization of my “imagined community,” in which we tend to integrate people, symbols, and natural landscapes in our own national consciousness. Although the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco have been slowly but progressively understanding and accepting Venezuelan citizenship, I felt from the beginning that we shared a common ground that was the Venezuelan territory. Those territorial boundaries that confine us to share the same locus and a national identity permeated my approach to them. At this national level, I became a sort of “native anthropologist” (Jones 1982), “postcolonial intellectual” (Spivak 1990), or perhaps “peripheral scholar” doing “anthropology at home” (Peirano 1998), in my own backyard, which is constituted by the symbolic and geographical boundaries of the Venezuelan national ideology.

However, it is quite obvious as well that although the Yanomami reside in the same country as I do, we confront cultural and language differences. As part of the group defined as criollo¹⁰ in Venezuela, I found myself in a different ethnic and social

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¹⁰ In the ethnic structure of the Venezuelan population, criollo has been identified with the people that were born in the country as a result of the mestizaje or ethnic intermix among European, African, and aboriginal descendants. It was a colonial term that originally referred to those born in the country, descendant of non-Venezuelans. Currently, criollo refers to the people that live in urban and rural areas
position from those who are indigenous peoples. As an urban criollo person raised in the "westernized" forms of knowledge, I am a member of the supposed Venezuelan civil society, a citizen (who legally) is subjected to the rights and duties granted in the national constitution. Indigenous peoples have not always been recognized as part of the civil society with all their rights as different ethnic groups. The recognition of these opposing categories made me realize how the national institutions have the legal and political means to compartmentalize the ethnic differences.

Though I have lived and worked with the Yanomami and have become engaged in this participant observation enterprise, I tried to avoid the idea of "becoming" Yanomami, a very tempting fantasy in this kind of setting, that has occasionally overtaken other anthropologists who have worked in that territory. The reasons are quite visible: they would never see me as a Yanomami, and I never expected such cultural incorporation, even though we usually played around using kin terms to name each other. In fact, while I was doing fieldwork I found that performing the usual role of an urban caraqueña woman who was particularly awkward in survival matters in the jungle was more comfortable for all of us. I agree with Hastrup (1995) that in some ways who recognize themselves as non-indigenous. There is an assumed idea that Venezuelan criollos, as ethnically mixture people, are like café con leche (coffee with milk) (Wright 1990) and this supposed process of mestizaje has guided the country to develop a so-called "racial democracy" ideology. Although racial discriminations are perhaps less evident in Venezuela than other Latin American countries, racial prejudices and discrimination against Afro-Venezuelans and indigenous groups are commonly disguised with discourses about social and economic inequalities.

11 One of the most knowable examples in academic circles and in the public sphere regarding the Yanomami is the case of the anthropologist Kenneth Good who, according to Bernard (1994), attempted "becoming Indian". He married a Yanomami woman and spent almost 13 years living in the forest with them. His experiences among the Yanomami are in detail described in his book Into the Heart. One Man's pursuit of love and knowledge among the Yanomama (Good with Chanoff 1991).
we “become” natives at the same time as we carry out participant observation during our fieldwork, but the idea of actually “going native” or “becoming a true Yanomami” was simply unsuitable both for them and for me.

This situation was clear for the Yanomami with whom I was working during my field research. In spite of their friendship and acceptance they constantly established a cultural gap when they treated me as and called me napéyoma, indicating that I was not seen as Yanomami but as an outsider, and frankly I did not pursue being one of them either. With this, I am not necessarily questioning scholars who are seduced by the native peoples and the appealing Amazonian landscape. What I intend to emphasize here is that pretending to become a Yanomami is more a personal and idyllic desire than a social and cultural likelihood. As Wagner pointed out once, "going native" is to enter "a world of one's own creation" (1975:9), and that is what probably have happened to those who has been trapped in the game of becoming native.

Another personal consideration was that I experienced the advantage of being recognized as a woman physically but not in social terms. As many other female anthropologists have highlighted, women in the field might have a “privileged position” (Nader 1986). Women who have carried out fieldwork among the Yanomami are able to play with their female condition because their status as outsiders prevails over the female status. My remarkable condition of napéyoma (female-outsider) allowed me to access and

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12 I remember Jacques Lizot’s comment when he decided to leave the Alto Orinoco after spending twenty years living with the Yanomami. He said something like “I am leaving the Yanomami territory because it will be too hard for me to become older among them; they never saw me as one of them in spite of all these years living with them.” I recall a certain kind of discontent and melancholy in his words because after so many years living with them he hoped that at least he was considered another member of the community, and he did not have that feeling.
participates in male-dominated domains such as political activities, ceremonial meetings, shamanic rituals, and long trips with just Yanomami men. Likewise, I participated in activities related to female domains such as going with the women to their gardens, trekking and gathering eteweshi (*Mauritia flexuosa*) palm fruit, taking baths in the river, and spending time with a teenage girl inside of her ceremonial first menses hut, an exclusively female space. In this latter case, for example, I had an advantage over my male counterparts, who were not allowed to observe this kind of female ritual. I realized that gender could be managed in different ways among the Yanomami and that my status as a female-outsider, *napëyoma*, allowed me to participate in different gender activities without constraints due to my femaleness.

The second concern is with the poetic pragmatism of doing ethnography. The ethnographic experience embraces a mixture of local events, personal endeavors, and common practices with Yanomami people. This begins with the acceptance or not of the outsider(s) by the host community. Most of the times my arrival at the villages, especially at those where I had been before, was well received, but it took a while to gain the trust of the people in some other communities that I did not know. Learning the rudiments of the language is a long process that requires endurance and tolerance due to the mocking commentaries made by the Yanomami when you are considered *aka porepi* (literally sleepy tongue) which means not being capable to speak as in the case of small children. When I began the dissertation fieldwork, although I was able to roughly understand the language, which I had began to learn in previous field trips, I had to struggle to overcome my status of *aka porepi* and to slowly attain later a working knowledge of their language.
In spite of the predictable teasing reactions coming especially from the kids and teenagers when I mispronounced a word or wrongly uttered a phrase, they also encouraged me to keep practicing and learning their language.

The common experiences that certainly shaped fieldwork are those relating to the daily routine and activities shared with the members of the communities that include feasts, rituals, conflicts, birth, sickness, and death. The discrepancy in opinions that I had with some Yanomami leaders on politics pervaded also fieldwork experience. In this case, I was particularly infused by political conflicts, national elections in which I also voted, meetings in the shapono and elsewhere, and specific tasks related to the handcraft cooperative such as organizing and listing the crafts, dispatching *matohi* (manufactured goods) to the villages, and teaching general notions on the national constitution.

Leisure activities like visiting old friends in different shapono, fishing in the small tributaries of the main rivers, exchanging songs in Spanish and Yanomami with the women, cooking a special *napé* dish once in a while, playing ball with the kids, arguing with some of them in order to find a private moment and space for myself, and making fun about an event or an awkward behavior of one of us also created the distinctive ambience in which fieldwork took place. This experience is not just about “[T]he comprehension of the self by the detour of the other” (Rabinow 1977). It is about the knowledge and feelings that we share during our trips on the river, living together, eating together, and even conversing intensively about their visions and expectations regarding their relationship with the national institutions and the *napé* people. These are the tuneful
and discordant experiences of doing ethnography that certainly affect the anthropologists' subjectivities and therefore shape in many ways our writing enterprise.

_Encounters in the field and elsewhere_

Years have passed since my first encounter(s) with the Yanomami, and the multiple and assorted encounters with them in the field and _elsewhere_ strike in me a chord that leads me to reflect on the many changes that they have experienced over the years and those that I was able to appreciate and share with them. The “traditional” semi-isolated indigenous group is now experiencing an ever-increasing participation in political and social activities with the local, regional, and national institutions. The Yanomami settled next to the missions and the health posts now wear mostly clothes and tennis shoes; they use sunglasses and Casio watches; and they play soccer and volleyball in the middle of the _shapono_ with colorful sport uniforms. They also listen to popular Colombian dance tunes with a preference for the _cumbia_ and _raspacanilla_ music styles, and they ask outsiders and government employees for Sony tape recorders because some of them have heard that this is the best brand. They also ask for generators so they can have electric lights in their villages; they watch movies using VCR’s, and one village on the Mavaca River even had a satellite dish during the electoral campaigns. Besides these material and tangible changes, I have seen how life cycles also have evolved. Good friends from the areas of Ocamo, Mavaca, and Platanal have passed away because of

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13 Elsewhere refers to any place outside the conventional fixed field site constituted in this case by the Alto Orinoco territory in the Amazonas State, Venezuela where the Yanomami are settled.
tropical diseases and fights; village girls that I had met are now mothers with several children, boys that played with little arrows are now adults involved in politics, villages that used to be up river have moved closer to the mission and health posts, and an increasing number of Yanomami can currently speak some Spanish. All these facets of life constitute the social scenery that I have faced and witnessed while living among some of the Yanomami groups of the Alto Orinoco.

If I were to compare my first encounters with later encounters and with the encounters I had during this doctoral fieldwork, I might fall into the temptation of romanticizing the past, regretfully thinking how an “isolated,” “pure,” and “tribal” group is disappearing as a result of the neo-colonial impact of the national expansion. However, that kind of view would be perpetuating an imperialist nostalgia\textsuperscript{14} (Rosaldo 1993) on what is or is not culturally authentic. Despite the melancholic reminiscences of the past, which anthropologists have tried to avoid but inevitably embodied, the social reality of this indigenous group is entirely another story. The Yanomami groups of the Alto Orinoco demonstrate that they “are in motion,” actually in a high-speed motion searching for cultural, political, and ideological changes on their own terms.

I went to the village of Koparima to visit some old friends. I wanted to talk to Javier about his engagement in politics. I have not been much in control of the whole process of gathering data, nor keeping a constant pattern in my fieldwork tasks. I was not sure if I wanted to use a tape recorder right away or if I just wanted to talk informally with some of them. I believe that I intentionally left the tape recorder in Mavaca so as to just hang out with them. During our conversation, Javier mentioned a couple of interesting things; he said, “We don’t trust politicians very much, we are trying to organize ourselves to obtain some

\textsuperscript{14} Ramos gives a twist to this idea when she says that she had an unenthusiastic response when she went back to the Sanumá territory after several years and saw this people wearing “shabby clothes.” As she points out “My negative reaction to this new ungainly appearance was prompted not by a residue of ‘imperialist nostalgia’ but by the sense of aesthetic impoverishment” (1995: xvii).
goods, and to take advantage of the municipality. We want some changes, I worry about my kids and, we want more schools and better health services for them. Our kids, they have to learn more napé stuff.”

I was explaining to him the goals of my fieldwork and why I was thinking the Yanomami were especially attracted to participating in national politics, when he said: “I have been thinking, Horte, why there are so many foreigners from other countries who want to come here. But there are just a few Venezuelans that want to come and work here. I like that Venezuelans come here to teach Yanomami. It is better. I like that you came here because you are Venezuelan.” That was the first time that a Yanomami recognized and confronted my nationality and I was surprised and flattered... They are unquestionably experiencing cultural changes... (Fieldnotes, July 1999).

I currently find myself in an odd cultural situation trying to articulate different meaningful worlds in an exercise of ethnographic self-displaying. On the one hand, I am writing a doctoral dissertation in English for an anthropology department in a North American university on the cultural change processes of the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco in the Venezuelan Amazon. I am also a Venezuelan, caraqueña woman, a native Spanish speaker, and anthropology student who has advocated for Yanomami self-management projects and who has established close ties with some of them. It seems that my status of outsider repeats itself in different social and cultural contexts. I was a stranger, an outsider among the Yanomami, and I am also a stranger and outsider among the Tucsonans in Arizona where I am writing this dissertation. I had cultural shocks when I went to the Alto Orinoco as well as when I came to Tucson. Actually, my cultural and national confrontations were sometimes more clearly evident in the bureaucratic procedures I had to experience “to be here” in the United States than when I went to
Yanomami territory. For instance, I felt closer to my Yanomami friend Javier when he was dealing with the procedures for getting an American visa to attend a conference in Washington because I had had to go through the same process. We share something that connects us that is the belonging to a same country in spite of the cultural and linguistic differences. Therefore, similarities as well as cultural differences created through the languages, nationalities, ethnicities, and gender roles influence the personal approach and commitment of the ethnographer with the members of the community we are working with.

When I returned to the Alto Orinoco in 1999 to initiate my fieldwork for this dissertation I unintentionally assumed the stance of an “official” fieldworker. In different ways I was trying to disguise myself with the mask of a “real” fieldworker. The many rites of passage accomplished in academia (courses, comprehensive exams, research proposals) reach the pinnacle when one is allowed to do fieldwork for one’s dissertation. Following the “growing-up” stages of an academic persona I found myself playing being an anthropologist all the way through the North American (metropolitan) canons. I applied for and was awarded grants to carry out field research, reviewed theoretical frameworks and concepts, requested the official permits for field research, bought specialized field equipment, planned trips and working schedules, carefully organized the logistics of my work, and wrote a report from the field following the standard procedures.

Clifford (1988b:92-113) examines ethnographic subjectivities introducing the idea of “ethnographic self-fashioning,” in which contradictory subjective situations are articulated at the levels of language, desire, and cultural affiliations.
of field research. I was alienated by the academic imperatives of doing fieldwork through “metropolitan” anthropological techniques.

By this, I am not saying that “peripheral” anthropologists do not follow similar patterns, organizing fieldtrips and applying specific methodological procedures. What I am saying is that after being in the academy for several years I was trapped by methodological field models represented on what Fabian (1983:107) defined as “the total time for fieldwork conventionally fixed,” in which the duration of fieldwork would affect the production of knowledge. That means that establishing a predetermined schedule of research during a standard time span of fieldwork (usually one year) would guarantee the gathering of enough amounts of data that would determine the quality of the ethnographic production.

I found later that the relationship between timed fieldwork and the accumulation of reliable knowledge was a relative and circumstantial matter. When an ethnographer writes the introductory chapter to a thesis, most of the time she/he begins with the statement “I have spent (X) months/years doing fieldwork among (X) group,” following sometimes by a “I have made (X) field trips to (X) area.” Actually, I am not totally exempt from this sin, since I also stated in the first chapter the amount of time that I spent in the field for this specific research. It seems that to establish the time in the field displays a sort of convincing formula: fieldwork provides knowledge; knowledge gives the authority to talk and write about a particular group; authority is represented in the time spent doing fieldwork. The main purpose of this timing declaration is to demonstrate the many times the ethnographer has put a foot on the field, asserting thereby her/his
“ethnographic authority” (Clifford 1988a) to justify particular ethnographic descriptions and analyses.

I wonder, however, if is it really meaningful to measure with a great precision the time we spend in the field as some researchers, who have worked among the Yanomami, constantly try to emphasize in their writings and talks. Grounded on the time they have been in an “isolated” field with a so-called “exotic” indigenous group, they attempt to reaffirm their ethnographic authority and scientific knowledge on the studied society. I certainly do not know how much time in total I have spent among the Yanomami since I first went to the Alto Orinoco, time which I do not plan to quantify now. Certainly, I do not feel either that I have enough “authority” to render a whole picture of their culture. I do remember some events and encounters with some of them in the field that allow me to account for fragments of what I have seen and experienced among them. As I mentioned before, I have had many encounters in the field and elsewhere with some Yanomami, and all these experiences are valuable for the understanding of Yanomami actions and responses in different socio-cultural contexts.

I disagree with the idea that the knowledge collected by ethnographers from a particular group of people should necessarily be related to the time they spent in the so-called “field site.” That view would restrict the access of the production of knowledge to a territorial space and to a specific time in a sort of confining spatiality and temporally the ethnographic experience that would neglect what one can share and communicate with the individuals in other places (elsewhere) and other times. “Being there” or becoming an accurate “eyewitness” of local activities in situ are not the only relevant
considerations; anthropologists must also consider what they are able to exchange and experience with the people in different social spaces.16

It would be biased if I were to believe that a Yanomami outside of his land, out of the forest, far from the Alto Orinoco, is unable to share his/her experiences, knowledge, and comments with me while we are in Puerto Ayacucho, in Caracas, or elsewhere. Beyond the temporal and spatial notion of being in “the field,” anthropologists should instead be aware of the advantage of being and sharing with the people (no matter where) for the production of knowledge. With this I am not neglecting the ethnographic value in carrying out fieldwork; my comments are rather on the recurrent attitude of some researchers who have worked with “isolated” groups such as the Yanomami in affirming with a fully ethnographic authority that they “know” how these groups behave because they have been “in the field” for a certain time span.

During the fieldwork process, I found that I could not ignore past experiences and friendship relationships I had had with some Yanomami, as I stated before. After a while, the disguise of the “authorized” academic anthropologist blurred with the “informal” anthropologist who had worked systematically with them in practical tasks and maintained close relations with some of them. Any anthropologist who has worked with a Yanomami group could say that this kind of “friendship” relationship is clearly based on the exchange of goods, food, and favors with the Yanomami. However, I found that depending on the different social settings it is also common to develop a strong sense of closeness and fraternity with some Yanomami as well as separation and detachment from

16 The purpose of this discussion is to analyze primarily the implications and effects of fieldwork
others, as in any other social relationship. Hendry (1992) states that the establishment of friendship between anthropologists and the "native" implies a degree of sameness and equality, but as Hastrup points out it also entails asymmetry relations between "the knowledge projects of the friends" (1995:2). Hence, it would be naïve to think that anthropologists do not establish power relationships between themselves and those they research; this is a fact that we cannot fail to acknowledge.

In this case, the relationship between the observer and the observed was not always so clear because I was also involved in several projects that Yanomami carry out in relation to their school, municipality, health, and self-management programs. This particular interaction with the Yanomami led me to participate in many activities in which the role of observer was merged with that of the observed. These blurred situations took place several times in the field and elsewhere. For example, while I was gathering data related to Yanomami point of views regarding the new constitutional articles on indigenous peoples (as an observer), I was asked by a group of Yanomami representatives of the SUYAO organization to coordinate and teach a workshop in which the leaders could become familiar with the constitution and with the articles on indigenous rights. We spent three days discussing and analyzing the implication of each article to the Yanomami case so that with this information they were able to make their own decisions regarding their political participation. This mingling of roles was made even clearer when some criollos, members of a political party, arrived at a community trying to manipulate the information of the constitution and asking the Yanomami for experiences carried out by anthropologists among "out-of-the-way" groups such as the Yanomami.
their support, thinking that they did not know the content of the new constitution. "We" (in this case, I include myself as a temporal member of the village) clearly contested the tricky proposal performed by this group of politicians.

At the beginning of this section I described my first encounter with the Yanomami a long time ago. I have told that story many times among friends and family, but composing in written style the first impressions of how I came to the field and my contact with the Yanomami made me realize how important that first arrival to the Alto Orinoco was. It would be unfair if the ethnographer did not have the chance to share the first encounter with the readers because those first impressions and experiences are probably the most eloquent and honest statements coming from the writer. It is the pressure and the pleasure of "putting things to paper," according to Geertz (1988), and to share those experiences with others.

Pratt (1986) once argued that in classical ethnographies "arrival tropes" are probably the only ones in which some personal issues of the ethnographer are written and consciously uttered. I believe that arrival tropes are the beginning of shared experiences that should be revealed as long as the ethnography is taking form. It is the encounters in the field and elsewhere that will serve as the conducting thread of an ethnographic narrative in which multiple subjectivities and point of views from the ethnographer and the members of the communities are revealed in a textual representation, in an ethnographic work. Encounters are not unilateral, monological, or experienced only by "Westerners;" they require at least two or more people whose voices can vary at times and these dialogical encounters might occur in different socio-cultural settings. I found
particularly interesting how a bilingual Yanomami leader who has been several times in the city described his experiences in Caracas while we were chatting at his village in Mavaca:

I went to Caracas to attend a meeting of the Indigenous Commission. I have been in Caracas several times and I always get frightened there. There are many cars, people in the streets; there are a lot of malandros (delinquents) who are very dangerous, and everything is too big. I stayed at your house with Jesús. After the meeting was over, Alonso and I went to Jesús’ house. The next day, I wanted to go to a political rally downtown in the center of the city but Alonso was tired so I went by myself. After the rally was over, I wanted to go back to your house, but I was scared, really scared and I did not want to take either the subway or the bus, actually I did not know how to do it. There were a lot of people on the streets. I thought I was going to get lost. There were a lot of napé in the streets and I felt very scared but I had the address of your house and phone number, so I took a taxi and showed the taxi driver the address. The taxi driver was really nice. He took me safely to your house. I know a little bit about Caracas but I still worry about getting lost there. It is too big there and one feels really threatened by the malandros. (Javier, Mavaca 1999)

This is one of the many perceptions that a Yanomami visitor can have elsewhere, in this case in Caracas. This leader experienced diverse challenges: the people, the size of the city, and what he knew and did not know about the city and the napé life. It is not only relevant to understand the encounter of the ethnographer in the field and elsewhere, but also to grasp how the local people react and describe the encounters with the outsiders napé in their own indigenous territories and in places where they are outsiders. The encounter of a member of the Yanomami group with other peoples and other social spaces constitutes as well an integral part of the rhetoric of the ethnographic encounters.
Ins and outs of ethnographic writing

Doing ethnographic fieldwork and above all writing about the Yanomami indigenous people generates an incommensurable apprehension in me. These worries oscillate from distress to eagerness, from scholastic anxiety to passionate fieldwork, from feelings of otherness to cultural intimacy, from recognition of painful realities to pleasant memories, and from an objective stand to subjective commitments. This mix of feelings arises not just because I was going to immerse myself in the unknown anthropological rhetoric of a deep participant observation experience among a so-called “tribal society” such as the Yanomami. Neither is it because I was going to justify the vicissitudes confronted in the process of objectification of knowing how the “native” still lives relatively isolated from the Western world. It is because doing ethnography entails “a written product of fieldwork” (Marcus and Fischer 1986) in which anthropologists display and represent on paper the “Other” culture according to the knowledge acquired. The ethnographic texts are in fact the outcome of a combination of power, scientific knowledge, and ethnographic experience that they might have political and ethical repercussions for the people that we work with.

This particular spectrum of feelings on ethnographic writing comes from a combination of experiences already lived and shared with the Yanomami, on journeys to different regions of the Alto Orinoco area during diverse periods of time, and multiple and diverse encounters in the field and elsewhere with them. These past experiences, along with the general knowledge that has been hoarded over the years on the
Yanomami, made me rethink two issues quite obvious at the present but necessary to restate in the course of this ethnographic experience: First, how fragmentary and changeable is the understanding of social cultural phenomena within an indigenous group, and second, how limited and biased can be the anthropological scientific knowledge gathered during our field experiences.

My fearfulness of ethnographic writing is also due to the enormous amount of literature that has been produced on the Yanomami and all that has been said and visually portrayed about them in academic and non-academic circles for almost three decades. From an academic perspective, the Yanomami have been the center of intense controversies, hostile theoretical and methodological debates, and personal conflicts among anthropologists who have argued ceaselessly on the causes of their warfare practices and aggressive behaviors. In fact, Sponsel (1998) suggests that the Yanomami have been the focus of conflict and aggression in different levels: their internal aggression, the aggression among anthropologists, and the aggression from the Western world against this people. Here, violent behavior and hostility are the main issues that have surrounded this indigenous group and have shaped their representation in anthropological discourses. “The fierce people” is an image that has pursued them from the appearance of the first edition of Chagnon’s Yanomamö, the fierce people in 1968. Since then, numerous anthropologists have questioned his ethnographic and theoretical stances producing endless discussions on this topic. I would say that there have been aggressive anthropological obsessions in finding out about Yanomami violent behavioral patterns, but there has also been an incredible fixation in determining the opposite.
From a pragmatic and experiential stance, dramatic events have threatened Yanomami physical and cultural integrity. Among them, there are high levels of disease and mortality, territorial invasions, mining exploitation, deleterious state policies regarding Yanomami lands, and struggles between governmental and non-governmental interest groups over the recognition of their rights as an indigenous group in Brazil and in Venezuela.¹⁷ We have to recall, for instance, the harmful impact of the gold miners who by the end of the 1980s were estimated at 50,000 *garimpeiros* working in Brazilian Yanomami territory. The terrible result of this land invasion was that in a period of three years of gold rush about fifteen per cent of the Yanomami in Brazil may have died (Rabben 1998).

From an ethical standpoint, my apprehension on doing and writing ethnography on the Yanomami has increased more recently with the bitter but perhaps inevitable controversy on the ethical issues of scientific research highlighted in the book *Darkness in El Dorado* (Tierney 2000). The intense disputes that this controversy has generated between the groups that support Tierney’s allegations and those that reject and condemn his accusations have been a fertile ground for an extensive production of articles, reviews, and reports in academic settings and elsewhere.¹⁸ However, here again the

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¹⁷ Human rights movements have internationally condemned many of these harmful policies. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), for example, supported pioneer publications on these issues during the 1970s and 1980s. See Lizot (1976), Ramos et al. (1979), and Colchester (1985). Other recent documents that address these problems regarding the Brazilian side see Ramos (1995), Rabben (1998), and Albert (1992).

¹⁸ The web site called “Doug’s anthropological niche” holds a large body of references regarding this controversy. See Doug’s web page: [http://www.anth.uconn.edu/gradstudents/dhume/darkness_in_el_dorado/index.htm](http://www.anth.uconn.edu/gradstudents/dhume/darkness_in_el_dorado/index.htm).
Yanomami became the center of a controversy that some scholars have described as a disgraceful episode in the history of anthropology. There are therefore multiple personal and external contingencies that shape, constrain, and exert an intense pressure on this endeavor of writing about the Yanomami, especially at this time when human subject issues related to scientific research among indigenous peoples are so susceptible to being addressed.¹⁹

Writing ethnographically, which is definitely the textual form that enmeshes the fieldwork experience (Clifford 1988a), also represents a challenge because the Yanomami themselves could be the most critical witnesses of these texts. The way in which I am going to reconstruct and depict their social and political organization, their inter and intra-ethnic relations, their symbolic and material exchanges with the outside world, and above all their viewpoints within specific historical periods are major concerns. The role of the anthropologist as “observer,” “translator,” “reader,” and “interpreter” (of) and “intruder” (in) a culture in which she/he participates in an intersubjective engagement with the “Other” might be critically questioned by the analyzed subjects themselves.

Considering the implications that scientific research has among any ethnic group and the impact of foreign and national policies that affect their lands, cultural patterns,

¹⁹ I have to draw attention to the fact that two of the allegations examined by the El Dorado Task Force of the American Anthropological Association were regarding the fieldwork practices carried out by anthropologists among Yanomami and the negative impact that ethnographic representations and portrayals may have had on this indigenous group. An inquiry into these accusations relating to past anthropological fieldwork carried out by scientists in general and anthropologists in particular has also been conducted by the Venezuelan Yanomami Commission, that is in charge of investigating these accusations of mistreatment as well as the current Yanomami situation (Jesús Ignacio Cardozo: personal communication).
and use of the language are essentially ethical and practical issues of which anthropologists should be aware when we are immersed in the work of writing culture. Therefore, writing about the Yanomami is not an easy task. It compels one to find a dynamic, flexible, and straightforward building-text strategy that disentangles what the Yanomami are currently experiencing as a result of their engagement with national institutions and their relationship with the national society.

Besides the ethical, academic, and practical issues mentioned before, working with and writing on the Yanomami also requires considering how anthropologists have depicted the Amazonian indigenous groups in general and the Yanomami in particular. The intellectual "appropriation" and (re)presentation of other cultures through the knowledge acquired during the fieldwork experiences and the application of certain theoretical and methodological approaches are some of the issues to be pondered when we commit ourselves to the task of doing and writing ethnography. The examination of conventional ethnographic strategies and the impact of certain theoretical perspectives to account for cultural patterns of Amazonian indigenous groups will allow us to understand how these indigenous peoples have been ethnographically represented.

**Ethnographic canons and representations**

Amazonian indigenous peoples have distinguished themselves by sharing a geographical-ecological setting known as the Tropical Rain Forest of South America.

These groups have demonstrated that they also share cultural and linguistic affiliations, but above all display a wide cultural diversity embodied by the many indigenous groups that inhabit these “out-of-the-way” territories. In order to portray and account for the cultural specificities of these indigenous groups, certain theoretical and methodological approaches have prevailed over others emphasizing the particular relationship between these indigenous peoples and their unique ecosystems. This section displays in a broad sense the principal theoretical approaches that have predominated throughout the studies on the Amazonian indigenous groups and how these theoretical perspectives and anthropologists’ standpoints have played a crucial role in the ethnographic representation of the Yanomami.

The publication of the *Handbook of South American Indians*, edited by Julian Steward from 1946 to 1950, opened an ethnographic space for Anglo-American studies among “Indians of the Amazon Basin.” This monumental collection highlighted the necessity to systematize the dispersed and limited existing data of the “great South American civilizations.” Above all, it remarked the insufficient information regarding the ethnological production on lowland Amazonian Indians. The collection paid special attention to “the culture of each tribe at the time of its first contact with Europeans.”

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20 The article entitled “Discourse forms and processes in indigenous lowland South America: an areal-typological perspective” (Beier et al. 2002) presents a very fine review on the several types of discourses uttered by indigenous groups of distinct genetic linguistic affiliations of the “greater Amazonia” area. According to the authors, the concept of discourse area is analogous to the notion of linguistic area.

21 Although Steward’s work represented an astonishing effort to condense and organize information about South America Indians, we cannot overlook that major ethnographic sources of this Handbook came from previous ethnological work produced by explorers, missionaries, and local ethnologists such as Arthur Ferreira Reis, Eduardo Galvão, Curt Nimuendaju, and Darcy Ribeiro among many others for the Amazon region.
(Steward 1946 [I]:3), their levels of acculturation, and final absorption of the "Tropical Forest Tribes," into European societies. With this extensive ethnographical assessment of the "Indian Tribes" scholars would get a better picture of the remaining "little known" tribes encouraging the production of upcoming anthropological work. This apparently little studied geographical and ethnographic setting became a fertile ground for Anglo-American researchers to investigate these so-called "isolated tribes" of the Amazon Basin.

The Amazonian ethnological studies coincided with the growth of the cultural ecology approach proposed by Steward (1955). Through this perspective, cultural adaptations of the Amazon peoples to tropical environments were analyzed to determine their "levels of socio-cultural integration" to the natural world. Based on this "integration" model, Steward and Faron (1959) later developed a typology for South American societies in which horticulturalist tropical forest groups occupied an intermediate evolutionary position between the "Andean irrigation civilizations," at the top, and the "nomadic hunter and gatherers," at the bottom. The Yanomami, identified by that time as "Waika, Guaharibo, or Shiriana" (Metraux 1948) as well as the Gê indigenous groups, were placed wrongly with the nomadic hunter and gatherer tribes within this evolutionary scale. 22 Despite the fact that Steward recognized certain ecological differences and cultural variations among Amazonian groups, the use of this typological scheme led these authors to put together "into a common framework" (Hatch

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22 Further researches on Yanomami subsistence patterns accounted later that besides hunting and gathering activities they regularly practice gardening tasks (Chagnon 1968; Barandarian 1967; Lizot 1971, 1980). These researches reported once for all that the Yanomami were not a nomadic society.
1973) a wide variety of Amazonian groups, oversimplifying the diversity of their cultural patterns and their environments.

The cultural ecology theory with its several ramifications dominated for a considerable period the studies of Amazonian indigenous peoples. Research that followed this conceptual frame stressed the relationship between ecological settings and cultural systems considering kinship rules, economic practices, residence patterns, and political organization to examine how this nature-culture interaction kept the cultural structure as a whole. Among the subdivisions of the cultural ecology theory, two main tendencies influenced the Amazonian studies. One was the cultural materialist trend developed by Marvin Harris (1979), who argued for an articulation between the environmental factors and cultural development that functions as an integrated whole. The second trend was drawn on neo-Darwinian principles in which cultural patterns were explained through biological determinants. This perspective known as sociobiology or evolutionary biology gained a particular space in Yanomami studies through the works of Napoleon Chagnon. The Amazonian peoples and especially the Yanomami became the perfect example of an isolated tribal society for testing conceptual and methodological models based on these ecological and biological determinants.

The best example in which the Amazon basin continued to be the core of intellectual choice of cultural speculations (Viveiros de Castro 1996) was on the “great protein debate.” The intense and sometimes nasty discussion on the animal protein hypothesis became the focal point of an extensive academic dispute between Marvin Harris and Napoleon Chagnon regarding the causes of the Yanomami warfare during the
late 1970 and in 1980s. Harris and his followers stated that the Yanomami violence existed because of competition for scarce natural resources, especially animal protein. Chagnon, on the other hand, pointed out that tribal violence among the Yanomami took place because of male competition over women and reproductive striving.

For Chagnon the majority of the tribal conflicts arose from sexual reasons and women were the triggers that caused warfare. Some of the main critiques of these cultural ecology approaches argue that there is an excessive emphasis on ecological and biological determinants over culture. Due to the application of its rigid conceptual and methodological tools at that time, this theoretical model preferred to hypothesize on Western-scientific knowledge rather than assess the active role played by the indigenous peoples, neglecting them as historical subjects (Jorna et al. 1991).

It seems that the studies on Amazonian indigenous groups and the Yanomami in particular have gravitated around the power granted over the scientific knowledge achieved through fieldwork experiences and theoretical assumptions. Scholars have spent quite an amount of time discerning the veracity of mono-causal determinants and establishing fixed categories to find universal patterns of cultural practices while indigenous peoples were reified as mere objects of study. The scientific dogmas

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23 This perspective stressed that game depletion was the key source to understand subsequently warfare patterns among Yanomami groups and among other Amazonian peoples. Harris displays the main arguments of this theory in several of his publications (1974, 1977, and 1984), as well as Gross (1975) and Ross (1978). Some of the scholars that contested Harris’ proposal were Chagnon (1975, 1979a), Lizot (1977), Chagnon and Hames (1980). For a wider analysis on the impact of this theoretical background among Yanomami studies see Ferguson (1995) and Sponsel (1998).

24 I not intend to discuss in this dissertation the variables that cause Yanomami warfare. This topic has been the core of Chagnon’s work (1968, 1979b, 1983, 1988, and 1992) and has been highly discussed among scholars. Some of the major arguments against Chagnon’s proposition of Yanomami warfare are
compressed by several theoretical models have operated as ideological tools to locate, or I should say, to “interpellate” according to Althusser (1971) the Yanomami in an objectified scheme.

The continuity of these approaches on Yanomami studies is still in force with certain variants. This is the case of Ferguson’s works, wherein, in spite of his efforts to incorporate a critical historical perspective on Yanomami warfare, he insists on arguing about the causes that motivate the Yanomami to make war (Ferguson 1992, 1995, 2001). These rhetorical exercises on the causes of Yanomami aggression have generated the perpetuation of detached views between the production of knowledge and the people themselves. In Foucault’s terms (1970) the scientific knowledge and the highly structured “scientific classification” have turned the Yanomami into objectified subjects. Thus, the discourses of these theoretical models have reduced Yanomami violent behavioral patterns to the scarcity of a specific strategic resource. For Chagnon the problem is the shortage of women, for Harris it is that of animal protein, and for Ferguson it is the introduction of manufactured tools (cf. Sponsel 1998).

Another main theory that influenced the studies on Amazonian indigenous peoples was the structuralist approach developed by Lévi-Strauss. Based on his research among the Nambikwara in Brazil, Lévi-Strauss concentrated on the symbolic and cognitive value of the material dimension of social life. The idea of revealing the structures of symbolic manifestations of the indigenous groups represented in their myths and kinship relationships constituted a strong trend in the study of the Amazonian
peoples. The structural anthropology had its first impact on the Amazonian ethnology through the British social anthropology and specifically on the Harvard Central-Brazil Project (among the Ge groups) conducted by Maybury-Lewis (1967, 1979). In the studies about Yanomami, the initial works of Jacques Lizot exhibited clearly this structuralist influence (Lizot 1971, 1972, 1977). On the other hand, as Kenneth Good (1991) pointed out, while Lizot was Lévi-Strauss’ student he himself was Marvin Harris’s student, and Harris emphatically rejected the structuralist perspective. As Harris attacked Lévi-Strauss’ exaggerated concern on myth and mental phenomenon in understanding human culture, structuralist supporters disdained Harris’ pragmatism because of the reduction of culture to merely material forces, considering his theory as “vulgar materialism.”

Structuralism through a “structural-culturalist orientation” (Viveiros de Castro 1996) mainly dominated the subsequent ethnological studies in which social organization, kinship, cosmologies, rituals, and religious manifestations were privileged in ethnographic accounts. Through the structuralist perspective, synchronic analyses and inquiries regarding ideological and symbolic dimensions of culture prevailed in the ethnographic studies of lowland Amazonian cultures. The ethnographic production based on this approach highlighted the cognitive construction of indigenous mythical worlds that had been neglected by cultural ecologists.

However, in spite of revealing the symbolic order of natives groups, the main critique of Amazonian structuralists was that they tended to idealize and reify the notion of culture as an entity separated from the active subjects. There was such a high

predisposition to focus on the mental structures of the natives that sometimes the researchers were more concerned with the myths themselves than with the individual narrators who, in some occasions, were portrayed as the mere information carriers (Jorna et al. 1991).

Through this theoretical approach the Amazonian peoples again constituted a perfect setting for developing a new socio-cultural typology. It is known that Lévi-Strauss' (1966) classification of mythic societies or "cold societies" vis-à-vis the supposed industrialized and historically more complex cultures or "hot societies" had its birth when he classified the Amazonian peoples as "cold societies." This dualistic model served for a while as a main frame in the work of Maybury-Lewis (1979) and his followers for accounting for Amazonian societies. This type of polarized characterization objectified the Amazonian peoples in a temporal and spatial discourse as well since it encapsulated them in macro categories that prevented any discerning of the effects of historical processes and internal shifts of their cultural orders.25

These are the theoretical platforms that predominated as the anthropological canons for accounting for the adaptations of Amazonian indigenes to their environment as well as for exploring their cosmological and kinship systems. As Viveiros de Castro points out, despite the conceptual divergences on the studies of Amazonian groups between cultural ecologists and structuralists, there were also common views projected

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25 The collection of articles compiled by Hill in Rethinking History and Myth (1988) contests clearly Lévi-Strauss' notion of Amazonian peoples as cold societies or mythical societies, posing them instead within historical narratives. This collection argues that mythical stories are not closed structures of symbolic relations opposed to historical processes; on the contrary for Hill "mythic and historical modes of social consciousness" are related and represent "complementary ways of interpreting social processes" (1988:7).
by both groups regarding the Amazon basin; this region "was still seen as the habitat of small, dispersed, isolated groups that were autonomous and self-contained, egalitarian and technologically austere" (1996:182).

At different levels these diverse theoretical mainstreams contributed to fostering the image of unalterable "exotic Indians" in which a sense of enduring systems and idyllic relations between culture and nature took place. These timeless and static images of indigenous peoples have been portrayed in ethnographic writings. In those texts, anthropologists have mainly described the indigenous peoples through the ethnographic-present rhetoric while ignoring the historical processes experienced by them that included changes in their economic, social, and political patterns. Moreover, in order to objectify "the native" and to establish a scientific validation of the data, ethnographers tried to adopt a clear distance between themselves and the indigenous peoples in which the use of the third person pronoun predominated in the ethnographic writing.

The writing strategies that held these theoretical backgrounds revealed an epistemological perspective that focused on 'to know' and 'to account for' the unknown Amazonian populations and territories that did not necessarily imply the inclusion of the indigenous peoples' active roles in their ethnographic discourses. Many of these conventional ethnographies on the Amazonian indigenous peoples neglected the historical processes of social transformation while they underpinned the notion of undisturbed "Indians" living in their ancestral territory (Roosevelt 1994). These

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Although in the ethnographic writings anthropologists used to display synchronic analysis based on these cultural ecology or structuralist approaches, some of them have also carried out intense advocacy work supporting Amazonian Indigenous groups. An example of this advocacy work was the creation of the organization of Survival International set up by David Maybury-Lewis in 1969.
traditional ethnographies displayed the legitimacy of the ethnographic information through scientific discourses that encompassed a sense of totality, authority, and objectivism. That is perceived in the many theoretical debates carried out by scholars of the different schools of thought.

There is a third tendency that concerns the use of the notion of history as a conceptual framework that considers the changes experienced by the Amazonian peoples. These studies developed mainly by Brazilian anthropologists and other Latin American anthropologists focused more on cultural contacts and transforming processes during colonial time and within the later impact of the nation-states’ policies and capitalist system. At the beginning of the 1960s, Cardoso de Oliveira, based on Ribeiro’s works (1962) on contact relations of indigenous populations, developed a whole research line on the notion of interethnic frictions considered by many as “the most successful theoretical innovation produced in Brazil” (Peirano 1998). In his book, O Indio e o Mundo dos Brancos, published in 1964, Cardoso de Oliveira critically discusses the “situation of contact” and argues for theoretical concepts that enlighten the type of relationship between the indigenous peoples and the Brazilian State, proposing the analysis of the “interethnic friction” (Cardoso de Oliveira 1963). This author concentrated on cultural tensions established between indigenous peoples and the Brazilian nation-state and on the

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27 Fernando Ortiz (1978) in “Contrapunteo Cubano. Del Tabaco y el Azúcar” published in 1940 had already developed a critical stance regarding the cultural transformations of Afro-Cuban cultures as the result of the colonial and neocolonial processes. In this book, he argued that the concept of “acculturation” was too lineal, inflexible, and limited to explain the cultural changes experienced by the “colonized peoples” as a consequence of the impositions of the immigrant colonizers. Instead, he proposed the notion of “transculturation” implies a more reciprocal process among the groups and accounts for a new phenomenon, an emergent social reality that combines the point of views of two or more cultures.
consequences of a “potential integration” of the tribal groups into the national society. Through the interethnic friction model this author was searching for “the structural variables that direct the perspective and levels of articulation and participation of native people in the national society” (Wright 1988:372).

Cardoso de Oliveira, taking as point of departure the study of “interethnic contacts,” had a critical view of the notion of “social change” sustained by the British functionalist approach and the North American “acculturation studies” developed by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovitz. Considering the situation of contact of the indigenous populations this author criticized the acculturation theory that, while accounting for the cultural changes occurring in traditional societies, failed to reflect “any engagement with the survival of tribal population” (Cardoso de Oliveira 1964:27). Viveiros de Castro and Carneiro da Cunha (1993) have also emphasized that acculturation and social change were just descriptive terms that overlooked the processes of interaction among societies, asserting that those were “amorphous terms” used to depict “amorphous processes.”

The interethnic friction model developed at the beginning of the 1970s influenced the subsequent generations of Brazilian and other South American anthropologists who have worked with Amazonian societies. Alcida Rita Ramos, who has done extensive research among the Sanumá (a Yanomami linguistic sub-group settled in the northern border of Brazil and Venezuela), embraced this idea of “interethnic friction” to account for the relationship between the Amazonian indigenes and the national society. In the book Hierarquia e Simbiose. Relacões Intertribais no Brasil (1980), she argues for an analysis of the inter-tribal relations in which asymmetric and symmetric alliances also
take place among different indigenous groups. More recently, Ramos (1995) presents not only an ethnographic accounts on Sanumá social organization and kinship relationship, but also recounts the devastating impact of the road constructions and gold mining among the Yanomami in Brazil. Current studies that are rooted in the interethnic friction tradition consider critically the status of indigenous peoples within the Brazilian national contexts (Carneiro da Cunha 1992, Sousa Lima 1995, and Ramos 1998).

It would be unfair if I tried to classify all the Amazonian ethnographies within these theoretical models as if all of them would invariably have been grounded on one or another approach. However, in order to summarize the ethnographic discourses that encompass the different representations of Amazonian indigenous peoples, I would say that there are two main referential images that have been perpetuated by the academic rhetoric until a few years ago. These are the “isolated Indian” and the “contacted Indian.” The diffusion of these two images in some way coincides with two scholarly standpoints respectively: the North American and European tradition or “the metropolitan anthropology” and the Latin American perspective or “periphery anthropology.” These two anthropological traditions can be also identified as the development of theoretical frames for the former vis-à-vis applied and political standpoints for the Latin Americanists. However, beyond the distinction between theoretical and applied anthropology that certainly has produced different approaches in the studying of

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28 I prefer to use these spatial and temporal referents to describe these two forms of representations of the Amazon indigenous peoples. There are of course other essentialist categories such as exotic, heathen, primitive, and nomadic Indians that are linked to this notion of “isolated native.” These naturalized images of the indigenous groups as savage, inferior, and backward have been managed by the controlling colonial and post-colonial apparatus as ideological justification to adopt intense policies of indigenous incorporation into the mainstream societies.
indigenous peoples, there are also narratives styles, methodological standpoints, and forms of personal engagement that are better gauged through the looking glass of metropolitan and periphery academic perspectives.

The images of "isolated" and "self-contained" Amazonian indigenes have been mainly displayed by the cultural ecology and structuralist perspectives (metropolitan anthropology), which emphasized this objectified image of indigenous groups transforming them into timeless and exotic peoples. These pictures are captured in the ethnographic writing style, in which the use of the ethnographic present device and universal claims has prevailed. The second form of representation emphasized the "contacted Indian." This standpoint developed mostly by the peripheral anthropology has been concerned with the policies of integration and domination perpetuated by the nation-states, and the adaptation processes experienced by these groups due to the state-purported expansion. This perspective has considered historical and political issues and more recently has taken into account the responses and struggles of the indigenous groups regarding their land, languages, and indigenous rights.

There are, of course, other particular ethnographic texts (written in essay format) that have depicted the Amazonian indigenous peoples within wider social, ecological, and historical contexts. However, there are still commonsensical ideas endorsed by some academic circles and public opinion that only stress the former life styles and the

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traditional patterns of these indigenous peoples, thereby reproducing a romantic image of cultural immutability. Santos Granero (1996) states that the ethnographic literature of the Amazonian indigenous peoples has highlighted above all "the traditional life" of these peoples rather than their processes of social change, denying their contemporaneous condition. In this sense, current studies on Amazonian groups in general and on the Yanomami in particular call for a recognition of the contemporaneous conditions of indigenous peoples in which not only their cultural differences are acknowledged, but also the intercultural relationships with other indigenous groups as well as with the rest of the national society. The main concern is that anthropologists should consider the existence of different layers of ethnographic reality and different narrative registers that display the coeval existence of the people with whom they work. The challenge now is to reveal the diversity, complexity, mobility, and heterogeneity of groups such as the Yanomami.

Yanomami, the eternal "Other"

The Yanomami have represented the archetypal example of a "tribal," "primitive," "isolated group" in anthropological literature and in the public domain. Dozens of textbooks, scientific articles, fictional literature, \(^{30}\) and films still display the

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\(^{30}\) *Shapono, A visit to a remote and magical world in the South American Rainforest* (1982) written by Florinda Donner was apparently conceived as an experimental ethnographic work based on anthropological field research among the Yanomami in Venezuela. However, much has criticized about the veracity of this text to the extent that several anthropologists asserted that the book was a total fraud. Holmes (1983), for instance, argues that Donner plagiarized Ettore Biocca’s book (1970), on the stories of Helena Valero, a white girl kidnapped by the Yanomami. The way Donner describes the ethnographic settings and the indigenous ways of life gives the impression that the book is more a personal construction of imaginary experiences apparently performed with Yanomami groups.
Yanomami as the ideal exotic people, a self-contained indigenous group, extremely aggressive and hostile, that lives in perfect harmony with its environment. They have been commonly known as “the fierce people.” Under that stereotypical image the Yanomami have become “the most famous tribe in the world,” as Napoleon Chagnon pointed out once regarding the popularity of his ethnography.

In some ways that statement is right; the Yanomami are a very popular people, not only in the academia but also in the media and in the public sphere. “Everybody has heard, seen, or read something about the Yanomami,” a non-anthropologist friend told me once when we were arguing about the international popularity of this group. Several authors have highlighted the impact of the Yanomami exotic representation in the scientific world. Davis, for example, who by the middle of the 1970s had already questioned the anthropological representation of the Yanomami and the diffusion of the warfare images, wrote:

[T]he Yanomamo are one of the best-documented Indian tribes in the Amazon Basin. Thousands of college students have read about the Yanomamo in introductory courses... The obvious reason for the popularity of the Yanomamo lies in the unique pattern of warfare and male aggression which Prof. Chagnon has chosen to highlight in his various ethnographic studies of this tribe” (Davis 1976:7).

Other authors have remarked on the distorted reputation created on the Yanomami as the “favorite contemporary ‘exotic people’ in the teaching of undergraduate anthropology” (Marcus 1992:x). Some have argued that the Yanomami have been portrayed “as exemplars of ‘primitive warfare’ in most introductory textbooks” (Sponsel 1998).
These ethnographic images have also been disseminated in the printed and visual media where most of the time the Yanomami embody the ideal “primitive savage” with none or barely any relationship with the Western world. The task of identifying and analyzing the wide gamut of news coverage, journal articles, films, and even human rights campaigns related to this indigenous group would be an endeavor that exceeds the main topic of this thesis. However, an example that recently caught my attention due to the bizarre nature of the argument was the film entitled “Dragonfly” (2002). This is a Hollywood thriller movie and perhaps we should not expect too much regarding a fair ethnographic portrayal of indigenous peoples. Yet what is surprising is that here the Yanomami are used, once again, as the stereotypical and exotic icon to depict the “real primitive.” In this film they are represented as the cliched native, living in a sacred and secret place, wearing loincloths, screaming in a pidgin language, and worshiping a foreign human deity. These are the Yanomami images that are constantly reproduced in the media and that are cast and fixed in the popular imagination in the United States, Brazil, Venezuela, and elsewhere.

The discussion of why the Yanomami are becoming the perfect “Other” is linked to how they have been depicted historically and ethnographically. Anthropologists usually confront their western values with the natives' cultural values. Most of the time ethnographers arrive in the field with an objective attitude regarding the culture that we are going to study, and have theoretical frameworks and hypotheses that will guide the course of the research. However, we also have preconceived ideas, prejudices, anxieties and fears that are projected in the development of our own fieldwork and towards the local people that we
are studying. In some sense, anthropologists usually build and reconstruct the culture of the "Other" according to their own objective and subjective parameters.

Thus, forms of representations of the "Other" are drawn on the construction and application of certain anthropological theories as well as by personal field experiences of anthropologists who pursue to explain, directly or indirectly, Yanomami cultural practices. How anthropologists have portrayed the Yanomami according to their fieldwork experiences is a question that Ramos (1992) addressed in her article, "Reflecting on The Yanomami: Ethnographic images and the pursuit of the exotic."

Based on the ethnographic work of three anthropologists that carried out fieldwork almost at the same time in Yanomami territory (two in Venezuela and one in Brazil), Ramos argues that each ethnographer constructed a particular image of the Yanomami according to their "personal inclinations."

The ethnographic images of the Yanomami displayed by these three different anthropologists, according to Ramos (1992), varied surprisingly in spite of the fact that there were no time or event divergences when they carried out their fieldwork. For Napoleon Chagnon (1983), the Yanomami were the fierce people. For Jacques Lizot (1978) the Yanomami were the erotic people. For Bruce Albert (1985) they were the mystical Indians. These cultural anthropologists had and have different theoretical backgrounds and, although they have worked with the same indigenous people and almost at the same time, they have developed different "interpretations" of Yanomami culture. It is clear that anthropologists' personal experiences and inclinations determined the production of knowledge. In Chagnon's case, through his ethnographic research he
found and "saw" facts that supported his theoretical position according to his sociobiology approach. On the other hand, Lizot was trained in a structuralist approach, and after twenty years of living among the Yanomami, he ended up developing an intensive linguistic work that is in different ways a reflection of his perception of the Yanomami. In the case of Albert he rediscovered the mythical or "intellectual" dimension of this indigenous group, which is displayed in his writing on the symbolic representation of disease. In sum, these differences, regarding their perceptions of the Yanomami, have to do with their theoretical backgrounds, their methodological approaches, and their personal experiences that determine the way the Yanomami are conceptualized and represented in anthropological texts.

_The state's influence in a "tribal zone"_

In the extensive ethnographic production about this indigenous group, other approaches have emerged trying to explain the causes of the Yanomami warfare. For Ferguson (1992, 1995) the Yanomami were not entirely isolated, and they were part of an intense exchange network of Western goods with other indigenous groups. He asserts that there is a coexistence of the presence of the state in a "tribal zone," allowing the indigenous peoples to maintain their independence while carrying out intra-ethnic warfare. According to Ferguson, the tribal zone "is an extensive area beyond state administrative control, inhabited by non-state people who must react to the far-flung effects of the state presence" (1995:6). This author, whose explanations are based not on field research but on the analysis of secondary and ethnohistorical sources, actually
considers that Yanomami warfare is the product of the presence of “Western society.” It is the state influence that can explain variations in the form and intensity of violence among this indigenous group. This interpretation of Yanomami warfare is opposed to the idea that warfare is only caused by the competition among males for the acquisition of women, as has been argued by Napoleon Chagnon in several editions of *Yanomamo: The fierce people* (1968, 1977, 1983, 1992, and 1997).

Although Ferguson attributes Yanomami warfare to the state presence through the access and exchange of Western goods, this interpretation based on a materialistic approach is equally essentialist, and does not transcend the utilitarian domain of manufactured goods. The understanding of Yanomami warfare has become the core of endless discussion in academic circles. Ferguson, in his intent of explaining in a different way the causes of Yanomami violence (once again) exaggerates the influence of Western commodities. With this, I am not saying that the commodities must be neglected; on the contrary, the impact of Western commodities in Yanomami society is indisputable, but reducing the causes of warfare just to the incorporation of foreign goods into Yanomami life results in an extremely mechanistic view.

There are other interpretations of Yanomami warfare that consider other cultural factors. For instance, sorcery or even the fear of potential sorcery could generate conflicts since it might bring diseases and death to the members of the villages (Smole 1976). Albert (1990), on the other hand, argues that Yanomami warfare has to be seen and understood as a complex cultural construction in which an “ideational/ritual dimension” should be considered. Yanomami warfare shall take into consideration “a classification of
sociopolitical distances [of the villages], a theory of physical and supernatural aggression, and a system of symbolic exchange via funerary and war rituals” (Albert 1990:561). I would add that Yanomami warfare is the final result of multidimensional socio-political processes, in which individuals according to their kinship and inter-village relationships embody first a whole gamut of forms of negotiation, concession, and resistance as constitutive elements of an ethics of conflict resolution. The Yanomami employ several mechanisms to solve individual and collective antagonisms that fluctuate from simply ignoring the other person to more direct forms of dialogue and exchange that might help to dissipate the conflict.

It is definitely clear that the Yanomami have been constantly attracted to the acquisition of Western commodities, and they have historically established diverse strategies to attain these manufactured goods. However, claiming that Yanomami warfare is mainly a consequence of the distribution and access to Western commodities constrains not only the multi-variable nature of their intra-ethnic conflicts, but also neglects other state-forms of national expansion that are not represented ultimately in material objects. The state influences among out-of the ways peoples such as the Yanomami have to be seen and understood also through national institutions, public services, local and regional ideologies, and the application of indigenist policies by the many governmental institutions.

Making a comparative analysis of the cultural encounters between the state and other indigenous groups, vis-à-vis the state and the Yanomami, we can distinguish which are the main socio-political factors that affect in different degrees the process of cultural
transformation among each indigenous group. This historical and comparative approach will lead us to an understanding of their current behavior in relation to the national Venezuelan society. Due to geographical, historical, and political reasons, the colonial and postcolonial state did not aggressively penetrate into the Alto Orinoco until very recently. The Yanomami did not experience the coercive ways of state power and the enforced incorporation into the national development schemes such as many other indigenous groups suffered until the middle of the 20th century. These are historical facts that need to be pondered to understand the later forms of political penetration of the state and indigenous responses.

**Ethnography of the present**

Several years ago, a group of Yanomami attended the International Conference on Yanomami Habitat and Culture held in Caracas. At the end of the conference, five or six of them—who had come from the Mavaca and Ocamo areas—gathered with a few anthropologists and missionaries in order to watch Yanomami films. Timothy Asch, a visual anthropologist who had years earlier produced a series of documentaries in the Alto Orinoco, wanted to show them "The Feast," "The Ax Fight," and several other of his films. After the screenings, Asch asked them what they thought of the films. The Yanomami stated that the films were accurate. *Noreshi thé pê peheti,* "the films are true," they said. However, they also asserted that those films showed only one side of

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31 Timothy Asch recorded 37 films among the Yanomami during the late 1960s and the 1970s. Many of them were produced in conjunction with Napoleon Chagnon. At the end of the 1980s, Asch changed his
Yanomami life, that of the early people, no patapi thé pë. They then pointed out, “we also have other things,” “we do other things besides what you portray in those noreshi.” They continued,

We have schools, a craft cooperative, health dispensaries, and there are missionaries, doctors, and anthropologists who live with us. We carry out other activities in our villages and gardens that are not shown in those films.

They certainly agreed with Asch’s films but they also wanted to see other aspects of Yanomami life depicted. They were asking for a different representation of their culture, one that integrated customary life with the experiences that the Yanomami were living at that time with outside institutions and foreigners.

This encounter, which took place at the end of 1990, shocked and challenged us all. These few Yanomami in Caracas were demanding different perspectives of what they were experiencing in those days, other representations of themselves that reflected a spatial-temporal approach of their life and their social reality in a cultural-shifting process. The Yanomami were asking for a contemporaneous view of themselves. A recent testimony given by one of the leaders of the Upper Mavaca area complements this example.

We are getting tired of anthropologists who always come here to take pictures, ask a bunch of questions, write books and get rich. We want people that work perspective on ethnographic filming, and rather than producing more documentaries encouraged instead the Yanomami to do their own filming according to their own scheme.

This exchange resulted in the creation of the Yanomami Educational Video Project, also known as the Noreshi Project. Through this initiative, the Yanomami learned how to use video cameras to record their most relevant contemporary events. For more details on this experience, see Asch et al. (1991). One of the outcomes of this project was the first Yanomami-made film Escuela ipa yahi ké a (The school is my home) indexed in: Venezuela, Biblioteca Nacional, 1995.

He later explained to me that this belief regarding anthropologists “getting rich by selling books about Yanomami” was because he had heard that Napoleon Chagnon had written and sold many books.
with us, that help us to understand the nape life, that teach us different things of what is going on right now, and not people that only take photos of us wearing loin cloths and with bows and arrows.... (Serafin, Upper Mavaca 2000).

I felt myself once again contested but inspired by this comment. I had first met Serafin several years earlier in one of the villages of the Mavaca area and later in Caracas, while he attended a meeting on native issues. As an indigenous representative, he has played an active role in fostering as well as discouraging (depending on the case) the incorporation of Yanomami groups into the criollo world. At the beginning, he was one of the Yanomami leaders most concerned with the internal organization of the villages in promoting self-management projects, working for the SUYAO cooperative, and supporting the creation of the Alto Orinoco Biosphere Reserve in Yanomami territory. By the time that I was doing field research for this dissertation, he had acquired a more radical stance, encouraging major cultural changes among the members of his community and the involvement of the Mavaca villages in local and national politics. In fact, by the year 2000 he was running as candidate for one of the positions at the Concejo Municipal (Municipal County) of the Alto Orinoco municipality. As I recall, I replied:

In some ways you are right. We anthropologists come to where you live, spend quite a bit of time among you asking many questions about many things, and taking notes and pictures because that is part of what we have to accomplish in the field. But we also work to support your local endeavors and initiatives.

I told him that there are many different ways of doing anthropology. It is true that some anthropologists and other scientists have taken notes and photos among the Yanomami and after finishing their work they left and never came back again. It is also

where he “talked about the Yanomami.” He was referring to the many editions of Yanomamö. The Fierce People.
true that there are other researchers who carry out studies among indigenous peoples and work simultaneously with local communities in advocating their projects. In a participatory way, anthropologists might get politically engaged supporting indigenous projects and people’s claims to their rights. However, in order to work with the members of the Yanomami communities in a collaborative effort, anthropologists have to know how they think and how they perform their cultural practices and what they expect from the researchers and other outsiders. It would be very hard to cooperate with them if anthropologists did not have certain basic kinds of knowledge about their culture. This conversation ended by us making jokes on how anthropologists and napē in general ask really silly questions about Yanomami practices that are quite obvious for the Yanomami themselves.

This testimony contests the role of anthropologists in the field, the depiction of the Yanomami in anthropological texts, and the insufficiency of foreign information that indigenes would like to have. Serafin’s statement deals with the problem of ethnographic representation and the awareness of their current situation. When this leader requests that their daily life be recorded and depicted in present time it means that it should not be frozen in an ethnographic present rhetoric. He contests the production of past ethnographic discourses that account for some few aspects of their life. These kinds of statements challenge us as anthropologists and urge us to look for new perspectives that transcend conventional styles on doing and writing ethnographies, some of which have promoted an exotic image of this indigenous group.
These types of ethnographic testimonies also embrace multiple voices and points of view from different social actors. These voices are not only from the Yanomami, the *napê* (outsider) people, and my own as someone who is arranging the pieces of this ethnographic puzzle, but also from a same individual who might express heteroglossic registers (Bakhtin 1981). The articulation of different voices and actions from the same individual reveals the complexity of discursive forms related to what the person experiences in everyday life. These rhetorical modes and cultural practices, in which the individual utters multiple voices depending on the daily interaction with other people, confirm that ethnographic representations should account for general socio-cultural changes as well as for the transformations of individual discourses.

In the case of Serafín, the Yanomami leader, his discourses (multiple voices) frequently varied according to his social interactions. For instance, to one of my questions on how he was planning to win the elections (he was running as candidate for one of the Municipal Council positions), he emphatically answered:

I don’t care about the elders, my only concerns are the young people because they know how to vote and they vote. Here in this *shapono* there are only young people who can and know how to vote. (Serafín, Upper Mavaca 2000).

Here, he was asserting his political authority as a candidate and his knowledge about the electoral process to an anthropologist, a *napêyoma* (female outsider) who was asking questions about his candidacy. He stated that the young people were his concern because they were the ones who had identification cards and could vote, while most of the elders did not have ID cards and thus couldn’t vote. His language and attitude were
different when he talked several days later to a group of *criollo* politicians who were asking about the local support for his candidacy. He said:

> I am running as a candidate because I do not trust other Yekuana and Yanomami candidates for the municipal council at the *alcaldía* (county seat). However, I am going to need all the support of my people, from this village and other villages. I am going to need the support of the elders, young people, women, and even kids.... I am going to need the support of all of them. (Serafín, Upper Mavaca 2000).

In this case, the candidate was telling the *criollos* about his electoral strategies based on his ethnic and intra-village affiliations, adding that he was going to require the collaboration of all the people, including the elders. These words exemplify how the same individual can express different language registers according to the contexts and interactions with the listeners. Dealing with outside politics is clearly a novel setting in which the Yanomami perform different discursive registers, which show a contemporaneous view of an indigenous group that is experiencing continuing cultural changes.

The production of additional ethnographic knowledge about the Yanomami requires, therefore, to reassess some fundamental questions that lead me to frame this dissertation within a more flexible ethnographic perspective that considers the relationship of historical processes, forms of representation, and cultural transformations experienced by particular Yanomami groups. First, one might ask about *what* I am going to describe and explain here about the Yanomami. This question by itself (incidentally very predictable but fundamental) might drive me to pursue very concrete features of their life styles within the standard discursive rhetoric of doing and writing ethnography. Although the primary goal of this dissertation is to examine and account for the gradual
Yanomami participation in Venezuela’s regional and national political structures, I do not pretend merely to describe the causes of their incorporation or to account for their internal social and political organization. I will place their cultural transformations in historical periods distinguishing the impact of major social and political events. Through the examination of local and national events within historical processes and waves of cultural transformations, I argue that ethnographic accounts of indigenous population can exceed the semantic rigidity of the ethnographic present tense.

Second, from a more analytical perspective, one might ask *how* I am going to portray and (re)present the Yanomami in this dissertation. This question addresses a more provoking issue since it deals with a self-reflexive position concerning the relationship between the investigator and the investigated that has epistemological and even ethical implications for how to (re)present them in an ethnographic text. The main concern of this question is which Yanomami I am going to depict here. The whole ethnic group shares cultural patterns and commonalties, but it also displays cultural, linguistic, and societal particularities that require diverse approaches for understanding the local cultural flow. It would be wrong if we were to think that there is a generic and universal Yanomami, as it would be wrong as well to think that there is a universal Venezuelan, or North American, or any other societal group archetype. As Fox (1991) states, working and writing about the world at the present not only means to stress the contemporary but also to point out the peculiar. I intend to address the cultural peculiarities of the Alto

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The examination of “events” enables placing the actions and strategies employed by people within spatial and temporal interconnected frames. Moore (1987, 1994), Barth (1994), Turner (1988), and Salzman (1999) describe how the examination of “events,” as key sources of information, provides an accurate understanding of social dynamics and cultural changes.
Orinoco Yanomami concentrated in the Orinoco-Mavaca area within a wider context related to the Venezuelan State formation and the regional and local events that have affected them in different ways.

Finally, a more essential and at the same time challenging question might be, why I am going to write another ethnography, one more dissertation on the Yanomami. If this indigenous group is already “well-known” in anthropological circles due to the large amount of ethnographic literature produced on them, readily “recognized” worldwide and in different scientific spheres because of their physical and cultural characteristics, and are seemingly “icons” of a native authenticity in the popular cultural domains, why then would I write an additional ethnography on the Yanomami? Considering the existence of this ethnographic production, it is legitimate to ask if there is something novel to say about the Yanomami that has not been already stated in the large amount of material published and filmed on this particular indigenous group.

This last question leads me to consider what Roseberry stated once, that some anthropologists “[treat] culture as a product but not as a production” (1994:26). In fact, beyond this reified notion of culture as a product that has been lately criticized (Rosaldo 1993, Hannerz 1992, Spivak 1999), this suggestive statement claims to reassess the notion of people in action, rather than focussing on the notion of culture as a merely

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Doctoral dissertations written in English for North American and British universities have favored the following conceptual themes: Cultural ecology and subsistence patterns (Taylor 1972, Colchester 1982, Sponsel 1981, Good 1989); Social organization, kinship relationships, and sex roles (Ramos 1972, Shapiro 1972, Saffirio 1985); Social structure and changes (Peters 1973); Warfare, marriages alliances, and evolutionary psychology (Chagnon 1966, Melancon 1982, Fredlund 1982, Hagen 1999); Language and grammar (Migliazza 1972, Godwing-Gómez 1990); and Genetics (Ward 1970, Spielman 1971, Lorey 1985). Other doctoral theses on ritual system, shamanism, and medicine are written in French (Albert 1985) and in Portuguese (Smiljanic-Borges 1999). I mention here only the production of doctoral dissertations;
abstraction. Culture has to be seen as a process in motion, as a progressive social enactment that is molded by gradual changes from the inside and the outside world. The intention is, therefore, to reexamine the performative practices of people who experience ongoing shifting processes as a result of internal and external forces.

This constitutes the main reason for a new ethnographic production and additional assessments of the current situation of Alto Orinoco Yanomami. Thus, doing ethnography and (re)writing culture once more on the Yanomami guides me to reaffirm that cultures are not given products; they are not fixed. On the contrary they are unpredictable since people constantly incorporate new elements into their lives and reject others in the course of events. The implementation of diverse strategies of accommodation and contestation in an effort of cultural resilience to the new cultural encounters generates constant changes that are needed to address progressively among any social group. Hence, there are no conclusive ethnographic truths because cultural practices are always making, building, and assembling themselves in dynamic social processes. The notion that culture goes through transforming processes in terms of meaning, structures, symbols, and ideas has been identified as "culture in motion" (Rosaldo 1993); "cultural flow" (Hannerz 1992), "the cultural in motion" (Borofsky 1994), or "culture on the run" Spivak (1999). However, this evident principle of cultures in transformation is still neglected in some current anthropological studies on Amazonian indigenous peoples.

however, there are also a number of Master thesis' and licenciatura (BA) theses produced in Spanish and Portuguese, and a few in English.
Ethnographies acquire a temporal and spatial value since they can only account for a concrete social reality in a specific space and time. Postmodernists have also highlighted this idea that “ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial-committed and incomplete” and that “culture is contested, temporal, and emergent” (Clifford 1986:7, 19). What the ethnographers see is what they observe in a specific time and, later, what they write about. In most cases there is a temporal and spatial detachment between the empirical research and the writing stage. This separation, according to Fabian (1983:71-79), emerges through the “allochronism” established in the use of rhetorical devices that display a temporal distancing between the subject (the ethnographer) and the object (in this case an indigenous group) of anthropology. While fieldwork entails a sharing of time with the people, writing commonly presupposes a temporal distancing denying the coevalness to the object of inquiry (Fabian 1983, Marcus and Fisher 1986, Hastrup 1995).

Yanomami ethnographies that take into account the articulation of their different ways of life with cultural clashes, different social and political backgrounds, local perspectives within national contexts, and diverse spatial and temporal perspectives are required to depict current events in a changing world. The coming out of alternative narratives that consider the “ethnography of the present” (Moore 1994) instead of the conventional ethnographic present justifies the necessity for additional ethnographies on the Yanomami.

The goal, therefore, is to correlate the present histories of the Yanomami groups settled in the Orinoco and Mavaca Rivers who are engaged in active and participatory forms in broader national and political contexts with past events and previous encounters
with the criollo world. It is essential to understand and enlighten the present events and current situations experienced by these people through an historical discourse that links past events concerning the different impacts of national frontier expansion. The purpose is to encompass diverse historical frames and political alterations of the Yanomami territorial spaces with their everyday life expressions and the paradoxes confronted in their articulation with the new socio-political systems. This kind of ethnographic entanglement is what the Yanomami were claiming for in their commentaries quoted at the beginning of this section, which is also related to the statement from this “manifesto for ethnography.”

For us the best ethnography also recognizes and records how experience is entrained in the flow of contemporary history, large and small, partly caught up in its movement, partly itself creatively helping to maintain it, enacting the uncertainty of the eddies and gathering flows dryly recorded from the outside as ‘structures’ and ‘trends.’ (Willis and Trodman 2000:6).

The ethnographic experience entails indistinguishable “eddies” and is the task of the anthropologist to discern and recognize which events and phenomena are running contrary to the main historical process without neglecting the inner value of these shifting cultural flows. In a certain way, the challenge now is to write an ethnography that describes not only the details of the everyday life of the communities or the political structures of the national institutions, but one that combines the different ethnographic layers that represent the various facets of Yanomami socio-historical realities and their multiple voices.

How the Yanomami build new social and political relationships among themselves, with other indigenous groups, and with the rest of the Venezuelan society
through their engagement with the national society constitutes the scenario for this
particular enterprise of doing ethnography as well as writing ethnography. Of course, the
selection of these research criteria is the result of my own decision-making based on a
supposed “ethnographic authority” gained after undergoing field research and being in
academia for several years. It is also true that I am the one who is interested in composing
and ordering in an ethnographic description the local indigenous knowledge in order to
submit a dissertation to obtain the doctoral degree in Anthropology. Yet, the ethnographic
work does not appear merely as a scholarly construction of the anthropologist. The reality
is not simply an arbitrary and subjective creation of the researcher as the postmodern
critique has phrased in different ways.

The choices of certain themes and the information contained in this ethnography
are molded by the social facts, by the complex reality that indigenous peoples have to
confront daily in order to deal with the national and transnational expansions. In this case,
it is what particular Yanomami communities of the Alto Orinoco in Venezuela (not all
Yanomami) are currently experiencing and living in a context of cultural transformations
and within wider national-political domains. Thus, Yanomami’s points of view, their
consents, and dissents are intertwined in ethnographic discourses (instead of ethnographic
authority) that are shaped by the many voices that make up this ethnography of the
present.
CHAPTER 3
HISTORIES, ENCOUNTERS, AND ALTERITIES

When I was a kid, I heard from other Yanomami that the napê were around. I thought that the napê were like the Yanomami, I had not seen any napê. The first time that we found some napê was close to the Guaharibo Rapids. When I really saw one of them, I run of fear. They were not like Yanomami; they were different.
(Elder women from Mosho, 1999).

This chapter attempts to display different historical accounts of the encounters and “non-encounters” between Yanomami and the napê (outsiders). Making use of different historical sources such as oral narratives, myths, colonial documents, official reports, chronicles, and ethnographies, I seek to reconstruct the Yanomami history that encompasses mythical accounts, large historical processes, particular encounters, and even specific moments of the quotidian life of the Alto Orinoco Yanomami. I disclose comparatively not only the main events that occurred in the contact situation but also the “nonevents” that appear as they would have never happened or simply have been neglected in the process of the national frontier expansion.³⁶

The first part of the chapter focuses on the many ways the Yanomami have perceived the arrival of the outsiders (napê) in their territory through different discursive narratives. The Yanomami’s histories are reconstructed through mythical references,

³⁶ According to Fogelson (1989:133-147), the nonevents are historical events that have been neglected in the historical accounts. These “nonevents” are free of the historical interpretations because other natives’ narrative plots and Indians’ understanding of events are not considered. For this author, the “nonevents” are those events that were not officially documented, that concern “differential recognition” of what is considered eventful, that may be labeled “imagined,” can be invented, or because of their traumatic effects can be “denied.”
individual narratives, and past memories. This section emphasizes the distinctions made by the Yanomami between their world and the nape world using mythical accounts and variations of these stories adapted to new historical contexts. The Yanomami voices discursively accommodate the arrival of the outside elements as well as link up contradictory versions of historical events related to the presence of nape in indigenous territory and elsewhere. The first part calls attention to the rhetorical devices of the Alto Orinoco Yanomami who convey through their mythical history and their individual stories a feeling of identity and self-management, in spite of the different encounters with the nape milieu.

The European and criollo constructions and perceptions surrounding Yanomami cultural practices also require an epistemological review of the production of historiography. In the second part of this chapter I extensively analyze how the Yanomami alterity has been perceived and constituted in “Western” thought during different historical periods for almost two centuries. Particularly, I address how the image of the “ferocious Indian” is an historical construction based on conjectural and fabricated violent encounters between the outsider explorers and the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco.

Yanomami’s perceptions of the nape

We have to remember that the term Yanomami means human being, and any individual or thing that is not acknowledged as a constituent of their socio-cultural milieu will be considered nape. Thus, nape are all the other indigenous groups and white people
from any nationality, including mestizos and African descendants. Napé also refers to all things, institutions, and behaviors that come from the outside world (including the recent political phenomenon), which are not intrinsic elements of the Yanomami culture. Although the Yanomami recognize the existence of the napé, who share the "same world" but different spaces, they establish clear boundaries and cultural differences between themselves and the outsiders.

Napé means stranger, alien, and by extension a potential enemy. The otherness of the napé is so evident among the Yanomami that some anthropologists have stated that napé is a “reserved category for designating all the human beings that do not deserve any kind of consideration,” who are only good “for being robbed and attacked, an object of disdain, reduced to the level of subhumanity that is both despised and feared, guilty of the horrible misdeeds” (Lizot 1978:9-10). According to this description, the outsiders (napé) seem pretty despicable to the Yanomami and although this depiction of the napé sounds probably too harsh, there are inherent cultural reasons for that contempt.

For the Yanomami, the napé incarnate the true “Other.” They are physically different, speak other languages, and have deviant behaviors that do not correspond to Yanomami cultural expectations. They see the napé as “cannibals” because they eat bloody animal flesh which is a hideous transgression of Yanomami beliefs. Moreover, we cannot forget that napé are like enemies and napé mou means to be hostile or to wage war against an adversary. Thus, while Yanomami and napé are opposed social categories, at the same time they constitute a complementary pair in the Yanomami understanding of the self and the “Other.”
In the course of history, the Yanomami have sustained encounters with many different napê; some have been friendly while others have been hostile. We know that since the establishment of the missionaries in the Alto Orinoco during the 1950s, the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco have maintained enduring relationships with outsiders and the natives have “allowed” the presence of white people living in the urihi (the forest). In the historical reconstruction of their past, the Yanomami commonly evoke different events: how they arrived to the mission posts, the moving from one village to another, the fights between villages, the size of their gardens, difficulties finding food during the rainy season, and the outbreak of disease, among others. Yet, they also incorporate in their personal narratives occasions when they first encountered napê such as explorers, missionaries, travelers, and members of the malariology department and how they interacted to exchange goods and information with the outsiders. At the same time, the recognition of the napê and the Yanomami intercultural relationships with outsiders have been constitutive elements in their mythical narratives that are articulated according to the social contexts and the personal experience of the storytellers.

At play in the fields of the moon

All Yanomami, all napê, all the people of the world come from the blood of the moon spirit, Periporiwê. He was a Yanomami who, after eating some internal organs of his daughter because he got angry at her, began to rise up and up into the air, up to the sky. The ancestors (no patapi) began to laugh and make fun of Periporiwê because he was ascending in the air and nobody could catch him, he was going up and up. He was moving away really fast. Some men tried to capture Periporiwê shooting arrows at him, but they missed him and Periporiwê kept going up and up, nobody could stop him....
Finally Suhirinariwê, which is the scorpion spirit, got up from his hammock took his bow and arrow, strained the cord of the bow, carefully aimed with the point of the arrow, and then released it ... Tahhhhh. He hit on eriporiwê’s chest and everybody screamed, the people were worried about him ... Right away drops of blood began to drip down from Periporiwê’s body. Each drop of him became a Yanomami. Periporiwê was left without blood and later he was transformed into a mountain that is really far away. That is how Periporiwê died. Now the moon (peripo) is not the body of Periporiwê, it is his no porepi (spirit liberated by death); the elders say that it is a bad spirit because it takes the soul of the children.... The first Yanomami came out from the blood of the moon, that means from Peripo ...

The Yanomami are the chosen “children of the moon” but they are not alone in the world. In their mythical origin they contemplate the creation and the existence of themselves as well as that of those who are non-Yanomami, the outsiders or napê. However, for the Yanomami there is not a unique and single myth of origin or creation of the world. Instead, there are multiple mythical accounts and individual interpretations on how the world was, so to speak, arranged by the ancestors (no patapi) to encompass the appearance of natural elements such as domestic and wild plants, animals, the rainy and dry seasons, and so on. There are other myths that refer to the origin of women, fire, arrows, poisons, supernatural powers, customs, and illnesses that are related to legendary figures or demiurges such as Omawe and Yoawê.

Therefore, it is quite difficult if not impossible to have a definitive understanding of “the genesis” of the Yanomami (at least for us, the napê). Yet, anthropologists and missionaries (Chagnon 1983, Lizot 1988, Cocco 1972, Egufflôr) have explained their mythical origins in a wide sense through three “humankind types” or three “grand

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37 While I was in the field I heard several variations of this myth. This version was described by one of the schoolteachers of Mavaca, a young Yanomami male. We have to be aware that this version
myths.” One is the myth of the moon spirit (Periporiwē) from where the first Yanomami and napē originated. The other is the myth of the pregnant calf from where the first woman was born. Finally, there is the myth of Omawē and Yoawē, two demiurge brothers that survived the great flood perpetuating the existence of the Yanomami in the urihi (forest).

We have to be aware that the acceptance of these accounts as the unique “grand myths of origin” of the Yanomami would reduce these narratives into a definite ethnographic product built around fixed characters and themes that are likely to describe the “specific” origin of this indigenous group. Instead, there are multiple local and individual stories that are produced and embellished throughout history that display the vital dynamic of the narratives according to personal motives, interpretations, and choices of the storytellers (Basso 1987). These different verbal interpretations of the stories reveal the complexity and heterogeneity of mythical discourses. For instance, in these mythological stories the Yanomami ancestors (no patapi) play specific roles in the creation of the world, yet they vary regarding the personal experiences of narrator and the social contexts where those narratives are uttered.

The Yanomami recognize the napē alterity in their mythical milieu as a different people who live in different places, but at the same time they share with outsiders certain “sameness” when they assert that the napē also come from the same source or substance that is the blood of Periporiwē. Although outsiders are part of these mythical references they are just marginal entities in the Yanomami cosmology. As is indicated in the Omawē resembles the one collected by Cocco (1972), which it is taught at the bilingual and intercultural school
and Yoawë myth, Omawë not only saved them but also saved the napë from the great flood, yet the outsiders remained close to motu-këu (the ocean), really far away from the forest and from the Yanomami. That means that although the Yanomami mention the existence of outsiders (napë) in their mythical stories, they are placed far enough from their cultural universe and their social space so that the outsiders could be easily neglected or strategically mentioned in their stories. In some respects, this could be identified as a quality of indigenous “perpectivism,” which refers to the many ways Amerindian cosmologies perceive humans, animals, and spirits that differ from the way these “beings see humans and see themselves” (Viveiros de Castro 2000:470). In this case, these mythical accounts reflect a kind of perspectivism that discloses the different human alterities.

The Yanomami are the center of the world while the outsiders could be displaced or even transformed into other Yanomami. This is palpable in the following witty understanding of the moon myth:

The moon, peripo is waning; if I were Suhirinariwë I would throw my arrow at peripo right now. All the drops of blood from the moon would fall down and the drops would become Yanomami. Those people that come from the blood of Periporiwë would replace all the napë of this big city (X-theri) and only Yanomami would still be alive. The no-patapi (ancestors) would laugh with this. Then, the big napë city (X-theri) would be filled with Yanomami and no napë would be here, just Yanomami ... That would have happened, if I were Suhirinariwë... (Javier, in a in a foreign country 2001).

A Yanomami male of the Alto Orinoco uttered this particular version of the myth while we were walking through crowded streets of a foreign urban city and exchanging

where this promotor (teacher) works.
amusing stories about the “customs” of the foreign napê and the Yanomami. He went to that city as a special delegate to provide information regarding “the Yanomami situation in Venezuela” at an international conference. He was in a very metropolitan milieu and for almost six days he had gone to talks, meetings, and other reunions discussing the rights of the Yanomami people. Being so far of his village and family but at the same time living intensively his role as an indigenous representative in an unknown city, he had found a moment to playfully accommodate mythical images of the past with personal experiences of the present. Staring at the firmament and asking himself whether that moon of that city would be the same moon of the Alto Orinoco led him to embellish the above story, in which the Yanomami and the napê were in a “situation of contact,” in this case struggling for a foreign urban space.

There are two interesting issues about this adaptation of the myth in an elsewhere context. On the one hand, as in the first version of the myth of Periporiwê, there is recognition of the napê existence that was obvious for this Yanomami representative since he was in an urban city, a “very” napê environment. On the other hand, in this second version of the story, there is not such a separation between a mythical past and a possible fictional present. Actually, there is a discursive linkage between the current personal experience of this Yanomami representative and past encounters (in this case a mythological origin) with the napê.

The napê (everything that comes from the outside world) are acknowledged in these two imaginary accounts. Although the napê constitute a subordinate element to the Yanomami action and are minor referents in their worldview, the Yanomami have
developed different rhetorical and experiential devices in approaching the *napê* world. These strategies have oscillated from rejection and isolation to sustained conviviality with outsiders such as missionaries, scientists, explorers, and more recently, politicians. These Yanomami narratives enlighten intercultural relationships and encounters with the outsiders while accounting for the many ways they understand their affiliation with the *napê* horizon.

In the second story, the *no patapi* (ancestors), who created the world and the people (Yanomami and non-Yanomami), are elicited in a mythological past. However, they can also be part of quite recent stories that might imply the interaction between the Yanomami and the outsiders either in their “traditional” territory or elsewhere. For the Yanomami, it seems that the ancestral images (*no patapi*) personify the past in a wide temporal and spatial spectrum that is not limited to legendary times. The *no patapi* (the ancestors, those who came before) embody the Yanomami mythical age but they might also embody a relatively recent past. There is a sense of continuity between mythological times and the historical past that is elicited in different discursive genres: myth, impish stories, individual testimonies, and informal conversation, among others.

When they recall the time of *no patapi* they refer to those legendary figures such as *Omawê*, *Yoawê*, *Horonami* and in general to the mythical age of the Yanomami, that is expressed in the expressions *yetu*, *yetu ha*, or *yetu hamî* (before, long time ago). Nevertheless, when they reconstructed past memories related to migrations, fights, *conucos* (gardens), floods, and other events, in which the narrator(s) even include discreetly their relatives, they might also inform about the time of the *no patapi* (the
people from before) using similar rhetorical expressions. Here is an example of an elder man from a village of the Upper Mavaca who recounts the life of his ascendant relatives using similar expressions to those utilized in mythical accounts.

Long time ago, grandfather [no patapi shoaye] lived very far, in that place the old grandfather [no patapi] had his son-in-law. In that village, his son-in-law [in this case father of the informant] started to do the bride service [siohamou]. Father was doing the bride service just there where the ancestor [no patapi] lived. (Elder man from Mrakapiwei, 2000).

We must remember that the Yanomami have a very strong taboo on mentioning dead people and that is why they simply avoid stating the name of the dead person. The names of the deceased are suppressed; their personal belongings are burned, and everything that is related to the dead relatives is concealed and destroyed, so the soul of the deceased will not be tempted to go back to the living world searching for a new soul. For the Yanomami the death of a relative is so heartbreaking that after a short period of mourning, they cremate their dead, and later in a funeral feast (reahu) they consume the deceased's ashes. Through this very complex ritual, the Yanomami try to remove all vestiges of the deceased in the living world to the point that it seems that the individual never existed. In that way the living people can evade sorrowful memories of their dead relatives. In some way, the very personal past related to their death relatives is "consumed" (and utterly forbidden) as long as the deceased's ashes are consumed. For the living family members the intake of the funerary ashes mixed in plantain juice (carato) is almost a therapeutic way of coping with the grief; it is also a way of dealing with the memories of the deceased, which are diluted as well in this thick beverage.

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38 For more detail about this funeral ceremony see Albert (1985), Chagnon (1983), Lizot (1988).
I suggest that the Yanomami, in order to communicate more freely about the past, need to place their memories in the temporal context of the *no patapí* period. Placing histories and narratives within the time frame of the ancestors (*no patapí*), they are able to manipulate a familiar and communal past using different temporalities and social spaces. In this case, I am referring to those temporalities that correspond to their mythical past and those that emerge from relatively recent individual memories that do not transgress their taboos regarding dead relatives. However, we have to be aware that although they show this sense of historical continuity between the mythical time and the recent past, they can also utter very complex discursive narratives in a mythical and not colloquial intelligible language. That is the case of the shamanic language and the different variants of ceremonial dialogues such as the *himou* (diurnal) and *wayamou* (nocturnal) (Lizot 1991).

The examples I have presented above show that the Yanomami perceive the *napê* otherness (alterity) through an historical perspective that takes into account their mythical past and individual stories, in which they reconstruct contact situations and interactions (including cultural transformations) with the outsiders. The historical relationship between the Yanomami and the *napê* is not constrained to a single myth or to one specific event nor are these mutually exclusive in different contexts. The Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco not only intertwine multiple histories and interpretations of the cultural encounters with the *napê*, which are contingent on the nature of the relationship with the outsiders including explorers, rubber tappers, missionaries, scientists, miners, governmental officials, tourists, etc. Their narratives also emphasize social
transformations, connectedness, and fuzziness of the boundaries between these groups of people.

“When the napé arrived.” An account of the contact situation

For the Yanomami the arrival of the napé is definitely an historical event that is recalled in their stories and in which they discriminate the forms of encounter and the types of relationships established with the outsiders. The following is a testimony from an elder of Mavaca about the time his relatives of a previous generation encountered for the first time some napé, presumably rubber tappers in the forest, and about when he later established direct contact with other outsiders. He and his group were among the first Yanomami that settled in Mavaca with the missionaries and have been living there since then.

When the Yanomami did not know the napé, they were numerous. The Yanomami lived apart, and thus passed a great deal of time. Later, the napé arrived, they arrived but the Yanomami were not aware of their arrival, they did not see them arriving, as they realized later. Because the napé [probably rubber tappers] wanted to be friends with the Yanomami they gave them machetes. The Yanomami also wanted to be friends of the napé and the elders went there where the napé were staying, and then they camped near the napé, the Yanomami made camp in wayumi [temporary trekking lean-tos] next to them. But in spite of the good relations between the Yanomami and the napé, some Yanomami began to steal from the outsiders, the relations became tense, the napé began to watch the Yanomami, the napé got mad and the Yanomami feared of them and returned to their house, where they lived before... The napé were very angry because those Yanomami stole from them.

I did not meet those outsiders. Those were our ancestors, no patapi (our relatives of the previous generation) who met them first. The napé that we know now here in Mavaca are not the same as those who arrived first. I was not afraid of the napé; I was already a teenager, almost an adult when I met them.
The napē asked, “Who are you?” “We are Yanomami, we answered, (I also did).” We want to have friendly relations with you, we also said. But later, I moved to another place, I did not see the napē for a while, and I missed them. Then the napē arrived at Mahekoto (Platanal), the first one was Paowe [James Barker, the protestant missionary], and I remember I was afraid of him.

Then the napē arrived later to Mavaca and the Yanomami wanted to become like the napē, they wanted to live with them, and to imitate them; they settled in Mavaca so as to live near them. I was not the first one who had contact with the napē. I do not know what the napē thought about me when they saw me for the first time. I lived in Shitohama, an old place where we had a conuco (big garden) when the first napē arrived. Paowe [James Barker] came first, and then the priests [the Salesian missionaries] came later. The priests used to say “do not continue making war.” When they said that, I thought about it, then I decided to be friends with other Yanomami and now I do not practice war, I do not kill the others any more.

At first, the priests liked me. The priests and Velázquez [a Yekuana Indian from La Esmeralda] named me Capitán (chief) in the beginning and now they have not stopped calling me capitán. The napē are the ones who say that the capitanes should receive things such as manioc flour, machete, and color beads. Before, the napē were happy with me, they really liked me, now they do not. The priest that had a very long beard and who died long time ago [Father Cocco], he really liked me. That is the reason why I miss so much the real napē of the past time... (Big Bird, Mavaca 1990)

This is an oral account of an elderly man that currently lives in one of the villages of Mavaca. At the end of his narration he identified the places where he had lived with the gardens (conucos) he had grown until his arrival to the Mavaca-Orinoco area. He said that once in Mavaca he found some napē and they asked him “What is the name of your village?” and he said: “It called Pishaasi-theri, I am Pishaasi-theri.” “And we decided to stay here, I cultivated my garden of plantains, and we remained here.” The Pishaasi-theri is perhaps the first Yanomami group settled in the Mavaca area (Chagnon 1966), and if where they established permanent contact with the outsiders, the missionaries and other indigenous groups such as the Yekuana.
In this testimony, he traced an historical continuum when his ancestors from previous generation met some napê in the forests and his later encounters with the white outsiders, first the protestant missionaries and later the Catholic priests. He acknowledged the fear, curiosity, and the subsequent tense relationship between the earlier Yanomami and the napê, when the former stole some goods from the outsiders. He also mentions his fear of the white outsider (Paowê) when he met him in Platanal, and the type of relationship he had with the missionaries. He reconstructs the situation of contact in two periods, one related to his ancestors, no patapi, in which their relationship with the napê is historicized through events such as robbery, the sizes of his garden, and the exchange of goods with the outsiders, and the other related to his personal history. In his case, there is a direct encounter with the outsiders, which is interpreted as a first acknowledgement of the "Other," and how other Yanomami wanted to live with the outsiders and imitate them. Finally, he endorsed the way the napê (in this case the missionaries) favored him when he was appointed capitán (chief) of his villages in order to obtain goods.

The Yanomami have a complex system of social identification that depends mainly on their kinship relationships. In the case of the outsiders, because they are not part of their kinship networks, they are identified in terms of their exchange forms, alliances, or rejection with/to the outsiders. This testimony reconstructs fragments of the historical encounters between the Yanomami and the outsiders, revealing how this elder perceives the alterity of the napê. It also shows how the "contact situations" are historically an ongoing process constituted by a succession of events, interactions, and
practices that entail the tensions and accommodation of the dominated and dominant groups.

As "a system of interaction," the contact situation (colonial or post-colonial) has been defined "with a structure of its own, which includes aspects of both societies, each of which in turn has structures of its own" (Turner 1988: 239). Although with "a structure of its own," the contact situations entail above all different interpretations and significance of these processes of cultural interaction that depends on the individual indigenes experiences in relation to the outsiders (explorers, colonizers, miners, missionaries, scientists, governmental personnel, etc.). From the Amazonian indigenous points of view, the historical representation of the contact situation has also led them to redefine and transform their mythical, ceremonial, and ritual discourses as a result of the cultural encounters.39

In this case, I have attempted to display these "contact zones" and the transcultural dynamics of the cultural encounter with the outside world through Yanomami mythical accounts, personal stories, and individual historical testimonies. It seems that the Yanomami place their histories in a continuum in which they incorporate and link recent experiences to previous encounters and even mythical encounters with the napē. They have developed different discursive forms that relate historical continuities and discontinuities that embellish their perspective regarding the contact situation with the napē.

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39 See for example the edited volumes of Hill (1988), Basso and Sherzer (1990), and Hill and Santos-Granero (2002) and recent works of Gow (2001) and Whitehead (2002).
Through these examples, the voices of the Alto Orinoco Yanomami discursively accommodate the arrival of the outsiders as well as reveal opposed versions of their mythological and historical pasts related to the *napê* world. These narratives emphasize the many ways in which the Alto Orinoco Yanomami convey through their mythical past and their individual stories a feeling of identity and command of their historical past in spite of the different encounters with the *napê* world.

**Constructing the ferocious Other; or the savage through explorers’ eyes**

The reexamination of Yanomami history from the outsider point of view entails an appraisal of the discursive formations (episteme) on the constituents of Western knowledge-as-power (Foucault 1972). This means the understanding of thoughts that command Western perceptions and values around the “Other” represented here by the Yanomami. Through this revision of the colonial and postcolonial encounters, and how imaginary descriptions have been constructed around these people, I intend to reach a better understanding of the current processes experienced by the Yanomami within the national-political context. Based on historical records, this second part of the chapter draws on the imaginary views of explorers and travelers created around the isolated regions that surround the Yanomami and particularly focused on their geographical location with respect to the Orinoco River.

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40 This section is partially based on two chapters of my Master’s thesis in History entitled *El Salvaje Desconocido. Incursiones en Territorio Yanomami, 1750-1940* (Caballero-Arias 1996).
Throughout the encounters between the outsiders (*napê*) and Yanomami, the historical reconstruction through the documentary sources indicates that "Western" perceptions have emphasized the images of violent, fierce, and primitive people constructed around the Yanomami. Through a critical revision of historical documents I intend to understand: 1) how explorers, travelers, and missionaries have reconstructed the history of the Yanomami, and 2) which commonsensical ideas are historically and ethnographically interwoven around their supposed aggressive behaviors.

*The colonization processes of the Alto Orinoco region*

The Guayana Region made up of the Bolívar, Delta Amacuro, and Amazonas States and located south of the Orinoco River has historically and spatially varied processes of colonization. Whereas the lower and middle Orinoco regions had a relatively active colonial expansion from the Europeans, especially Spaniards, the Alto Orinoco-Rio Negro region had a very slow process of Spanish colonization. Although currently the "Alto Orinoco" sub-region is confined in the southeast corner of the Amazonas State where the Yanomami are settled, which I will refer to as the "upper-Alto Orinoco territory," during colonial times the "Alto Orinoco Region" (Figure 4) was an extensive area that encompassed roughly the current Amazonas State. The "Alto Orinoco Region"

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41 For this particular chapter, I distinguish geographically the "Alto Orinoco region" from the "upper-Alto Orinoco territory." The Alto Orinoco was the colonial region that encompassed from the Atuares and Malpures Falls in the northwest, the Rio Negro in the West and the headwaters of the Orinoco in the south area of the Amazonas State. The term "upper-Alto Orinoco territory" identifies the area from the mouth of the Casiquiare River to the sources of the Orinoco. Following this territorial distinction, the Yanomami subgroup, the core of this thesis has been historically located in the upper-Alto Orinoco area.
Figure 4
The Alto Orinoco Region and the Upper-Alto Orinoco Territory

Based on: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. The University of Texas at Austin
www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/venezuela.html
and other areas from Guayana remained mostly unexplored by the Spaniards until the beginning of the 18th century.

The search for the “El Dorado realm,” apparently located in the hidden city of “Manoa” close to the “Parime” lakeshore, became the main incentive behind the European explorations and conquering of the Guayana territories and indigenous populations. Perhaps the search intensified because of the explorations of Antonio de Berrio between 1591 and 1595 and Walter Raleigh in 1595 who identified Guayana as “the great region of El Dorado” (González and Donis 1989, Ramos Pérez 1988). The fantastic city of gold “El Dorado” turned into the never-ending obsession of the European conquistadors who explored the “Guianas” (Guayana) for almost two centuries searching for this enigmatic place that was never found. This “golden realm” became a mythical space with subhuman entities and fictitious stories. From the El Dorado myth came the peculiar Amazonas, the beautiful and warlike women that inhabited the island of “Matinino,” and the Ewaipanomas, who according to Sir Walter Raleigh’s descriptions (1986), were fearful warriors, men without heads whose mouths were in their bellies and eyes whose were between their shoulders.

The search for El Dorado lasted until the late 1770s when the European incursions reached the headwaters of the Paragua, Caroní and Caura Rivers in the current Bolívar State. During this time the governor of Guayana, Manuel Centurion, was considered the “great golden fanatic” because of all of his efforts in finding El Dorado. Actually, the main event that ended the compulsive searching for El Dorado was when Spanish and Portuguese surprisingly found each other at the Río Branco (in Brazilian territory). Since
then, the dream of El Dorado, the unknown space considered endless, gradually vanished in the imagination of the conquistadors. The territorial disputes of that region were partially settled when Spain and Portugal signed the "Spanish-Portuguese Treaty of Limits" in 1750 establishing several frontier agreements that protected their territories against the incursions of other colonies such as England, France and particularly against Dutch invasions. During that time, the Carib tribes had close relationships with the Dutch with whom they exchanged tools, hatchets, and shotguns (*poitos*) that had escaped from the cultivated fields of Guayana (Morales Méndez 1990, Whitehead 1988).

In Guayana, the missionary activities experienced different waves of expansion that began in the middle of the 17th century. In 1726, the Spanish Crown sponsored the building of several fortresses in the Orinoco to help the reconstruction of old mission posts. These old settlements had been built during the 1680s but did not remain very long due to the resistance of indigenous groups, especially the Carib who destroyed these first European villages (Useche 1987). Several Jesuit missionaries such as Fathers Rivero, Cassani, Roman, and above all José Gumilla reestablished the mission settlements in order to indoctrinate “the Indians of the middle Orinoco” (Gumilla 1993[1741]). Although the foundational pace of these mission-towns increased from 1741 throughout the Orinoco, the scarcity of mission personnel and the intention of the Crown to continue carrying out expeditions in other areas reduced the Jesuits tasks in the middle Orinoco region (Rey Fajardo 1977). The Jesuits ended their activities in Guayana when they were expelled from the whole American continent in 1767.
At this stage only the northwest area of the current Amazonas State had been slightly explored by the Spaniards. Regarding the Portuguese expansion into the Alto Orinoco region, there are historical records that indicate an early advance to this area through the Río Negro up to the Casiquiare by the 1720s (Useche 1987). The Portuguese penetration into this zone had several goals: trading slaves, gathering of wild spices, and asserting the Crown power in those territorial possessions. The Portuguese had penetrated the Río Negro area since the middle of the 17th century, first with the Jesuits and later with the Carmelite missionaries who had secular and religious power over the Indian nations of the Río Negro and Branco basin.

Ferguson (1995:79-80) argues that the bloodbath caused by the Portuguese slave raiding of the Río Negro during the 1720s, which had begun with the slave traffic established by the Manao (Manoa) Indians along the Río Negro and Branco and by the Carib tribes in northern Guayana, also affected the Yanomami. Although the Yanomami settlement patterns might have been influenced by the slave raids forcing them to retreat towards the Parima highlands, there is no definite evidence indicating the Carib directly raided the Yanomami for slaves (Cocco 1972:37). What we might infer is that the Yanomami at the beginning of the 18th century moved away from the pressure produced by the Arakawa in the west, and the Carib in the north, who were raiding slaves for the Portuguese and the Dutch, respectively (Whitehead 1988, 1990).

It was in 1744 that a geographical finding, the connection between the Orinoco River and Amazonas River through the Casiquiare canal that links to the Río Negro, finally drew Spain’s attention to this region. Although the Jesuit missionaries had already
received news of the fluvial connection between these rivers through indigenous
testimonies, it was the Jesuit Father Manuel Roman, the Superior of the Orinoco River’s
Jesuit missions, who fortuitously verified this fluvial union. After several days traveling
along the Orinoco River Father Roman accidentally encountered a Portuguese ship close
to the mouth of the Atabapo River (Gilij 1987, vol I). The Portuguese had navigated from
the Río Negro (in Portuguese dominions) to the Orinoco through the Casiquiare canal.
During that time, the Portuguese were expanding to other Indian territories in the upper
Río Negro raiding slaves through the civilizing mechanism of tropas de rescate⁴² (rescue
troops) that had been set up since the middle of the 17th century. These enslaved Indians
were later going to be traded in the towns of the eastern side of Brazil (Useche 1987).

The Spaniards organized the notable “Limits Expedition” between 1754 and 1761
to confirm this fluvial connection and to explore the unknown territories of the Alto
Orinoco region. According to historians (Ramos Pérez 1946, Lucena Giraldo 1990) the
Limits Expedition is the first coherent enterprise of the Spanish Crown in establishing
Spanish villages in the previously unexplored Alto Orinoco region. The purpose of this
expedition was to delimit the boundaries between Spanish and Portuguese territories,
explore the natural geography of that area, and establish the first contact with indigenous
groups. To safeguard the Spanish territories against the incursion of the Portuguese who
were moving forward to that area, the Spanish conquistadors crossed the Atures and
Maipures Falls in 1756 and laid the foundation for a number of towns at the edge of the

⁴² As Galvão (1979) pointed out the term “tropas de rescate” (rescue troops) was a euphemism for
slave raids. Because of certain colonial laws prohibited the enslavement of Indians, the slave hunters
alleged that they were “rescuing Indians” that had been captured by other Indian tribes such as the Manao
Indians.
Orinoco and Río Negro Rivers. Thus by 1758 they had founded San José de Maipures, San Fernando de Atabapo (the headquarters of the Limits Expedition), and Santa Barbara in the west edge of the Alto Orinoco region. Between 1759 and 1760 they also founded Buena Guardia, San Carlos de Río Negro and San Felipe; these last two villages also were located in the west margin of the current Amazonas State.

The Limits Expedition commanded by José de Iturriaga, Eugenio Alvarado, and José Solano also had political and scientific intentions (Lucena Giraldó, 1993). Among the political goals, the explorers had to obtain all the possible information on this relatively unknown territory, the situation of old Spanish towns, the raiding plans of the Dutch and French colonizers, the existence of the black maroon settlements, and the location of the Carib Indians. Among their scientific goals, the explorers had to look for new natural products at the axis of the Orinoco and Amazonas Rivers, especially cacao, nuts, cinnamon, and medicinal plants. In order to find these herbs and spices, and fugitive black slaves, the Marquis José Solano sent a special commission led by Sergeant Francisco Fernandez de Bobadilla up the Orinoco River in 1758. This was the first official expedition to go beyond the Casiquiare-Orinoco Rivers bifurcation, and Fernández de Bobadilla collected the initial information concerning the Padamo and Ocamo Rivers, including a huge quantity of wild cocoa-trees. He also established the first contacts with the Makiritare (Yekuana) Indians (the Yanomami neighbors) with whom he exchanged gifts for food and offered future protection against their enemies, other Carib groups who were invading the Makiritare land and chasing slaves for the Dutch.
With this colonial expedition to the Alto Orinoco area began the first historical misunderstanding of a made up confrontation between Europeans and a group of Yanomami Indians. By that time, the Yanomami were known as “white Guaribas” and “Guaharibos.” Alexander von Humboldt, the distinguished naturalist and traveler of the 19th century, displayed an incorrect version of Bobadilla’s expedition that was disseminated through his writings. In his famous historical account, *Personal Narrative of travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, Humboldt stated that Fernandez de Bobadilla in the first expedition had reached the Guaharibo Rapids in the Orinoco River:

> But having advanced to the foot of the rocky dike that forms the great cataract, he was suddenly attacked, while he was breakfasting, by the Guaharibos and Guaycas, two warlike tribes celebrated for the virulence of the *curare*, with which the arrows are poisoned. The Indians occupied the rocks that rise in the middle of the river, and seeing the Spaniards without bows, and having no knowledge of firearms, they provoked the whites, whom they believed to be without defense. Several of the latter were dangerously wounded, and Bobadilla found himself forced to give the signal of battle. A fearful carnage ensued among the natives... (Humboldt 1852(II): 461).

This supposed contact was erroneously considered the first European encounter with Yanomami. According to Michelena y Rojas (1989 [1867]), an explorer of the middle of the 19th century, Humboldt fabricated this confrontation with the Indians. Bobadilla never had any violent encounter with these tribes nor did he reach the Guaharibo Rapids. Ramos Pérez (1946) clarifies all these misinterpretations, asserting that Bobadilla never went beyond the mouth of the Ocamo River in that trip. That means that he did not reach the Guaharibo Rapids, and therefore, he could not have had any violent encounter with Indians of that area. Other historical misunderstandings arose
about Bobadilla's first trip not only from Humboldt but also from Michaena y Rojas himself, who later confused dates and journeys of the explorers of the Limits Expedition to the Alto Orinoco region which were also elucidated by Ramos Pérez (1946).

In 1760 Apolinar Díez de la Fuente, a commander of the Limits Expedition, was commanded by Solano to go up the Orinoco River to find its headwaters. In this expedition, Díez de la Fuente had several encounters with Makiritare (Yekuana) Indians and located wild cocoa-trees on the shores of the Orinoco. He began to build a fort called Buena Guardia at the mouth of the Casiquiare to defend the Makiritare from Carib, their enemies, while encouraging them to convert to Christianity. On this trip up the Orinoco River, he found an idyllic savanna with streams and good land for the founding of a new village where he planned to gather the Makiritare. He called this site La Esmeralda, thinking that he had discovered abundant sources of emerald and gold (Díez de la Fuente 1954:294). For a period of time the conquistador thought he had found the new El Dorado. La Esmeralda did not have any emeralds or gold and turned into the last marginal settlement of the Alto Orinoco until the middle of the 20th century.

Since the main purpose of Díez de la Fuente's expedition was to "discover the sources" of the Orinoco, he asked several Makiritare Indians to accompany him upriver. However, these Indian guides warned him not to continue to the headwaters of the Orinoco, because of the difficulties of crossing the rapids and the ferocity of the "Guariba Indians."

By interlocution of an Uramanavi Indian, I asked them if they had navigated by the Orinoco to its sources, and they replied yes; and that they had gone to make war against the Guaribas, who were very quarrelsome and valiant. And that I should not go there because they would kill me and all my people because those
Indians [the Guaribas] would not admit any kind of friendship with other Indians” (Díez de la Fuente 1954:301).

Díez de la Fuente never established direct contact with Guariba or Guaharibo Indians in this expedition and only reached the Guaharibo Rapids thinking wrongly that he had found the sources of the Orinoco River. Thus, it is probable that Humboldt has confused the news of Bobadilla’s trip with the information gathered later by Díez de la Fuente from his Indian guides regarding the bellicosity of the “Guariba Indians.”

In any case, Humboldt was wrong about the happenings of Bobadilla’s first exploration. As a result, other explorers who followed Humboldt’s journey to the upper-Alto Orinoco territories searching for the mysterious sources of the Orinoco also stated the false confrontation between Bobadilla and the “Guariba” or “Guaharibo Indians.” With this historical misunderstanding, the "savage Indians" who apparently impeded the explorers and other Indians from proceeding beyond the Guaharibo Rapids towards the Orinoco headwaters began to acquire the archetypical image of the ferocious natives.

According to the historical records of the Limits Expedition there was no evidence of any real encounter between the Europeans and the Guaharibo (Yanomami). From the Yanomami historical or mythical point of view, they do not have any accounts that explain or justify the coming of colonial explorers to their territory, unlike their indigenous neighbors. Instead, the Makiritare (Yekuana) did elaborate a whole mythical reinterpretation of the arrival of the explorers of the Limits Expedition to their lands that is recreated in Watunna, their legendary and religious account of the development of this

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43 The Guaharibo Rapids (Raudal de Guharibos) are located approximately 200 km from the headwaters of the Orinoco River. In Yanomami, these Rapids are called Karepé-pora.
indigenous people (Civrieux 1976, 1992). Of course the lack of historical documents or explicit narratives that elicit a certain type of relationship between the Spaniards and the Yanomami does not necessarily indicate that there were no encounters at all. However, due to the scope and goals of this monumental expedition, if the colonizers had sustained any kind of contact with this indigenous people, they would have mentioned it in their travel accounts.

_Locating the “Guahibas blancos”_

Currently, around 2500 Yanomami are settled on the shores of the Padamo, Ocamo, Mavaca and Orinoco Rivers, and a few other thousand are located in interfluvial areas amid these rivers. However, several centuries ago this territory was mainly occupied by Mandawaca Indians, descendants of the Arakawa-Maipure groups, who apparently later migrated to the axis of the Orinoco-Río Negro areas to establish new settlements as a result of ritual migrations (Vidal Ontiveros 1993). By the end of the 18th century the Yanomami from the Parima highlands occasionally used to reach to the Orinoco-Mavaca shores (Wagner and Arvelo 1986, Lizot 1988).

Although this area was not their usual occupation zone, they used it as a hinterland for hunting and gathering activities, and certainly to exchange goods and information with other as "Indian nations" (Cocco 1972). Actually, the first cartographic information that mentions the Yanomami, with the name of “white Guahibas Indians,”
places them in the “Pais de los cacaguayes” among the Mavaca, Siapa, and Orinoco Rivers and very close to the “Parima Lake” (Figure 5).

Father Antonio Caulin, who had been the reverend priest of the Limits Expedition, gathered these geographical references that were used later by the cartographers Cruz Cano y Olmedilla in 1775 and Luis de Surville in 1778. He pointed out in his description of Indian groups of the Orinoco River that in the sources of the Omaguaca (Mavaca) River “dwell the nation of the “Guaribas Indians,” white of color like the Spaniards, whose chief is called Oni” (Caulin [1779] 1987 I:129). However, all the information gathered about the “Guaríbas” or “Guahibas” was coming from other indigenous people and not from direct encounters with them that accurately reflect their geographical situation.

These historical references of the Guaríbas (Guaica) located close to the Parime Lake have even confused some historians and writers, who have considered the two different Indian groups as the same one. They have believed that these Guaica of the Orinoco are the same Guaica from the Guayana region who were indoctrinated by the Catalan Capuchin missionaries of the Caroni and Cuyuní Rivers during the middle of the 18th century (Carrocera 1979).

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44 Although the Yanomami use in certain occasion onoto or achiote (Bixa orellana) to paint their bodies, it seems that the whiteness of their skin particularly caught the attention of the explorers.

45 From Carib affiliation, this indigenous people are currently known as the Akawaio.
Figure 5
Location of the White Guahibas Indians in the Eighteenth Century

Source: Caulin 1987 [1779]
Although there are some historical references of the existence of "Guaríbas" or "Guajaribas" nation in the upper-Alto Orinoco territories, the Yanomami did not have any sustained contact with the Spanish conquistadors by that time. This is evident in the chronicles of the father José Antonio de Jerez, prefect of the New Reductions of the Alto Orinoco and Río Negro, who arrived at La Esmeralda in 1767 with Díez de la Fuente and Fernandez de Bobadilla. In La Esmeralda, he estimated that between three thousand to four thousand of "Guajarivas" and "Guatapayanes" (the last one a non-Yanomami group) dwelt near that area, but these Indians could not travel to "where the members of the expedition were because of the distances from their dwellings" (Jerez [1768] 1960:191). Other Indians commented on the existence of the Guaharibo and Guaribas in that area, but the Spaniards did not directly confirm it.

There are in fact no historical records that indicate any peaceful or violent encounter between the Yanomami (Guaribas, Guajarivas, or Guahibas blancos) and the Spanish explorers. Other Indian groups with whom they had interethnic conflicts, such as the Arakawa and the Makiritare, were the informants who provided news about the Yanomami's supposed location close to the sources of the Orinoco, and their warlike and belligerent attitude against Indians and non-Indians. Regarding the potential existence of Guaharibo Indians in Portuguese territory, Migliazza (1972), who reconstructs the expeditions to the Amazonas and Río Negro basins in relation to the Yanomami, did not
mention any Portuguese encounters with these Indians.\(^4\) He only suggests that during that time Yanomami settlements may have existed in the upper Uraricuera.

At that time the only known descriptions of the Yanomami came from second hand references. That means other indigenous groups called the Yanomami by particular terms, sometimes with pejorative meaning, because these groups were probably enemies of the Yanomami. The European explorers later employed these outside designations that are not self-denominative designations. For example, the term Guaharibo (Guariba) apparently is an Arakawa term that means red howlers monkey (*mono araguato*), an animal known for its strident howling noise. According to Migliazza (1972: 6), the term Guahariba was used to designate backward and isolated groups, with little or no contact with the European. Presumably, the Spanish adopted the term “Guaharibo” from the Arakawa groups of Río Negro who were in war with the “Yanomami” and referred to them as Guariba or Guaharibo.

Thus, the Yanomami territory was presumably located during that time above the Guaharibo Rapids, up the Orinoco River, between the Parima Mountain range and the Uraricuera and Río Branco basins. However, in spite of the Europeans’ effort to find the sources of the Orinoco River, they could not reach beyond the Guaharibo Rapids.

\(^{46}\) At the end of the 18th century, Manuel Lobo de Almada reported in his description of the Río Branco region a group of “Oayca Indians that inhabit the highlands of the Majari and Parime Rivers” tributaries of the Uraricuera (Lobo de Alamada [1787] 1861:676). However, as Migliazza points out (1972:362) these “Oaycas” were not Yanomami but Carib subgroups that came from the Cuyuni and Caura Rivers. For long time, there was the wrong idea that the “Oyacas” or “Guacias” from the Caura River were the same as the “Guaiacas” (the Yanomami) of the Alto Orinoco.

\(^{47}\) Araguato comes from the Carib language *arawata* or *arowata* (Migliazza 1972). Currently that is the word we use in Venezuela to name that type of monkey.
There is a correlation between the unexplored geography and the unknown Guariba and Guaharibo who were reported to be living at the end of the rapids. Hence, a mythical relation emerges between the undiscovered space and the “aggressive Indians” that inhabit that territory, like the mythical city of El Dorado with its enigmatic inhabitants. The difference is that El Dorado was an imaginary place that only existed in the mind of the colonizers, while the sources of the Orinoco and the Yanomami were definitely located at the edge of the upper-Alto Orinoco sub-region. At the end of the 18th century, later explorers, with only a few exceptions, repeated these characterizations of the Guariba and Guaharibo as savage and bellicose Indians. The travelers who tried to find the unknown headwaters of the Orinoco River persisted with embellishing the representation of the Yanomami as a violent people.

En route for the Orinoco headwaters

With the beginning of the 19th century and as a result of the influence of Enlightenment ideas, new challenges emerged in the natural sciences and humanities. Europe continued its expansion to the Americas, searching for diverse natural resources to be exploited, and looking for new geographical areas that had not yet been discovered. Expeditions to unknown territories gained social value for European explorers, and the descriptions of “savages” played an important role in the philosophical discussion of the social contract, the civilization models, and the origin of inequalities asserted by Rousseau and other intellectuals. For the explorers of that time, there was a particular interest in discovering new horizons that might expand the fields of geography, physics,
and natural sciences. One of those scientific pursuits was the examination of hydrographic characteristic of the American rivers, especially those that were connected with the Amazon River. Among those rivers, the Orinoco constituted a challenge with its unexplored areas and still unknown headwaters that in some way referred back to the unforgotten myth of El Dorado. Thus, the expeditions of the 19th century to the Alto Orinoco were characterized by an intense search of the Orinoco sources and by extension of the Indian tribes that inhabited those territories and that had not been reduced yet to Christianity.

The discursive production of the first explorers who went to the upper-Alto Orinoco area emphasized the ferocity and cannibalistic attitude of the Guaharibo and Guaica Indians to the point that later travelers reproduced, and reified as well, the image of wild and violent Indians without having any personal encounter with them. The tendency during this period is to categorize the “non-civilized” Indians as simple ferocious and undomesticated people. It did not matter if the explorers had in fact a direct relationship with the native or not. The alterity of the Guaica and Guaharibo was constructed through invented encounters and negative commentaries from other Indians who kept closer relationships with the colonizers.

The second waves of expeditions to the Alto Orinoco region began with Alexander Von Humboldt who navigated from the Atures Mission (next to the fall with the same name) to La Esmeralda between 1799 and 1800. The main goal of his expedition was to verify the connection between the Orinoco and the Amazonas Rivers through the Casiquiare canal, and to account for the geographical situation and the social
life of the inhabitants of the Orinoco region. His inherent intention (not totally explicit) was to reach the Guaharibo Rapids where he thought the sources of the Orinoco were located. Although he could navigate the Orinoco River to the Iguapo stream (that is a little further from La Esmeralda), he was not able to continue his trip up river.

He mentioned that among the causes of his returning down river from La Esmeralda were his states of weakness, caused “by the torment of insects, bad food, and a long voyage, in narrow and damp boats” (Humboldt 1852 II: 467). However, we can also infer that he and his group felt threatened by the stories gathered in La Esmeralda of the belligerent attitude of the Guaharibo and Guaica Indians. In his accounts, he displays a surreptitious disappointment because he could not navigate beyond the Iguapo stream to the Guaharibo Rapids. He justified this failure with the supposed violent incident experienced by the conquistador Fernandez de Bobadilla and the dreadful Indians when the Spaniard was trying to reach the sources of the Orinoco. Humboldt (1852 II:461) in his accounts insisted that those warrior tribes, known by the use of the curare with which they poisoned their arrows, attacked the explorers close to the Guaharibo Rapids. As I previously mentioned, this violent encounter did not occur and it seems that Humboldt recreated that incident from other stories he gathered at La Esmeralda to justify his prompt return.

Thus, the last mission post he reached in the Orinoco River was La Esmeralda. According to Humboldt, La Esmeralda was a beautiful and enchanted plain filled with flowing streams, but later he described it as a disgraceful place saturated with mosquitoes, without missionaries, and inhabited by zambos, mulatos (maroons) and exile
"copper-colored people" who identified themselves as Spaniards (Españoles). They called themselves gente de razón (the people endowed with reason) to differentiate from the Indians. He found three Indian languages that were spoken in La Esmeralda: the Idapimanare, the Catarapeño, and the Maquiritano. Although he found a Guaica family in La Esmeralda, whose members he described "as fair [white] and small in size Indians," he did not encounter any Guaica or Guaharibo village in that area. This explorer contradicted himself when, first, he was surprised with the small size of these Indians, and later asserted that the smallness of them had been an exaggeration, as well as the whiteness of the Guaharibo, whom Father Caulin called "Guaribas blancos."

Humboldt’s accounts display two kinds of data. One type of information is based on direct observation of the facts such as the description of the river courses, natural and cartographic information, and some ethnological descriptions. The other type of data came from second hand information. That means that he collected and endorsed substantial information coming from the experiences of other people: white, mestizos, and some Indians who provided him with biased reports of the life in those remote areas. Tavera Acosta pointed out that because of the hurried nature of Humboldt’s trip to the Alto Orinoco, “he did not have time to deal with those tribes, much less study their costumes, and far less to see them” (1954:83).

Humboldt’s account regarding the sources of the Orinoco River, and the Guaica and Guaharibo Indians, proceeds almost in its totality from secondary information, with the exception of the description of the Guaica family that he found in La Esmeralda. Thus, it is suspicious when he states that they were able to obtain "precise notions of the
course of the Orinoco to the east of the mission” (1852 II: 456) when he could not navigate beyond the Iguapo stream. This erroneous appreciation of the river is evident when he affirms that the Orinoco reduces suddenly its rate of flow in the confluence of the Mavaca River “like an Alpine torrent” (1852: II: 460). Though it is true that the Orinoco flow diminishes during the summer season, it is an exaggeration to state that “it becomes a very difficult river to navigate” since the Orinoco at the intersection with the Mavaca is more than 100 meters wide. Regarding the Yanomami, he asserted that the Guaica and the Guaharibo were two different tribes “of white Indians” when in fact they were the same indigenous group.

Humboldt’s narratives reflect certain inconsistencies that go from how the explorers could certainly reach the sources of the Orinoco, to how difficult is to accomplish that goal, because of the hostile attitude of the Guaica and Guaharibo Indians. He first indicates that

The Orinoco may be ascended without danger from Esmeralda as far as the cataracts occupied by the Guaica Indians, who prevent all farther progress of the Spaniards. This is a voyage of six days and a half. (1852 II: 459)

However, in spite of the many ways he imagined coming close to the Orinoco sources, he decided not to continue his trip up river because the idea of confronting the Guaharibo and Guaica threatened him. It is suspicious that a great explorer such as Humboldt decided not continue to the source of this challenging river when he insisted several times that it was so close to La Esmeralda. Among the arguments he wields to justify his decision to not continue to the Guaharibo Rapids is:

We did not go up the Orinoco beyond the mouth of the Iguapo River, which we should have done, if we could have attempted to reach the sources of the river.
There remains a distance of fifteen leagues from the Iguapo to the Raudal of the Guaharibos. At this cataract, which is passed on a bridge of lianas, Indians are posted armed with bows and arrows, to prevent the whites, or those who come from their territory from advancing westward. How could we hope to pass a point where the commander of Rio Negro, Don Francisco Bobadilla, was stopped when, accompanied by his soldiers, he tried to penetrate beyond the Gehette? The carnage then made among the natives has rendered them more distrustful, and more averse to the inhabitants of the missions. (1852 II: 467).

In a few words, Humboldt perceived the Guiaca and Guaharibo (Yanomami) as frightening and distrustful independent “wild Indians” who forbid the explorers to advance any further to the Orinoco headwaters, and who are adverse to the inhabitants of the Esmeralda mission. With Humboldt’s testimonies, spread through his large and well-known work, the discovery of the Orinoco headwaters became a challenge to any explorer or traveler who would desire to pursue that goal. However, according to Humboldt, besides the geographical difficulties of the upper-Alto Orinoco forest, the explorers were going to deal with the fearful savage Indians who would not allow them to advance beyond the Guaharibo Rapids.

Humboldt’s representation of the Yanomami had an incredible impact among the travelers who followed him, trying to come close to the sources of the Orinoco. Although Humboldt did not directly encounter groups of Yanomami, with the exception of a family he met in La Esmeralda, he projected through his narratives powerful images of wild and hostile Indians around the Guaharibo and Guaica that were later reiterated by several other voyagers of the 19th century.
The Franciscan missionary Ramón Bueno, who during 1801-04 was the minister of La Urbana and La Tortuga in the middle Orinoco, settlements located really far away of the upper-Alto Orinoco territory, described the Yanomami in a very particular way:

The Guajariba nation is tanned color, medium size; they walk naked in the forest without huts or crop fields. They sleep on the ground and in-between poles and they eat roots of sticks and hearts of yagua or guama. They do not eat human flesh or animal game; they do not use arrows or any other weapon, no music, no beverages; they are very shy and (cimarrones) untamed. (Bueno 1933:81).

This description is based on mere speculations since this missionary never approached the Guaharibo area. If we compare this description with current ethnographic features, is easy to refute this depiction, since the Yanomami do not sleep on the ground, they eat all the animal game that is available, live in communal dwellings, and are very skilled with bows and arrows. Of course, I do not intend to reproduce a static cultural continuity juxtaposing current Yanomami ways of life with cultural practices from the past. Hence, what these “Western” images of the Guaharibo certainly demonstrate was a lack of information about these people and the prejudiced ideas towards those “tribes” considered as “independent Indians” because they were still “uncivilized.”

Other travelers tried to go up the Orinoco River to find the sources without success. Between 1835 and 1836, the Frenchman Francois Arnaud only reached the mouth of the Mavaca River where he founded the communities of San Pedro or Mavaca, and Santa Isabel up Mavaca River. However, any encounter with Guaharibo or other Indians was reported.

Between 1837 and 1838, the geographer Colonel Agustín Codazzi made significant observations of the natural and physical geography of Venezuela. His
geographical work in conjunction with Baralt’s Venezuelan History (1840) are milestones in Venezuelan historiography since they are the first “national” publications that accounted for the historical and geographical transformation of this country from a local and independent perspective. By that time Venezuela had already reached its independence from Spain (1821) and the new local governments were trying to unify a very split country that had lost almost one third of the population during the Independence Wars.

Regarding Codazzi’s journey to the Alto Orinoco region, there is a debate among historians who argue about if he actually reached the Guaharibo Rapids, or not, in that trip. According to the French Academy of Science that assessed his geographical account, Codazzi arrived at the Guaharibo Rapids where savage Indians had attacked Francisco de Bobadilla. The geographer could not go further “because the Guaharibos have kept their independence" and with this, their distrust towards the white man” (Codazzi 1960 II: 3).

However, the fact that Codazzi reached that site in the Orinoco is disputable, since the evidence indicates that he only went up to the bifurcation of the Orinoco and the Casiquiare Rivers, later returning through the Río Negro without having contacted any Guaharibo (Tavera Acosta 1954, Michelena y Rojas 1989). His references and descriptions of the Indians of the upper-Alto Orinoco territory were presumably obtained through other informants of those areas and from Humboldt’s chronicles. As Tavera Acosta pointed out (1954:304-05) Codazzi actually never saw any members of the

48 According to Codazzi’s (1960 II:35) classification of the Venezuelan population, the Guaharibo and Guiaca were considered as “independent Indians” vis-a-vis the “civilized” and “christianized” Indians.
Guaharibo tribe, and his observations came from the data collected by Balbi from his ethnographic atlas, and Balbi never reached that region.

However, in his geographical account of the Río Negro district he describes and indicates demographic data of the Indian tribes located on the north and on the east sides of the Orinoco River. According to Codazzi’s map, he distinguishes three groups of Yanomami, placing the Guaharibo close to the headwaters of the Orinoco and Manaviche Rivers, the Guaicas in the Ocamo River zone, and the Kirishanas (Shirishana) in the Parima highlands.

He states that the Guaharibo are ferocious warriors and are made up of 1,100 individuals who live at the Rapids with the same name, “They do not use boats but shells to navigate and they subsist on fish and game, their women walk all naked (Codazzi 1960 I: 273). Regarding the Guaica, he explains that they are about 1,200 individuals, are whiter than the rest of the Indians, and they live in the Ocamo, Matacuna, and Manaviche Rivers. “Some of their tribes are allies of the Maquiritare, and others of the Guaharibo, these two groups made war in 1838. (Codazzi 1960 I:273). Codazzi highlights the fact that the Guaica and Guaharibo tribes were under the influence and attack of the Makiritare Indians of the Ventuari and Padamo Rivers. The Makiritare were trying to capture their children who were taken to the Demerari River with the Dutch to be traded for tools, glass beads, and mirrors. (Codazzi 1960 I:76, 256).

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In spite this demographic and geographical information, there are no accounts that support any encounter with Guaica or Guaharibo Indians. Thus, it is quite probable that what the French Academy of Science stated about Codazzi’s trip was a reiteration of Humboldt’s wrong descriptions. Regarding the sources of the Orinoco, Codazzi points out that the only way to reach and control the Guaharibo Rapids would be using military force; however, he would not suggest that alternative to the Venezuelan government. The source of this river and the nature of the people settled in that region were still unknown.

Between 1838 and 1839 the German explorer Robert H. Schomburgk traveled from Roraima (at the intersection of Brazil, British Guiana, and Venezuela) to Río Negro, through the Merevari in the headwaters of the Caura River, the Parima basin, and the upper Uraricuera in Brazilian territory. The main purpose of his trip was to find the sources of the Orinoco River that were apparently located close to the Parima River after crossing an extensive mountain shield (Schomburgk 1841:235).

However, this explorer could not achieve his goal. The main reason of his failure was that while traveling from the Río Branco up to the Uraricuera, they found a Maiongkong (Yekuana) village with people who were in a tremendous agitation and ready to leave that place. They were leaving because the Kirishana (Sanemá), who inhabited the mountains between the Ocamo and Orinoco Rivers, had killed twenty Maiongkong when they were going to trade goods. They also heard that these Kirishana had later attacked...
another Maiongkong village only a day’s journey from where they were and killed all the people (Schomburgk 1841:235).

These events provoked panic among Schomburgk’s Macushi guides who were averse to continue the trip and had actually decided to return, leaving the explorer alone. Finally, Schomburgk convinced them to wait until the next day and returned to the North reaching the Auaris River, crossing the upper Matacuni to the Cunucunuma, and arriving at La Esmeralda on February of 1839. Schomburgk mentions in his account that the Kirischana frustrated his goal in finding the sources of the Orinoco, and that those warlike Indians might have been the same Guaharibo and Guaica that had hindered Humboldt’s trip some years before (1841:236).

Although Schomburgk did not directly encounter any Kirischana, he found a garden near the Marutani highlands, in the upper Uraricuera that was identified as Kirischana. He locates this group as living on the upper Uruwe River, a left bank tributary of the Uraricuera and in the Parima highland. He states that they are a nomad tribe, warlike and courageous, who live in a perfect natural state. They subsist on hunting and when game is scarce they go fishing and eat turtles and caimans, and sometimes cultivate (presumably bitter manioc) in small gardens. Schomburgk mentions that the Kirischanas’ neighbors are afraid of them, and asserts that the Kirischana take advantage of that fear to attack other tribes.

Schomburgk, as well as Humboldt and Codazzi, did not have any encounter with the Kirischana (Yanomami-Sanemá) during his journey through the Parima highlands and his

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51 Migliazza (1972:365) suggests that Schomburgk was probably the first one to start the myth that the Yanomami subsistence patterns consisted on hunting and fishing and that they cultivate just a little bit of manioc. The fact is that the Yanomami depend mostly on cultivated food, therefore they cannot be classified as a hunter-gatherer group.
descriptions came from the prejudiced testimonies of their Indian neighbors. What is clear is
that the Kirischana were in war with the Maiongkong, Macushi, and other tribes of the area,
so any references about these Yanomami were going to be biased by the local views of the
threatened Indians. The Guaharibo, the Guaica and now the Kirischana increased their
reputation of warlike people among the explorers. However, up to that moment none of the
European explorers had met face-to-face with a Yanomami, with the exception of the family
that Humboldt found in La Esmeralda. The sources of the Orinoco continued to be
unknown.

In 1853 the British botanist Richard Spruce arrived in San Carlos of Río Negro
with the main goal of reaching the sources of the Orinoco River. According to Alfred R.
Wallace, the editor of his notes, Spruce pursues two objectives with this expedition. First,
he wanted to travel through the same areas traversed by Humboldt and Bomplant, and
particularly by Schomburgk. The second was to ascend through two rivers
never before explored by a European traveler, while he was acquiring some information about Indian
tribes of that region (1908:385).

In his journey through the Casiquiare he visited several pueblos. In one of them
called Monagas, located close to the confluence with the Orinoco, he met a Guaharibo
Indian who had been caught by mestizos around thirty years ago, when he was in his
twenties, and must have been fifty when Spruce found him. This explorer spent some
time trying to find out about the life of this Guaharibo, and described some details about
his customs, language, settlement, and how Monagas, a mestizo that named this pueblo
after him, had captured the Indian. Spruce mentions that the Guaharibo spoke scarcely any Castillian so Monagas served as interpreter. His name was Kudé-Kubui but he had been baptized as José Miguel. According to Spruce this Guaharibo was

[L]ow of stature, five feet, pot-bellied and knock kneed, fair-skinned, and with light hazel eyes... He seemed very good-natured, but much less intelligent than the Bares, and when those around me laughed at the words of his language he laughed more heartily than any (1908: 396-97).

Spruce states that Monagas captured this Guaharibo when he and six other mestizos went up river to the Manaviche to gather nuts of yuvia and came upon a pueblo of Guaharibo. They found some of them and captured this Guaharibo male and three women who later died of scarlet fever. After binding the captives they were attacked by a group of Guaharibo, "but escaped in the dense of the forest after killing one of them and got safely back to their boats." (1908:397)

Based on Monagas' accounts, Spruce describes the Guaharibo settlements as houses with a "particular annular form" with low angled roof, and with an opened-center area of the village. This is probably the first "official" description of a Yanomami shapono. Later he recounts some of the Guaharibo customs: "They burn the bodies of their dead, collect the calcined bones, and pound them in a mortar; and keep them in their houses in globular baskets of closely-woven mamuri (Spruce 1908: 398). Although there are certain ethnographic discrepancies regarding if those bones were human or animal remains (cf. Cocco 1972:51), this is the first published reference made to Yanomami funerary rituals. What we can infer is that Spruce was particularly fascinated in finding

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52 He does not mention the names of the rivers, but we can infer that one of them was the Orinoco in its headwaters.
out about ceremonies and other customs of the Guaharibo Indians, whom Humboldt had been describing as wild and warlike Indians.

In his voyage, Spruce arrived to La Esmeralda only after several weeks of traveling through the Casiquiare canal where he found a village with six miserable huts, standing on “the most magnificent site I have seen in South America.” As he later stated, La Esmeralda is a paradise with the majestic Duida Mountain range but in reality it is “an inferno” because of the insufferable mosquitoes from which he could nowhere escape. After a few days in La Esmeralda, he descended the Orinoco to the Cunucunuma River and later went down via Casiquiare to San Carlos of Río Negro. Although Spruce displays a different view of the only Guaharibo that he found in his long journey, it would be audacious to assert that he had a real encounter with the Yanomami milieu.

Francisco Michelena y Rojas, governor of the Province of Amazonas in Venezuela, carried out another important expedition to the Alto Orinoco and Río Negro region between 1857 and 1859. By petition of the then president of Venezuela José Tadeo Monagas, Michelena y Rojas was charged with fulfilling not just a scientific exploration of the region, but also making an assessment of the local populations, the economic situation of the region, and the treatment of the Indians and other inhabitants by the official entities (Sach 1987:259). In his monumental manuscript that he entitled Exploración Oficial, Michelena y Rojas ratified that from the headwaters to the Guaharibo Rapids the Orinoco River was still unknown. However, he considered that there were no major impediments in reaching the sources as other explorers had stated (Michelena y Rojas 1989:170).
In 1857, he went up the Orinoco River to the confluence of the Mavaca River and from that point went up the Mavaca River during nine days to Santa Isabel village, which he found empty, with few gardens of plantain and sugar cane. The next day some Indians showed up with their chief. Although he did not identify them, I presume that those Indians were Panatarras or Curichipanas (ARG 1843:91) descendants of Arakawa groups.  

Michelena y Rojas asked about the warlike Guaharibo Indians to these Indians from Santa Isabel, who conveyed that the Guaharibo were tranquil Indians:

> The Indians also assured me, that there was no founded fear in going to the cataracts, of being attacked by the Guaharibos; that they were trading and exchanging products with this group, and those were peaceful. Opinions absolutely opposed to those that have prevailed up to now (Michelena y Rojas 1989:170).

Michelena y Rojas asserts that all the measures made by Humboldt, Codazzi, and Schomburgk regarding the depth and distances of the Orinoco River “are all wrong from La Esmeralda to up river.” (1989:170). In spite of the fact that this explorer did not try to go up the Orinoco to the Guaharibo Rapids and did not find any Guaica or Guaharibo, he portrays a different view of them. On the one hand, it seems that the good relationship between the Indians from Santa Isabel and the Guaharibo at that time determined how Michelena y Rojas described them; on the other hand, he was also trying to contest Humboldt and Schomburgk’s descriptions of those areas that “they never passed through” (1989:170).

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53 Cocco (1972) remarks that those Indians from the Mavaca River were the Curiaranas who used to trade with the people of San Carlos of Río Negro.
Unlike the previous explorers that went up to the Alto Orinoco, Michelena y Rojas had other particular characteristics that could have shaped his whole perception of the Alto Orinoco territory and the indigenous groups settled in those regions. He was appointed directly by the Venezuelan president to do the expedition, he had been the governor of the Amazonas region, in which he had certain power and influence in the territory, and he had a vast knowledge of the physical and human geography of the Alto Orinoco Region. With all this experience and knowledge of the region, Michelena y Rojas was pretty skeptical of any type of exaggeration regarding the natural environment of the Alto Orinoco, or the aggressiveness of the indigenous groups. In this sense, Michelena y Rojas is the first explorer that displayed a constructive image of the Guaharibo, and although he recognized that the sources of the Orinoco had not yet been discovered because of the fear caused by those Indians, he affirmed that the Guaharibo were peaceful Indians that were able to trade with other people.

In 1886, the French adventurer and explorer Jean Chaffanjon traversed the Orinoco River to discover the headwaters of this River as the main objective of his journey. Throughout his book “El Orinoco y El Caura” (1989) originally published in 1889, he displays his incommensurable desire to accomplish that goal that would lead him to be a “celebrity” in the scientific circles of Europe. However, in order to reach the sources of the Orinoco River he had to defeat the Guaharibo Indians who became the most difficult impediment to overcome his enterprise. For Chaffanjon, the existence of the Guaharibo located close to the sources of the Orinoco and their belligerent behavior
turned into a constant referent in his exaggerated and fantastic accounts. Although he states that the terrible stories collected about the Guaharibo came from other Indians that have kept tense relationships with them, he invariably refers to them as “cannibals, white Indians, with long beards, and terribly cruel with their Indian neighbors.” (Chaffanjon 1989:133). For this explorer, these Indians made up ferocious tribes who prevented the travelers from going further up the Guaharibo Rapids.

He mentioned that all the people in the Orinoco advised them not to go up the Orinoco River because the Guaharibo would kill them, but he decided to continue in the company of the French painter Morisot, with several Baré and Maquiritare Indians as guides. He reached La Esmeralda, which was totally abandoned, and continued his journey to the Guaharibo Rapids. He crossed these cataracts and proceeded up river to the last navigable site that he called the French Rapids (later Peñascal), where supposedly he had discovered the sources of the Orinoco. He said that he had reached a point where the river became impassable due to the amount of rocks that obstructed any further travel. Chaffanjon thought and asserted that he had discovered the sources of the Orinoco that were located at the Sierra Parima (1989:280). However, he had only reached Peñascal, which is at least 100 kilometers from the headwaters. In spite of several critiques from other explorers who contradicted this hydrographic finding at that time (Stradelli [1887] 1966), Chaffanjon credited himself as the first explorer who finally achieved the discovery of the Orinoco headwaters.

Chaffanjon’s accounts of the Orinoco and the Indians tribes of that region were so fantastic that Jules Verne wrote in 1898 Le Superbe Orénoque, a literary fiction novels based on this explorer’s binnacle.
Regarding the Guaharibo Indians, he also affirmed that he had encountered two
different groups of Guaharibo after crossing the Rapids with the same name. He said that
they had a “repulsive aspect,” but that there was nothing to fear about those apparently
cannibal Indians (Chaffanjon 1989:274-279). However, their Indian guides later refuted
this encounter between the Guaharibo and Chaffanjon saying that the expedition never
had any contact with those Indians (Tavera Acosta 1954, Rice 122:1502). Despite
Chaffanjon never reaching the sources of the Orinoco as he officially asserted, he did
cross the Guaharibo Rapids for the first time. Moreover, like previous explorers he
repeated the terrible stories about the ferocious Guaharibo, and even fabricated an
encounter with them that apparently never took place.

After Chaffanjon, other local (criollo) explorers tried to find the headwaters of the
Orinoco. In 1897 Guillermo Escobar presumably reached Peñascal, but there are no
references to the Guaharibo. Later Guillermo Level also tried to go up river, without
success. Bartolomé Tavera Acosta, who was governor of Amazonas, traveled to the upper
Orinoco in 1903, just to the bifurcation with the Casiquiare canal. Although he did not
reach Yanomami territory, his observations and descriptions of the area questioned the
overstated judgments of previous explorers such as Humboldt and Codazzi regarding the
fierceness of the Guaharibo.

Until the end of the 19th century, the sources of the Orinoco River were still an
unknown space and a geographical challenge for Europeans and criollos. About the
Guaharibo, Guaica, or Schirianá peoples only sporadic information on their material
culture and physical appearance had been gathered. Besides the isolated encounters with
very few Guaharibo out of their territory, as in the case of Humboldt in La Esmeralda or Spruce in the town of Monagas, there was no criollo or European contact registered with a Yanomami village until the first decades of the next century. After several expeditionary attempts to reach the sources of the Orinoco River, the geographical space as well as the “wild tribes” settled in that area continued to be a mystery for European and criollos, creating a major tension and curiosity around the “unknown savage.”

**Ethnographers, other explorers, and rubber tappers**

With the beginning of the 20th century, scientific expeditions to the Orinoco shifted from their broad goals of describing any kind of natural or social phenomena to more concrete and rigorous research on specific topical areas. The idea of reaching the sources of the Orinoco persisted among travelers and explorers. Nevertheless, making accurate descriptions of the environmental issues regarding the Orinoco was significant for those researchers of the natural sciences as well. Thus several explorers, ethnographers, and scientists went to the upper-Alto Orinoco area not only trying to reach the headwaters, but also to have a better understanding of the geographical landscape and the indigenous populations settled in those territories.

The German ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg, following Schomburgk’s journey, started his expedition from Roraima to the Orinoco River between 1911 and 1912 to gather ethnographic information about several indigenous groups including the Schirianá who dwelled in those regions. Alexander Hamilton Rice, member of the Royal Geographical Society of London went across the Río Negro to the Orinoco through the
Casiquiare canal in order to finish a map of the Río Negro area and to explore and map the Orinoco to its sources during 1919-1920. Herbert Spencer Dickey, a North American explorer, traveled in 1931 across the Orinoco with the balata tapper Luis Vega trying to find the sources of the Orinoco. They passed through the Guaharibo and Peñascal Rapids and reached the confluence of the Orinoco with the Ugueto River from where they could not continue because the riverbed was too shallow.

Regarding the contacts between these explorers and the Yanomami, almost all of them had the chance to have a close encounter with some of Guaharibo, Guaica or Schirianá. Koch-Griinberg ([1924] 1982), for instance, found two groups of Schirianá: one from the Alto Uraricaá and the other from the Motomoto River. He actually stayed for a short period in a temporary village with them until the natives left the place. Koch-Grünberg is the first explorer that had a direct contact with some Schirianá displaying a wider depiction of this Yanomami group. He described in detail their houses, physical appearance, the health situation, material culture, and subsistence activities. As Schomburgk, Koch-Grünberg identified the Schirianá erroneously as just a hunting and gathering tribe, highlighting the nomadic life without verifying their horticultural activities. He remarked on the interethic friction between the Schirianá and the Yekuana and Maco, but also highlighted the intra-ethnic conflicts among the Schirianá villages of the Marutani Mountains ([1924] 1982 I:212). He also traded directly some manufactured tools for plantains and ethnographic objects.

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55 This notion of hunters and gathers continued well into 20th century.
Although the Schirianá represent a very rudimentary culture, “the poorest of the poor” according to Koch-Grünberg, he contested the image of violent people, asserting that too much has been written about the savage condition of the Guaharibo. He stated that there are several indications of the innocuous attitude of those groups, and the reasons of their attacks to other people has to be examined among the “civilized Indians” and mestizos who previously have harassed the Guaharibo ([1924] 1982 III:248). Koch-Grünberg’s perspective on the Yanomami differs from the 19th century European explorers’ views. He had the chance to spend some time in a Schirianá village and to have direct relationship with some of them gathering first hand ethnographic information. Although he displays a clear ethnocentrism, describing them as the real “savage Indians,” the aggressive and violent image of the Guaharibo is discursively shifted now to a more “primitive” view of them because of their rudimentary culture in comparison to other Indian tribes ([1924] 1982 I:212).

In the case of Hamilton Rice (1922), his encounter with the Guaharibo Indians took place a little bit further from the Guaharibo Rapids. However, this was not a friendly contact as happened with Koch-Grünberg and the Schirianá at the Uraricaá River. While Rice’s expedition was camping out in one of the beaches of the Orinoco, around 60 Guaharibo showed up screaming and demonstrating an aggressive attitude towards his party. Rice and his guides thought that the Guaharibo were attacking them with the intention of killing and later “eating them” (1922, 101:1511). The explorers felt threatened and decided to fire on the Indians, and some Guaharibo responded shooting their arrows while the rest ran away. Rice stated that they had to kill some Guaharibo in
that infelicitous encounter. This violent incident was explained in his chronicles as a deliberate attack of the Guaharibo on the explorers. However, later references indicated that the reasons for this clash were the conflict situation between the Guaharibo and Rice’s guides, the Baré and Makiritare Indians who were predisposed against the Guaharibo, the misunderstanding when the Guaharibo tried to trade things, and finally the fright of Rice who decided to shoot them.

Hamilton Rice described the Guaharibo as forest, “foot Indians”, not river Indians who build bridges to cross the rivers; they live in cylindrical houses, do not cultivate any crops and do not have dogs. They know how to use curare (poison). They are cannibals and eat their food uncooked, especially wild animals. Similar to Koch-Grunberg ([1924] 1982 I:209), Rice mistakenly regarded that eating uncooked animals and the lack of gardening activities were cultural characteristic of these Indians. For Yanomami all the animal meat game has to be completely cooked and without any sign of blood. If it is not cooked they believe that food could produce diseases.

The Yanomami groups settled in Platanal and Mavaca recalled as well old unfriendly contacts at the Guaharibo Rapids. A Yanomami version of a similar hostile encounter between napé and Yanomami (or maybe it is an account of what in fact happened to Rice) was recalled by one of the elders of the Mavaca area who told me:

The first napé arrived up there, close to the Guaharibo Rapids and close to where the later Patanowé-theri used to live. The Yanomami made a bridge there to get some machetes from the river and they saw some napé working right there. And those Yanomami went to the shapono to tell the others about the napé so they can ask them for machetes. Right there, they had the encounter to trade little things. But the napé did not like the Yanomami. Some napé gave few goods, but those that did not give anything began to fire on the Yanomami so they had to run away. (Elder from the former village of Poreshiia, 1990).
While Rice thought that the Guaharibo were attacking him, the Yanomami interpretation (elders from Platanal) of these types of encounters raises two issues. One is that the napê (other indigenous groups and criollos) were not always friendly and actually used to fire on them so the Yanomami responded to those confrontations. Second is that the Yanomami were looking forward to obtaining manufactured goods and the only way to do it was by getting closer to the outsiders. This physical approaching was many times misunderstood as an attack on the explorers. The fact is that the Yanomami were also frightened by the idea of contacting the white people.

After several days of traveling through the Orinoco, Herbert Spender Dickey encountered some Guaharibo who were afraid of a possible attack from the Guaica, which he described wrongly as “a tribe of white men with beards.” About the Guaharibo, despite that he had a friendly encounter with them and exchanged a few tools for bows and arrows, most of his description about their customs, leadership, and settlements are incorrect and biased (Dickey 1932:254-260).

Other scientific and political explorations took place in the following decades. During the 1930s Felix Cardona Puig accomplished several trips to the Alto Orinoco close to the sources of the river to gather hydrographic data of the Orinoco and its tributaries. He had contact with some Schirianá with whom he established friendly relationships to the extent that they served as guides when he traveled through the Parima and Uraricuera Rivers. In 1943, Hilario Itriago a member of the Venezuelan-Brazilian Boundary Commission went across the Demeni, Toototobi, and Ugueto Rivers to set up
the frontier markers and to build detailed maps of the area. Though he did not see any Guaharibo, he described them as a nomad tribe that “consumed themselves in their ignorance and savagery” (Anduze 1960:34).

In November of 1951, the French-Venezuelan expedition leaded by Major Franz Ríosquez Irribarren and made up by several scientists, explorers, and Venezuelan military personnel finally conquered the headwaters of the Orinoco River. After more than three months of navigating the river they established the official coordinates of the sources at the Delgado Chalbaud peak in the Parima highlands at 1,047 meters of altitude. Although the main goal of this large expedition was to discover once and for all the location of the Orinoco sources (Ríosquez Irribarren 1962), it also had as a purpose to contact and carry out ethnographic and linguistic studies of the different tribes of that region (Anduze 1960, Lichy 1979). This expedition had direct contact with several Yanomami groups, and although the explorers were under the influence of what Anduze (1960) called the “Guaharibo psychosis” because they were afraid of being attacked by the Yanomami, they did not have any kind of violent encounter with them. It took almost two centuries for the Westerners (European, North American or criollos) in reaching the anxious and “fearful” Orinoco headwaters.⁵⁶

In addition to the scientific explorations, there were some incursions from rubber and balata (Mimusops balata) tappers to the upper-Alto Orinoco area during the first three decades of the 20th century. The Yanomami did not experience as high a degree as

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⁵⁶ As a point of comparison of Western scientific discoveries, the headwaters of the Orinoco River were “discovered” just eighteen years before man reached the moon on July of 1969. The fact is that the sources of the Orinoco River became an unreachable enterprise for “Western” expeditions that tried on numerous occasions in finding the headwaters of this river.
the traumatic effects of the rubber boom as their neighbors the Makiritare, Piaroa, and Maco groups because of their isolated location and their itinerant mobilization. However, they had different types of contacts with group of mestizos and “semi-civilized Indians” who were trying to exploit rubber and balata in several areas of the Amazon. There are references that indicate violent encounters between rubber tappers and some Guaharibo groups in the areas of the Cauaburí, Maturacá and Marauí when the mestizos were looking for rubber and balata (Cocco 1972:62). One example of these violent encounters is the case of the mestiza girl Helena Valero who was kidnapped in 1933 in the Maricoabi stream, affluent of the Dimate of the Río Negro by a group of Yanomami from the Kohoroxiwé-theri village (Biocca 1970, Valero 1984). There are also accounts that refer to friendly relationships as in the case of Antonio Silva, a rubber tapper, and some Guaharibo from the upper Cauaburí. (Cocco 1972:63). In any case for the rubber tappers, the Yanomami were “barbarian,” “irrational Indians” vis-à-vis the “rational Indians” that had been dominated and “civilized.”

Although it is obvious that the Yanomami and the rubber tappers had conflictive encounters, we have to stress that the incursions of mestizos searchers of rubber in the upper-Alto Orinoco coincided as well with the Yanomami demographic expansion to the North and West areas of the Orinoco. With this Yanomami mobilization to new territories close to the Mavaca and Ocamo River new encounters and relationships with the outsiders began to occur more frequently.

For the Yanomami the rubber exploitation is recalled as a very weird and unhealthy activity. They did not understand why those napé were pulling out “the blood
of the trees" that was later burned, and from which emanated a hideous smoke (*shawara*) that caused sickness among the children. An elder from Mavaca stated that

> The Yanomami ancestors" (*no patapi*) did not like to work with the *napé* that used to only draw out rubber (*husu husu*) from the trees, they were very bad people, they tried to shoot Yanomami. That is why the Yanomami ran away every time they heard the *napé* were approaching to get *husu husu*. (Elder man from Mavaca, 1990).

The first sustained encounter with the *napé* took place when the protestant missionary James Barker settled in Platanal with the people of the Mahekoto-theri in 1950, and subsequently the Catholic missionary (Salesian) Luis Cocco arrived to Ocamo in 1957. Since that time some Yanomami villages of the Alto Orinoco have maintained permanent contact with outsider people that increased in the next decades as I show in the next chapter.

What we can infer from these first decades of the 20th century is that for the scientific explorers and travelers, the Yanomami continued representing the wild and primitive people who blocked the route towards the Orinoco headwaters. For the rubber tappers and other *mestizos* the Yanomami were simply "irrational and barbaric Indians" that used to attack them to steal their tools and manufactured goods while they were exploiting rubber and balata. On the other hand, several accounts report the conflictive relationships between the Guaharibo and the other indigenous groups such as the Makiritare, Piaroa, or Maco that used to be the guides of the explorers and who reinforced the image of the ferocious Guaharibo.

It is pretty obvious that during that period the Yanomami were hostile with the rubber tappers and other "rational" *mestizos* who were "raiding Indians" for the rubber
exploitation, but it is also true that they had friendly encounters with explorers and even rubber workers. The attacks and conflicted relationship between Yanomami and napê depended on the nature of the encounter, the predisposition of the other indigenes against them, and the type of exchange they sustained, not simply because the Yanomami were seen as "naturally savage and ferocious." On the other hand, we have to consider that during those decades the Yanomami were in total demographic expansion to other areas due to intra-ethnic fissions. Although during this period the Yanomami had more direct encounters with outsiders, it is only with the missionary settlements that this indigenous group began to have a continued relationship with the criollos and other non-native people who later portrayed a more complex view of this indigenous group. However, the image of the savage, irrational, and "fierce Indian" continued being displayed in other ethnographic narratives and voyager's accounts.

It is quite eloquent that in spite of the different historical periods and the personal features of each explorer or traveler, the Yanomami alterity has been constituted above all by fabricated violent encounters between outsiders (mainly European) and Yanomami. These supposed violent clashes led other explorers to recreate this image of quarrelsome and wild indigenes who have as a main attribute being the inhabitants of the Orinoco headwaters. For almost two centuries the European, North American, and criollo travelers (with few exceptions) stressed the violent behavior of the Yanomami that impeded the advance of any explorer to conquer the sources of the Orinoco. It is also peculiar that the most amazing descriptions of the Guaharibo and Guaica fierceness and
wildness came from European explorers, while the local explorers such as Michelena y Rojas were able to display a different view of this indigenous group.

There is an intrinsic relationship between the unknown space of the upper-Alto Orinoco and the unknown “Indians” settled in that almost unreachable place. I believe that it is not a coincidence that once the French-Venezuelan expedition reached the sources of the Orinoco in 1950, the Yanomami began to have more sustained contact with the outsider napē. The “Western” representation of the Yanomami otherness shifted from the “fierce and cannibal Indians” to the “savage and irrational Indians” and later to more primitive and deprived natives. In any case, throughout this historical characterization the Yanomami alterity has been a key reference to create the image of the “exotic Indian” that is still portrayed in the media, written accounts, and ethnographic texts.
CHAPTER 4
THE RHETORIC OF THE STATE AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The State will recognize the existence of the indigenous peoples and communities, their social, political, and economic organization, their cultures, practices, and customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitats and original rights over the lands that they ancestrally and traditionally occupy and that are necessary to develop and guarantee their ways of life. It shall be the role of the State, with the participation of the indigenous people, to demarcate and guarantee the right to the collective property of their lands, which will be inalienable, unexpendable, non-sequestrable, and non-transferable according to the terms of the Constitution and the law.
(Venezuela, National Constitution 1999, article 119)

This new constitutional process means to take in consideration indigenous peoples. We cannot have democracy if we do not take in consideration the indigenous peoples; we cannot have democracy if there is no justice.... We need the presence of the Yanomami defending the rights of the indigenous peoples..." (Noel Pocaterra, 1999)

Grounded on the cultural transformations experienced by the indigenous peoples throughout historical processes within the frame of the Venezuelan State formation, I explore in this chapter the different types of interactions between the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco and the Venezuelan nation-state in the last fifty years. In order to explore the implications of the state-purported expansion to the out-of-the-way populations, I outline the constitution and application of national policies towards indigenous peoples. In particular, I address the dominant discursive practices exercised by Venezuelan political structures and the degree to which states' institutions co-opt, negotiate, or

57 Noel Pocaterra is a Wayuu indigenous representative and member of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA). This speech was delivered in Ocamo, Alto Orinoco when a group of five members of the
integrate the indigenous groups into the state system and ideologies. The broader argument that is the understanding of the current situation of the Alto Orinoco Yanomami requires positioning them historically and spatially within the Venezuelan national context. The nature of the relationship between the Yanomami and state structures is the result of the different approaching forms and interactions framed within the state formation and not by a merely given condition or a naturalized view of "isolated tribal groups" as has been promoted until recently in academic and public circles.

The interaction between nation-state and indigenous peoples is an intricate process that demands multiple analytical perspectives. On the one hand, the national frontier expansion requires the analysis of the constitution of the nation-state as a dominant structure that legitimizes its power through legal, political, and ideological apparatuses (Gramsci 1971, Althusser 1971). On the other hand, the encounters with the state’s institutions reveal the responses, actions, and agreements of the ethnic groups toward the imposition of national structures and ideologies. In these processes of interaction, it is predictable that indigenous peoples will find multiple ways to interpret the national laws and make use of state institutions in their own strategic fashion.

Different forms of control, contestation, and negotiation are developed either by the nation-state or by the indigenous groups. While the nation-states try to rule the socio-cultural life of indigenous peoples through policies of regulation, assimilation, or even extermination, indigenous groups develop strategies for their survival and continuity that

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NCA went to the Alto Orinoco to discuss with the Yanomami the "Proposal of Venezuelan indigenous peoples and organizations to the National Constituent Assembly." September 25, 1999.
include the use and management of their lands, languages, rituals, and local subsistence patterns as well as social movements and rebellions. More recently, indigenous peoples in Latin America are actively engaging in national political processes as concrete responses of their cultural and political strategies (Warren and Jackson 2002, Maybury-Lewis 2002). They are adjusting their identities and self-management experiences within the national context and participating more vigorously in the constitution building legislations. This is what the Venezuelan indigenous peoples are currently experiencing in the face of political expansion of the nation-state.

Although the state is a very complex and changeable entity considered in part as an ideological construction (Corrigan and Sayer 1985), it sets up a more or less cohesive “state-system” and reproduces the ideological forms of domination or “state-ideas” (Abrams 1988:81-82) through its social institutions and political practices. As an “ideological artefact,” state formation produces among members of a particular community a totalizing idea of the “national character” and “national identity.” Joseph and Nugent, for the case of revolutionary Mexico, rephrased Corrigan and Sayer’s (1985) statements on state formation:

[They] equally consider the individualizing dimension of state formation, which is organized through impositional claims embodied in distinctive categories (e.g., citizen, taxpayer, head of the household, ejidatario, and so on) that are

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58 As example of different indigenous strategies in Central America see the work of Adams (1991).

59 This conceptualization of the state is based on the works of Abrams (1988), Anderson (1991), and Corrigan and Sayer (1985). For a critical reassessment of these ideas see Alonso (1994), and Joseph and Nugent (1994).

60 Corrigan and Sayer assert that individuals are enlisted “within the state community as citizens, voters, taxpayers, ratepayers, jurors, parents, consumers, and homeowners…” (1985:5).
structured along the axes of class, occupation, gender, age, ethnicity, and locality. (Joseph and Nugent 1994:20)

The establishment of different categories, definitions, discourses, and identities over individuals and by extension over collective groups such as indigenous peoples constitutes regulating forms of the state. These controlling discourses are represented by certain mechanisms such as census, constitutional laws, national symbols, public pronouncements, etc. as a part of the “routines and rituals of state” (Corrigan and Sayer 1985:5). The implementation of national census among indigenous groups is a concrete example of the state routinized practices in which government institutions set up “impositional claims” based on specific social and ethnic categories.

In this sense, one must also consider Foucault’s (1991) notion of “governmentality” (governmental rationality) as tactics of controlling governable subjects through institutions, administrative organizations, and bureaucratic procedures. Governmentality is at the same time internal and external to the state: “[It] is the tactic of government which makes possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not...” (1991:103). The discourses of power and technologies of knowledge employed by the state to regulate individuals are analytical tools that make possible the study of the impact of national institutions on individuals’ behavior and the way people have embodied these systems of regulation in their everyday life.

Although this perspective mainly favors the implications of dominant state institutions over individuals as governable subjects, I contemplate as well the controlling state discourses over social collectivities grouped according to ethnic particularities such
as in the cases of indigenous peoples. In this sense, I see these tactics as institutional
state’s more or less coordinated practices that have as a final goal the incorporation of the
indigenous peoples into the national domain. These tactics of government are challenged,
transformed, and deceived by the individual and collective strategies of indigenous
peoples. Extrapolating Foucault’s conceptualization of state power and framing the state
in relationship to indigenous groups, I wonder which are the dominant ideological
discursive practices and “the tactics of government” employed by national institutions to
control the autonomy of indigenous populations in Venezuela.

To answer this last concern, I distinguish in this chapter the different controlling
tactics of the Venezuelan State applied among the indigenous peoples in a wide-ranging
scale and among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco in particular. First, I assess the
enforcement of the national legislation to indigenous peoples that has tended to neglect
their contemporaneous condition in the state formation. Second, I place spatially and
politically the Amazonas territory in relation to the rest of the country and assess the
impact of political-territorial regulations to the indigenous populations at the border
zones. Third, I display historically the sustained encounters in the last fifty years between
the Yanomami and the outsiders highlighting the establishment of national institutions in
the processes of state expansion.

When we explore the implication of the state-systems and state-ideas among the
different social and ethnic groups, we are also facing the many ways in which the state
makes itself present on the dissimilar geographical landscapes. That is the reason
whereby the controlling rhetoric of the Venezuelan State regarding the indigenous
population is not limited only to the enforcement of indigenist policies through the national legislation and the establishment of the national institutions in the frontier zones. It is also displayed through the state's cartographic dispositions, and the political-administrative division of the national territories linked to the management of the natural resources and the people who inhabit those areas.

In the examination of cultural interaction between different social and cultural orders that comprise the state formation, the following questions will guide my discussion: What are the political and ideological discourses employed by the Venezuelan State in its effort to incorporate frontier territories and indigenous peoples into a totalizing “imagined community”? How have the Venezuelan State institutions and policies ruled, assimilated, and articulated the indigenous peoples in general and the Yanomami in particular into the national society? Are the processes of cultural transformation experienced by the Yanomami the consequences of new national policies of intercultural relations or are they the continuation of past colonial forms?

These questions will set up the historical and political characterization of Venezuelan indigenous people within the national society and particularly the condition of the Yanomami within the context of state formation and national policies. The purpose of understanding state regulations and policies is, conversely, to examine the approaching forms of indigenous peoples to the national political systems. The idea is to establish an historical political frame of the sustained encounters with Amazonian indigenous groups to account for the processes of cultural engagement experienced by the Alto Orinoco Yanomami and their responses to the outside (napé) way of life.
Therefore, this chapter stresses the legal frame that rules the incorporation of indigenous peoples to the nation-state and the nature of the relationship between the Yanomami and the national expansion through different external agents. It also disentangles and contextualizes historically the effects of the indigenist state policies since the constitution of Venezuela as an independent nation. Finally, I intend to highlight the paradoxical discourses of state policies enforced over frontier territories that are inhabited by indigenous populations.

The overlooked rationality of indigenist policies

There is a big truth in Venezuela, and that is that indigenous peoples have been almost invisible. They [criollos] have not wanted to see us; we are almost invisible. They have always ignored us.


Ramos' book Indigenism. Ethnic Politics in Brazil begins with the following question: “Why [do] Brazilian Indians, being so few, have a prominent place in the national consciousness” (1998:3). This simple but sharp question can be reformulated for the rest of the Latin American countries to explore, which is the role that indigenous people play in the national ideals of each nation. The question highlights at the same time a suggestive issue that is the correlation between the quantity of indigenous people and the relevance they have in a broader context that is the national consciousness. In comparison to the Brazilian example, there are cases in which the indigenous peoples
constitute the majority population, but their representation in the national system has been constrained to have a low impact in national ideologies. There are other situations in which the indigenous represent a minority of the total population and do not have a broad impact on the national consciousness, such as in the Venezuelan case.

The representation of indigenous people in relation to the rest of the Venezuelan population is displayed in statistical terms. According to the Venezuelan census (Venezuela, OCEI 1993), the total indigenous population for 1992 was 315,815 individuals who live in ten federal entities. There are 31 indigenous groups that have lived traditionally in Venezuelan territory and who represent about 1.5 per cent of the Venezuelan population. In addition to this scarce indigenous population, the emblematic representations of indigenous peoples in the national consciousness have been isolated and often frozen in time.

There is a commonsensical idea that Venezuela does not enjoy a great indigenous heritage and that indigenous peoples never were so visible and advanced as in Mexico, Peru, or Guatemala. The standardized notion that has encompassed indigenous groups in Venezuela is that they were nomadic, dispersed, and backward peoples that never developed complex cultural forms like the Aztec, Inca, or Maya civilizations. Spatially, the few groups that still exist are settled at the frontier zones of the country that are seen as the forgotten territories. Ethnically, the remaining indigenous peoples have not been necessarily considered as relevant societal groups that contribute to the economic growth

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61 Liborio Guaruya, a Baniba Indian is currently (2003) the Governor of Amazonas State. He was also elected as one of the two representatives from the Amazonas State to the National Constituent Assembly in 1999.
of the country or to the cultural development of the nation as in the case of Brazil underpinned by Ramos (1998).

Hence, the question would be why indigenous peoples in Venezuela, being so few but diverse, have had a sort of ambiguous, or I should say, invisible status in the national consciousness, at least until very recently. I would say that one of the reasons for this overlooking of indigenous people is related to the incoherent and ambiguous rhetoric of the nation-state regarding the indigenous peoples since the foundation of the first independent Republic of Venezuela in 1811. More concretely, these inconsistencies are pinpointed in the legal framework and indigenous policies endorsed by the Venezuelan State. The unseen existence of indigenous groups also has to do with issues of ethnicity, the *criollization* models, and the *mestizaje* ideologies that emerged in the processes of the formation of the Venezuelan national project.

Scholars who have analyzed indigenous policies in Venezuela agree that the nation state has neglected in different ways the existence of the indigenous population. Arvelo-Jiménez (1980:211) asserts that between 1915 and 1969 Venezuela was characterized by a “lack of coherent planning in indigenist affairs.” Henley has described this political indifference of the state towards indigenous people saying, “[T]he very absences of a systematic policy may in fact be a policy in itself” (1982: 247). Heinen and Coppens (1986) analyze the shifts in Indian policies, asserting that since the arrival of the Spaniards on the Venezuelan coast in 1498, the areas of indigenous population have not experienced such drastic and rapid changes “as in the last ten years” (1986:364).
Indigenous representatives also expressed a similar opinion. In 1974 a group of them declared in an international conference that in Venezuela "there has never existed a basic coherence in the planning and implementation of the few works [indigenist policies] carried out by the state" (Montiel et al. 1981: 344). More recently, I recalled the ironic statement coming from a former Director of Indigenous Affair (DAI) who at the beginning of the 1990s in an official lecture at the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research stated, "Venezuela lacks any indigenist policy; there are no Indian policies here." A journalist quoting an official representative from the national office of statistics also agreed that: "Venezuela’s Yanomami Indians, as well as the rest of the country’s indigenous groups, are suffering from government neglect" (Guzmán 1993).

It seems that scholars, governmental personnel, journalists and even the indigenous representatives agree with the premise that the nation-state has lacked indigenous policies and has almost ignored the existence of the indigenous peoples, or at least that is what the state has demonstrated for a long period. Expanding this common notion, I would say that in addition to a lack of policies and the inconsistency of the few indigenist policies, what has predominated is an existential denial of them as collective culturally different groups that have persisted among the criollo groups that make up the national society.

The liberal ideas of the 19th century that favored individual rights and juridical equality among all the members of the society prevailed over the recognition of other societies culturally and linguistically different such as indigenous peoples within the district, and several federal dependencies (islands).
nation-state. It appears that the state, throughout the Venezuelan history, has developed certain tactics to manipulate the presence of indigenous peoples. One of the state tactics to control the continuity or not of the indigenous populations in the nation has been "the negation of the existence of the Indians" (Stavenhagen 1988) and the consequent ethnic obliteration of many of these groups that used to be settled in the northern area of Venezuela. These ideas remained implicitly in the discursive rhetoric of the state towards indigenous groups until a few decades ago through the slippery indifference of the national and regional institutions regarding indigenous rights.

The Venezuelan indigenist policies have been characterized fundamentally by a deficient and confusing legislation that began to change a few years ago, especially when indigenous representatives claimed a more active participation in the decision-making process. An example of an active role of these populations refers to the articles regarding indigenous issues granted by the recent national constitution of 1999. However, when I point out that the Venezuelan State has lacked of any indigenist policy, I am not saying that a more aggressive and intense indigenist policy would have solved "the Indian problem." On the contrary, the policies on incorporation would have been more deleterious towards the cultural integrity of the remaining indigenous populations. For indigenous representatives the definition of a real Venezuela indigenist policy is one that considers the active participation of indigenous people in the decision-making processes (Montiel et al. 1981). In this sense, the development of the national indigenist policies

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has ignored in different ways a true participation and the consent of indigenous groups regarding their right over their land and ways of life.

This glance at indigenous policies makes me to ask why the Venezuelan State has been particularly careless in carrying out a more or less coherent and even contentious policy towards indigenous groups. This almost intrinsic detachment between the state and indigenous peoples (that last since the end of the 19th century until the 1960s) took place because the remaining indigenous populations did not represent contesting social, political or economic groups that were capable of threatening the interest of the Venezuelan nation-state. Although they have constituted an ideological and even ontological challenge to the state formation, in practice they did not have the political and material means to confront the national expansion.

The remaining indigenous peoples were considered neither a relevant social group that would contribute to the development of the country nor a major component of the nation-state building. On the contrary, these enduring groups were seen as isolated people at the margins of the economic and social growth of the country. However, the only way that the nation-state coped with the “existence” of these cultural different groups that survived the colonial and republican expansions was by ignoring them.

In Venezuela, the indigenous heritage is a significant element of a mestizo (later identified as criollo) ideology created by the mixture of European whites, Indians, and Africans during the colonial and republican periods. Scholars and the public opinion have commonly identified the core of a so-called “national identity” on the crossroads of these “three cultures” that make up “the nation.” Although the notion of indigenous roots is
considered in the constitution of a national consciousness, the coexisting of indigenous
groups within a national society has been constrained to the remote hinterland of the
frontiers such as the Amazonas, Delta Amacuro and Guajira regions. The few references
in the national imagination concerning indigenous peoples were fossilized in time in
textbooks and stamps evoking the bravery of the *caciques* (chiefs) that fought against the
Spanish during the Conquest age. Although the images of indigenous *caciques* have
penetrated into the popular imagination through the María Lionza cult, these “Indian”
figures and invented biographies of the *caciques* have been “disseminated by the media
and the educational system as part of the populist network of interpellation” (Sánchez
2001:411) developed in the last decades of the democratic period in Venezuela.

The representations of an indigenist iconography that have recreated mainly the
heroic past of the *caciques* have contributed as well to concealing the existence of
contemporary indigenous peoples that survived the Colonial and Republican expansion.
The state through its institutions and dominant ideologies of *criollization* has generated a
historical rupture between the past and present, obliterating the continuation of
indigenous peoples at the national consciousness. The recognition of the indigenous
contemporaneity has been therefore virtually negated and the scattered approval of their
presence as a group of people has been basically restricted to the frontier zones. The
southern Venezuelan boundaries became for a long time the last frontier, a “liminal

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64 The María Lionza cult is a “syncretic” religious expression that originated in the central west area
of Venezuela in the Yaracuy State. Taussig (1997) analyzes, in a sort of surrealistic way, the symbiotic
relationship among the María Lionza cult, the people, and the Venezuelan State.

65 The volume entitled “Where cultures meet. Frontiers in Latin America History” (Weber and
Rausch 1994) develops a suggestive conceptual frame on frontier expansion in Latin America countries.
space” (Alonso 1995) with isolated and restricted areas where out-of-the-way societies such as the indigenous peoples might survive, but that did not mean that they were going to be part of the national project.

Hence, if Venezuela did not take account of a large indigenous population, why should the state have developed an extensive and elaborate indigenist policy for culturally different frontier societies? This claim seems to be more an academic concern than a matter for the state. For state institutions, which are always in transformation and do not represent necessarily coherent and structured entities, there was a correlation between the isolation of the border zones and keeping indigenous peoples away from the primary national programs and policies. This correlation has to do with the conceptualization and enforcement of indigenous laws throughout history.

Making the indigenist legislation

At the beginning of the formation of the Venezuelan State as an independent country, many indigenous peoples were rapidly incorporated and reduced to the incipient national society. When the emerging Republican State of the 19th century began to expropriate indigenous lands and refuse to recognize their ancestral territories, a high proportion of their descendants became part of the mixture race classification neglecting their cultural differences. The access and control of indigenous lands constituted the central issue for the state that was managed through the enactment of several laws after

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66 According to Codazzi (1960 II:35), by 1839 the Venezuelan population reached 945,348 inhabitants and was divided in six races: Whites (260,000); Mixed races (414,151); Slaves (49,782); Civilized Indians (155,000); Catechized Indians (14,000); Independent Indians (52,415). The Guaharibo and Guaica (as were known the Yanomami) were classified as Independent Indians.
the independence of Venezuela. The *resguardo indígena* (communally held land) that was a legal colonial entity, which the Spanish Crown granted to the indigenous villages, was practically eliminated by several laws endorsed in the 19th century and the earlier decades of the 20th-century.\(^6^7\)

The indigenous lands that were protected by the *resguardos* were expropriated by the state because they were considered *tierras baldías* (uncultivated and unclaimed lands). As result of the liberal policies of the incipient Venezuelan State, the traditionally indigenous land considered *tierras baldías* became part of the state’s properties. However, the 1824 law on “Indian assistance” ordered the distribution of uncultivated and unclaimed lands to those indigenous peoples of the Venezuelan Amazon who chose to abandon their supposed “nomadic life.” With this decree the new republic was trying to establish in the southern area of the nation “processes of civilization” encouraging the native to move out from their traditional lands to areas more easily controlled.

During the presidential regime of Antonio Guzmán Blanco (1870-1887), several “organic acts” were granted for the Federal Territories. The 1884 law on Indian reduction, civilization, and *resguardos* recognized that the only “real indigenous communities” were those settled in the Venezuelan Amazonas, Upper Orinoco, and Guajira Federal Territories. This law established that these indigenous communities were the owners of their respective *resguardos*, which they had to divide within a period of two years or the land would become *tierras baldías*. Although this legislation intended to

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\(^6^7\) With the laws of 1821, 1836, 1882, 1884, 1904, 1911, and 1936 (see Armellada, 1977, in *Fuero Indígena*) the majority of the *resguardos* in Venezuela were dissolved, with the exception of those communal lands situated in *La Guajira* (Zulia State) and *Amazonas* and *Alto Orinoco* territories (Amazonas State).
cover the whole Amazon area, the Alto Orinoco region and the access of Yanomami territory seemed too far and inaccessible to be controlled by the juridical entities of resguardos and tierras baldías. We have to remember that by the end of the 19th century, only Jean Chaffanjon in 1886 and probably Guillermo Escobar in 1897 had gone up the Orinoco River beyond the Guaharibo Rapids, up to the Peñascal Rapids (thinking erroneously that they had found the headwaters of the Orinoco River). In their accounts there are no references of any encounter with the Yanomami.

The state legislation of the 19th century and the beginning of the twenties assured the management of the majority of indigenous lands in the country. With the control of their lands many indigenous were clearly incorporated into the national society, losing their territories and ways of life. A statement of this period is that the indigenous groups who survived these processes of incorporation were those who inhabited the margins of the national territory, away from the national expansion. Thus, the indigenous peoples settled in the delta of the Orinoco, in the Guajira peninsula in the western side, and those in the Amazonas in the southern area of the country were capriciously “protected” by the indifference of the state.68

68 There were a few exceptions such as the Kariña Indians who remained living in the central area of the country in the Anzoátegui State.
The missions’ role

This approach shifted when the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez (governed from 1908 to 1935),69 proclaimed the Ley de Misiones (Mission Law) in 1915 with its respective Reglamento (regulations) in 1921. With this law, the Venezuelan State delegated the Catholic missions the task “to reduce and attract to the civilized life those tribes and indigenous groups.” The state signed three following agreements with different religious orders that would care for and teach Spanish and other occupations to the indigenous peoples of these remote areas. The Capuchin order was in charge of the indigenous peoples in the Guayana area and the Orinoco Delta (1922) and the indigenous groups of the Guajira-Perijá region in the Zulia State (1944).

The Salesian order arrived at the Amazonas in 1933 and gained official control of the indigenous groups of this territory since 1937 when the Ministry of Interior Affairs signed the Alto Orinoco Mission Agreement with the Prefecture Apostolic of the Alto Orinoco, entrusted of the Holy See. In 1940 the nun order “Sisters of María Auxiliadora” joined the Salesian order to accomplish the missionary work in the Amazonas territory. The Apostolic Prefecture of the Alto Orinoco was in charge of “the organization and regimen of the indispensable tasks to civilize the indigenous tribes that exist in the territory.”70

The Mission Law of 1915 (still in force) gave to the Salesian missionaries the power to oversee the indigenous population in the Venezuelan Amazon, and also granted

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69 During his long period of dictatorship, Gómez imposed two substitute presidents. First was Victorino Márquez Bustillo who ruled between 1915 and 1922 and later was Juan Bautista Pérez who ruled between 1929 and 1931. Both followed directly Gómez’s commands.
them political, judicial, and civil powers over the region. Although the Salesian order does not currently enforce these powers, they used to be, until a few decades ago, the only Western authority that ruled the indigenous population in some regions of the Amazonas territory. This was the case of the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco who were predominantly under the tutelage of the Salesian missionaries. The Italian Father Luis Cocco founded the first Salesian mission in Ocamo in 1957 and lived there for fifteen years; later other missions were founded in Platanal and in Mavaca. In a film called “Ocamo is my town,” (1974) Cocco asserts:

The mission's goal is to soften the inevitable impact of civilization on the Yanomamo of this area. Baptism and monogamy can wait; what is crucial is that the Indians are no longer seen as museum pieces, but as significant human beings and citizens in the larger Venezuelan society. At the same time, indigenous Yanomamo culture must be respected. (Asch and Chagnon, 1974)

Although Cocco’s words seemed pretty progressive, the fact is that with the establishment of the Salesian missionaries in the Alto Orinoco the Yanomami have experienced cultural changes through religious indoctrination, practicing non-traditional economic activities such as raising cattle and chickens, producing craft for the cooperative, and attending the bilingual school. The Salesian mission in each post is divided between the priests and the nuns who live in separate houses and perform different activities. Although they work in the same areas and with the same communities and in similar projects at the school and teaching catechism, the Sisters of María Auxiliadora and the Salesian priests of Don Bosco are two separate entities that function and are organized in an autonomous way.

The Venezuelan State basically granted the responsibility of taking care and dealing with the indigenous population to the Catholic missions. The indigenous groups of Amazonas have been under the jurisdiction of the Puerto Ayacucho Apostolic Vicariate of the Salesian order, which was in charge of civilizing, indoctrinating, and educating these peoples. However, as Henley (1982) pointed out, although the Vicariates exercised legal control over indigenous groups and their territories, their political control of these areas was not so evident. In fact, the indigenous groups of the Amazonas Federal Territory experienced the invasion of their lands by criollo groups who virtually chased, captured, and enslaved them. To this point, the detachment of the Venezuelan State was so clear that issues regarding education, land tenure, and the incorporation of the indigenous into the national society were assumed by the missionary orders. Hence, the organization of the indigenous areas with respect to the missionary orders was that the Salesian missionaries were in charge of the Amazonas area, and the Capuchinos missionaries were responsible for the Gran Sabana, the Guajira-Perijá, and the Orinoco Delta areas.

Official policies

After the death of the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935, a new political leadership arose in Venezuela looking for economic, ideological and political changes. While there was a certain economic stability generated by the production of coffee coinciding with the discovery and exploitation of oil, historians agree that Venezuela lived in the worst period of darkness and backwardness during the Gómez government
due to the terror caused by the dictatorship practices of domination. The decade of the 1940s became a period of major changes in the national politics. The two most important political parties of Venezuela until 1990s, Acción Democrática (AD) and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI), began to consolidate as the strongest political groups that governed the country for almost four decades (1960-1990s). The ideas of modernization and development of the state, the economy and the society constituted the fundamental proposals in their political agendas. In December of 1947 Venezuela underwent the first national democratic election after several decades of dictatorship. In the meantime, the Protestant Evangelical mission established in the Amazonas Federal Territory in 1947 began to occupy indigenous areas for their religious proselytism that had been controlled previously by the Catholic missions and vice-versa. For instance, Platanal, in the Alto Orinoco, was first a Protestant settlement (New Tribe Mission) and was later turned into a Salesian mission.

During that time, indigenous peoples neither jeopardized the building and expansion of the nation-state nor constituted an ideological challenge. They were seen as insignificant populations that do not threaten or endanger the supposed stability and development of the country. Thus, the nation-state spent only a slight effort dealing with the “Indian tribes.” At the First Inter-American Indigenist Conference celebrated in Pátzcuaro, Mexico in 1940, the Venezuelan representatives asserted that Venezuela did

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71 After Gómez’s death and during the 1940s a large number of political parties tried to consolidate. However, after several transformations, divisions, and coalitions, the Acción Democrática (AD) party was finally founded in 1941 and COPEI in 1946. The ideological doctrine of AD party lead by Rómulo Betancourt promoted social democrat and reformist ideas. COPEI (Committee for Political Organization and Independent Elections), leaded by Rafael Caldera promulgated a social Christian doctrine.
not have "an indigenous problem." This position was a continuation of the previous ideas in which the state did not conceive of the indigenous people as a culturally important population.

In regard to this, the state policy concentrated on providing financial support to the Catholic missionaries who were in charge of "civilizing" and educating indigenous peoples. The official indigenist policies began to change when the National Constituent Assembly created the Comisión Indigenista (Indian Commission) under the Ministry of Interior in 1947 that later was moved in 1951 to the Ministry of Justice and in 1952 was created the respective technical office of the Indian Commission. The goals of the commission were promoting scientific studies on the indigenous situation, their demography, culture, and necessities that could "serve as basis for practical solution of the economic and social problems of the Indians" (In Armellada 1977:361). By 1951, the government ruled by a Junta de Gobierno (a transitional government) declared the decree number 250 that regulates, through the Ministry of Justice, access of any person or non-official institution that intends to carry out expeditions in the areas occupied by indigenous groups. This decree is still on the books although is not always actively enforced. However, this state's first task, to carry out more assertive indigenist policies through the Indian Commission and "extricate the Indians from their status as legal minors" (Arvelo-Jimenez et al. 1977: 323), was not totally successful. This condition of

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72 The Amazon region is probably the area in which this decree is taken into consideration more seriously, especially regarding access to the Yanomami territory. For my dissertation fieldtrip, I requested a research permit of the General Directorate of Indian Affairs who endorses the decree number 250 and the Ministry of Environment through the Inparques office (National Park Institute) that regulates the access of scientific expeditions to National Parks.
wards of the state is reminiscent of the colonial period in which the Indian were considered as “minors and incapable” and totally dependent of the Spanish Crown tutelage. Although the liberal ideas of the 19th-century attempted to change this inferior status of the Indians, transforming them into “full citizens” and members of the new national society, the indigenous groups continued to experience processes of subordination in which the status as “minors” was not completely disentangled.

In the meantime, the French-Venezuelan expedition after several months traveling up the Orinoco River found the headwaters of this river at the end of 1951. This expedition, made up of members of the Venezuelan military, international scientists, and indigenous guides, was the first one to reach the source of the Orinoco, the principal river of Venezuela. The napê people had gone all the way through to the Yanomami territory to find for the first time the headwaters of the most important river in Venezuela. Several encounters with Yanomami groups took place during this prolonged expedition.

During the government of dictatorship Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1953-58), the Indian Commission barely operated. After the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez in 1958, the commission assumed more directly the direction of Indian affairs that had been delegated almost exclusively to the missionaries. In 1959, the decree-law number 20 ultimately promulgated that the Indian Commission was going to be in charge of designing and fulfilling the national indigenous policy and coordinating the activities carried out by other institutions among indigenous groups. However, in spite of the commission’s effort, the indigenist national policy was still imprecise and awkwardly implemented. This occurred, first, because of the status quo generated by the political dictatorship and
second, because of constraints of the previous agreements established between the State and the missionaries. As several scholars have pointed out, the indigenist policies in Venezuela were still controlled by the Roman Catholic Church through the missionary orders that were charged with indoctrinating and educating the remaining indigenous groups.

In 1958, Rómulo Betancourt from Acción Democrática party won the national elections and, during the 1960s, Venezuela experienced important political changes that shifted the approach of the state to indigenous peoples. Once the political parties consolidated, democracy was understood as the best option for the development of the country, and new legal frames were proposed to legitimize the sovereignty of the state over its territories and peoples. The Acción Democrática (AD) government, which was the political party opening the democratic period of the country, approved the Agrarian Reform Law of 1960. This law that has as a goal “the transformation of the agrarian structure of the country and the incorporation of the rural population into the economic, social, and political development of the nation,”73 changed the view on indigenous peoples at the national legal stage. Scholars agree that this law represented a major landmark in Venezuela indigenist legislation (Henley 1982, Heinen and Coppens 1986) because it recognizes indigenous rights to their land and other natural resources. In spite of this recognition, others contest the social character of this decree, since through this law indigenous peoples were incorporated into the Venezuelan class system as peasants

(Arvelo-Jimenez 1980). Probably the most quoted clause of this Agrarian Reform Law regarding indigenist policy is article 2, section (d) stating that it:

Guarantees and recognizes the right of indigenous population which de facto retain their communal or extended family status, without prejudice to the privileges to which they are entitled as Venezuelans, according to previous paragraphs, to hold the lands, woods and waterways which they occupy or which belong to them in those sites where they customarily dwell, without detriment to their incorporation to the national society according to this and other laws.\(^{74}\)

This law definitely enacted at least a legal recognition of the existence of indigenous people and the certain rights over their territories within a national framework. However, this law had two main problems. First, indigenous peoples were included within the category of campesinos (peasants) that are considered as criollo rural populations.\(^{75}\) Second, their legal status as full Venezuelan citizens was not totally clear because according to this law they had to behave as “Indians” while they were incorporated into the national society. Regarding the Yanomami and the scope of this article, Colchester and Fuentes (1983:70) pointed out once that this law might have been applicable to them because they have occupied their lands for decades and have “retained their communal or extended family status.”

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\(^{74}\) Garantiza y reconoce a la población indígena que de hecho guarde el estado comunal o de familia extensiva, sin menoscabo del derecho que le corresponde como venezolanos, de acuerdo con los apartes anteriores, el derecho de disfrutar de las tierras, bosques y aguas que ocupen o les pertenezcan en los lugares donde habitualmente moran sin perjuicio de su incorporación a la vida nacional conforme a esta u otras leyes. In: Armellada 1977:391.

\(^{75}\) In Venezuela, the prevailing idea is that peasants groups are culturally and socially distinct from the indigenous peoples. A unique definition of peasants would be inadequately following Roseberry’s statement that “the Venezuelan peasantry never existed as an identifiable whole but only in its regionally differentiated parts.” (1994:59). However, peasants can be seen as a social constituent of the national project since they share commonly national values, language, and laws with the rest of the Venezuelan population. In spite of their condition of rural and marginalized people, peasants have been integrated into the collective notion of the Venezuelan criollo while indigenous peoples have represented the emblematic “Other” because of their cultural and linguistic differences.
The initial intention to recognize and to define the status of the indigenous people at the start of the nation democratic period is related to article number 77 of the 1961 national constitution. This article is the only one that in the entire constitution makes reference to the indigenous population and served as the national lawful frame for 38 years (Sevilla 1997) until the issuing of the new constitution in 1999. The article reflects a lack of understanding of social and cultural difference between campesinos (peasants) and indígenas (indigenous). Both groups are erroneously named as if they were the same kind of ethnic group. Article number 77 states:

The State pledges to improve the life conditions of the peasant population. The law will establish the regime of exception that will require assuming the protection of the indigenous communities and their progressive incorporation into national life.\(^\text{76}\)

This constitutional article reflects an unclear status of the indigenous communities, since they should be treated in the same way as the criollo peasants. It denotes a certain detachment between indigenous people and the rest of the civil society because they have to be treated through a “regimen of exceptions”. That means that the regimen of exception can be interpreted in many ways, sometimes favoring the rights of the indigenous groups, sometimes going against their claims. This article is too ambiguous and flexible, and this elasticity was used many times to the detriment of the well being of indigenous peoples. The application of this article ranges from paternalist policies that used to provide any kind of commodities to the indigenous groups to more

\(^{76}\) El Estado propenderá a mejorar las condiciones de vida de la población campesina. La ley establecerá el régimen de excepción que requerirá la protección de las comunidades indígenas y su incorporación progresiva a la vida de la Nación (Venezuela, National Constitution 1961).
drastic ways of incorporation by depriving them from their land and the use of natural resources. Because of the ambiguous character of this article, multiple interpretations emerged from the policies applied by the national governmental institutions.

In addition to the national constitution of 1961, other decrees and policies through the Health, Environmental, Educational, Interior, and Justice Ministries were enacted, as well as regional laws to protect or control indigenous populations in Venezuela. However, during the 1970s, the indigenous representatives from different groups that had been influenced by the Barbados Declaration I in 1971 began to organize in indigenous federations in order to claim for their rights as indigenous and as Venezuelan citizens. As of 1973, six indigenous federations were founded in Anzoátegui, Apure, Bolívar, and Zulia States and in Delta and Amazonas Territories (now States) and the establishment of the Venezuelan Indigenous Confederation (Arvelo-Jiménez 1980). Grounded in the Barbados’ principle of liberty for indigenous peoples, these indigenous representatives contested not only the inconsistencies of state indigenist programs but also the controlling role of the missionary orders and the invasions of the criollos ranchers into their lands (Montiel et al. 1981).

The puzzling recognition of the indigenous people by the state policies demanded the rise of several institutions and minor laws that encouraged little by little the incorporation of the indigenous groups into the national system. Thus, the OCAI office was dissolved and became the Ministerial Office for Frontier and Indian Affairs.

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77 The “I Barbados Declaration” was an early influential document written by an international group of academics in support of indigenous peoples' struggles. This document questioned the role of the Latin American nation-states and their indigenist policies, the dominant missionary practices, and the slippery role of anthropologists regarding their commitments to the indigenous cause.
(OMAFI) by 1977. Later on, in 1979 this office became the Dirección de Asuntos Indígenas, DAI (Office of Indian Affairs) ascribed to the Ministry of Education. This office was in charge of defining the national indigenist policy. In the meantime, the Venezuela economy reached a high level of expansion with the rise of world oil prices, whereby the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (AD party), as a nationalist maneuver, decided to nationalize the petroleum industry in 1976.

In 1982, the Central Statistic and Information Office (OCEI) took a special census of the indigenous population of Venezuela. At the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s some indigenous groups such as the Warao, the Pemon and the Piaroa organized indigenous conferences to discuss the main problems in relation to the national policies. In 1989, Co-CONIVE\(^78\) organized the First Venezuelan National Indian Conference, in which representatives from 17 indigenous groups discussed issues pertaining to education, language, culture, ecology, tourism, health, human rights, mining, legislation, Indian philosophy, and Indian politics (CONIVE 1989). From this conference emerged the indigenous organization CONIVE, Consejo Nacional Indio de Venezuela that constituted the most important indigenous organization during the 1990s.\(^79\) It is definitely in this decade that indigenous representatives from different groups began to organize more consistently in order to play an active role in the decision-making processes. In the Amazonas State, the Organización de los Pueblos Indígenas de Amazonas, ORPIA

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\(^78\) Co-CONIVE was the Organizer Committee of the National Indian Council of Venezuela that was in charged of coordinate this first national Indian conference.

\(^79\) CONIVE organized the “IV National Congress of Indigenous Peoples of Venezuela” in Caracas in May 2002. The main theme of this event was “the power of the Indian people with the Bolivarian constitution,” referring to the articles on indigenous rights granted in the new national constitution.
joined together indigenous representatives from all the indigenous groups of this region, including Yanomami. ORPIA started to accomplish different activities in 1994 within the confusing political atmosphere of this area that was transformed from Federal Territory to Amazonas State in 1992.

At this stage, the prevailing rhetoric of the Venezuelan State, ruling either by liberal groups, dictatorial regimes or democratic parties, regarding the indigenous populations has been to confine them at the frontier zones through official enactments on the use and occupation of the space, reaffirming in that way the hegemony of the state.

Simultaneously, as a tactic of government, the state has randomly acknowledged the existence of the indigenous population depending on the political interests of the political regime and powerful economic criollo groups. In the meantime, the missionaries, mostly Catholics, became the agents in charge of the indigenous incorporation into the national society. What is clear is that the nation-state, in spite of its efforts to incorporate the indigenous population into the national society, has maintained a controlling discursive rhetoric that is legally inconsistent and politically unpredictable. That is demonstrated in the application of the Agrarian Reform law and the 1961 constitutional article referring to the regime of exception for the indigenous peoples.

The constitutional reform of Venezuela

The new Venezuelan national constitution approved by referendum in December of 1999 has definitively changed the status of the indigenous peoples within the national society, at least from a legal point of view. The official recognition of their rights as
socially and culturally different groups from the rest of the national population has given
the indigenous peoples the capacity to participate more actively in the development of
national indigenist legislation. As relatively self-governing groups, indigenous peoples
have the right to preserve their practices and customs, languages, territories, religious
practices, and socio-political systems. At the same time they have the right to demand
health and education services, the protection of their environment, and economic
programs that promote indigenous self-determination.

The new national constitution promoted by the current president Hugo Chávez
Frías granted for the first time the indigenous rights that had been neglected for so
many years. Throughout the whole constitution there are 17 articles that refer to
indigenous peoples, but the main core is Chapter eight (Articles 119-126) dedicated
exclusively to De los derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas (On the rights of the indigenous
peoples). These articles guarantee the legal existence and the individual rights of these
culturally diverse collectivities within the national territory (see Appendix A).

Up to that moment, indigenous groups had attempted to request major
constitutional reforms of the 1961 national constitution. These reforms had to do with the
recognition of their languages, religion, habitat, and customs. They were also asking for
the acknowledgment of the common law and an integral protection of the “indigenous

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80 Hugo Chávez Frías was elected President of Venezuela in December of 1998. In 1999 he called
for National Constituent Assembly that put together the new national constitution that was approved by
referendum on December 15 of 1999. In July 30 of 2000, Chávez won again the presidential elections
according to the new national constitution. On April 11 of 2002, due to the stressful and critical economic,
political, and social situation in Venezuela, a group of civilians and military attempted a coup d'état against
Chávez that last 48 hours. Currently, Chávez continues as president of Venezuela. His mandate expires
constitutionally in 2006; however, due to the political and economic crisis of the country large
ethnic groups, peoples and communities” of Venezuela (CONIVE 1992). In spite of some minor changes that occurred in local legislation, these indigenous’ claims never had major impact in the decision-making at the National Congress. It was only with the issuing of the new national constitution that indigenous rights were formally recognized.

Three indigenous representatives out of 131 representatives made up the National Constituent Assembly of 1999. The first stage was the creation of the Comisión de Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas. La relación del Estado con los Pueblos Indígenas to produce the proposal of indigenous peoples to the National Constituent Assembly (NCA). This proposal considered the point of view of indigenous representatives, official and non-official counselors as well as the support of indigenous and non-indigenous organizations. The elaboration of indigenous constitutional clauses was a challenge not only for the indigenous people but also for the members of the National Constituent Assembly and even the rest of civil society. The discussion of a whole set of articles on the indigenous rights surprised many congressmen and public opinion. Frictions with official and non-official sectors as well as political conflicts among indigenous groups took place during the discussion of these articles. The main issues debated were the recognition of the usage and rights of indigenous traditional territories and the use of the term pueblos indígenas (indigenous peoples) in the constitution.

conglomerates of civil and military forces are pressuring the president to fulfill a consulting referendum and to run an emergency presidential election immediately.

81 “Indigenous peoples rights commission. The relationship of the state with the indigenous peoples.” Noelí Pocaterra, a Wayuu woman from the Zulia State was the president of this commission. The other two members were Guillermo Guevara, a Hivi from the Amazonas State and José Luis González a Femon from the Bolívar State.
According to the Comisión de Seguridad y Defensa (Defense and Security Commission), the recognition of “indigenous territories” would threaten the sovereignty of Venezuela and would endanger the territorial integrity of the nation. However, more than jeopardizing the so-called sovereignty of the nation, the allowance of formal “indigenous territories” would prevent the use and appropriation of indigenous land from other social and economic sectors, including the military.

Regarding the term pueblos indígenas, this commission considered it inappropriate to name them pueblos because pueblo venezolano is only one and Venezuela, constitutionally, cannot contains several pueblos within its national territory. After many intense debates, the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) agreed with the concept pueblos indígenas with the plea that indigenous peoples would make up the Venezuelan State and the term pueblos (in this case) would not have the implications established in international jurisprudence. The term “indigenous territories” was replaced with the concept of habitat in the constitution. According to the representatives of the NCA the use of the term habitat was more suitable to naming the indigenous territorial spaces since it did not represent a threat to the rhetoric of the political-territorial order of the nation.

The articles that support indigenous rights were approved with only slight changes. Since then, indigenous delegates have occupied political positions at the national, regional, and local levels. José Poyo, a Kariña delegate from the National Indian Council of Venezuela (CONIVE) has claimed, “Indigenous communities are participating
in national and state politics like never before.”82 At the same time, this full indigenous participation in the national politics constitutes a major challenge for the indigenous leaders and their capacity to accomplish those new tasks. As Guevara pointed out,

We the indigenous peoples, have so much power now. We have reached so many things with the new national constitution. Are we ready to assume these roles? We ask ourselves sometimes these questions.... We have to work, we have to persist in our goals, and we have to support our people...” (Guillermo Guevara, 2000) 83

In the last national elections of 2000 three indigenous representatives were elected to the National Assembly and for the first time the Amazonas State has an indigenous as the governor of this regional entity. Indigenous delegates, in spite of their political differences and tendencies, agree that Hugo Chávez’s government changed the status of indigenous peoples at the constitutional level as never before in the history of the country. According to legal representatives, the current Venezuela constitution represents one of the most advanced constitutions regarding indigenous rights in Latin America.

The current Hugo Chávez government’s identification of the so-called revolutionary process with the struggles and aspirations of Venezuelans indigenous peoples creates new and paradoxical scenarios. On the one hand, although the country defines itself as a multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural society, in fact the ways in which indigenous communities can exercise their identities and aspirations vis-à-vis the national government are those that the very same government has already predetermined. In other

82 Interview made by IPS correspondent Danielle Knight (2001).

83 Guillermo Guevara is one of the three indigenous representatives elected for the National Constitutional Assembly in charged of promulgates the national constitution of 1999. This speech was uttered in Puerto Ayacucho, Amazonas State in the Indigenous Conference at the Tobogán de la Selva. January 28, 2000.
words, the “revolutionary government” is all for indigenous causes as long as those causes are defined and determined within the social programs established by the government itself. A clear example is the paternalist policies put into practice by the National Guard in the Amazonas state and particularly among the Yanomami. Through the Plan Casiquiare 2000 indigenous people were provided with tools, commodities, and services as an initiative of the state without considering the cultural situation and aspirations of each indigenous group or the transforming effects that these policies might have caused. It seems that the implementation of this program had to do with state forms of “social” development that considers indigenous peoples as members of the low social strata rather than fostering local self-management projects according to the cultural diversity of each group. In other words, although the new national constitution recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples, the current national policies tend to place them into a social dispossessed rhetoric that handles their problems in the same way as the problems of urban and rural groups with scarce resources.

On the other hand, the current Dirección General de Asuntos Indígenas (DGAI) based on the 1999 national constitution has encouraged different forms of dialogue to improve the relationship between indigenous groups and governmental offices. An example that illustrates the shift of previously neglected indigenous policies to new forms of interaction with indigenous groups refers to the efforts in publishing bilingual pedagogic guides in conjunction with representatives of indigenous communities.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{84} Up to now the Office of Indian Affairs has published the pedagogic guide of the Pemon and the Yekuana Indians. The building of the Guía pedagógica Dhecwana/Ye’kwana para la Educación Intercultural Bilingüe, (Venezuela, DGAI 2002) counted with the participation of 217 Yekuana representatives as authors of this guide. This broad participation of Yekuana delegates had as a purpose the
The constitutional reform has definitely opened a political and social space to the indigenous populations to participate more actively in the processes of decision-making regarding their land, languages, and their local ways of life. The existence of indigenous groups as contemporaneous constituents of the national society has been recognized at least officially. However, it is quite early to predict what would be the impact of these new indigenous laws on the rest of the mainstream society as well as on the indigenous leaders responsible for assuring a fair application of these norms to the rest of the indigenous peoples.

The subaltern Amazonas

The marginal condition, in which the Amazonas Federal Territory finds itself, in spite of having one of the largest mining, agro-industrial, and hydroelectric potentials, has made this area seem like an island in terra firme and as a “lost world.”


The understanding of current national policies to ward off indigenous peoples at the frontier zone, and specifically among the Yanomami, requires the political and spatial placement of this indigenous group within the territorial discursive practices of the nation-state. The indigenous geographical localization is not simply a matter of drawing an ethnographic map of the distribution of the Yanomami communities within the national territory. In fact, the predisposition of oversimplifying the implications of space and place in relation to cultural difference and historical processes, in which space itself maximum consensus as to the ethnographic information that was going to be displayed in the pedagogic
becomes a sort of discrete “neutral grid,” has been questioned in the last years (Appadurai 1991, Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The role of the state and state’s institutions are key sources helping us to understand how the rationalization, organization, and control of the spaces rely on political strategies of unification, homogenization or partition of the national territories (Harvey 1989). The forms of territorialization of the state as a constituent of nationalist discourses have also depended on the recognition of the cultural differences of the people that live within a common area.

Rethinking the implications that the territorialization of the national spaces might have among indigenous peoples, we can ask how the spaces within a national territory have been hierarchically interconnected, and how this connection or disconnection has something to do with cultural transformations of indigenous people at the border zones. In this sense, I wonder in which ways the Venezuelan centralized nation-state links the frontier spaces where the remaining indigenous population has survived with the national political project. Among the many ways of establishing a territorial national community, or an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991), the state apparatuses hold the power to redefine, articulate, or partially segregate the geopolitical entities of the nation according to its economic and political interests. The Amazonas of Venezuela is one of these territories that has been marginalized by the central state policies and actions, and has been the object of numerous political-administrative transformations since the first independent movements of Venezuela in 1810 (Iribertegui 1997).
To describe all the historical political divisions, changes at the international boundaries, and incorporations of this region into the geographical configuration of the nation would divert the aim of this thesis. However, the reality is that Amazonas as well as the Delta Amacuro and Guajira regions were considered for so long the forgotten frontiers for the rest of the country, the detached zones that were not incorporated actively into the national context. This spatial out-of-the-way status of Amazonas territory parallels the unsystematic national policies applied to this area regarding the management of natural resources, the dealing with the indigenous population, and the organization of the local political powers.

From the perspective of the centralized state power, the managing of the Amazonas territory, which is geographically distant from the urban areas and in many ways unknown due to its large extension and difficult access, has represented a geopolitical challenge in the consolidation of the national borders and ideas. The remote condition of Amazonas topography linked to the exoticism of the tropical rainforest ecosystem, and the diverse indigenous populations who live there, have set up a disconnected imaginary boundary with respect to the rest of the regional states entities located north of the Orinoco River. This emblematic separation of this territory created by the watercourse of this river was inextricably related to its subaltern political constituency as Federal Territory that lasted 99 years when this entity finally became a full-fledged regional State in 1992. I recall that when I was taking geography courses in elementary school we used to repeat persistently that Venezuela was politically divided
into “twenty States, two Federal Territories, and one Federal District.” We had at least a vague idea about what the States and the Federal District represented because we were living in those entities, but what about the Federal Territories? The next concern was who lives in those territories. The answer was: “mainly Indians live in the Federal Territories.”

The criollo groups from Amazonas (amazonenses) who live in Puerto Ayacucho, the capital, used to express certain resentment about the lack of attention paid by the centralized state power to their territory, arguing that the state had unequally distributed the benefits of the oil revenue. They felt abandoned and segregated to an area that does not count on the economic opportunity or public services. Yet, what they resented even more was their exclusion to participate in political decision-making at the regional level, because it was the central power, through its state institutions, that decided the policies for this territory. As one of the writers and the chroniclers of the Amazonas State has eloquently described:

The Amazonas Federal Territory seems to have always trodden through the quicksand of history. She appears to have been lost in the chaos of time due to the secular official indifference, neglect, and to the ancestral apathy of its own sons. It would seem the process of colonization and conquest has not to be canceled yet, and qualifies the present as trapped by the inertia of that involution in time, swindled by an arrested history. (Henríquez 1994:263)

It is not accidental that there is an intrinsic correlation between the elusiveness and remote condition of the Amazonas region and the confinement of the indigenous peoples who have survived the national expansion in the border zones since the establishment of the 1880s laws on Indian reductions in that area. The centralized nation-

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85 Currently Venezuela is politically divided into twenty-three States, one Federal District, and several Federal Dependencies (Islands).
state had concentrated mainly in the development of the northwestern area since the 1920s with the intensification of oil production.

The subalternity of the Amazonas territory has been, therefore, an indexical reference of the otherness embodied by the different “Indian tribes” that inhabit a so-called “no man’s land.” The nation-state displayed a commonsensical idea that the more remote the territories, the more strange and “wild” were the people who live in the borderlands; a negative view that was also applied to other “frontiers in Latin American countries” (Weber and Rausch 1994). This view was applicable to the indigenous communities that were settled in the Amazonas, and was clearly pertinent to the Yanomami who live in the extreme edge of the Amazonas, in the headwaters of the Orinoco River where a few missionaries, travelers, and some scientists for long time were the only ones living as of the 1950s.

The Venezuelan Amazonas obtained the status of Federal Territory in 1893, when the Alto Orinoco Federal Territory was integrated with the old Amazonas Federal Territory. It had as a capital San Fernando de Atabapo until 1928, when it was changed to Puerto Ayacucho. The economic and social development of Amazonas has been extremely slow. This territorial entity was divided in four departments: Atures, Atabapo, Casiquiare, and Río Negro. According to that former political administrative division, the Yanomami people were settled in an area of approximately 35,000 square kilometers on the Atabapo and Río Negro Departments separated by the course of the Orinoco River. However, this regional political division was innocuous in terms of the application of state policies and programs among the Yanomami. The fact that they were living in two
different departments did not affect them at all because these departmental units of the Amazonas Federal Territory lacked political and economic power. In the Yanomami territory, as well as in other indigenous areas, the legal regulations and indigenist policies were applied, first, through the missionaries, and later, through the centralized official indigenist institutions, but rarely from the local power or regional government.

Unlike the other Venezuelan regional entities known as *Estados* (States), which hold local political-autonomy, the Federal Territories with their scarce population, the majority of which is indigenous, depended directly to the central national governments. According to the former 1961 National Constitution, the president of the Republic had the authority to assign and remove the governor of the Amazonas Federal Territory; and the National Congress, through its organic laws, established the political regime and organization for these areas. In this sense, with the exception of municipal autonomy of the counties, the Amazonas people lack political participation at the regional level. However, according to Article 13 of the 1961 constitution, “by special law” the National Congress was able to grant the status of State (*Estado*) to a Federal Territory “giving the totality or sections of an area from the respective territory” (Venezuela, National Constitution 1961). This legal device permitted the National Congress through a special decree to change the status of the Delta Amacuro Federal Territory into Delta Amacuro State on August third of 1991. The people of Amazonas, through their local representative, submitted a petition to the National Congress requesting that this Federal

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86 The organic laws refer to those that hierarchically are between the constitution and the ordinary laws. That means that in the case of an overlapping between an organic law and an ordinary law, the second one must be subordinated to the organic law (Sevilla 1997).
Territory also be elevated to the category of State. The Amazonas Federal Territory finally became a State on July 29 of 1992, by decision of the National Congress.  

Amazonas State is located in the southern area of the country and is part of the large pan-Amazon region constituted by eight countries of South America. Geographically, it is located in the area know as the Guayana Region in Venezuela. This region that occupies nearly 50 percent of the whole national territory is also made up of the Delta Amacuro and Bolívar States, and is located in the southern part of the Orinoco River. The surface of the Amazonas State covers 19.3 percent of Venezuelan territory, and contains a large amount of natural and mineral resources such as gold, bauxite, diamonds and radioactive minerals. The inhabitants of the whole Amazonas State reached only 0.45 percent of the Venezuelan total population (Venezuela, OCEI 2002) and it has a population density of 0.57 inhabitants per square kilometers.

The Bolívar State borders the Amazonas State on the northeast, the Republic of Brazil on the southeast and the Republic of Colombia on the west. In this territory live nineteen indigenous peoples from different linguistic groups that represent almost 50 percent of the total Amazonas population. The other 50 percent is composed of criollos, Spanish speakers that live predominantly in the capital Puerto Ayacucho, the biggest town in the area with an approximate population of 40,000 inhabitants. According to

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87 Puerto Ayacucho remained as the capital of the new state. The decree was published on the Official Gazette No 35.015, 1992.

88 The extension of the Amazonas State reaches 177,000 km2. According to the Census of 2001 there are 101,908 inhabitants in this State (Venezuela, OCEI 2002).

89 As a comparative example of the impact of development programs in the Amazon basin, Brazil has several cities with more than a million inhabitants in this lowland region.
the indigenous census of 1992 (Venezuela, OCEI 1993), public services in the territory were very limited for indigenous communities. The data indicate that 70.8 percent of the indigenous communities do not have schools, 88.8 percent of the communities do not have medical posts, and 71 percent do not have permanent transportation services (which due to the ecological condition of the area travel is mainly by river). The Yanomami is the largest indigenous group of the Amazonas State, representing 30 percent of the indigenous population in this regional entity and occupying an area of approximately 20 percent of this regional entity.

The purpose of presenting this basic statistical information on the Amazonas State is, first, to position the Yanomami within the regional context, and second, to display the many ways in which the Venezuelan nation-state of the 20th century has simply ignored the south of the country, its geography, and its people. The discursive practices of the state regarding this frontier zone cannot be defined essentially as aggressive policies of incorporation, but as an aggressive politics of indifference to the Amazonas. The indigenous peoples in general and the Yanomami in particular have borne the brunt of this Venezuelan State's overlooked policies.

The lack of interest from the central state power to this area has brought other social and political maladies. The criollo local groups have taken advantage of this lawless condition of Amazonas to exploit and manipulate the indigenous groups, while Catholic and Protestant missionaries have been in charge of indoctrinating, educating and gradually integrating them into the national society. The scarce presence of the state displayed through the limited institutions and legal structures has made the Amazonas a
"no man's land." Amazonenses and outsiders have described it as the true "Macondo," like the mysterious place where everything is possible, following the magical realism portrayed by Gabriel García Marquez in his novel *One hundred years of Solitude*. Like in García Márquez's fiction, Amazonas history is full of enigmatic images such as phantoms, revel spirits, natural disasters such as sudden flooding and drought, but is also filled with despotism, discrimination, and corruption. These practices of domination were clearly established by the *criollos amazonenses* who controlled the indigenous peoples during the rubber boom at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th-century, and who have continued to do so.

During the Republican period of 1817 and 1921 and due to the political instability of the nation, 25 rulers of Amazonas were dismissed from the central state; several went to jail, and at least 10 were killed (Henríquez 1994). But it was the colonel José Tomas Funes, a rubber tapper, who became the "great" *caudillo*. He reached the pinnacle of authoritarian forms of power in Amazonas between 1913 and 1921 when he was killed. Funes was considered the "last *caudillo*" during the dictatorship of Gómez who, instead of defeating him (as he did with the rest of the *caudillos* in Venezuela), decided to ratify Funes as the governor of the Amazonas territory. The main reasons for this decision were the isolation of the territory, the logistic difficulties to access the area, and Gómez's

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90 *Caudillismo* was a type of personalized leadership and local political organization developed during the XIX Century. According to Irving (1988) the *caudillo* in Venezuela was a ruler, a warrior, a politician with a direct area of influence to control; the *caudillo* was the leader of an armed group, a sort of personal army that was employed to enforce his power over a local region and the inhabitants of that area contesting the centralized power of the state.
interests in developing the northern part of the country, first with coffee production and later with oil exploitation.

Subsequently, the tyranny of Funes against both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples is recalled as one of the most horrible and cruel periods of the Amazonas history. Although the capital was changed from San Fernando de Atabapo to Puerto Ayacucho after the death of Funes, the local criollo leaders continued invading indigenous lands in the central and west areas of the territory. In spite of the intense impact of the rubber exploitation in the western side of the Amazonas territory, the Yanomami did not directly experience these forms of domination or suppression, as did other indigenous groups such as the Arawak and some Carib groups.

This political instability of the Amazonas continued for several decades since the central government held the unique authority to designate the governor of this territory. During the period of 1928 and 1980, 40 governors ruled the territory, of which 15 were military personnel (Henríquez 1994). It is not surprising that some of these regional leaders continued perpetuating certain "caudillo" behaviors over the territory and the indigenous peoples. There is a distinction between those who are the criollos and those who are indigenous peoples, and the criollos have taken advantage of these ethnic differences to politically manipulate the indigenous groups through paternalistic discourses and patron-client relationships that have been accentuated in the last decades. Representatives of the "Indigenous Federation of Puerto Ayacucho" of the Amazonas
Federal Territory censured this situation of political excess during the II Barbados Declaration\textsuperscript{91} in 1977:

[W]e want to talk with you about one of our problems: none of the politicians are interested in our destiny, we do not trust in their promises, we should not commit with them, we should not being manipulative objects. We want to clarify that we do not believe in politicians; in the last 30 years we have had different experiences with politicians but our problems are not solving but are getting worse over the years. For that reason we do not commit with any politicians. Besides, we do not live off politics, but from our work and our effort (Federación Indígena de Puerto Ayacucho 1979:55-56).

In spite of the different political tendencies of the national governments in the last 50 years that include the dictatorship of Pérez Jimenez and the democratic period ruled by the two most influential political parties until few years ago (the social democratic AD and the Christian democratic COPEI), Amazonas has been object of random and dispersed state policies. With the exception of the development programs of CODESUR (1969-74), the political ambivalence of the central state is perceived through casual assistance policies, some public facilities and few structures built in Ayacucho. This sluggish process of “conquest” is also seen through the slow establishment of the state’s governmental institutions such as the military forces, which have been capriciously organized in Amazonas, as it is a frontier zone.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{91} The “II Barbados Declaration” counted with the participations of different indigenous representatives of Latin American countries as well as intellectuals that have participated in the “I Barbados Declaration” in 1971. The main goals of this event were the establishment of indigenous alliances, the claims of self-development plans, and the critical contestation of dominant mechanisms of the nation-states.

\textsuperscript{92} Although the Ministry of Defense through the Armed Forces Services have created since the 1970s special frontier and fluvial units, and in 1981 the 52 Infantry Brigade of the Army with different military posts within the territory (Mariño Blanco 1992), the national public opinion constantly has complained of the incapacity of the military forces to guard the Venezuelan territorial limits with Colombia and Brazil. This was evident when Brazilian miners penetrated the frontier in 1989. The military forces were not prepared to keep the miners out of Venezuelan territory and the guerrillas from Colombia trespassed the border and even attacked the military posts in Venezuela on several occasions.
The evident subordinate condition of the Amazonas Federal Territory with respect to the rest of the country, and the wide possibilities of exploiting the natural and bureaucratic resources of this territory, induced the *amazonenses* of Puerto Ayacucho to request turning this region into a State. For the *amazonenses*, the central government and the national society had marginalized this area in many ways from the crafting process of the national project, and they resented that recklessness. However, these groups of *amazonenses* only represent half of the population of this territory; the other half is made up of nineteen different indigenous peoples with different languages, rituals, myths, forms of social and political organization, and subsistence patterns.

The reality is that Amazonas is a complex cultural and ecological mosaic and it would be totally inadequate to assert that the people from Puerto Ayacucho and all the indigenous peoples constitute a sort of homogenous cultural and social unit. Due to this condition of multiethnic territory it is pertinent to ask how indigenous peoples and indigenous organizations have visualized and reacted to the establishment of the new Amazonas State within the national-political context. Were they aware of the consequences generated by the changing status from Federal Territory to State? Under what conditions do the indigenous representatives participate in the design of new policies within the regional state? These issues are considered below, with regard to the impact of the recent political administrative division of the Amazonas State among indigenous peoples.
The new political-territorial division

When Amazonas changed its status from Federal Territory to State in 1992 new laws, political entities, and a new political territorial division were set up for the whole State. The first step was to elaborate the constitution of the Amazonas State, which was approved by the Legislative Assembly of the new regional state in 1993. In order to recognize the cultural heterogeneity and the ethnic differences of the populations settled in this State, Article 2 of the regional constitution asserts, "The Amazonas State is a multiethnic and pluricultural political entity of the Republic of Venezuela, which guarantees the harmonic conviviality among their inhabitants." However, this apparently wide-open perspective of the constitution did not correspond with the following legal step pursued by the new State that was the elaboration of the proposal of Ley de División Político Territorial del Estado Amazonas (the political territorial division law of the Amazonas State).

In spite of the request of indigenous organizations to consider ethnic areas and local particularities in the elaboration of the political-territorial division law, the Legislative Assembly composed of local criollo representatives neglected indigenous petitions and approved the law on July 29 of 1994. With this new territorial law, the four former departments that made up the Amazonas were revoked and the territory was divided into seven Municipios, which did not necessarily correspond to the cultural and territorial divisions of the indigenous peoples. Thus, the Amazonas State was divided into the following the municipalities: Alto Orinoco, Atabapo, Atures, Autana, Guainía, Manapiare, and Río Negro, each with an elected mayor; and each of them was at the
same time divided into Juntas Parroquiales (Council Parishes) with their respective elected leaders.

Despite the objections of the Amazonas local groups, the governor Edgar Sayago authenticated this territorial law in September of 1994 without taking into account the demand of indigenous representatives and without making a consulta popular (popular consultation) with the local population, procedures that were considered in the clauses of the regional constitution. The irony of this unilateral decision-making is that criollo amazonenses of the regional government applied the same excluding policy that the central government used to do with them when this region was a Federal Territory. In this sense, the indigenous representatives are now the ones who complain about the limitations imposed by these criollo groups that did not allow them to participate in the elaboration of legal dispositions for the State. The arbitrary decision of splitting the Amazonas into these municipalities was determined by political and economic interests of the political parties in exploiting and controlling regional clusters, rather than for the well being of the indigenous peoples and their territories.

Several indigenous organizations that are members of the local organization ORPIA\textsuperscript{93} (including the Yanomami SUYAO\textsuperscript{94} organization) and local NGOs including the Human Rights Office of the Vicariate of Puerto Ayacucho were in disagreement with

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{93} ORPIA, Organización Regional de los Pueblos Indígenas de Amazonas (Regional Organization of the Amazonas Indigenous Peoples) is an autonomous non-governmental organization that according to its statutes "has as a goal materialize the ideals of indigenous peoples to preserve our socio-cultural integrity." During 1993 the indigenous leaders of the Amazonas State organized several meetings with members of the indigenous peoples of this State. From those meeting arose the "I Congreso de los Pueblos Indígenas de Amazonas" held in September of 1993 in which ORPIA was created.
\end{footnote}
this political-administrative division of Amazonas State. At the beginning of 1995, they filed an appeal before the Supreme Court of Justice, based on the unconstitutionality and illegality of the procedures to establish this political territorial division law of the Amazonas State. In December of 1996, the Supreme Court of Justice revoked this political administrative law, based on the infringement of the constitutional rights that enact the local participation and the violation of the "regime of exception" for the indigenous peoples set out in Article 77 of the former national constitution of 1961. As I mentioned before, the indigenous peoples constitute almost half of the total population of the Amazonas State, and their rights as "citizens" had been infringed upon in the fulfillment of this territorial law.

After the Supreme Court of Justice annulled the law for the political territorial division of Amazonas, the indigenous peoples through ORPIA organized a “Special Conference of the Indigenous Peoples of Amazonas” to elaborate a new political-territorial division proposal that contemplated the ethnic territorial differences. Based on wide discussions with members of the nineteen indigenous peoples of this State, the indigenous organizations proposed the establishment of eight multiethnic and pluricultural municipalities following the constitutional rights of political participation. They prepared a document claiming the empowerment of the political participation principles of the communities in local affairs, the decentralization of the regional budget used mainly for the development of the capital, and the respect for the territories

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SUAYO, Shaponos Unidos Yanomami Alto Orinoco is the Yanomami craft cooperative that has become in their indigenous organization.
occupied by the indigenous peoples in the different municipalities (ORPIA 1997, ODH 1997).

They also proposed, based on consultation with Yanomami representatives, the creation of a new municipality in the Yanomami territory “under a special regimen of functioning and administration due to the socio-cultural conditions of this ethnic group” (ODH 1997:97). The indigenous organizations of Amazonas passed this proposal to the Legislative Assembly; however, this entity employed several political and legal mechanisms to avoid the prerequisites set up by the Supreme Court of Justice.

During almost two years the regional Legislative Assembly neglected the indigenous petitions and statements, and the initial proposal of the political-territorial division law of the Amazonas State remained imposed over the territory (see Appendix B). In fact, since the enactment of this law in 1994, Amazonas State has carried out municipal and regional elections. At the same time the regional government has distributed official budgets for construction, goods, and services according to the population of the municipalities, has erected new political institutions, and has offered a large amount of governmental positions. However, the major impact of the endorsement of this law is the disagreement and conflicts that this political territorial division has generated between amazonenses and indigenous representatives and among indigenous peoples themselves. With the establishment of municipios in indigenous territories some dominant criollo groups and some indigenous leaders have taken astonishing economic and political control of smaller and more marginal communities.
The encounter with the national society

The understanding of the national frontier expansion among the Yanomami requires an evaluation of the many ways the “state-systems” and “state-ideas” have influenced them. The interaction of culturally and ethnically different societies itself generates a particular study area, in which the Venezuelan national society and the Yanomami society are linked by several forms of contact that are interpreted by particular events and actions. Contrasting these socio-historical happenings will allow us to understand the degrees of Yanomami autonomy in relation to the nation state’s regulations over their territory and culture in the last fifty years. The assessment of the influence of the state apparatus among indigenous populations is not limited only to the bureaucratic and centralized public institutions, but also to the general impact of the national frontier expansion with its different social actors and non-governmental associations.

Due to several factors such as extreme isolation, difficulties in access to their territory, inhospitable geographical conditions, and their traditional semi-nomadism, the encounter between the Yanomami and the national society occurred late, in comparison with other indigenous groups in Venezuela. While other indigenous peoples suffered and were victims of the conquest and colonization processes, and were later dramatically affected by the national expansion during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the Yanomami were by and large at considerable distance from these dominant colonial and post-independent experiences.
Since the middle of the eighteenth century, the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco underwent different types of encounters and interactions with European explorers and travelers. Nonetheless, they did not suffer the devastating effects of the conquest and colonial expansion. They were not subjected to Spanish forms of indigenous dominations such as the *encomienda* system (a controlling regime of Indian lands, forced labor, and exacted tribute), *pueblos de misión* (mission towns), or *resguardos* (communally held indigenous lands) as many indigenous groups experienced in the territory currently known as Venezuela.

The Yanomami did not undergo pacification processes like other indigenous groups during the independence and federal wars of the 19th century, and were barely exposed to the harmful impact of the rubber exploitation throughout the first decades of the 20th century in the Venezuelan Amazon. It would be inaccurate to assert that they dealt with the capitalist expansion in the same way as their Carib and Arawak neighbors, who were enslaved and tortured during the rubber boom exploitation. In comparison to many of the indigenous peoples in the Amazon region, they did not have to confront major transformative-events, since they did not suffer the labor controlling mechanism or the cultural clashes of the colonial and post-colonial waves of changes.

The assessment of these historical events that caused a significant impact among Amazonian indigenous groups vis-à-vis the Yanomami that experienced only indirectly the impact of the colonial and national frontier expansion led me to consider the

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95 The other form of indigenous domination employed by the rubber tappers was through the *Sistema de Avance o Endeude*. This system consists in providing the indigenous with manufactured goods in advance of the accomplishment of the labor. Because of the prices of these goods were extremely
continuity of certain cultural practices of this population. With this, I am not intending to represent the Yanomami cultural patterns as invulnerable to internal and external changes, or to suggest that they are fixed in a timeless frame of cultural immovability. Rather, it is important to understand how Yanomami ways of life have been maintained through their rituals, subsistence activities, histories, language, and social organization. Following Santos Granero’s (1996) proposal that analyzes the cultural transformation of indigenous groups of the Amazon basin, by combining historical and ethnographic categories, allows me to assess to what extent the Yanomami have continued to maintain their territorial, social, economic, linguistic, and political autonomy with respect to colonial and state power, at least until the 1990s.

The Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco region in Venezuela have lived in their territories without suffering the impact of expropriation or divisions of their lands. They have moved all around the southeast corner of the Amazonas State following their own migration patterns and their inter-ethnic relations with other indigenous groups. Their land has not been divided as a consequence of development programs or been invaded by gold miners as experienced by the Yanomami of Brazil.

Socially, the Alto Orinoco Yanomami have not yet been transformed into rural peasant groups, nor suffered the process of marginalization or proletarization like other indigenous groups such as the Arawak in the Amazon or the Warao Indians in the Orinoco Delta. The Yanomami continue to practice their subsistence patterns as well as their economic exchange system in parallel to the capitalist expansion. The Yanomami expensive and the payment for their work very insignificant, they were run into debt all their life with the
language prevails over Spanish, the official language of Venezuela, and up to now there is no evidence that a language shift phenomenon is occurring.

Their political autonomy and the organization of their communities depend exclusively on Yanomami social systems. They have not been defeated by other indigenous groups or by the national government in terms of their political independence. They continue practicing warfare according to the Yanomami ways of life and, in spite of the impact of the new political national structures, there is no external institution or national policy that has established special rules to deal with their internal political and social organization.

With this in mind, we can recognize why the Yanomami are still considered by anthropologists as one of the “relatively unacculturated indigenous groups” in South America (Chagnon 1997, Ramos 1995, Lizot 1988). However, the fact that they have not gone through these intense cultural changes, and that they have been kept comparatively apart from the influences of major transformative-events does not mean that they have not experienced, in other ways, the ever-increasing presence of the criollo world and the rest of the national society. What I try to highlight in this section is not the lack of contact with the national society but the type of the encounters and above all, the degrees of intensity of the inter-ethnic relationships established between the Yanomami and the criollo society.

Therefore, it would be inaccurate to state that the Yanomami have lived in complete isolation until the arrival of the first missionaries in the 1950s, as I have already rubber tappers.
reported in a previous chapter. It would be an historical and analytical mistake to consider that they were not exposed in one way or another to the colonial and capitalist waves of cultural change. As I stated before, they had several encounters with expeditions and travelers, and they were at the margins of the rubber exploitation at the beginning of the 20th century. Moreover, the Alto Orinoco Yanomami have established intense exchange systems with other indigenous groups that have enabled the access to manufactured goods, information about their indigenous neighbors, and the approaching of “white people” (napé) to their territory.

**Napé incursions into the Alto Orinoco**

Venezuela had gone through an intense political period during the 1950s with the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jimenez (ruled 1953-58) and the concerns for indigenous populations were scarce and dispersed. After that politically tense period, the 1960s represented a political and ideological challenge for the nation. Through different political parties, novel political leadership and the support of civil groups, Venezuela was trying to attain and consolidate what has been called “the democratic experience” (Martz and Myers 1977). Territorially, the Orinoco River divided the nation into two geographic and economic regions. The North constituted the main challenge for the consolidation of the democratic process and the modernization of the country through new economic and social programs. The southern part of the Orinoco River, known as the Guayana Region made up by the Bolívar, Delta Amacuro, and Amazonas States remained overlooked and relatively forgotten by the technological and political advances of the North.
It was only in 1950 when the first groups of Protestant missionaries established a
direct and sustained contact with Yanomami villages. For the Yanomami, the decade of
the 1950s was characterized by the first lengthy conviviality with napê “white people,”
especially missionaries. In this section, I identify the main religious, scientific, and state
ongoing encounters with the Yanomami. Naming the napê people and institutions that
have approached the Yanomami enables us to distinguish the scope of the controlling
discursive practices promoted by the national frontier expansion.

The missionary and institutional arrival

The New Tribe missionary James Barker had the first prolonged contact with the
Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco when he settled in Platanal next to the Mahekoto village
in 1950. When the official French-Venezuelan expedition finally reached the headwaters
of the Orinoco River in 1951 for the first time, Barker had already lived nine months with
these people. Between 1954 and 1955, the ethnologists Otto Zerries and Meinhard
Schuster from the Frobenius Institute spent 10 months at the village of Mahekoto (in
Platanal). They conducted a detailed anthropological research project among the Alto
Orinoco Yanomami that resulted in the production of a general report of their cultural
situation (Zerries 1956) and the first ethnography in German titled “Waika” (Zerries
1964).

Later on, in 1957, Catholic missionaries from the Salesian order also established a
permanent mission post in the Alto Orinoco. In 1957 the priests Luis Cocco and Alfredo
Bonvecchio founded the Santa María de los Guiacas Mission, (currently known as the
Ocamo Mission) at the confluence of the Orinoco and Ocamo Rivers. Since then, the Salesians have founded two other permanent mission posts on the banks of the Orinoco River: Platanal (1959), and Mavaca (1961), and one on the Mavaca River, Mavakita (1976). More recently, in 1993 they built an unoccupied extension post in the Ocamo River on the Maweti area. According to the Mission Law of 1915 and the agreement signed between the Holy See and the Venezuelan State in 1937, the Salesian order has been charged to “indoctrinate and educate” the indigenous populations of Amazonas including the Yanomami. Thus, since the 1950s, the principal agents of sustained contact among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco have been the missionaries, first with the Protestant mission and later with the Catholic mission.

An elder recalled the arrival of some missionaries and other napé people to the Mavaca area. He pointed out the forms of interaction with the missionaries and other outsiders.

I remember when father Bonvecchio and father Cocco, and father Bemo arrived here. In that time, the fathers asked me to work in the airstrip of Mavaca. They gave me a lot of goods, machete, hooks, and nylon. They gave me an outboard motor as a payment for my work on the airstrip…. During that time, I had a big conuco (garden plot) because I want to have manioc root for mañoco (crude manioc flour). I cultivated a lot of manioc root to produce mañoco for selling. I also cultivated bananas, plantains, and tubers. During that time we did not know the pineapple. During that time when the priests came, the shamans thought that God was the Sun, they also thought that God were the clouds, and the mist. I remember other napé, I remember a malariology guy called Correa and we called him Konove, he was always giving malaria pills (An elder man from Zinc-theri village, 1990).

The first non-missionary state penetration into the Alto Orinoco was through the Malariology Service of the Ministry of Sanitation and Social Assistance (MSAS). In 1958, the Venezuelan government decided to found a Malaria control post at the
intersection of the Mavaca and Orinoco River as part of a health campaign against malaria, which was hitting many rural and even urban areas in Venezuela. Later on, the Bishaasi-theri settled close to the malaria post in Mavaca and in 1959 the New Tribes missionary James Barker moved from Platanal to Mavaca for a few years until they moved to the Parima region. In 1961 the Salesian brother Pedro Uiterwaal founded the permanent Catholic mission on the north side of the Orinoco River in front of the mouth of the Mavaca River. The Salesian mission is still there.

Before the arrival of the missionaries to the Alto Orinoco, the Yanomami were in considerable demographic expansion. The population growth can be identified with its concomitant territorial expansion to areas down the Orinoco River that were not traditionally occupied by them. The Yanomami arrival and settlement in the Platanal, Ocamo, and Mavaca areas is a relatively recent event. This took place between the 1940s and 1960s as a result of several waves of expansion from the Parima highlands that began at the end of the 19th century (Chagnon 1966, Cocco 1972). Since that time, the Yanomami have been moving downstream into the lowland areas in order to exchange and acquire Western goods and medical assistance. The exchange of commodities in the Alto Orinoco, had already taken place through the exchange networks the Yanomami had with other indigenous groups, such as the Arawak and Carib who used to trade with them. However, the establishment of the mission posts, and later on the malaria control posts on the Alto Orinoco induced nearby Yanomami to approach directly these new and tiny criollo settlements when looking for manufactured tools, food, and health services.
At the beginning of the establishment of the missions in the Alto Orinoco, the Salesians had a more paternalistic relationship with the Yanomami, taking care of them, and teaching them the Catholic doctrine. However, after the Vatican Second Council in the middle of the 1970s, the Catholic Church advocated a relationship between the goal of preaching of the gospel and living in the host culture that modified its approach to local communities. In that sense, the mission policy among indigenous groups changed to education and intercultural plans, promoting bilingual teaching and self-management projects.

The current main goal of the Salesians’ pastoral action is “to go with the Yanomami people in their historical development.” That means the promotion of self-management Yanomami programs that enable them to incorporate little by little to the national dynamics. These programs concentrate on the bilingual school, the production of crafts and other supplies for the SUYAO cooperative, and the formation and promotion of women (sue-pehi) and the young people (huya-pehi), among others (Cardozo and Caballero 1994).

Scientific expeditions

If by the beginning of the 1960s the southern area of the country was still considered an isolated region and a negligible space, then the Alto Orinoco area was simply considered geographically and conceptually the last frontier. Only missionaries and few explorers and scientists were interested in maintaining an ever-increasing relationship with the Yanomami. Thus, the 1960s constituted the beginning of formal
scientific research among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco. The scientific encounters with this group occurred with researchers of different disciplines in natural and social sciences. Between 1962 and 1963 the Italian parasitologist Ettore Biocca spent time in the Alto Orinoco with support from the Italian National Research Council. He compiled Helena Valero's life history among the Yanomami in the book *Yanoáma* (Biocca [1965] 1970). Helena was a *mestiza* woman who was kidnapped when she was teenager and lived with the Yanomami for 23 years, until she escaped, and was later found by Salesian missionaries in the late 1950s.

Since 1961, the medical doctor Inga Steinvorth Goetz explored the Orinoco River, and in 1969 she was the second Western explorer to reach the headwaters of the Orinoco. Unlike the French-Venezuelan expedition of 1951 that reached the goal of finding the sources of the Orinoco for the first time (with a large contingent of male explorers and military personnel), Inga Steinvorth made the same trip with just a few Indian guides (Steinvorth Goetz 1969).

In 1964, the North American anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon from the University of Michigan arrived at the Mavaca area to do his field research for his doctoral dissertation (Chagnon 1966). In 1968 the French ethnologist Jacques Lizot from the College of France and disciple of Claude Lévi-Strauss entered Yanomami territory for the first time to carry out research projects on nutrition and economic activities (Lizot 1971). In 1968, James Neel, a North American geneticist, carried out a multi-disciplinary

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96 Translated from Italian in English as *Yanoáma. The narrative of a white girl kidnapped by Amazonian Indians* (1970).
expedition to the Alto Orinoco to collect biological and medical material among the Yanomami (Neel 1970). Thus, access to the Alto Orinoco during the 1960s was limited to the presence of the missionaries, the malariology personnel, and the international scientific expeditions that were eager to know the life style of this "tribal" and almost "untouchable exotic" society that still existed.

After these first scientific expeditions that placed the Yanomami within intense academic discussions, other ethnographers and national and international scientist groups traveled to the Alto Orinoco to study this indigenous group. During the 1970s and 1980s several anthropologists carried out field research in Yanomami territory in Venezuela. Among them were Kenneth Good, who expended several years among the Yanomami of the Guaharibo-Penascal area (between 1975-1987); Marcus Colchester and Leslie Sponsel who worked among the Sanemá; Jean Chiappino and Catherine Alès who worked in the Parima highlands; and Jesús Ignacio Cardozo who has worked in the Ocamo-Mavaca-Platanal area. Other social scientists expended some time among the Yanomami during that period as well. These were Robert Carneiro, Raymond Hames, Eric Fredlund, Luis Llambí, Harald Herzog, and Irenous Eibl-Eibesfeldt, among others.

At the end of the 1980s, the Academy of Physics, Mathematics, and Natural Science of Venezuela (Academia de Ciencias Físicas, Matemáticas, y Naturales) coordinated also several scientific expeditions to explore the biological, geographical, and climatic conditions of the Alto Orinoco and specifically of the Tapirapecó Plateau.

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97 The ethical dimensions of this research, and the procedures in collecting biomedical samples in tests conducted by Neel and Chagnon have been highly criticized (Tierney 2000, see also AAA El Dorado Task Force 2002).
Development projects

During the early 1970's, the Venezuelan government under President Rafael Caldera (from the COPEI social-Christian party) initiated a series of development projects in the Amazon through the program called *La Conquista del Sur* (the Conquest of the South). The agency that coordinated this program was the *Comisión para el Desarrollo del Sur*, CODESUR (Commission for the Development of the South), created within the Ministry of Public Work (MOP) in 1969 as part of the governmental policies of the ruling Christian Democrat party COPEI. The goal of CODESUR was to promote the economic development of the south region of the country made up by the Amazonas Federal Territory and the Bolívar State. Similar developmental projects were carried out in the Amazonian areas of Peru, Colombia, Brazil and Ecuador at the time.

The Conquest of the South in conjunction with the “Development of Frontier Areas” program were probably the most aggressive and direct governmental plans to foster the economic and social development of the frontier areas between 1969-74. These *desarrollistas* programs designed by the centralized state were trying to imitate the Brazilian military model of development in the Amazon region, encouraging the colonization of indigenous lands and the incorporation of indigenous peoples into the national society. CODESUR fulfilled several geographical, climatic, and hydrographic studies in this region and in the capital of Amazonas and other towns constructed several structures such as few roads, schools, medical posts, and governmental buildings. In the Alto Orinoco, CODESUR built the medical dispensaries of Platanal, Ocamo and Mavaca.
However, as Colchester (1998) stated, considering that the pressure in developing the countryside of Venezuela was very low, because the production of oil as well as the capital attracted the population to the northern region, these development programs were considered as simple “political mania.” Since the Conquest of the South plan was exclusively a COPEI political party’s initiative, as soon as the new government from the AD party came to power in 1974, the projects and budgets of this program were virtually cut down.

During this period, the indigenous people who had kept apart from the national frontier expansion were rapidly incorporated into national policies, as a part of the state discourses that encouraged the development of the country. Almost all indigenous groups in Amazonas were affected in one way or another with this project. Among the Yanomami, the Platanal (Mahekoto-theri) was probably the gathering place that experienced most the influence from these programs. Governmental personnel, missionaries, and tourists used to land at the precarious airstrip of Platanal and stay there for weeks, enjoying nature and living truly like the “authentic” Indians. Due to the increasing boom of the development programs, some missionaries with a few private travel agents from Caracas used to organize very selective travel packages for European and North America tourists. These particular groups of tourists used to go to the Alto Orinoco to have an ecological and “exotic” experience among the Yanomami, thereby breaking the constraint imposed by decree number 250 that regulates the entrance of expeditions to indigenous territories.
When I went to Platanal for the first time in 1988, the Yanomami used to talk about the napê people that spent several weeks hanging around. They recalled that many “musiu” (non-Venezuelan people) used to arrive in big planes with a lot of food and manufactured goods. Actually, it was common to find in the Alto Orinoco Swiss bankers, prosperous businessman from the United States, and wealthy families from Italy, among others. One of the Yanomami from Mahekoto-theri told me once,

I liked that napê people who used to come here, they brought many things, what I did not like is that they were very stingy and sometimes bothered us too much with their cameras, that annoyed us.

However, when the national political elections brought about a change in government in 1974 with the Acción Democrática party, these projects were rapidly abandoned. With the increasing oil boom in Venezuela, the state concentrated once again on developing the central and the western areas of country, while the Amazon remained an ignored and relatively isolated region. For over 30 years, the missionaries, in conjunction with some members of scientific expeditions and governmental personnel from CODESUR programs, constituted the main group of napê people that interacted and had more sustained encounters with the Yanomami.

Education, health, and environment

During the 1980’s three key pivotal events took place in the Alto Orinoco. First was the consolidation of the intercultural and bilingual Yanomami School as a part of the intercultural and bilingual education system based on a new policy from the Education Ministry. The Salesian missionaries coordinated the intercultural and bilingual education
of the Yanomami. In fact, before the issuing of the decree number 283 of 1979, in which the Ministry of Education established the intercultural and bilingual regime for indigenous people, the missionaries had already initiated the project of the Yanomami School in 1976.

Second was the implementation of Primary Health Care Programs for the inhabitants of Alto Orinoco through the Parima-Culebra program, established in 1986, and the subsequent official health policies regulated by the Ministry of Health. Before the coming of the Parima-Culebra program to Ocamo, Mavaca, and Platanal, the health care of the Yanomami was under the responsibility of the sisters of the Salesian mission and sporadic visits of health teams from national universities and hospitals. The malariology programs have continued throughout these decades. Currently, the Yanomami area according to the scope of health public policies corresponds to the Sanitary District No. 4 of the Amazonas State.

Third, the issuing of several projects for the creation of a Yanomami park or reserve that began in 1978 with a proposal for a bi-national Yanomami Park in the Venezuelan-Brazilian basin. The powerful influence of the Brazilian developmental programs among the Yanomami in that country during the 1970’s induced a rethinking of what was going to be the future of the Yanomami in Venezuela. Two main proposals came up for the protection of Yanomami lives and territories. One proposition came from the La Salle Foundation of Natural Sciences who suggested the creation of a Reserva

98 The Parima-Culebra program was an initiation of a young group of doctors who decided to offer medical care to the Yanomami with the support of the Ministry of Health (Perret and Magris 1991).
Indígena Yanomami in an area of 37285 square kilometers (Colchester and Fuentes 1983). The Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research (IVIC) coordinated the second proposal suggesting the creation of a Yanomami Biosphere Reserve (Arvelo-Jiménez 1984). These territorial plans for the Alto Orinoco were discussed and evaluated among anthropologists, intellectuals, conservationists, and a group of congressmen, without a consensus ever being reached. Simultaneously, land conflicts between the Piaroa Indians and ranchers at the Guanay Valley, at the northern end of the Amazonas State produced additional political tension in the discussion of these plans. During that period, the Yanomami of Venezuela still lacked a national legislation that protected their territories and lifestyles.

In 1989, a group of Brazilian gold miners (garimpeiros) were by chance discovered illegally operating in the very upper reaches of the Orinoco River in Venezuela. For the nation-state, the idea of protecting the headwaters of the Orinoco and all of Yanomami territory was considered a geopolitical issue. The Venezuelan State, through the Ministry of Environment, was already concerned especially with the protection of the Amazon ecosystems. Its policies focused on the creation of Areas bajo Regimen de Administración Especial, ABRAES, (Areas under Special Administration) in order to protect the fragile habitats of the Amazon. Through the management of the ABRAES almost 55 per cent of the Venezuelan Amazonas territory is protected.

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99 In June of 1988 a small group of Yanomami men while they were hunting found three Brazilian miners in the Orinoco River and took them to the Platanal mission post. These miners were lost in the jungle and in very bad health. They alleged that they spent three months walking through the jungle thinking that they were in Brazil when they actually were in Venezuela. Platanal is at least 200 km far from the border. This episode warned the official authorities and the public opinion about the illegal penetration of miners (garimpeiros) coming from Brazil in Yanomami area of the Venezuelan side.
Simultaneously, according to the decree number 269 of 1989, the mining and timber exploitation is prohibited in the Amazonas State. In spite of this territorial protection, the ABRAES are legal instruments that preserve the territories from a national point of view, although not necessarily from the indigenous point of view. The implementation of the ABRAE on indigenous territories denies the possibility for local groups to own their lands.

Miner invasions, NGO responses, and state actions

As a consequence of the incursion of Brazilian gold miners in Venezuelan territory at the end of the 1980’s and the beginning of the 1990’s, the State intervention policies in Yanomami territory began to be more straightforward. The fact that miners from another country had transgressed the Venezuelan border persuaded the national government ruled by President Carlos Andrés Pérez (from the Acción Democrática party) to formulate more rigorous policies regarding frontier matters. A National Guard military post was established in Platanal at the end of 1989, and later on Ocamo became a military advance post serving as a halfway town to Parima. The Yanomami from Ocamo used to say that sometimes a dozen military airplanes landed there daily, transforming their villages to military compounds. In 1991, the national armed forces also built a military post and an airstrip in Parima B close to the Brazilian border. After numerous complaints from indigenous groups, Catholic missionaries, and NGO’s groups the military post in Ocamo was removed.
Simultaneously with these events, non-governmental associations began to take a more active role in Yanomami affairs. In 1990, a coalition of several institutions, led by the Fundación Venezolana para la Investigación Antropológica, FUNVENA (Venezuelan Foundation for Anthropological Research, a local NGO) organized the International Conference on Yanomami Habitat and Culture.¹⁰⁰ This public event put additional national and international pressure on the government to protect the integrity of the Alto Orinoco and its inhabitants. In 1991 the government issued the presidential decrees that created the Alto Orinoco Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve and the Parima-Tapirapecó National Park, allotting nearly 83,000 km² of areas under special administration in the southeast of Amazonas State.

With these two decrees, the state pursued two goals. The first was to internally signal and exhibit official national presence over the Venezuelan Amazon region, in the face of the incursions of the miners and the carrying out of Brazilian development projects near the border. Second, the Venezuelan State displayed an international image of a country that was concerned about the environment and the native populations of the Amazon, contrasting to what the Brazilian government and mining companies were doing in the Brazilian Amazon.

With these actions that pursued the control and sort of “reappropriation” of the Amazonas region by legal mechanism of the Venezuelan State, the Yanomami have been affected in different ways. The traditional protective isolation that the Yanomami had

¹⁰⁰ I have worked with this NGO since its foundation in 1987. The main activities of this institution have been the organization of conferences, talks, and symposiums on anthropological themes; the support and assistance of national institutions that deal with indigenous issues; and the promotion of self-management projects among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco.
experienced has diminished with the increasing presence of missionaries, government officials, explorers, tourists, scientists, soldiers, and the unabashed illegal miners who have continued their doings in spite of the government's efforts. As a consequence of the incursion of the miners, a dramatic event took place in the border between Brazil and Venezuela in 1993, when sixteen Yanomami from the Haximu village\textsuperscript{101} were brutally killed by the \textit{garimpeiros} coming from the Brazilian side.

As a result of this traumatic event, a group of national and international NGOs committed to human rights issues made charges against the Venezuelan State through the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in 1996 on behalf of the Yanomami of Haximu village. The accusation alleges that the Venezuelan government failed in its obligation to protect the indigenous populations, in this case Yanomami, against the action of the gold miners, \textit{garimpeiros}. The State was also denounced to the IACHR because of its lack of foresight of possible violations of indigenous rights, ineffective investigation, and failure to punish the murderers, who were released by the Brazilian authority after 3 months arrest (ODH 1997). In 1999, the Venezuelan government reached an out-of-court settlement in which it pledged to provide protection and security to the Yanomami that live on the Venezuelan side. In particular, the national government committed to carrying out an extensive health care program for the Yanomami people through the Ministry of Health and Social Development and the Amazonian Research and Control Center of Tropical Diseases, CAICET (Venezuela, MSDS 2000).

\textsuperscript{101} For a wide overview of the Yanomami massacre in Haximu see Albert (1993).
A paradoxical state indifference

In spite of the encounters, exchanges, and conflicts sustained with these different external agents, the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco continue practicing and carrying out their earlier cultural patterns. For the Yanomami it is perfectly reasonable to go to the mission church and later return to the *shapono* for a religious ceremony, and vice-versa; or attending a medical appointment at the health dispensary, and later being healed by a shaman. What they are doing in these processes of intercultural relationships is disclosing different strategies of accommodation in the course of the national frontier expansion.

Although the nation-state has intended to develop several projects in the southern region of the country, none of them has been totally successful, and the Yanomami have benefited in some way from the lack of a permanent state controlling institution during this period. It is true that the centralized state granted the missionaries the care of this population, and it would be easy to think that the presence of the Catholic missionaries in Ocamo, Mavaca, and Platanal with the sporadic presence of the malariology and medical personnel, and the incursion of scientific expeditions are an extension of state practices and policies. However, another interpretation of this policy would be that the state as an organized network of public power did not really heed the situation of these indigenous people or their territory, thus conferring to the missionaries the control and attention of this population.

Rethinking the effects produced by the different waves of change among indigenous populations and the purview of the national indigenist policies, I consider that
the recent cultural transformations experienced by the Yanomami are the result of a mixture of different national policies of intercultural relations with local responses. These responses are related to their own needs, such as improving their Spanish language skill, attending school, and getting medical treatments. I believe that the Yanomami are one of the few indigenous groups that have experienced a paradoxical or benign state indifference (Caballero and Cardozo 2000). It is clear that they have experienced the effects of the criollo world through the presence of missionaries, scientists, military personnel and the harmful impact of miners groups in several villages. Nevertheless, if we place these transformative events within the wider domain of the national indigenist policies, the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco have in different ways benefited from this kind of indifferent rationality of the centralized nation-state. This unconcerned approach of the state institutions drastically changed when the Territorio Federal Amazonas became Amazonas State and the territory was divided into municipalities.

The Alto Orinoco Municipality

In spite of the annulment of the political territorial division law of the Amazonas State granted by the Supreme Court in 1996 and the discussion of different indigenous proposals in dividing the Alto Orinoco region, the Yanomami territory was arbitrarily broken into two municipalities: the Alto Orinoco and the Río Negro municipios. This regulation affected the territorial division of Yanomami land that did not correspond with the political and ethnic boundaries of this indigenous group.
The Legislative Assembly of Amazonas did not consider the proposal raised by the indigenous organization ORPIA in redefining the whole political administrative division of the Amazonas State. This indigenous organization in conjunction with other local NGO’s called for the establishing of municipios according to the ethnic territorial differences of the different indigenous peoples that inhabit in this regional state. In fact one of ORPIA’s main recommendations was to establish an additional municipality just for the Yanomami that will be adapted to “their specific socio-cultural situation.”

However, as some indigenous representatives stated later, it would have been too risky for the regional government and political parties to create a municipality just for this indigenous group. The establishment of a new municipality in that strategic area made up only by Yanomami would have restricted the political power and blocked the access of economic resources to other local leaders that already ruled the previously constituted Alto Orinoco Municipality. In this sense, the municipalization of the Alto Orinoco has become the funneling of a significant amount of public money to this political entity, and the imposition of a criollo model of government among the Yanomami that has not been previously discussed with them. Thus, according to the political territorial division law of Amazonas of 1994 (still in force), the Alto Orinoco Municipality was divided into the following parishes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parroquia (Parish)</th>
<th>Administrative center</th>
<th>Main ethnic groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Esmeralda</td>
<td>La Esmeralda</td>
<td>Yekuana, Arawak, Piaroa, Criollos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huachamacare</td>
<td>Acaña</td>
<td>Yekuana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marawaka</td>
<td>Toky-Shamanaña</td>
<td>Yekuana, Yanomami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mavaca</td>
<td>Mavaca</td>
<td>Yanomami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Parima</td>
<td>Parima B</td>
<td>Yanomami</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With the sudden establishment of the municipality in the Alto Orinoco territory, the Yanomami have experienced another type of encounter with the outside world. The municipality constitutes a new political-territorial setting in which the Yanomami start to organize in different ways in order to obtain the economic and political benefits from the alcaldía and other regional institutions. They are confronting different challenges concerning who rules the municipality, how political parties manipulate them to obtain votes, and which kind of relationships they should establish with the members of the municipality. Through this political and administrative entity, the Yanomami have rapidly engaged in the last few years in political activities such as holding political positions at the local county, participating in intra- and inter-ethnic level meetings, and voting in regional and municipal elections.

Although they constitute demographically the larger group of the Alto Orinoco Municipality that is also made up, in fewer proportions, by Yekuana and Arawak groups, the mayor who ruled this municipio between 1996 and 2002 was a Yekuana and not a Yanomami. This mayor, who had been a local indigenous representative, had been co-opted by the members of Acción Democrática political party who have transmitted the idea that the Yanomami are a backward indigenous group who should be educated and turned into “civilized people.”

The relationship between the mayor and the five council members (concejales) of the Alto Orinoco jurisdiction (alcaldía) and the Yanomami people have been characterized by patron-client relationships in which the mayor exchanges commodities for votes and tries to impose criollo settlement patterns among the villages that support
his policies. Moreover, this municipality became one of the most corrupted of Amazonas, and for that reason the mayor Jaime Turón was arrested on charges of embezzlement and imprisonment in Puerto Ayacucho in July 2002.

On the other hand, the alcaldía or administrative center (cabecera de municipio) of the municipality is located in La Esmeralda, a non-Yanomami town made up of different indigenous groups and criollos. In addition to this, the decisions regarding the Yanomami territory are formulated most of the time outside the limits of the core of the municipality, and their active participation in the decision-making processes depends on the outside political conjunctures. This is the case of the political party representatives who only during electoral periods decide to travel to the Alto Orinoco to obtain votes for their political campaigns.

Moreover, the neighboring Yekuana and Arawak indigenous groups have also acquired political and economic power through the municipal administration gaining more authority over that territory that is a Yanomami area. This situation has generated uneven relationships between the Yekuana and the Yanomami and among the Yanomami themselves. At the same time, the presence of tourists, politicians, and military personnel has increased in the Alto Orinoco. These groups of foreigners have brought new illness, conflicts, and modifications of the local economic activities such as depending more on salaries than in the production of their gardens. These facts demonstrate that the creation and consolidation of the municipality did not correspond with the requirements and cultural particularities of the Yanomami people.
Although the governor of Amazonas by 2001, Liborio Guaruya has stated that he will support the proposal of setting up a Yanomami municipality according to the cultural patterns of this group (personal communication), there are numerous political and economic interests that prevent administrative and territorial changes at the municipal level. On the other hand, some Yanomami leaders that have been involved in these political processes reject the idea of creating a different municipality that has not been similar to the rest of the Amazonas’ municipalities. For these Yanomami leaders, the constitution of a non-typical criollo municipality in their territory would make it impossible to gain governmental positions and local budgets. With the establishment of the Alto Orinoco Municipality, the Yanomami of this area not only have been "officially" engaged with the national-political domains, but also are experiencing the most profound forms of cultural transformations as a result of this kind of state expansion.

**Wrapping up ideas**

This chapter has attempted to account for the main influence of Venezuelan State policies on the indigenous peoples in general, and on the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco in particular. The centralized nation-state has been characterized by the development of confusing indigenist laws and policies since the formation of Venezuela as independent state, in which the recognition of the contemporaneous condition of indigenous populations timidly began in the 1960s.

For several decades, the Venezuelan State simply neglected the presence of indigenous groups. First, the few indigenous groups that survived the impact of the
independence wars and the “Indian policies” of ethnic cleansing were practically abandoned at the frontier zones of the country. Second, since the indigenous populations did not constitute a major social, political or economic challenge, the process of incorporation to the national society was granted to different missionary Catholic orders, which were in charge of taking care and educating these isolated people. Third, since the dominant political and economic powers were not explicitly interested in the cultural continuity of those isolated groups, the national juridical frames regarding indigenous people remained vague and diffuse for many years. Finally, the unsystematic national policies applied to indigenous areas were reinforced with the spatial out-of-the-way status of the Amazonas territory and the lack of organized local political powers.

The tendency of the 20th century Venezuelan indigenist policies has fluctuated from explicit detachment and strategies of neglect to more controlling policies over the indigenous peoples. The state predisposition has also oscillated from frequent overlapping and contradictory programs carried out by national institutions on land, education, health, and environmental issues to more confrontational responses from indigenous groups to state policies in the last 30 years. The fact is that despite the many mechanisms of incorporation that the nation-state has employed towards the indigenous peoples, its controlling discursive rhetoric has been legally inconsistent throughout history.

The indifferent stance of the state towards indigenous groups began to change a few years ago when indigenous representatives claimed their wish for more active participation in the decision-making processes regarding indigenous issues. This turn of
perspective materialized with the issuing of the recent national constitution of 1999 that
granted legal rights to indigenous peoples. At least constitutionally these culturally
different groups are now recognized as contemporaneous citizens of the national society.
Nevertheless, it is premature to foresee what would be the political impact of these
constitutional articles among the indigenous representatives as well as among the rest of
the criollo society.

My purpose in portraying these historical-political contexts of the Venezuelan
indigenist policies is to position the Yanomami experience within a national and regional
framework and to illustrate how the state frontier expansion has mainly neglected the
Amazonas territory and especially the indigenous peoples. Although the Yanomami of
the Alto Orinoco have undergone sustained contact with the criollo world since the 1950s
with the arrival of the first missionaries and other external agents, due to their remote
geographical situation and the incoherent national indigenist legislation, they have
survived physically and culturally despite of the national frontier expansion. Of course,
we cannot neglect the transformative influence generated by missionaries, scientists,
governmental personnel, miners, and tourists among the Yanomami. However, as I have
tried to demonstrate throughout this chapter, despite of the impacts of the centralized
state policies, the Yanomami have been capable of continuing their cultural practices. In
this sense, I have attempted to demonstrate that the Yanomami’s relative isolation is not a
naturalized condition, but the outcome of the intercultural relationships established with
the national society and the degrees of intensity of the cultural encounters between the
criollo world and the Yanomami.
CHAPTER 5

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, LEADERSHIP, AND ELECTIONS

I don't want to work in politics because there are always problems, it is not a good work, but if I receive a little payment it is fine with me. I am currently a Sports promoter, but I am going to run out of this job pretty soon. So where am I going to work now: with the Council Parish or with the alcaldía? I am seeking whom I am going to working with. I am still looking for. (Caraciolo, Shakita 2000)

With the creation of the Alto Orinoco Municipality, the Yanomami are undoubtedly experiencing the most intense forms of cultural transformation, in which they are trying to adapt and reconcile the penetration of these national political structures with their own ways of life. The encounter, adjustment, and negotiation with the members of the municipality and political parties represent one of those major napé events in the historical relationships with the outside world. The municipality constitutes a new political and administrative setting in which novel forms of participation, leadership, and party affiliations are emerging and are being contrasted with internal social organizations. It is an institution that not only epitomizes the coming out of different trans-local modes of political organization in indigenous territories but also the Yanomami linkage with national electoral processes and their incorporation as citizens into the whole national discourse.

The many ways the Yanomami of the Venezuelan Amazon foresee and interpret the abstract notion of the state takes place through their active participation in political entities such as the Alto Orinoco Municipality and the incorporation of national symbols
and ideologies. Due to the character of the relationship with the nation-state and other external agents in the past, and the interaction with the new national political structures, the Yanomami are defining, in a selective process, which strategies they should employ to approach the national system in the most effective mode. These Yanomami forms of accommodation and negotiation are characterized by taking advantage of the offerings made by different national institutions, playing along with the discourses and requirements of the politicians, emulating *criollo* behaviors to get more recognition outside their villages, and challenging forms of political exclusion imposed by other indigenous and *criollo* representatives.

The impact of the state forms and practices through the municipality led me to examine: a) how the Yanomami conceptualize and rationalize this new political entity in relation to their local ways of life, b) to what extent the emergence of new political leaders is the outcome of their political participation in municipal contexts, and c) how political practices such as the elections entail collective decisions within the villages to support a particular political party as well as new forms of gender relations in which Yanomami women play new roles in processes of cultural transformation.

**From the urihi to the municipality**

For the Yanomami, the *urihi* (forest) is their land, where they live and have lived since the *no-patapi* (their ancestors) created the world and filled it up with Yanomami and *napé* long time ago. The *urihi* is the Yanomami universe, with incredibly large green areas, almost endless, occupied by scattered villages settled close to streams, rivers, and
rapids within the rain forest. It is the place where they conceptualize the natural order of things. For instance, urihi therimi means “of the forest,” that is, everything that exists in the jungle: plants, animals, and spirits. I recall a Yanomami man saying once “the urihi is so big that it never ends,” referring to the impossibility that the forest would stop providing all the animals and plants they need to survive.

For the Yanomami, the urihi represents their ecological setting where they carry out their subsistence activities and from where they obtain the raw material and plant products for the fabrication of their material culture: bows, arrows, baskets, hammocks, houses, bodily adornments, tools, etc. The forest provides grand varieties of plant and animal food necessary to survive. In the urihi the Yanomami men go for short and long periods of hunting (rami huu and heniyomi huu, respectively). In the jungle, they gather wild food, honey, and insects when they go on wayumi (trekking) for prolonged periods of time. They fish in brooks as well as in the main rivers, depending on the season (rainy or dry season). The urihi is also where the spirits hide, sometimes far away beyond the hills, the streams, and stones. The challenge of the shamans (shapori) is to embody the hekura (spirits) and find those forces in disguised places to heal somebody or to bring harm to an enemy.

The forest becomes a more intimate social space when the Yanomami build and inhabit their shapono, cultivate crops in their gardens, and make trails to interact with neighboring villages. The shapono is their home; it is where they perform their domestic and ritual activities. It is a semi-permanent structure made by poles, vines, and leaves with a big plaza in the center where they interact and promote the family and friendship
ties. The Yanomami *shapono* is a round communal house with a continuous circular roof that is a unique structure among indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin. More recently, keeping the circular form of the space, they have built individual houses with double-pitched roofs and wood walls on each house to protect themselves from mosquitoes and other insects. They carefully select the land where they are going to slash and burn to seed their gardens (*hikari*). Those cultivated areas, which belong to each family, is where they plant a great variety of plantains, *kuratha* (*Musa paradisiaca* and *Musa sapientum*), manioc root, maize, sugar cane, pineapple, papaya, and tubers, among others. They also grow cotton, tobacco, achiote (*Bixa Orellana*), and hallucinogenic plants for the preparation of the *epena* (drug) that is used by the *shapori* in their shamanic sessions. In short, the life of the *urihi* is intrinsically connected with the life of the *shapono*.

But, what happens when this natural and cultural topography begins to change politically and bureaucratically as a result of the national frontier expansion? The transformation of indigenous territories takes place not only through indiscriminate appropriation of their lands or violent invasions of their territories such as in the case of the gold miners, but also through official state policies. Some of these official and administrative entities attempt to protect the indigenous groups, while others simply try to incorporate them into political and development national processes.

In this case, the *urihi*, the Yanomami forest, has been geographically, administratively, and politically redefined by different state institutions and identified with other spatial categories within the national political boundaries. For example, the Yanomami territory, which became the Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve and
the Parima-Tapirapecó National Park (in 1991), are two “Areas Under Special Administrative Regime” (ABRAES) administered by the Environment and Natural Resources Ministry. The Yanomami territory is also identified as the Health District No 4 of the Amazonas State for the implementation of health policies, which is coordinated by the Ministry of Health and Social Development. More recently, in 1994 this large indigenous region became the Alto Orinoco Municipality as the result of the political territorial division law of the Amazonas State.

Among all these spatial and administrative state categories juxtaposed on Yanomami land, the Alto Orinoco municipality is without doubt the institution that has generated most impact because it has been convincingly encouraging the Yanomami to participate in politics and to incorporate criollo models into their ways of life. This political entity is also affecting the Yanomami conceptualization of their social and natural spaces related to their shapono and the urihi.

It would seem that the Yanomami are trying to make a distinction between the urihi that represents their ways of living and the municipality, that is, the napê space considering the foreign style of doing things. They are struggling to establish a separation between “things” that come from the forest (urihi therimi) and the village (yahi therimi), and “things” that come from the municipality (which might be called napê therimi). However, there is no such separation because although the Yanomami believe that they can separate these two worlds into two social spaces, it is very common to see, for instance, how they embody criollo behaviors while simultaneously reproducing kinship relationships and traditional alliances with other villages.
Marcos:

Before, Yanomami were not paying attention to politics and the alcaldía. We spent more time preparing feasts, hunting, and performing other activities in the shapono and cultivating our gardens, but now with politics we spend so much time talking about politics and the municipality, and this and that. We used to be more concerned with our own things, and our own problems in our communities, making our own politics.

Julio:

You are wrong Marcos, politics is that which comes from the alcaldía, and through it we can obtain napé things, we get jobs, and other commodities that we always need. In our shapono we have our customs, dances, and feasts; it is different. But politics is that which is done by the napé in the alcaldía.

This dialogue between two young Yanomami men from Mavaca reflects the distinction they establish between the politics of the municipality as an outside entity and their village as an inward place. For the Yanomami “político” (anything related to politics), which is the Spanish term they mostly use, encompasses the napé people that make politics, the political parties, the electoral candidates, and the alcaldía itself. For them, político stands for people who make promises, offer and give things, and use a disproportionate and wordy rhetoric in their discourses in public meetings.

Engaging in politics

For the Yanomami, the arrival of the Alto Orinoco Municipality to their territory was received perhaps with the same surprise and amazement as when they encountered the first explorers and missionaries close to the banks of the Orinoco River many years before. The Yanomami did not know what were the goals, organization, and tasks of a
municipality. They simply knew that it was something created by the napê from Puerto Ayacucho, with the headquarters located in La Esmeralda (a non-Yanomami space), and that there was a Yekuana representative named Turón\textsuperscript{102} who was meeting with some Yanomami to talk about this new institution called alcaldía (administrative seat).

The Yanomami from Mavaca, Ocamo, Padamo, and Platanal were informed by the mayor that their villages were going to receive two-way short-wave radios, outboard motors, aluminum boats, electric generators, and so on. They also gradually found out that there were several political parties such as Acción Democrática (AD), Convergencia, Copei, Proyecto Venezuela, and later Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) and Patria Para Todos (PPT) which, in order to control the alcaldía of the Alto Orinoco, were asking for the Yanomami’s support and votes. The first reactions of some of the bilingual leaders from Mavaca were certainly surprise and confusion with the bureaucratic procedures and political campaigns they experienced. Despite the initial lack of information, the settlement of the municipality as a foreign institution was rapidly and generally accepted, although the Yanomami did not have clear ideas of what it represented or what its impact would be on their own social and political organization.

The following testimony displays the perception of one of the Mavaca area leaders about how it all began:

I do not know when politics started for the first time in the Alto Orinoco. I am not sure maybe in 1996 or 1997. I don’t know because we, the Yanomami, did not know about that thing or the candidates for the alcaldía, we did not know. Then, a guy named Turón came here, he is Yekuana, well, actually, he did not come, but

\textsuperscript{102} Jaime Turón was the mayor of the Alto Orinoco Municipality. I decided to use his real name here because he is a public figure and has been the center of intense political controversies due to his patron-client procedures employed among the indigenous peoples that live in this municipality.
Leandro, from my village, was with him while he was doing campaign Orinoco down river. When Leandro came back, he told us what the politicians were doing; he said they were doing political campaign.

Later, Seraffín from Mavakita went to Cejal, because he knew that Turón wanted to be the candidate for the alcaldía and he came here to tell us about the news and to support the candidate. We went to Koshiro (on the Padamo River) and we met there with other people, and then Turón arrived. He said, “If I am the mayor, I am going to do this and that, and because in this region there are many Yanomami, you should look for your candidate for concejal (councilman).” So right there, I began to understand a little bit about politics.

Afterwards, Turón came to Warapana (on the Mavaca River) campaigning to run as mayor; he called everybody from the shapono asking for support. He said that he was raised in the upper Padamo, and that he had learned to speak Yanomami and to take yopo (Yanomami hallucinogenic drug). Then he began to promise us a lot of stuff, he promised radios, outboard motors, aluminum boats, and that he was going to fix our houses. After that, I went to La Esmeralda, only very few Yanomami were registered to vote, I was one of them. I voted for Turón and he won…. he became the mayor of the Alto Orinoco. After that, I went back to my village and I forgot about that issue of alcaldía. I did not know what a mayor had to do. (Julio from Shakita, 1999).

Julio is a relatively young Yanomami who has studied at the bilingual school and is probably the most skilled outboard motor mechanic in the area. He is also one of the main leaders of Shakita village and is the son of an influential headman who died five years ago. Currently, Julio considers himself to be the “captain” of his village; however, because of the relative political egalitarianism of the Yanomami he is just another leading figure who, because of his skills, acts as a liaison between the life of the shapono and the napë world. At present, he is actively involved in politics and is one of the members of the Junta Parroquial (Parish Council) of Mavaca. For him, the beginning of the alcaldía was quite confusing, although it seems that the political demagogy and patronage
relationships (clientelism) with the representatives of the municipality rapidly caught his
interest as well as that of many other Yanomami.

Again, I received an invitation to go to a celebration in Koshiro, where the musiús
[foreign protestant missionaries] live. There, Turón arrived and said “I am here,
and I am going to work with the people, doing this, this, and this…” Later, he
named me “chief of my community,” and also named me Promotor de Servicio
Social del Alto Orinoco (Promoter of Social Services of the Alto Orinoco). And
my friend Leandro was named Promotor Deportivo (Sports Promoter) of our
village.

Then, Turón took me to Puerto Ayacucho, there he talked and he said my
shapono was big and had a lot of people. He said “Julio now you have your cargo
(job) as well as Leandro, and pretty soon you are going to have a radio, an
outboard motor, boat and a little school, tell this to your people.” When I got back
from Ayacucho I talked to the people of my village. During that time I was very
mohoti (naïve, foolish), I did not know anything, because it was just promises. I
only got a radio. After a while I got mad with the mayor because he said that I
was saying bad things about the alcaldia. He was the one that was saying bad
things about me.

After that, the cedulación (the registration to obtain ID cards) came to La
Esmeralda. And there, we had a big problem. I communicated with people in
Platanal and in other villages telling them that the Yanomami had to go down
river to La Esmeralda in order to get their ID. But later, people from Tamatama
called by radio saying that the Yanomami, who did not support the mayor, should
not come; only those that supported the alcaldía could come. I got really pissed
off and I said, “There are only Yanomami here, there are no Colombians, we are
all Venezuelans here. I have to take those Yanomami who do not have a cédula
(ID card) there.”

I was really mad. A lot of Yanomami went to La Esmeralda to get their
identification cards, but the mayor and his people did not want to give food to
other Yanomami, I also went to La Esmeralda to help the people get their ID and
to find food for them. I talked to the prefecto, he is a napé from Acción
Democrática and told him “you are the prefecto, you have to help the people, and
do not be stingy.” Later the Yanomami councilman and a Yekuana commissioner
sent someone to take the radio from my shapono. There, I was really, really mad
with all the politicians… (Julio from Shakita 1999).
At that meeting in Koshiro, several Yanomami were chosen for municipal jobs (cargos) that they had to carry out in their communities. First, a single Yanomami was elected as one of the five councilmen for the municipal council (all the others were Yekuana and Arawak). This Yanomami was from Cejal, a village located close to La Esmeralda, in the hinterlands of the Mavaca-Ocamo-Platanal area. This Yanomami and his village had supported Turón during his campaign and had already received many gifts and commodities from the Acción Democrática party, which at that time ruled the government of the Amazonas State.

Later, several other Yanomami got bizarre jobs such as cultural, social, and sports promoters, and others were appointed as monitors (supervisors) in their respective villages. The irony of all these official positions is that, as “cultural promoters,” what the new employees had to do was to encourage the people of their villages to “do culture” or to carry out “cultural activities,” or, in the case of the “social promoters,” to organize festivities and keep the village clean. For the Yanomami, these assignments, coordinated from the alcaldía that paid somebody to do these tasks, seemed quite absurd. Although these municipal duties appeared nonsensical for them, as a strategy of accommodation they played along with these official appointments in order to obtain the benefits and services offered by the municipality.

In fact, they were only interested in knowing that as promoters or monitors they were going to receive a monthly income, that they had to attend meetings in La Esmeralda, and they had to be in charge of distributing the endowments of the municipality among their communities. In any case, they realized that through the new
municipality they were going to obtain salaries, jobs, and other resources and services. Obviously, all these new sources of income and goods constitute a fundamental change for the Yanomami communities and for the whole Alto Orinoco area.

However, not all the villages participated in this distribution of jobs and goods from the alcaldía, and actually many of them were not fortunate enough in having one of their members appointed as promoter or village monitor. It was clear that those shapono, which had supported the mayor, such as Cejal and Warapana, would receive many more benefits than those villages that had not. The result was that many villages resented the preference that the mayor and his Yanomami councilman from Cejal showed for this village, and for those others related by kinship ties, while neglecting many other villages of the Mavaca-Platanal-Ocamo areas.

The allocation of jobs at the alcaldía and the endowment of commodities transformed the Alto Orinoco municipality into a sort of a “big piñata” for the Yanomami, as an indigenous representative from Puerto Ayacucho once stated. It also turned it into the one of the most corrupt municipalities of the Amazonas State. It was hard to believe that a municipality that had such as short existence (created in 1995) already had so many problems, in which “out of the six people that run the alcaldía four of them have been by now accused of corruption,” as a journalist pointed out once (Bermúdez 1997).
Alcaldía: Clientelism and local antagonisms

The establishment of the municipality in indigenous territory has created paradoxical situations for the Yanomami. On the one hand, it is clear that the municipality has become a kind of a gift-providing napê center that is not at all adapted to the Yanomami exchange system, and has forced them, not in the most suitable way, to play a part in political games without been prepared to play out such roles. In this sense, it is “politics appropriated the Yanomami,” as another journalist once asserted. On the other hand, the municipality has also introduced them into political participation and has given them the opportunity to perform other roles and activities that are not predetermined by the missionaries or by other state institutions, thereby allowing them to make their own decisions in a process of trial and errors.

The Alto Orinoco municipality has become like a Pandora’s box, not only because of the many ways the alcaldía promotes patron-client relationship with the indigenous peoples but also because Yanomami participation in “napê politics” is a fertile source of cultural transformations and social conflicts for them. With the municipality, the Yanomami became the target of separate political and social interests. On the one hand, the different political “criollo” parties such as AD, COPEI, PPT, and MVR try to take advantage of the Yanomami by imposing on them their political ideologies. On the other hand, indigenous organizations such as ORPIA, CONIVE, and more recently the indigenous political party PUAMA (Pueblo Unido Multiétnico de Amazonas), are also generating certain pressures to consolidate homogenous opinions based on supra-ethnic indigenous categories.
In addition to these political forces, the missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, also play an important role in this new political context, supporting or criticizing Yanomami political participation in the municipality. On the one hand, the Protestant missionaries of the Padamo River (the Dawson Family) have been identified as allies and supporters of the Yekuana mayor Jaime Turón from the Acción Democrática party and his patronage relationships with some Yanomami villages such as Cejal, Warapana, Boca Padamo, and Cipoí, among others. On the other hand, the Salesian (Catholic) missionaries have been distinguished as the people that criticize the clientelist modes imposed by the alcaldía among the Yanomami and the intense political proselytism adopted by the indigenous representatives. All these external political entities contribute to the separation of the villages and generate asymmetric relationships among them since some groups have more access to goods and resources than others do.

The alcaldía is also promoting considerable changes in Yanomami settlement patterns. The Yanomami are being encouraged to live in permanent and large villages so that they can more easily request the benefits of the alcaldía. The members of the municipality, and especially the Yanomami councilmen (the previous and the new one), have reiterated that the Yanomami people should not live in caseríos (criollo term to identify small and isolated villages) but in communities that resemble criollo towns.

It is better to live in big communities; if we live in communities we are able to ask for other things from the napé to improve our village. But, if we live in caseríos we would not obtain all the things we want, because the Yanomami councilman says that if we live in caseríos we would not improve (Rubén from Purima 1999).

This testimony shows that some Yanomami are trying to imitate the criollo models of settlement. Rather than leaving the Yanomami to live in relatively small and
scattered villages, the members of the alcaldía have fostered the idea that permanent and populated communities are more suitable to receive generators of electric power, stable houses, docks on the riverbanks, health centers, and napê schools. In sum, the alcaldía, which is made up exclusively of indigenous representatives, is encouraging the establishment of criollo models of living, and some Yanomami villages are taking advantage of these offerings. However, in spite of the fact that there are a few villages such as Warapana, Cejal, and Shakita that are trying to become real “communities,” the majority of the villages in the Mavaca-Orinoco area are still small villages that tend to divide or come together, not because of “political ordinances” but because of internal conflicts and alliances.

The alcaldía is also transforming interpersonal and gender relations among the members of the villages. During my field research, I observed that the community of Hatakoa in the Mavaca area, for example, split because of a combination of political and personal differences. An extended family was supporting the indigenous political parties PUAMA and PPT while the rest of the community was in favor of the policies of the mayor and the Acción Democrática (AD) party. Out of 65 inhabitants in the village, 11 had voted in the last national election and everybody knew that two of those votes did not support the AD party. These political differences were coupled with another problem, which arose when a huya (a male teenager) began to “disturb” (meaning to flirt or seduce) one of Aurelio’s daughters, who was married to Carlos, a hard workingman. Aurelio’s daughters are young and beautiful women who were at that time the center of attention of many young men of the area. When Carlos realized that this teenager was
flirting with his wife he decided to challenge him to a club fight. However, Aurelio, his father in law, persuaded him not to do this and instead decided to move to new place because he was also tired of the political tension with the rest of the members of the village. They built a new shapono up river and settled there as an independent community where the young women felt more comfortable and protected from the young males of the other village who constantly tried to seduce them.

On another occasion two male relatives (classificatory brothers) from the same community almost ended up fighting because one of them, Josue, had gotten a position as a sports monitor at the alcaldía through Eleazar, a very influential person in the village. He had obtained the job in exchange for a woman for his “brother” Eleazar. But then, because of family reasons, the young woman had to return to her own village in the upper Mavaca and Eleazar blamed Josue for her departure. Everybody in the community agreed with Eleazar and demanded that Josue give up the job. As Josue stated:

I was suspended from my job as sports promoter, but that was not fair. I had a monthly income of 75,000 bolívares [at that time around $100] and now I don’t have anything. I am no longer on speaking terms with that man (Eleazar). Now, I have been here, in my house, by my own, and I do not get along so well with the rest members of my community that pushed me to quit my job. I would like to have my job back. (Josue, Warapana, 2000).

In this case, Eleazar was using his influential authority as a nursing aide and as one of the leaders of his shapono to “trade” a job in the alcaldía for a woman. He also had enough power to convince the others to take away Josue’s job when he could not keep the woman. In this sense, the alcaldía with its cargos públicos (public jobs) and social benefits became a napé entity where Yanomami men assert as well their male
authority. Men are the ones who make these kinds of decisions while women’s desires and needs are mostly ignored.

Thus, the municipality, with all its jobs and resources, is being used by the Yanomami to gain access to other instances that are more linked to the inner social organization. Although some Yanomami are trying to separate the alcaldia with all its administrative and political paraphernalia as a napê and outside entity distinct from their “native” social and symbolic spaces, other indigenes attempt to integrate both cultural domains in every single social space. In any case, there is not such cultural separation because the Yanomami constantly incorporate elements and behaviors from the outside world into their quotidian life.

*Omawê is not what we want*

The Alto Orinoco Municipality began to make sense among the Yanomami at the end of 1995. This took place when the mayor Jaime Turón and the five council members of the Concejo Municipal were elected and started making promises, offering jobs, giving out goods, and creating expectations regarding the improvement of the indigenous communities. While the Yanomami were struggling to figure out the purpose of this political entity and how to participate in the novel bureaucratic procedures such as obtaining Venezuelan identification cards and making censuses of their villages, indigenous representatives of ORPIA were rejecting the political territorial division law of the Amazonas State that created this and the other municipalities in the state.
In 1995 the Regional Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon (ORPIA)\textsuperscript{103} and other local organizations had requested from the Supreme Court of Justice the annulment of this political territorial division law of the Amazonas State because of the unconstitutional procedures followed by the regional Legislative Assembly.\textsuperscript{104} The Supreme Court annulled this law and ordered the Legislative Assembly of Amazonas to elaborate a new legislation that would include the indigenous people's participation. In February of 1997, ORPIA organized a Special Conference (Conferencia Extraordinaria) of the Indigenous Peoples of Amazonas in Puerto Ayacucho with the participation of representatives of the 19 indigenous groups, including Yanomami representatives from SUYAO, for the purpose of drafting a new proposal for the political and administrative division of the Amazonas State (ORPIA 1997).

Unlike the municipal scheme imposed by the Legislative Assembly that divided the Amazonas State into seven municipalities, ORPIA proposed the creation of eight multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural municipalities. Above all, they requested that, due to the particular cultural characteristics of the Yanomami people, a new and special “Yanomami Municipality,” be created with a special jurisdiction, separate from the “Alto Orinoco Municipality” which would be made up solely of Yekuana and Arawak communities. The Legislative Assembly rejected this indigenous peoples’ proposal, thereby “failing to recognize the rights of the indigenous peoples to have municipios that were more

\textsuperscript{103} ORPIA is an autonomous, non-governmental, self-governed and non-political organization whose goals are to represent the interests and points of view of Amazonas’ indigenous peoples and to preserve their socio-cultural integrity. As a parallel political entity, members of ORPIA also created the indigenous party PUAMA (Pueblo Unido Multiétnico de Amazonas).
appropriate to our historical and ethnic characteristics,” as an indigenous representative from ORPIA pointed out.

Although some Yanomami, through their organization SUYAO, had participated in this Special Conference organized by ORPIA and had demanded as well the recognition of an exclusively Yanomami municipality (ORPIA 1997, ODH 1997), they were still unclear about the political scope and organization that this new type of municipality would have. This was evident when this group of Yanomami delegates proposed the creation of the “Omawë Municipality” with the “Yoawë Council” in their territory, using the names of two of their main mythical figures. Although the creation of a new and separate municipality for the Yanomami would have been more appropriate for them because of their cultural specificities, the proposal for new political entities with native mythical names was not totally a Yanomami initiative.

The Salesian missionaries, the representatives of ORPIA, and the Human Rights Office of the Puerto Ayacucho were in fact the groups that promoted these ideas, trying to foster the establishment of a local municipality with an indigenous name. However, it seems that this proposal would more likely fulfill the desires and expectations of the missionaries and indigenous activists than of the Yanomami themselves. The creation of

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104 See Chapter 4 where I discuss more extensively the details of this new political and territorial division that took place in the Amazonas State in 1994.

105 Seventeen Yanomami delegates from the Ocamo, Mavaca, and Platanal villages attended this event in Puerto Ayacucho in 1997.
a municipality called Omawé was, however, also supported by some Yanomami villages that were under the influence of the Salesian missions and ORPIA while others totally rejected that idea. These other villages that opposed the Omawé Municipality were those controlled by the mayor and the people from the Acción Democrática party who were against the division of the Alto Orinoco Municipality into two new municipalities, whereby the Yanomami would have one of their own.

For some Yanomami having a municipality called Omawé was an appealing idea:

I agree with the municipio Omawé. In that municipality we can have representatives as leaders and we do not need mayors and councilmen. I know that there are other Yanomami who do not want the Omawé municipality and that they agree in having mayors and all that stuff, but those Yanomami are the ones that want to run for elections and get a position as a councilman (Juvenal, in Platanal 1999).

For others, such as the Yanomami councilman, the creation of the Omawé municipality would not be appropriate because:

With the municipio Omawé the Yanomami would not have a budget, we would not have secretaries that know how to write, type, and made financial plans, we would not have projects. We do not need an Omawé municipality; we need a municipality like the criollo municipalities (Feliciano, in Warapana 1999).

These different positions regarding the kind of municipality the Yanomami wanted created divergences among the villages; yet this time it was not because of traditional inter-village conflicts but was rather a result of the political manipulation of the parties and other organizations. As a way of “buscando un nuevo camino” (finding a new pathway), that is of reaching an agreement among all Yanomami points of view (as

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106 One of the written proposals from ORPIA and the Human Rights Office of the Puerto Ayacucho Vicariate was the creation of a Yanomami Municipality (Urihi Nohi Thaporewe) that would be divided into five parishes: Parima, Mavaca, Ocamo and upper Ocamo, Platanal, and upper Mavaca.
they reiteratively stated in their discourses), the Yanomami decided to gather in one of the shapono of Mavaca to discuss the Omawē municipality proposal. The Yanomami councilman summoned this meeting in Hatakoa (September of 1999), and the local assembly decided, according to the majority of the assistants, to reject the creation of the Omawē municipality. They called instead for the creation of a “Municipio Autóctono Yanomami” (Autochthonous Yanomami Municipality) that would be governed exclusively by Yanomami and not by any criollo or any other non-Yanomami indigene. However, this new entity would have similar characteristics to other standard criollo municipalities. As one of them pointed out

We do not want the Omawē municipality because Omawē is about our customs, about the no patapi, and we want a municipality with a budget and with projects like the napē have. (Rubén, Mavaca 1999).

The idea of having a municipality with mythical names recalled past memories, which contradicted and precluded Yanomami expectations of gaining access to and taking advantage of the criollo (napē) world through this novel institution that was imposed by the criollo themselves. Thus, it seems clear why a considerable number of Yanomami, especially those that have been educated in the intercultural school, have become teachers, nursing aide practitioners, and representatives of their villages, would reject a “native” municipality when the municipality itself is a foreign idea totally unrelated to Yanomami patterns of organization.

In this whole process of cultural interaction and negotiation with the outside world in general and with the municipality in particular, the young Yanomami leaders have striven to take advantage of the napē contexts as a strategy of accommodation. Like
the previous generations that took advantage of the missionaries and other outsiders, these young leaders have essentialized the *napë* as the holders of commodities and have found in the magical word “*proyecto*” (project) the proper template to access goods and services.

We need to have our *proyectos* (projects), with them we can find things for our villages, for our people. The politicians always say: if you need something from the *alcaldía* you have to write a little *proyecto* saying why you are asking for that good or any other thing, then you submit it to the *alcalde*. Yanomami need *proyectos* to improve our *shapono* and our situation (Oscar from Motorema, 2000).

For the Yanomami the *napë* domain and more recently the notion of “*tener proyectos*” (to have projects) has a “use-value,” because everything that comes from the outside world represents access to the Western commodities that are so sought after and cherished by them. With the establishment of the municipality, the Yanomami are expanding communal relationships with other villages and creating new types of relationships with the different national institutions and groups of *napë*. In order to gain access to new economic resources, they are developing more concrete actions and engaging in political procedures and bureaucratic processes that have been, until very recently, unfamiliar experiences for them.

**The emergence of political leaders**

Yanomami social and political organization is based on the family and the groups of families that make up a village, and each village is autonomous. For them, decisions about warfare, migration, subsistence activities, leisure time, ritual ceremonies and so forth, are related to the family nucleus, and to the alliance or hostile relationships with
other villages. Each village has its own leaders: headmen and shamans who make
decisions and coordinate some economic and social activities that the members of the
shapono have to carry out. However, the authority of headmen is relative because each
family group and individual is quite independent and able to make decisions without the
consent of the pata (elders, leaders). This form or political organization has characterized
them as a relatively egalitarian society.

If their customary collective references are the family and the villages where they
belong, and their political and social systems rest on this sort of egalitarianism, how do
the Yanomami, in their everyday life experiences, participate in new political and social
scenarios related to the national society? This question leads us to consider to what extent
the leadership of the monolingual elder generations is challenged by these national
political systems and how the young bilingual generations became influential people in
their villages.

The linkage of the Yanomami with the state institutions represented by the many
government officials with different and sometimes-conflicting programs has guided them
to look for collective and individual leadership strategies to cope with state institutions.
For instance, different Yanomami forms of political participation have developed through
the emergence of new political leaders. These leaders are young bilingual males, with
scholastic education, who act as liaisons and negotiators between the members of their
villages who are mainly monolingual speakers and the outsider napê who represent
national institutions. These embryonic leaders have been distinguished in other
Amazonian societies as “boundary leaders” (Gray 1986) or “chameleon-like leaders”
because of their “skills of intercultural relations: bilingualism, behavioral flexibility, and literacy” (Brown 1993:312). They have also been considered marginal leaders whose authority relies on their fragmentary knowledge of state institutions rather than on the wisdom of the traditional headmen.

Although these boundary leaders may in fact have an influential role in dealing with the bureaucratic institutions while neglecting the authority of the elders and overshadowing their traditional knowledge, the reality is that the Yanomami have found the way to articulate the traditional leadership with the emergence of the new political leaders. With the creation of the Alto Orinoco municipality, the Yanomami have been actively involved with administrative structures and national political parties and these bilingual leaders have been the representatives in charge of interacting with those napë. But this has been a complicated process, in which they have had to learn how to deal with municipal authorities and participate in elections and other bureaucratic procedures.

At the beginning, because they did not know what municipal and regional governments were, how they functioned, and what implications they would have for their lives, the Yanomami began to approach their indigenous neighbors (Yekuana and Arawak) in search of information and experiences regarding these new institutions. The old Yanomami leaders were at that time involved in these meetings, but their lack of proficiency in Spanish, and the constant journeys to La Esmeralda, Puerto Ayacucho, and Caracas that this process entailed, led them to pass on these tasks to the next generation. Many of this young generation’s leaders had been students at the intercultural and bilingual school coordinated by the Salesian missionaries, and later some of them worked
as teachers (*promotores*) at the school, in the handcrafts cooperative, and as nursing aides for the health district. These young leaders are bilingual males, most of them between 20 and 40 years old, with certain knowledge of what happens outside of Yanomamiland because of their frequent trips to Puerto Ayacucho in order to collect their salaries. Some of them are the sons or close relatives of those monolingual old leaders and shamans who had decided not to get directly involved in politics, but rather allowed and encouraged the new generations to carry out these new roles.

Big Bird, an old leader and a well-know shaman from the Mavaca area, described this process of awareness of what the municipality stands for and the emergence of the new generation of leaders. As he put it:

> When the *alcaldía* began, I went to Caracas invited by the mayor Turón. I introduced myself as the main leader and shaman of my community. I thought that all of us were participating in that meeting as *indígenas* (indigenes), but that meeting was not about *indígenas*, it was about politics. They said that with politics we could find a new path (*otro camino*). As my father did when he was the leader, he was always looking for other paths and places. Now it is the same, politics is the same. Now I am looking for a safe path but before I did not know anything about politics. Now, I want to know more about the municipality and politics, but I am tired and it is better that other young people go and learn about these things. I told Javier to go and learn about what they are doing at the municipality and to try to find things for us. (Big Bird, Koparima, 2000)

For Javier, who is one of these young leaders and is currently working for the regional government as *comisionado indígena*, the municipality and politics were also a challenge for him. He was a teacher at the school in which he had taught for over eight years but then he began “to be curious,” as he said, about political issues.

> Politics arrived around 1995 [in the Alto Orinoco] but I did not know anything about politics... I went to several meetings with the mayor and other indigenous - Yanomami and non-Yanomami- they wanted representatives as councilmen (*concejales*) and I wanted to be one of those representatives. Another Yanomami}
from another community down river, from Cejal, was elected; I thought it was not fair... Then, other people came from La Esmeralda and offered me work for a political party. I said yes, and I quit my job at the school. I thought that that was a good idea, to support these political groups because they would allow me to help my people. But I did not understand politics. I thought they were going to give me a position with an income salary, but they didn't. It was really difficult to learn about politics. (Javier, Mavaca, 2000).

These testimonies account for the first approaches and recognition of the municipality, its representatives, and the meaning of politics. The old shaman leader was aware of the potential benefits, mainly material goods that the alcaldia could give the Yanomami; as he said, "We do not understand napê, but the alcaldia is good when it provides us with things, the young guys know how to deal with napê." Although Big Bird recognizes the existence of the alcaldía, he and other elderly leaders are staying relatively apart from a direct relationship with these kinds of foreign structures. The old headman decided to transfer to the young leader the task of coping with the napê political institutions in order to gain access to the manufactured goods and services. In this case, leadership became a matter of cooperation and consensus between two different generations.

For the young leaders politics and the municipality are still difficult concepts. In fact, I have heard from young leaders, when they meet to discuss napê politics, that it is better not to inform the elders about political issues, because they do not understand politics. The new political leaders have now been participating in different activities promoted by the municipality. Some of them have obtained jobs paid by the alcaldía such as cultural, social and sports promoters (promotores). They speak Spanish, attend different inter-ethnic meetings, and vote in national elections. However, the
understanding of the municipality as a bureaucratic structure requires a deeper engagement with its members and procedures in order to transcend the idea that the municipality is just a provider of Western goods.

From cooperative to political organization

SUyAO, Shaponos Unidos Yanomami Alto Orinoco, started as a Yanomami cooperative that promoted the production, distribution, and commercialization of crafts products, and the acquisition of manufactured good for the improvement of their productive activities. Before the establishment of the cooperative, the Yanomami produced crafts for their own consumption and only sporadically traded some crafts with outsiders such as tourists and other visitors who traveled to the Alto Orinoco. SUYAO began in 1986 as a self-management project endorsed by the Salesian missionaries for the increasing of craft production. Through SUYAO, the Yanomami were able to trade baskets (wii and shote), bows, and arrows for Western commodities such as fish hooks, machetes, knifes, axes, aluminum pots, flash lights, colored beads, scissors, match boxes, and so on.

According to one of the missionaries who used to manage the cooperative in conjunction with Yanomami representatives, the main goals of SUYAO, when it started, were 1) the mutual assistance, cooperation, and administrative representation in the production, commercialization and acquisition of goods, 2) the promotion and valorization of Yanomami cultural manifestations, 3) the increasing of capital for the improvement of activities in Yanomami society (Bórtoli 1991). The crafts cooperative is
probably the best example of a Yanomami self-management project that counts on the support and advising of the Salesian missionaries. Through the cooperative, the Yanomami can produce their crafts according to their own rhythm and necessities. If the members of the villages decided to acquire agricultural and fishing tools, they would produce the sufficient amount of crafts that correspond to the costs of these tools. In that sense, what the cooperative earns will serve to buy other goods and tools that will be traded with the next crafts production. With the consolidation of the cooperative, the Yanomami not only increased the production of their crafts, especially baskets, bows and arrows, while obtaining manufactured goods, but also strengthened a local organization that would represent the voices and interests of the Yanomami groups within the national society.\[107\]

Thus, aside from commercializing Yanomami crafts, SUYAO has become an indigenous organization affiliated with regional and national indigenous organizations such as ORPIA in Amazonas, and CONIVE at the national level. These indigenous organizations have coordinated the mobilization of indigenous representatives in Venezuela to demand the recognition of rights as indigenous peoples and as Venezuelan citizens. In this sense, SUYAO has been part of these indigenous movements; it has acquired the status of the Yanomami organization that enables them to participate in these associations and has been used to defend their rights as indigenous peoples. More recently with the influence of the municipality, the Yanomami are making use of SUYAO not only as a cooperative, or as an indigenous organization, but also as a

\[107\] The organization, function, and scope of SUYAO have been analyzed in a separate article
political association that launches Yanomami representatives as candidates for the municipality.

This was evident during the municipal elections to elect the mayor and the representatives for the municipal council of the Alto Orinoco in the year 2000. A group of Yanomami from Mavaca decided to organize a meeting in Shakita to propose several Yanomami candidates for the alcaldía. Among them, Javier, Leandro, and Julio were perhaps the three representatives who were enthusiastically trying to mobilize this meeting. They summoned members from 15 different villages from Platanal and Ocamo and from the Mavaca area. They wanted to launch Yanomami candidates for the upcoming elections that were going to celebrate in July of 2000 and they were searching for a consensus among several villages. These Yanomami were aware that the villages from the Upper Mavaca, Warapana, Cenjal and some from Mavaca were also getting together to choose their own candidates from the Acción Democrática party.

As a way of contesting the legitimacy of those Yanomami affiliated to the Acción Democrática party, the Yanomami from Mavaca decided to call this meeting on behalf of SUYAO, the Yanomami organization that would support their candidacies. Javier, Leandro, and Julio, together with the leaders of Platanal and Ocamo, alleged that the best way to have political participation in the next coming elections was through SUYAO, which was the only “formal Yanomami organization.” SUYAO represented an indigenous association, which, unlike the criollo political parties, was a “native” and local organization, and the Yanomami were aware of this.

(Caballero-Arias 1997).
However, this group of leaders also realized that they would need the support of the members of their own villages and above all the approval of the old leaders (pata the pê). It was clear that although the young leaders (border leaders) were the spokespersons, the organizers, and the promoters of this encounter to decide about the candidates for the alcaldía, they were certainly also looking for the approval and consent of the elders. Most of the speeches referred to the fact that they were getting tired that other non-Yanomami indigenes such as the Yekuana and Arawak were the ones who obtained the leadership positions as mayor and councilmen at the alcaldía. Now, they wanted to have Yanomami candidates from their organization SUYAO to run for those positions. All of the participants of this meeting gave their opinions regarding the importance of having Yanomami candidates and of having SUYAO as the indigenous organization that would become the political platform from which to launch the political contestants. These are some of their testimonies:

Kariaco from Ocamo:

I speak here because I am the cooperative representative of my community. I visited several shapono in Parima when I went there. In Parima, the Yanomami told me that they were not going to support any other foreign candidate. We have our organization SUYAO; we are tired of supporting the Yekuana candidate. Before, we did not know how things work and we supported the Yekuana candidate, now we need our own candidate.

Nicanor from Mavaca:

Here in Shakita we are having an assembly to look for our Yanomami candidate on behalf of SUYAO. We have to come up with our Yanomami candidate using the name of SUYAO. We need to have our own candidate, we are getting tired that the Yekuana candidate is always winning the elections at the alcaldía.
Just like my old man, I always participate in politics. I heard that we want Yanomami candidates from SUYAO. Well, let’s work together; let’s all walk on the same road. If we want to elect our own candidate on behalf of SUYAO, we have to do it with the consent of the shapori (shamans) and the pata (elders).

Julian from Mavaca:

I always tell the people that in politics we have to find only one pathway; we have to go through the same pathway, a new pathway. In order to find it we have to work together, we have to agree with our thoughts.

Oswaldo (an elder) from Platanal:

I want that all of us go through the same pathway. We have to be together and support our people [candidates]. And the young people have to work hard and they have to do it fast because I am already old, and we cannot waste time.

Through these testimonies we can see that although there is an emerging Yanomami leadership, which deals with the national political structures, they do not make decisions on their own, but instead require the consent of the old leaders. The legitimacy of their actions regarding the municipality depends on the approval of the elders. However, as they have recurrently stated they are trying “to find a new pathway” in which all of them agree to work together to cope with the napē influence that would cause cultural transformations among them. Although in this meeting they did reach a consensus regarding the candidate that would run for mayor and the other nominees for the municipal council, the Yanomami could not use SUYAO as their political organization because it did not fit the official parameters of the national electoral system. They decided later to have their candidate run on the PUAMA (the indigenous political party of Amazonas) and Patria Para Todos (PPT) ballots as the regional and national political parties that would support their nomination as municipal candidates.
In the last decade, the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco have increasingly participated in the activities and struggles of wider indigenous movements that have striven for the recognition of indigenous rights within national contexts. More specifically, through the organization SUYAO, *Shaponos Unidos Yanomami Alto Orinoco* (United Yanomami Shaponos of the Alto Orinoco), Yanomami representatives have participated in indigenous conferences, assemblies, national and international events, and political forums to discuss issues on land, education, health, and forms of indigenous people’s participation in institutional spheres.

In recent times, as a result of the political territorial division of the Amazonas State, the Yanomami are more actively participating in the political processes of the Alto Orinoco Municipality. Their engagement in this political administrative structure has forced them to look for new forms of organization among the villages, and to search for collective consensus and political affiliations while the emergent leadership is coping with these foreign institutions.

Facing these new political scenarios, the Yanomami are employing different strategies of accommodation such as taking advantage of the institutional organizations like SUYAO. Although the Salesian missionaries created SUYAO as a cooperative, this organization is now being used by the Yanomami to challenge the municipal office led by non-Yanomami indigenous politicians. Through this “Yanomami organization” they are contesting those indigenous groups and political representatives that attempt to exclude them from the political participation in the alcaldía. It is important to remark that these Yanomami responses are not always the result of collective and common consents.
Actually inter-villages alliances depend most of the time on individual and familial interests who independently attempt to fulfill their needs through these political entities.

**Votes, candidates, and electoral promises**

*The day before*

We are waiting for the installation of a TV here in the *shapono*. They promised that to us. Yes, that’s right. The people from the *alcaldía* promised us a real TV, for watching programs just like in La Esmeralda. Now this *shapono* is going to be first one to have a TV with a special antenna. We are going to put the TV right here in the campaign headquarters (Eleazar, Warapana 2000). I could not believe what Eleazar was telling me, a TV in a *shapono*? I was astonished with the idea that the Yanomami were going to have cable TV. I had already seen a couple of *shapono* with television sets hooked up to VCRs, but the idea that they were going to watch the same TV programs -soap operas, news, sitcoms, and cartoons- as the people in Caracas and in Puerto Ayacucho really amazed me because of the substantial cultural and social impact that a TV in a *shapono* might produce among an indigenous population such as the Yanomami. A satellite dish in a *shapono* seemed very much like “matter out of place” following Mary Douglas classification (1966). But as everything in the Alto Orinoco, the most unexpected things might happen at any time and without notice, and especially during elections time.

The people of the *shapono* were going about their chores; some women were cooking, the teenagers were playing soccer in the middle of the plaza, and few elders were taking *yopo* (hallucinogenic drug) by the side of the *shapono*. Sunset was approaching and a group of women were arriving from the *conucos* (gardens) laden with the heavy baskets full of firewood for their hearths. Some males cleaned the campaign
headquarters while they awaited the arrival of the people from the alcaldía with the TV set and satellite dish. Some of them were very excited, particularly Eleazar, the nursing aide practitioner, who was guiding the others in organizing everything.

Eleazar constantly reiterated that everything was ready for the next day, meaning the elections, and that the mayor had promised him the TV would arrive before the voting day. He was sure that “his people,” the Acción Democrática party, would win the elections. These were the “Megaelections” of 2000 in which Venezuelans were going to elect the president of the Republic, all the state governors, the mayors of all the municipalities and other representatives for political positions.108

This shapono had already received from the alcaldía an extremely powerful brand new electric generator, which once installed, had worked for only 17 hours (as one of its counters displayed) before being damaged because the Yanomami in charge of its maintenance did not know how it functioned. Several months later, the electric plant was finally repaired and the shapono had electricity once again for four hours a day, from 6:00 to 10:00 pm. In addition, several members of this shapono held jobs as social, cultural, and sports promoters and monitors for the alcaldía. During the last few months previous to the elections, the people from this village (as well as those from another shapono on the Upper Mavaca area) had received plenty of processed food, hammocks, mosquito nets, gasoline, and so forth from the alcaldía. They had also received

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108 The Megaelecciones took place on July 30, 2000. Besides the president, governors, and mayors several other positions were elected. These were the deputies for the National Assembly, the indigenous members of the National Assembly, the members of the Legislative Council of the States, the indigenous members of the Legislative Council of the States, and the representatives for the Latin American and Andean Parliaments. In these elections, Venezuelans voted for a total of 760 public offices.
corrugated zinc planks for roofing and other building materials for what would be the campaign headquarters of the Acción Democrática party in the Mavaca area.

The shapono and the people were ready for the elections the next day. They had already fitted the boats with outboard motors and gasoline tanks for ferrying the people to the Mavaca School where the voting would take place. Within the village, every task carried out was done in preparation for the elections and there seemed to be no other topic of conversation that evening. Indeed, it appeared that the elections were these people's only concern. A huge political banner (pancarta) was displayed in front of the campaign headquarters with the logo of the Acción Democrática party and the names of their main regional and local candidates: Bernabé Gutiérrez (for governor of Amazonas) and Jaime Turón (for mayor of the Alto Orinoco Municipality). The people from Warapana were convinced they were going to receive the satellite dish and the TV that day before the elections.

Warapana

This village is on the Mavaca River; it has approximately 160 inhabitants and is 20 minutes away by speedboat from Mavaca, where the Salesian missionaries, the bilingual and intercultural school, and the health dispensary are located. Warapana is the biggest shapono of the Mavaca area. It has a little school (an extension of the Mavaca central school) in which two Yanomami instructors teach up to the third grade. It also has a health post (ambulatorio) with a nursing aid practitioner that depends on the Mavaca health center. Like other villages of Mavaca, Warapana is also part of the cooperative
network of SUYAO. During my field research the person in charge of the cooperative was a young woman who had just become an instructor at the school. It is important to highlight that the former Yanomami councilman and the president (for 2001) of the Mavaca Council Parish (*Junta Parroquial*) were two brothers from Cejal, a village closely related to the principal leaders of Warapana, including the nursing aide practitioner.

In the last few years, Warapana has grown quickly. The Yanomami have built new shelters and have expanded the circumference of the *shapono* in order to become a larger village. This growth in size and number of constructions (such as the campaign headquarters and other communal houses) has been in direct response to the politicians' urging of "becoming *comunidad* rather than keep being a *caserío*." Since the establishment of the municipality, the members of Warapana have actively participated in politics and *criollo* events that used to be completely strange for them. They celebrated the coming of the year 2000 with a huge party with fireworks, *cumbia* and *raspacanilla* music, and processed food. They also celebrate birthdays and sports activities. On one occasion, one of the teachers of the school invited me to celebrate the birthday of his son who was going to turn into five years old. He had bought a lot of rice, pasta, sardines, and sugar in La Esmeralda, decorated with colored paper a section of the *shapono*, and even got a small piñata full of candies. The party was a completely success and the young teacher gained appreciation from the other members of the community. All these *napê* events carried out in indigenous contexts by the Yanomami themselves denote not only
the strong influence of the alcaldía but also their desire to imitate the criollo behaviors in a mimetic cultural process.

The people of Warapana were definitely ready for the elections. They had received election materials several weeks earlier, and with those ballot cards (tarjetones) they had rehearsed over and over how to vote. They had to be sure that all the people registered to vote in the elections (36 Yanomami in this shapono) knew how to vote correctly, which meant that they would not get confused or would make mistakes when faced with all the political parties and names that were displayed on the tarjetones. The men spent time with all the women voters teaching them how they had to mark “only” the frames which were colored white (au au), the emblematic color of the Acción Democrática party. Rather than focusing on the names of their candidates, such as Bernabé Gutiérrez, or Jaime Turón, they used the colors of the party as the icons with which to distinguish one political party (and candidate) from another. The day before, one of the Yanomami promoters of the alcaldía had checked and made sure that everybody had their identifications cards, and although he already knew that from that shapono there were 36 voters, he verified that everybody was going to be ready on time the next day to go to Mavaca where the voting center was located. They knew that in the Mavaca electoral center 248 Yanomami were registered and that each vote was important.

The technicians from the alcaldía finally arrived at Warapana with the TV and the satellite dish. In less than an hour they installed all the equipment and paraphernalia, and fixed and oriented the antenna. As soon as the Yanomami realized that these napé had
arrived with the 13” TV and the rest of the equipment, women, men and children
gathered together inside of the campaign headquarters. Finally the satellite signal from
one of the Caracas TV stations was received, and the first thing that came up on the
screen was the news of the Megaelecciones that were going to take place in the whole
country the next day. Several reports announced that all the voting centers in the urban
areas and in the cities were ready for the elections. All Venezuelans were “going to make
use of their rights as citizens,” as the reporter pointed out. The Yanomami were
enchanted with the images, and Eleazar was really proud of his achievement in getting
the TV for his village.

On the one hand, the arrival of the TV to Warapana reaffirmed the relationship
and support of these Yanomami to the mayor and his party in the coming elections. For
them and especially for Eleazar it was really important to show other Yanomami that the
mayor fulfilled his promise and that they could trust him. On the other hand, the
installation of a TV with a “big antenna” denoted a high community status with respect to
the other villages of the Mavaca area that did not have this valued technological
apparatus. This Western commodity symbolized the climax of “progress” and the new
changes the Yanomami were pursuing through their participation in political activities.

The elections in the Alto Orinoco

Before the establishment of the Alto Orinoco municipality, the Yanomami did not
know about the procedures and implications of the electoral processes in Venezuela. For
them, it was quite a challenge to understand that the president of Venezuela, the governor
of the Amazonas State, and the mayor of the Alto Orinoco municipality had to be elected through a complicated voting system. Moreover, all these elected leaders were associated with political parties that carried out different activities among indigenous peoples trying to co-opt them into their political agendas. In order to access the electoral system and participate in the national, regional and local elections, the Yanomami had to register first in the national electoral system (through the National Electoral Council, CNE).

In order to register in this electoral system, the Yanomami needed an identification card (cédula de identidad), which is the only official document valid for voting. However, obtaining an ID card is not an easy process for any Venezuelan citizen due to the complicated bureaucratic procedures behind the issuing of this document. First you get a provisional paper ID (comprobante) and later, after several months and sometimes even a year, you can obtain the plastic ID card (cédula laminada). With the cédula laminada, which certifies (if such were the case) that the person is Venezuelan and is at least eighteen years old, the citizen is able to vote; one cannot vote with a comprobante. Thus, to vote in any kind of national, regional and local official elections, Venezuelan citizens must have official plastic ID cards and be registered in the Permanent Electoral Registry (REP).

Currently, the villages of the Ocamo, Mavaca, Platanal, Cejal and Padamo areas, which are accessed by river, make up the strongest region of political influence of the Alto Orinoco. This region comprises around 4000 Yanomami, of which probably less than 10 percent of them (by the year 2000) had identification cards. The acquisition of ID cards became in an important issue for the Yanomami and for the rest of the indigenous
peoples in the different municipalities in the Amazonas State. Yanomami men and
women have realized that the lack of identification cards might cause a lot of trouble
when they travel outside of their indigenous territory. Lilibet, a Yanomami monolingual
woman who has gone several times to Puerto Ayacucho due to health problems told me:

I really need my cédula. I don’t have any yet, but I really need one. If I have one,
I would not have trouble with the police and guardias (National Guards) every
time I go to Ayacucho. Once, I went there and I was very sick, and at the hospital
they ask for my cédula; later I went there again because my daughter was sick and
they asked me again for my cédula and my daughter’s. I always tell the napé that
I don’t have any; I am waiting to get one (Lilibet from Mrakapiwei, 2000).

In the case of the Alto Orinoco Municipality, the majority of potential voters did
not have ID cards nor had they registered in the Permanent Electoral Registry, and that
was a key issue for the electoral campaigning. This municipality was divided in five
parishes: Esmeralda, Huachamacare, Marawaka, Mavaca, and Sierra Parima. Mainly
Yanomami inhabits these last two parishes. Thus, the Yanomami from these parishes had
to be convinced of acquiring ID cards so they would vote in the national elections. The
political parties persuaded the Yanomami to acquire ID cards by paying them off with
food, goods, and other resources, which were handed out in La Esmeralda where the
cedulación (getting the IDs) took place.

When politics first started in the Alto Orinoco Municipality, around 10
Yanomami went to La Esmeralda to vote for the first time in the municipal elections at
the end of 1995. Later, by September of 1998, 38 people were already registered in the
electoral center of the Mavaca Parish, and by the end of October of that year at least 100
Yanomami were registered. The first time that the Yanomami participated in an election
in Mavaca was in November of 1998 for the regional elections to elect the Amazonas
State governor. In December of 1998 they also voted for the presidential elections when Hugo Chávez Frías won the Venezuelan presidency for the first time.

Since that time, and as a result of the political transformations encouraged by the president Hugo Chávez, Venezuela has undergone probably one of the most intense periods of democratic exhibition and electoral processes in spite of the aftermath of political conflicts. The Yanomami voters have also participated in those processes through political campaigns. As we can see, the Yanomami political participation is not only related to the creation of the Alto Orinoco municipality but also is a consequence of the many political changes that the nation was experiencing during that time.

It was rainy season and the mist that rest on the Orinoco River lifted very slowly while the sound of few outboard motors approached to Mavaca where the voting center (the school) was located. The first group in arrives were the people from Warapana. Men, women, and kids jumped out of the wood canoes and the aluminum boats as soon as the transportation reached the dock in front of the mission house. Little by little other boats coming from Platanal, Ocamo, Padamo, Cejal and the neighboring villages were approaching to Mavaca. Some of the biggest cargo boats carrying a Venezuelan flag in the prow, which was proudly flapping as a symbol of national civic behavior. (Field notes, Mavaca August 1, 2000).

Everybody was ready for the elections. A party of National Guards had arrived to Mavaca two days before bringing the electoral material and guaranteeing order during the electoral day. The tables with the voting boxes marked with the CNE (Consejo Nacional Electoral) stamp and the ballots cards were properly placed in one of the classrooms of the school that had a few old desks, a large blackboard, and a calendar indicating the day: Sunday, July 30, 2000. The members of the electoral board made up of a Salesian sister, a Salesian laical woman and five Yanomami representatives, were ready to receive the first voters while three official witnesses, also Yanomami, were sitting in front of the electoral
tables to guarantee the viability and truthfulness of the process. One and all were prepared to fulfill their tasks as representatives of the National Electoral Council for the *Megaelecciones*.

Outside of the school, the Yanomami were waiting in line to assert their rights as “Venezuelan citizens.” They organized by each *shapono*. First the people of Warapana voted and later each community got together to make the line to vote. The women with nursing babies were the first in line, followed by the rest of the women, later the old men, and finally the rest of the men. Voting in this sequence, the young bilingual representatives guaranteed that all the people of their villages promptly took part in the *megaelecciones*.

During my ethnographic research between 1999 and 2000 I observed several national elections among the Yanomami of the Mavaca-Orinoco area. In 1999 they participated in three different elections. In April they voted in the National Referendum regarding the need to draft a new constitution; in July they voted for those that were going to make up the National Constituent Assembly, and in December they participated in the Referendum for the approval of the new national constitution. In the year 2000, they participated in the *Megaelecciones* (July 30) to elect the president, national assembly members, governors, and mayors. Later, for the municipal elections (on December 3), they elected the authorities and representatives for the Council Parishes (*Juntas Parroquiales*). The Alto Orinoco Municipality was divided into five parishes (see Figure 6) made up of Yekuana, Arawak, Piaroa, and Yanomami indigenous groups. Mavaca became the voting center of the parish with the same name.
Figure 6
Indigenous Peoples Registered in the Electoral System by Parish.
Alto Orinoco Municipality. March 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish</th>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Voting Center</th>
<th>Number of Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Parima</td>
<td>Yanomami</td>
<td>Caserío Parima B</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cacique Tamanaco School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marawaka</td>
<td>Yekuana/Yanomami</td>
<td>Comunidad Toki Shamanaña</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gerbasio Rubio School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mavaca</td>
<td>Yanomami</td>
<td>Caserío Mavaca</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intercultural-Bilingual School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huachamakare</td>
<td>Yekuana</td>
<td>Caserío Akanaña</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Junín School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Esmeralda</td>
<td>Yekuana/Arawak/Criolos</td>
<td>Caserío La Esmeralda/ La Esmeralda School</td>
<td>642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL VOTERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1891</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all these elections, members of different villages traveled to Mavaca by river for several hours, and even for a whole day, in order to vote. Although politics have been a “male business” activity, the participation of women in the electoral process became an important issue for the candidates. For the Yanomami the act of voting turned into a novel experience that enabled them to play with unknown and at the same time challenging scenarios. They understood that they could take advantage of these electoral experiences and the idea of “exchanging” votes for commodities fit perfectly into their rational forms of dealing with the “politics napê.”
Political proselytism, strategic engagements

During the last political campaign for mayor of the Alto Orinoco Municipality in
the year 2000, some of the political candidates traveled to the Yanomami villages to
explain their “government programs.” Four candidates from different parties and
different indigenous backgrounds tried to win the elections for the Alto Orinoco
Municipality. Although this is a county with a predominantly Yanomami population,
one of the contestants was Yanomami. One of the candidates, Roberto, was a young
Arawak schoolteacher from La Esmeralda from the Patria Para Todos (PPT) party. He
was trying to defeat the mayor Turón, a Yekuana from the Acción Democrática (AD)
party who was pursuing reelection for the next period. The mayor had been highly
criticized by the other candidates and by public opinion, not only because of his corrupt
policies, but also because of the patron-client relationships established with indigenous
peoples of that county, especially the Yanomami.

The campaign goal of the young candidate of the PPT was to transmit the need for
a change in the style of government imposed by the former mayor Turón who was
applying intense policies of incorporation among the indigenous groups. In his political
scheme the young candidate proposed to improve the economic conditions of the
Yanomami villages, to expand the local cooperatives, to enhance the schools and medical

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109 These candidates were Jaime Turón, Yekuana from Acción Democrática party; Alfredo
Chamanare, Yekuana, independent candidate; Pablo Olivero, Arawak from MVR party; and Roberto
Yavinape, Arawak from Patria Para Todos (PPT) party.

110 Although the Yanomami had tried to have their own candidate for the alcaldía, they were
convinced by the other indigenous representatives of supporting other candidates because they “were not
ready to run for a municipal candidate,” meaning that the Yanomami did not have yet the skills to run as
mayor.
dispensaries and to obtain credits for the production of mañoco (crude manioc flour) and plantain flour for the Yanomami. Roberto visited several Yanomami communities along the Orinoco River explaining his program of government and trying to convince them to make a shift in the leadership of the municipality.

Although he did not say that he was going to hand out commodities (as gifts) to them, as the mayor was doing to obtain the Yanomami votes, the young candidate made a concrete proposal that particularly caught my attention. He said that if he won the elections he was going to give “pensions and special treatment to the elders and the shamans in order to help them.” He was offering a sort of retirement income so the elders could buy clothes, tools, and fishing material. He also said that he was going to set up a sort of festival in which the shamans from several indigenous groups might gather together to exchange their “shamanic expertise and tell their old stories.” The motto of his campaign was “Order and Progress” evoking the old positivist tendency developed well into twentieth century by the national governments and continued by military schemes. Although I am almost sure that this indigenous candidate and his followers did not know the origins and goals of this ideological model of expansion, in some ways they were promoting these positivist ideas by disseminating proposals for cultural changes and encouraging modernizing ideas among indigenous peoples themselves.

While he was expounding his political program in one of the communities of the Mavaca area, a group of elderly women were weaving baskets and a few shamans were inhaling hallucinogenic drug (epena) invoking the spirits (hekura). They were not paying attention to what the candidate was saying to a group of bilingual Yanomami males who
were discussing the political program with the candidate. After the candidate left the
city, a couple Yanomami teenagers who were carefully listening to him ran afterward
to one side of the shapono where their elderly relatives were performing their tasks. The
teenagers said in a joking way to the elders:

Hey, if this guy wins the elections for the alcaldia you will have some money
because you are elderly people and he wants to be nice to you guys. What a weird
thing! You will be in a special list just for elders, and you can have fishhooks and
other mathohi (goods), all because you are old people. That guy is crazy.

The shamans and the elderly women did not really pay attention to the irritating
comments of the teenagers and basically ignored them and what they were saying; they
just continued doing their activities. Only one of the elder women stated, “I am not going
to tell any story to those napê.” For these few elders, the idea of having a retirement fund
did not fit into their cultural rationality and the idea of sharing information and stories
with other non-Yanomami people in a sort of story-telling setting somewhere out of their
shapono did not seem particularly an appealing proposal for them. For the teenagers, the
proposal also seemed inappropriate: Why should the elders receive goods while the
young people did not?

Simultaneously, on the other side of the shapono the young bilingual leaders were
discussing the candidate’s offer. They did not seem quite clear with the political proposal
of this candidate. They knew that the mayor, who was looking for reelection, was giving
out a lot of matohi (commodities) to the villages that were supporting him. He offered
hammocks, gasoline, oil, outboard motors, food, and he even promised a satellite dish to
one of the villages in the Mavaca area. So how come this other candidate was going
about just offering a pension retirement plan for the elders and a few fishhooks? This seemed unreasonable to them.

These Yanomami were in a disjunctive situation. On the one hand, with all these political clientelism generated by the political parties and especially by members of the alcaldía, the Yanomami visualized the “napë politics” as a source of goods and services and in that way they were expecting those napë to behave. On the other hand, this group of Yanomami was struggling with rumors from other indigenous people from La Esmeralda who insinuated that the mayor was treating the Yanomami as mohoti (naïve, stupid) because he was “buying” and “manipulating” them with the few endowments he was giving them.

For these Yanomami, it was difficult to make the decision whether to support the new candidate with his bizarre proposal or to support the mayor in his reelection and request the manufactured commodities. This particular village decided to support Roberto, the young Arawak candidate. However, these young bilingual leaders were clear about what they would do with the candidate’s proposal. If they were asked to register the elders in this type of retirement program in order for them to receive some of the benefits of the municipality, they were willing to do so, but mainly as a strategy for taking advantage of the circumstances and as an easy way to acquire benefits from the outside world that might help out their family and community. In the end, the young candidate did not win the election. The former mayor was reelected and his policies and patron-
client relationships were reestablished with several Yanomami, as well as with other indigenous communities.\textsuperscript{111}

What we can grasp from this example is that the arrival of electoral candidates with promises and gifts is not a totally novel event for the Yanomami. This is part of a chain of past encounters between the Yanomami and the outsiders represented by explorers, missionaries, scientists, tourists, governmental personnel, and now with local politicians. The presence of these candidates in their villages and in their life is an additional element they integrate into their recent history in which they interplay continuities and discontinuities of their ways of life with continuities and discontinuities coming from the outside world. In this case, they just take advantage of a particular circumstance (such as the electoral processes of the Alto Orinoco Municipality) and strive to obtain the benefits that have been offered to them. It is a question of surviving in the napê world as they do in the urihi (forest).

What is interesting is that the Yanomami play along with the different offerings of the candidates and the political parties as a strategy of accommodation to these new political processes. During my ethnographic research I realized that their affiliations to political parties were changeable, inconstant, and that they did not necessarily display fidelity to any of these political factions. An example of this chameleonic way of dealing with the political parties is the case in which a leader from one of the villages of the Mavaca area approached the candidate of the PPT party with this proposal: The

\textsuperscript{111} Jaime Turón was reelected in July of 2000. However, due to his corrupt policies, he was arrested on charges of embezzlement and imprisonment in Puerto Ayacucho, Amazonas State on July of 2002. He was released after a few months.
Yanomami leader would convince the members of his *shapono* to vote for the PPT candidate in exchange for the outboard motor that the candidate was using for his campaign. I later asked him what his village would do with the opposing *Acción Democrática* party candidate whom they had also vowed to support. He said,

> If we get the *motoro* (outboard motor), we are willing to change parties, if we do not get anything from this *napê*, we just support the other candidate, that is the way how Yanomami think about politics. (Oscar from Motorema, 2000).

This reveals that when it is a matter of dealing with the outsider *napê* the Yanomami play betwixt and between roles with the different political forces in order to obtain the most goods that will satisfy their personal and collective needs and aspirations.

**The feminization of the elections**

The Yanomami recent active participation in local, regional, and national politics has produced changes in their gender relations and roles. Men are increasingly engaging in national, regional and local politics while women, in addition to their domestic activities, are working at the bilingual school and at the craft cooperative carrying out tasks that had been previously performed by the men before the establishment of the Municipality. These cultural transformations have, in some ways, modified as well as reinforced gender inequalities.

National politics arrived in the Alto Orinoco in different ways that imply carrying out diverse activities. As a result of their relationship to national institutions, these political activities in which the Yanomami are currently participating are: voting in national elections, holding political positions at the local county level, participating in
intra and inter-ethnic meetings, and redefining individual tasks according to gender, and age differences. In spite of their cultural male political domination pattern, Yanomami women also participate in these national, regional, and local voting processes. In fact, one of the main concerns for Yanomami men is that women who are eligible by age do manage to vote in all the elections. A male Yanomami representative from the Mavaca area once stated in a political meeting, “Yanomami women should also obtain identification cards so that we can count on their votes in the elections.”

Here, a gender issue was raised in a type of meeting that had been previously and exclusively concerned with men and their own activities. It seems that although the Yanomami have established gendered spaces in which public meetings and political encounters are mainly confined to males’ groups while women remain in domestic circles, the reality is that Yanomami women actually intercede and participate in the activities related to the outside world. Even though the pattern of male domination in Yanomami society is maintained, the idea of incorporating Yanomami women in larger political processes, hitherto restricted to men, gives rise to unusual criteria in which newly reformulated gender tropes are becoming part of the general political actions and discourses. Among these new practices related to the Western world is women’s participation in village workshops organized by local male leaders to learn about the voting process. During my ethnographic research I observed the ever-increasing Yanomami women’s participation in the national, regional, and local elections. Some women even worked as members of the electoral boards, a job that required an enormous amount of responsibility. According to one of the nuns from Mavaca (who worked as the
main secretary of the electoral board), the work of women in this kind of task was more reliable than the men's work.

I have worked in the voting benches during the elections, and it is a thorough job. We have to check the ID numbers of the voters with the one we have in the electoral forms. We have to be aware that the people sign the forms, that nobody cheat it with the IDs, and that everybody place correctly the ballots cards into the boxes. It is a lot of work. At the end I was tired because I have a babe-in-arms and I had to nurse him (Jacinta, Mavaca 2000).

Politics have generated the necessity of having national identification cards as a way of becoming a Venezuelan citizen and as prerequisites for gaining access to the nation's services and donations. Although the majority of Yanomami who bear Venezuelan identification cards are men, many women have also acquired them. In fact, the main reason why many more women do not have ID cards is because of the logistical difficulties that the official credentials program encounters in reaching distant frontier populations and not because of any male Yanomami opposition.

For instance, in the presidential elections of the year 2000 in Venezuela, in the Mavaca Parish only the Yanomami that possessed ID cards were registered to vote. This was the fifth political election in which they participated in a period of two years. According to the voting registry, out of the 248-registered Yanomami, 36 per cent were women and 64 per cent were men. Although men were the larger group, the significant participation of women in national elections indicates that there is no Yanomami gender exclusion in electoral processes.

With the establishment of the Alto Orinoco Municipality, some of the Yanomami males of the Alto Orinoco are presently more concerned with national politics than with their subsistence activities. Much of the effort of these bilingual Yanomami men has been
concentrated on the many new ways they can acquire Western commodities. The acquisition of these manufactured goods is through the paternalistic national policies carried out by the National Guard through the program “Casiquiare 2000,” or through patron-client relationships established with political parties and members of the alcaldía. These dependency relationships are principally established with Yanomami males, who at the same time engage in similar dependency relationships with other less influential males within their villages as well as with members of other (more distant) villages. This political clientelism has divided villages and families among the Yanomami groups.

An elder Yanomami woman from one of the shapono of the Mavaca area who had experienced the impact of missionaries and now of the political institutions commented on the effect of politics in the division of the villages related by kin ties in this way:

The other day, the people from a community down river (Cejal) called for a political meeting. The mayor had given out a lot of food, gasoline, and provided transportation to take the people to the meeting. I went to the meeting with my people from Mavaca. But the people from that community (Cejal, the host village) said that they were not going to give us food although all of us are family. They deceived us. I told them: “I came here to support you guys, and you did not do what you promised us.” They did not give us anything. That is why I don’t like politics anymore. The next time we have elections or meetings for the municipal county I am not going to participate, I am tired, and I am mad at all these politicians: Yanomami and napé politicians (Otilia, Purima, 2000).

Although Yanomami women participate in the electoral voting processes and attend some of the political meetings, they prefer to stay out of the main electoral-political discussions. As a male Yanomami teacher said, “our women, they do not have patience with politics, they get tired pretty soon, and they get angry if they feel that are betrayed with politics.” However, in spite of women’s reluctance to get directly involved in national, regional or local politics, they are increasingly participating in other activities
related to the *napê* world. It is common to find Yanomami women as teachers at the intercultural and bilingual school and in charge of the craft cooperative since the Yanomami males are abandoning these tasks and engaging more in national political issues. As *promotoras* (teachers) women have the same salary as men; the variations do not depend on gender differences but on experience and educational level. By 2001, the Mavaca School had the same number of female and male teachers.

Some women are also attaining more responsibility at the crafts cooperative. Although they always work with a man in the organizing and classification of the crafts that are taken to the mission where the headquarters of the SUYAO organization are located, women are playing a more active role in dealing with lists of prices and the costs of the manufactured goods. They are increasingly in charge of directly trading their crafts for the manufactured goods that are needed in their villages. However, women who participate in all these *napê* activities seem overwhelmed by some of them.

I work right now as representatives of the cooperative, but I am also a teacher, and that is too much work. I have two kids and I have to take care of the garden, cook, and help my mother. This is so much work; I think that I am going to quit the job at the cooperative. There are other men and other people that know math and can do that job. I think I am going to quit (Silvana, Warapana 1999).

Craft trading is a complex process because, although each village has its own cooperative whereby the Yanomami exchange the village crafts production for Western manufactured goods through SUYAO, the production of the crafts is an individual task. Due to Venezuelan market preferences, the great majority of Yanomami handcrafts are made up of baskets (*shoto* and *wii*), while bows and arrows comprise a much lesser portion of a village's production. Because weaving baskets is a female task while making
bows and arrows is a masculine activity, Yanomami women have the burden and responsibility of generating the bulk of a village’s traded manufactured goods.

However, with the establishment of the municipality, the Yanomami are leaving aside the self-management cooperative project in search of easier venues of access to money and manufactured goods and processed foods. Actually, the effects are identified at a more micro level. Yanomami women do continue to weave baskets and the young political leaders try to sell these baskets at the coop or to outside visitors or merchants. But with this money, they now usually buy gasoline for use in organizing and attending political meetings, often leaving the women without the household goods they used to obtain from the cooperative. Despite the fact that Yanomami women have been incorporated to electoral processes and are playing an important role at the school and the cooperative, the patron-client relationships established by members of the municipal county with indigenous populations has been counterproductive for women as well as for the self-management local projects such as the Yanomami cooperative. Although it appears the influence of these political institutions has empowered Yanomami women in certain social contexts, these cultural shifting processes have not necessarily ameliorated women’s life conditions in a society that has been characterized by asymmetric gender relations.

Wrapping up ideas

During my fieldwork among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco, and specifically in the Mavaca area, I found that the municipality had patently become a challenge for the
Yanomami. They had to learn and are still learning about administrative procedures, electoral process, bureaucratic dealings, and patron-client relationships, but at the same time the establishment of the *alcaldía* and the arrival of new people and political parties became a sort of entertainment event for them. For the Yanomami, the *alcaldía* and the parties did not seem deleterious entities to their social and cultural ways of life. They do not consider these institutions as a problem or a threat for their cultural integrity; on the contrary, as they said, “the *alcaldía* is a good thing” because through the *alcaldía* “we can obtain outboard motors, boats, hammocks, gasoline, food, and many other things.”

In order to obtain these manufactured goods, the Yanomami employ different strategies of accommodation. These strategies are related to the many ways they can join one or another political party and play along with the different institutional choices. They obtain jobs at the *alcaldía* performing bizarre tasks while taking advantage of the offerings that the municipality and other organizations bestow upon them. They actively participate in electoral processes and emulate *criollo* behaviors in order to obtain legitimacy not only in the municipality but also among other indigenous representatives. They have also developed interesting strategies such as writing letters requesting goods and services from the local mayor, the regional government, and even the president of Venezuela. They also spend quite a bit of time discussing the organization and strategies employed by other indigenous groups in order to obtain economic resources and political positions in other municipalities of the Amazonas State and learned how to fight back when other indigenous and *criollo* politicians excluded them from the decision-making regarding the municipality.
The Alto Orinoco Yanomami that I portray in this chapter are the outcome of the national policies, but above all, are the result of their own historical process. The ways in which the Yanomami manipulate the structures and institutions like the municipality for their own purposes reflect how they have related to the criollos in the last decades. For the Yanomami, the municipality and the national political structures are still new entities in which they try to reconcile cultural differences between their ways of life and the Venezuelan national society. However, in spite of the intricacy in articulating both worlds, they are struggling to understand the implications and the effects of the municipality as a cultural transforming institution. In the meantime, they are carrying out different activities in order to take advantage of what the municipality represents.

This approach to the most Westernized institutions such as municipality and political parties has paradoxical effects among the Yanomami. On the one hand, with the national expansion, the Yanomami have access to health and education services and the recognition of their rights as an indigenous people. On the other hand, these criollo models, represented by the municipality, are more complex forms of organization that the Yanomami want to imitate without a thorough evaluation of its effects. In this sense, the interaction between Yanomami and national society through the municipality is seen as a dialectic process that reflects the contradictions between the so-called tradition and modernity polarization. When the Yanomami point out in their meetings that they “are looking for a new path,” they are not only calling for social consensus among the villages; what they are saying is that they really want to acquire the napé lifestyle with all the goods and benefits associated with that life. What they probably have not come across
yet is "the path" to appraise critically the consequences of not always effective
articulations with the national political structures.
A frontier experience

After several days of hunting, a group of five Yanomami arrived at the Venezuelan military post of the Parima B settlement in the Parima highlands. They said they had been walking for almost three days and that they had seen some *garimpeiros* (illegal gold miners) not too far away from that post. One of the military officers arrogantly asked them if they had found those gold miners in Venezuelan territory. They could not answer that question; they just described the region and said that probably it had been in Brazil because they had heard the miners speaking a different language from Spanish.

These Yanomami lived in one of the communities of the Parima B area, quite close to the international Venezuelan-Brazilian border. A couple of them spoke some Spanish and translated to the rest of the group in Yanomami what the lieutenant was asking; they also demonstrated certain bewilderment to the confusing question of “international borders.” The lieutenant rapidly prepared a party of soldiers to investigate...

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112 Parima B and Parima A are the closest Venezuelan settlements to the Brazilian border located around 15 kilometers from these communities that hold indigenous and a few non-indigenous peoples. The protestant missionaries from the New Tribes Missions arrived to Parima B in 1968. The medical personnel of the Ministry of Health and the Malariology services as well as other governmental offices have worked occasionally in that area. Since the middle on the 1980s the members of the Amazonian Center for Research and Control of Tropical Diseases (CAICET) set up a research base there. In 1991, the Venezuelan government built a military base and an airstrip in Parima B when the illegal gold miners were found in the headwaters of the Orinoco River in Venezuelan territory.
whether those *garimpeiros* had in fact transgressed the Venezuelan border violating national sovereignty.

After the soldiers left, we continued talking with this group of Yanomami about the different villages located in the Parima highlands and the type of animal game available in a savanna environment. We were two anthropologists and a Yanomami from Ocamo (lowland area) who were carrying out a preliminary study on the health and nutritional status of the Parima Yanomami. For the three of us this was the first time that we had visited the Parima highlands, and it was obvious that there were not only environmental differences with respect to the lowland Alto Orinoco area but also dialectical variations and differences in their *ethos* between the two Yanomami groups.

We also asked this Yanomami party if they thought the *garimpeiros* were mining on the Venezuelan side. However, unlike the military officer who was almost demanding an accurate answer, what we were trying to elucidate from the conversation was their sense of awareness of what a national territory represents and what being Venezuelan or Brazilian might imply for their own interests. To this last question, one of them just answered *kui, ya taimi* (I don’t know). We continued talking about the differences between national borders and territories, and we asked again, do you know where Venezuela is? Finally, one of them asserted *kamiye, ya tai* (yes, I know). He simply pointed out to a small hill in front of the airstrip where the militaries had written with clay and in big letters the name Venezuela and had drawn a big Venezuelan flag with colored rocks identifying the military base in a frontier zone.
As a form of eliciting additional information regarding their ethnic and local identities vis-à-vis their rationalization of what being “citizens of a nation” means, we asked them, are you Venezuelans? In some way, we anticipated their reaction, which was a certain puzzled expression; and again there was no answer. One of them, as a result of a playful and provoking comment from our guide from Ocamo, later replied kamiyê Niyayobe-theri kë ya (I am from the community of the Niyayobe). In this exercise of bringing out ideas of their identities we also asked them if the criollo soldiers, the missionaries, and the Yekuana family that inhabited that site were considered people from the Parima highlands like the Yanomami who were living in that area. One of them remarked kamiyê napê mai, kamiyê Yanomami kë ya (I am not foreigner, I am Yanomami).

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The event described took place in 1992, soon after the Venezuelan State had established military posts in Ocamo, Parima B, and Platanal (Yanomami territory) at the frontier zone in order to “protect the national sovereignty” from the incursion of illegal gold miners coming in from Brazil. The fact that a group of military personnel and other civilian groups had arrived in Parima B making the Venezuelan State institutions explicitly present in a border territory confronted in different ways Yanomami ethnic and local identities. Although the Yanomami had had previous interethnic contact with napê people since the arrival of missionaries, travelers, and governmental officials, the establishment of a permanent military post with its all-nationalist paraphernalia represented the “official entrance” of the centralized state into this indigenous frontier
territory. With the coming of military personnel and their nationalist discourses on the Venezuelan sovereignty, the Yanomami faced not only the presence of new groups of outsiders militarily trained, but also an abstract conception of territoriality and national identity that did not correspond to their notions of spaces and boundaries.

For these few Yanomami who found some Brazilian miners at the border zone while they were simply hunting in the forest, the idea that they were in-between two different countries with different political systems, languages, and development programs was definitely confusing and challenging for them. They did clearly acknowledge the different languages uttered by the Brazilian garimpeiros (Portuguese) in comparison with the Venezuelan soldiers (Spanish), but recognizing nationalities and nationalist affiliations did not fit into their social identity schemes. Although the Yanomami currently recognize the different “types of outsiders” such as miners, soldiers, missionaries, and anthropologists, they identify non-Yanomami people with the all-encompassing category of napê (outsider). For them, the garimpeiros (miners) are napê but they also embody dangerous and intimidating people because they contaminate the rivers, bring shawara (diseases), and repress the natives when they obstruct their gold-mining enterprises. In this particular encounter that we had with the Parima B Indians, the exception was the Yanomami guide from Ocamo, who was identified as “ethnically” similar, but socially different because he was coming from another village of the lowland area.

While for the Venezuelan lieutenant it was quite standard procedure to ask about the boundaries of the country (taking for granted a geopolitical category reifying the
notion of Venezuela within a specific national space), for these Yanomami the limits and uses of their territories had other intrinsic meanings. For them, the utilization and appropriation of their spaces are more related to their subsistence activities, their mythical representations, their political relationships, and the inter-village social networks. Their conceptualization of the urihi or urifi (forest) is based on these social, ideological and economic practices that determine the utilization of the space in which they establish spatial and cultural boundaries with other villages and other indigenous groups. The Yanomami are relatively an egalitarian society and each village is an autonomous and politically independent entity. They do not have socially or politically encompassing mechanisms that lead them to organize themselves as a homogenous or totalizing ethnic group. Thus, the idea of sharing an all-inclusive notion of Yanomami nationhood is not a major constituent in their inward forms of collective identification because they build their social identities more on kinship ties and inter-village alliances.

Considering the particular ways they perceive themselves in relation to their family bonds, political alliances, and social spaces, the reaction of this group of Yanomami hunters is understandable when we asked them about the location of Venezuela and one of them just pointed at a determined physical spot. For that man, the best way to give sense to an intangible and meaningless category such as “Venezuela” was visualizing it in a real place and with explicit elements. In this case, “the nation” was reified in the small hill across from the airstrip with some particular icons such as the flag and a written name in that military plot of Parima. This is the transformation of an
indigenous topography, the *urihi*, into a very concrete and tangible notion of what a “national” territory could stand for them.

Thus, with the impact of the nation-state institutions such as the military forces, the Yanomami began to be directly exposed to ideas such as the Venezuelan nation, national borders, national sovereignty, and the semantics of national symbols. This process of being aware of what the nation means and represents began in some way since the arrival of the missionaries and other external institutions such as the school and the health center. However, with the establishment of the state institutions (military posts, the municipality, and political parties) since the beginning of the 1990s, they are facing drastic cultural transformations that have driven them to embody new national and ethnic identities that contrast with the many ways of expressing their “Yanomaminess.” With this state expansion they are experiencing more directly the advantages and disadvantages of what being citizens of Venezuela or Brazil might represent in the development of their new identities. The emergence of these forms of interethnic relations leads me to take into account the many ways the Yanomami configure their identities in settings such as these military settlements and at political meetings within and outside their villages.

*Framing the theme*

Drawing on intercultural experiences with the national society, this chapter attempts to grasp the major components of the politics of Yanomami identities along the axes of the Venezuelan nation-state, ethnicity, and the growing ideas of citizenship and
nationality embodied by this Amazonian indigenous people. Considering the impact of recent bureaucratic institutions and state policies, the Yanomami are constructing ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969) as well as ethnic alliances with other indigenous groups in order to participate more actively in decision-making on political issues regarding their territory.

The encounter with Venezuelan national society has challenged their ideas of what being Yanomami means within the wider socio-political contexts related to the Venezuelan territory, the Amazonas State, and the local Alto Orinoco Municipality. This process of ethnic awareness is an ongoing and haphazard process. Yanomami are continually reproducing and redefining their intra-ethnic relations as well as pan-Indian identities as they interact with missionaries, scientists, governmental personnel, military officers, politicians, and other indigenous groups.

Thus, the relationship between the expansion of the Venezuelan State and the redefinition of Yanomami identities is examined through the effects of three political instances. These are 1) the new national constitution; 2) the Alto Orinoco Municipality; and 3) state development programs such as the National Guard's program called Casiquiare 2000 (instituted by the Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez Frías in the Alto Orinoco). Through these examples, I analyze the manifold rhetoric of these state policies and institutions that influence the emergence of new identities and the rise of an ethnic and national consciousness among the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco.

Furthermore, I highlight the political discourses of these state institutions and the adaptation of multiple indigenous identities through the ideas of becoming Indian,
Ethnicity and the building of ethnic identities

Ethnicity and its homologous terms 'ethnic groups' and 'ethnic identities' have been highly debated in social sciences in recent years because of their strong relationship with modern worldwide politics, conflicts and nationalist expressions. However, the definitions of ethnicity and related concepts are characterized by their fuzziness (Alonso 1994) and “will-6-the wisp quality” (Maybury-Lewis 1997) that makes them extremely complex to define and to discuss in anthropology. Cohen (1978) had already called attention to such difficulty, pointing out that in spite of its popularity during the 1970s few scholars bothered to define the term.

In spite of the slippery and complicated task to explain ethnicity, there are common ideas that distinguish the core of this concept. One of them is that it has something to do with the classification of the people and the relationships among groups. In a broad sense, ethnicity refers to how people see and identify themselves and how other groups that are culturally different relate to and perceive these people, depending on socio-cultural contexts. Hence, ethnicity has sometimes been described as a form of social organization or like an expression of kinship relationships.
This relational and dynamic approach contrasts with the primordialist and essentialist view that considers ethnic groups as super-organic entities constituted by a set of fixed cultural traits that are supposedly transmitted through generations. In his pioneering book, Barth (1969) called attention to these conceptual limitations that have seen ethnic groups as closed cultural units with isolated histories. He argued instead for the examination of “the different processes that seem to be involved in generating and maintaining ethnic groups” and even moving towards the analysis of “ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance” (1969:10).

Barth presents two main principles regarding ethnic boundaries that are applicable to our own case. One is that cultural boundaries persist despite the flux of people across borders. This means that categorical ethnic distinctions denote processes of exclusion and inclusion in which identity categories are perpetuated in spite of the changeable situations of the individuals. The second principle is that the interaction of different cultures does not necessarily produce total acculturation or ethnic erasure and that cultural difference can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence while relations are maintained across such boundaries. Although Barth’s (1969) formulation of ethnicity does not particularly address the role of the state in relation to ethnic groups, his findings on cultural boundaries are quite applicable in the analyses of the linkage between indigenous peoples and nation-states, as Urban and Sherzer asserted (1991).

From a wider perspective, recent studies on ethnicity have highlighted the complex processes in which ethnic identities are reproduced, redefined, and contested according to the spatial and temporal dimensions of national and transnational contexts (Appadurai
The analysis and redefinition of ethnicity is nowadays discussed in relation to the hegemonic processes of nation-states and considering other axes such as class, race, and gender (Williams 1989, Alonso 1994). The relationship between nation-state and ethnicity has mostly been perceived as antagonistic and conflictive (Stavenhagen 1996). Different ethnic groups that share the territorial space of a nation have gone into conflict when the state, through its social institutions, imposes and reproduces "state-systems" and "state-ideas" (Abrams 1988), provoking ethnic groups to develop and assert their collective interest and make claims for their autonomy, rights, religiosity, and self-determination. In this sense, ethnicity and the formation of "categorical identities" (Williams 1989) are cultural constructions that also challenge the "totalizing project of the nation" (Corrigan and Sayer 1985) as a monolithic and homogenous entity.

Understanding the intercultural relationship between the national society and the Yanomami requires us to explore to what extent the Venezuelan State enables the existence and reproduction of this ethnic group. The notion of ethnic boundaries serves in this case as a referential frame to explore the maintenance, adaptation, and transformation of Yanomami ethnic identities according to the contemporary social and political contexts of intercultural relations with other indigenous groups and the criollo Venezuelan society. With this, I am not suggesting that the processes of achieving "ethnic awareness" are exclusively a result of state expansion nor do I suggest that the Yanomami were not previously cognizant of other cultural and linguistic commonalities.
and differences with respect to other Yanomami cognates, different indigenous groups, and non-indigenous people.

As I have pointed out in previous chapters, the Yanomami had sporadic contacts with "Western" explorers and travelers before the missionaries settled in the Alto Orinoco. They also established earlier relationships with other indigenous groups creating exchange networks as well as conflict relations, especially with their neighbors, the Arawak and Yekuana. At the same time, the Yanomami established clear boundaries with these other groups. However, besides the predictable cultural boundaries established historically with other societies, some Yanomami are recently experiencing a more all-encompassing "ethnic" perception of themselves as a result of the political structures imposed by regional and national institutions. Yanomami identities are being redefined and modified as a corollary of their intercultural relations with other groups that transcend their internal criteria of social identification, whereby they are setting up "ethnic" boundaries while experiencing an awareness of who are they vis-à-vis other indigenous and criollo groups.

Yanomami social and collective forms of identification

Before stressing the intercultural relations with the national society, I consider it appropriate to highlight some of the constituents of the Yanomami forms of social identification. This ethnographic information will be useful for the understanding of their forms of association with the national institutions. In this process of social identification, the Yanomami might employ contrasting binary categories regarding the type of intra and
inter-ethnic relations established among their villages and with other indigenous and criollo groups. The use of binary categories does not imply rigidity and inflexibility in the use of ethnic and social categories. Most of the time, the uses of these categories juxtapose or complement one another and intend to distinguish Yanomami forms of identity and alterity from the outsiders.

The Alto Orinoco Yanomami have a complex system of internal social identification based on kinship relationships, predominately agnatic lineages (patrilineal descendants), and political alliances among villages. The Yanomami kinship terminology is of classificatory and Dravidian type and according to Lizot (1991) is based on four opposition principles: generational differences, sex distinctions, kindred differences (affinal and consanguineal), and differences in age level within the same consanguineal generation. In the case of affinal and consanguineal relationships, these are denoted by kin terms such as mashi and yaiyē. These words establish a distinction between siblings and “parallel cousins” according to the sex of ego. Mashi are all the descendants from relatives of the same sex and same sex as ego (siblings and parallel “cousins” of the same sex as ego). Yaiyē are all the descendants from relatives of the same sex and opposite sex of the ego (siblings and parallel “cousins” of the opposite sex of the ego).

These consanguine relationships are complemented with the bilateral cross cousin relationships (affinity) that distinguish the classificatory terms for cross cousin marriages. For example, suwēpiyē means “my wife,” and is the male’s term for any female cross cousin classified as a potential wife, and hēarōyē means “my husband,” and is the female’s term for any male cross cousin classified as a potential husband. Based on this
marriage rule they identify with whom one might or might not marry. Although cross cousin marriage is the "ideal" Yanomami model (Chagnon 1992), they can marry members from other villages, in which other agreements might take place. Here is the testimony of a man talking about marriage rules and his desires of setting up a marriage arrangement for one of his son. We have to be aware that among the Yanomami most of the times the relatives of the "wife" are the ones who decide who is going to be their son-in-law and not the opposite.

My son can marry women from other villages, this is not a problem, and he can do it. But he has pë suwëpi [in this case he is referring to his son's female cross cousin] whom he shall marry. I am thinking to talk with her family, so as soon as my son grows up he could start the bride services for her parents. Well, that is if the family of the girl chooses him as their son-in-law (Yanomami man from Platanal, 1998).

On the other hand, mashi might also refer to a group of people with a common male ancestor that can be recognized and identified by the members of that agnatic lineage. However, as Lizot (1988:529) has pointed out, the members of the lineages are not always cohesive and socially unified; in fact, the descendants of a common ancestor can be dispersed in different areas and even merged with other villages due to internal fissions, migrations, and intra-village conflicts. In the following example, the notion of mashi, associated with the descendents from a common ancestor, is contrasted with the testimony of a young Yanomami man and his perception of political parties.

At the beginning, I did not understand about politics, and much less about political parties, I was confused when one of them arrived to the shapono talking about one or another party saying that they were adecos or convergencia. I did not see the differences between them because they were just talking about the same things: the municipality and local elections. Later, I understood a little bit more, and I saw that they have big leaders and small leaders, and that they performed different tasks within each party. They were like big families; they were like
Because they were like the same people, like sharing the same blood. The politicians [from each party] behave as the members of the same mashi (Humberto from Ocamo, 1999).

These are some examples of Yanomami social identification built on kinship relations and patrilineal descent that reinforce and at the same time reshape their local and cultural identities inside and outside their social networks. Lineages are also linked with the image of an animal; it is the twin figure of the person or noreshi113 (image, shadow). Each person has a noreshi that is represented by a specific animal that has been inherited according to their male or female ancestries; that is why men have different noreshi than women. In shamanic practices the searching and caring for the noreshi represents one of the ways of healing the afflicted person.

There are many other kinship categories and teknonymies, as well as other forms of social identification that are related to the person's roles and status. These designations are based on individual skills such as shamanism and according to age and gender differences that have been examined by Shapiro (1972), Ramos (1995), Chagnon (1983), Albert (1985), and Lizot (1978). Other identity markers are related to individual values such as generosity, courage, ritual knowledge, ceremonial discourse, and astuteness, among others (Cocco 1972, Eguiflor 1984, Chagnon 1988, Lizot 1991). Finally, yet other forms of self-representation have to do with the politics of illness and Yanomami relationships with the inside and outside world (Albert 1988) and their conceptualization of the double-images (noreshi) associated with some animals that determine Yanomami identities (Alès 1995).
Another form of collective identification refers to the membership to their respective villages (shapono). The sense of belonging to a community or group of related communities (yahi therimi) would define their political relationships and type of exchanges with other communities. However, due to the relative political egalitarianism of Yanomami society, villages are not always cohesive entities and therefore might split because of internal disputes. When a group of Yanomami decides to split from a village they have two possible alternatives: One is joining a friendly village, wherein they will identify and recognize themselves as new members of that shapono. The other alternative is to start a new settlement, usually located close to that group’s allies and far from the previous and antagonistic village. In this case, they will give the shapono a new name. It is surprising how many names they are able to come up for their villages that might related to animals, geographical areas, plants, and even trickster names.

While I was doing fieldwork (1999-2000), three villages split in the Central Mavaca area due to internal-familial conflicts and one village from the Upper Mavaca area moved down river to get closer to Mavakita where the Salesian school is located. In all the cases, the new settlements adopted names different from what they previously had. Through the collection of life histories it is possible to obtain amazing information about the many instances an individual has moved from one village to another and at the same time acquired the local identity of that village. Because of this pattern of changing villages and names of villages, the Yanomami will identify themselves with the last shapono they inhabit.

Yanomami also use the word noreshi to refer to images portrayed in films, photographs, shadows,
I am Purima-theriyôma (woman from Purima). I live in Purima-theri you know that. But I arrived here long time ago after moving from one village to another through the Pahana-ke u (Mavaca River). When I was a kid and I was growing, growing, I lived in Poshoripuwei-theri. But the people there did not like my father and they had a fight. My father was killed there. Later we moved with some relatives to Paruritawê-theri. After that we were going down, going down river to Reapopuwei-theri. But that village, another fight came up and the people split. My mother with one of her bothers decided to continue down river to Monoutheri that just to be a little further from Warapana. In Monoutheri I had my first menstruation (yipinou) and there I got married.... (Otilia, Mavaca 2000).

The Yanomami also consider the space as a social domain in which they map friendly and hostile relationships with close and distant villages according to political alliances and trading relationships (Chagnon 1997, Lizot 1988). For example, the general geographical terms establish a contrast between the people who live up-river, ora-theri, versus the people who live down-river, koro-theri. The latter might also imply a certain identity attachment to missionaries and criollo settlements that are located mostly down river. I frequently heard Yanomami from villages up the Orinoco River and relatively far from mission posts naming, for example, the people from Platanal as koro-theri.

Although they are referring to their geographical situation down-river, the koro-theri are at the same time napê kê pé (the strangers) because those Yanomami speak Spanish, hold larger quantities of manufactured goods, and dress and behave as the missionaries and other criollos that live in those settlements. Thus, this spatial classification refers not only to the location of the villages in relation to the rivers but also to new social and political areas of the Alto Orinoco. In this case, general geographical terms are acquiring novel social meanings that now convey identity markers with the outsiders (napê).

and any kind of reflected figure of the person.
The Yanomami use other forms of identification that are related to spatial areas such as Shamathari, Waika, Parahiri (Barafiri), and Shiithari (Shitari), which describe referential and regional classifications. In any case these terms neither indicate ethnic self-denominations nor imply kinship or village alliances. They employ these names as positional social categories to identify other Yanomami communities and people located away from their centered economic-political space. For instance, the Parahiri are those Yanomami who live in the Parima Highlands, while the Shiithari are those located in the Upper Ocama area.

In the Alto Orinoco area, the most common designations to identify those Yanomami that inhabit other geographical areas are Waika and Shamathari. Those who are settled in the north and the east areas of the Orinoco are called Waika, and those located in the south areas of the Orinoco between the Mavaca and Siapa Rivers are called Shamathari. These are oppositional spatial categories since a Yanomami will refer to the Waika or Shamathari according to the location of the other groups. The use of these names might have different connotations that vary from derogatory to neutral and to flattering meanings. Thus, Lizot (1988:528) has pointed out that for the Central Yanomami, those that are called Waika are dirty, behave inappropriately, talk like parrots, and maintain inept shamans, while the Shamathari are brave, tall, and aggressive. More recently, the Yanomami that live in the Upper Mavaca area identify themselves as the true Shamathari. They are also using this self-categorization to differentiate politically from the Mavaca groups that support a political party (PPT) different than theirs (AD).
In addition to these referential spatial categories, the neighboring villages of a specific area frequently establish social networks. The relationships among those villages are determined by degrees of empathy and economic and marriage exchanges. If members of a *shapono* have good relationships and exchange goods, services and “symbolic capital” with members of other village, they will be classified as *nohi kê pê* (friends, acquaintances in good terms). The opposite categories to *nohi* are *napê* (in this case meaning enemy) and *shomi* (different, the other, the other that is not so good). Those Yanomami identified as *napê* represent actual or potential enemies with whom one has hostile relationships. When somebody does not fit into any social category (kinship, geographic or otherwise) that individual is simply rendered as *shomi*, an unknown person that does not deserve any consideration, and who on the contrary might represent a potential rival. Moreover, the Yanomami employ some of these social and spatial criteria when they interact and establish different types of relationships with non-Yanomami people.

I grasped the significance of the word *shomi* when I decided to go up the Orinoco River to visit some villages beyond Platanal and the Guaharibo Rapids and a group of elders from Mavaca told me not to go there. I asked why? And one of them simply replied that I was going to lose my time up river, that those Yanomami were not friendly, they were dirty, and the men had ugly beards; he finally said “they are *shomi.*” With this comment, I understood that he did not have any relative or association with those Yanomami up-river.
In another occasion, a Yanomami woman (a teacher of the bilingual school) from one of the communities of Mavaca was complaining to one of the Salesian nuns because the medical doctor had left the post for few days. He had to go to the villages of the Upper Mavaca area to attend to several emergencies and cases of malaria and diarrhea. This Yanomami woman was really upset because she was not able to have the physician take care of her very mild illness, a headache, right away. The nun explained to her the critical health situation of the Upper Mavaca Yanomami, in which several children were even dying because of diarrhea, but she was disappointed and continued to argue in spite of this justification. She just answered in a derogatory way:

The doctor should not have left Mavaca to see those people; they are *shomi* (different); the doctor should have stayed here and taken care of us, not them. (Josefina from Hatakoa, 2000)

With this argumentative attitude, I understood first that she did not have any relatives in that area. It was also clear that with the use of the *shomi* category she was building a social and spatial separation from those Yanomami that were unknown to her or that simply represented potential enemies to her family and *shapono*. It appears that this example confirms the presupposed idea that the Yanomami do not have all-encompassing forms of nationhood and that they do not consider other members as part of their own “ethnic group.” However, what her response really denotes is the establishment of clear intra-ethnic distinctions from those other Yanomami with whom she does not have any relationship, naming them *shomi*. In fact, what this woman was suggesting in her statement of intra-ethnic frontier was the consideration of their inner forms of social identification that are based on kinship relations and inter-village
networks. In spite of the cultural transformations experienced as a result of living close to the Salesian missionaries, becoming Christian, and being a schoolteacher for several years, this Yanomami woman was setting up intra-ethnic boundaries with unknown (or adversarial) Yanomami groups while asserting her family and communal identities. However, this "ethnic" differentiation does not mean that the Yanomami lack a notion of "peoplehood" and that they are not able to acknowledge other forms of cultural identity.

The recognition of themselves as an ethnic group takes place, therefore, in a wider sense, in which social identities are gauged according to political relationships, kinship ties, economic and symbolic exchanges among the villages, and socio-cultural spatial areas. These types of "ethnic" representations are different from the mainstream national expectations that intend to organize and carry out development programs in the interest of entire ethnic groups. This all-inclusive and homogeneous notion of ethnic group is more a "Western" construction and a totalizing category to classify and to position the indigenous peoples within a national ideological frame that often tends to subordinate them in a hierarchical ethnic scale. This national ethnic ideology is contrasted as well with other examples in which a different ethnic perception goes even beyond the Yanomami inner forms of social identification and considers the intercultural relations with other indigenous groups.

**Cultural boundaries and the rise of pan-Yanomami identities**

At the First National Film Festival of Indigenous Peoples celebrated in Caracas at the beginning of 1990, representatives of different indigenous groups of Venezuela
participated as observers and discussants. Among the participants was a Yanomami delegate who had been invited in “representation of his ethnic group.” During the festival, I talked to him and with curiosity I asked him about his impressions of the film festival and asked which films he had preferred. He said that he had really enjoyed the films about the Yanomami. But, I asked, what about the other films and documentaries regarding other indigenous groups, do you like them? He answered,

I like to watch Yanomami films, but I don’t like much to watch those films about other indigenous groups such as Piaroa, Wayuu, Guahibo or Yekuana. The organizers of the festival have told me that they, the other Indians, are “my brothers” so I should see those films too.

This Yanomami delegate also added that he considered the Yanomami films to be the only “real films” and that he wanted to see only the Yanomami movies because he had become a little bored watching the films about other Indians. This testimony indexes his affiliation with his “ethnic group” the Yanomami, while establishing cultural differences with those indigenous peoples that were not members of his group. Through these films, he exhibited his sense of belonging to a group, and defined the boundaries of his ethnic identity vis-à-vis the other indigenous peoples. In this case, this Yanomami identified himself with the rain forest environment, the language, his people, his customs, and even the napé (the missionaries) that live in Yanomami territory in opposition to those areas and indigenous people that he had never seen or imagined. For him, the inclusive idea of “indigenous bothers” did not fit within his system of social and kinship classification and having to call the other indigenes “brothers” because of their indigenous ethnic alikeness seemed quite absurd. As he said, “Why I should call them
brothers? I do not know them, they are not my brothers; my real brothers live in Mavaca.”

This example illustrates two main issues that will be relevant to the discussion of ethnic identities and pan-Yanomami categories. First, it exemplifies the relevance of the social and cultural spaces (positionality) in which the Yanomami establish ethnic boundaries and ethnic differences with respect to other groups and other peoples. Second, it allows us to determine the significance to the Yanomami of the notion of “brotherhood” and “Indianness” constructed as a result of “Western” discourses (political and secular) imposed on them. These novel forms of ethnic identities that consider broader intercultural relationships lead me to emphasize the understanding of the contrasting categories between Yanomami and napê (or napêyoma for women) as outsiders that definitely imply cultural and ethnic difference.

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, napê means foreigner, enemy, and even sub-human. It is a category that includes all criollos and white people, other indigenous peoples, and even other Yanomami who are real or potential enemies. In this case, I concentrate only on the notion of napê related to the white people and other indigenous groups. As we have seen, the Yanomami establish “ethnic” differences among the napê, distinguishing the criollo peoples from the indigenous peoples that nowadays are identified by their own ethnic affiliations and indigenous names such as Yekuana, Piaroa, Hiwi, or Arawak. More recently, the Yanomami have also become aware of the diversity of the white “napêness,” identifying them as Venezuelan napê, Brazilian napê, miner napê, missionaries napê and anthropologist napê, and now the politician (político) napê.
What I want to stress here is that the Yanomami, according to their situational context, first establish and distinguish intra-ethnic classifications and identities based on kinship ties. These forms of social organization will determine their political and social alliances among the villages. They also consider the variable of the space in which they map friendly and enemy villages or simply different Yanomami settled in the hinterland areas. But when they deal with the napê environment (that, as I mentioned, includes all non-Yanomami), they establish clear cultural boundaries that are gauged through the looking glasses of their ethnic identities.

However, the notion of “Indian” as a generic category and the idea of Venezuela as a nation-state are still difficult to conceive and rationalize considering that they “imagined their own community” and by extension their own identities according to their inner forms of social and political organization. The concepts of “brotherhood” and “Indianness” among the Yanomami are still problematic since for them there are visible cultural and ethnic differences that separate, for instance, the Yanomami from the Yekuana Indians, and even more, the Yanomami from the criollos.

The interaction with the national society through the missionaries, the bilingual school, the military forces, and the political parties, the new constitutional legislation as well as the constant relations with other indigenous groups have all affected the Yanomami self-centered vision of the world. Now they are confronting their “ethnic identity,” not only in relation to the white napê but also by redefining their Indianness in relation to other indigenous groups. They have experienced a process of awareness and
The politics of identity: Ethnic awareness and national consciousness

The encounter, adjustment, and negotiation with different social actors such as the missionaries, scientists, military personnel, miners, other indigenous peoples, and governmental officials have led the Yanomami to face a paradoxical unfolding process of ethnic awareness and national consciousness. On the one hand, the Alto Orinoco Yanomami are “becoming Indians” since they are being more aware of their identity and culture as a result of the interactions with the national society. The emerging of the indigenous ethnic consciousness as a consequence of their accelerated incorporation into the national society has been described as “becoming Indian” or “being Indian” (Abercrombie 1991, Maybury-Lewis 1991, Jackson 1991, 1994). These conceptual referents refer to the many ways indigenous groups are acquiring an “Indian culture” as a result of their interaction with external agents. The process of “becoming Indian” described, for instance, in the case of the Tukanoan of the Vaupés in the central northwest Amazon (Jackson 1994) highlights the influential ideas of outsiders (non-Indians) about Indian culture and identity and how these ideas affect local indigenous communities.

On the other hand, the Yanomami are also becoming citizens and members of the civil society of the nation-state wherein indigenous rights are guaranteed (at least theoretically) in the national constitution. Anderson (1991) has proposed that the nation is
"an imagined political community," in which the members of a nation "imagine themselves" as part of the same "community," which is distinguished not by "their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1991:6). In this case, I am not discussing how ideas on Indianness play a key role in the formation of the Venezuelan national identity and have a symbolic value within the national consciousness, which I must say is a very provoking topic for future research. Instead, I identify specific settings to unravel how the Alto Orinoco Yanomami "imagine" themselves first as an "ethnic group," and second, as members of a national context when their cultural practices based on kinship relations, exchange, and political autonomy cope with socio-political models of the Venezuelan nation-state.

The processes of becoming Indians and becoming citizens generate a double discourse in the constitution of novel Yanomami identities. On the one hand, they are conscious of their ethnicity as indigenous peoples within a national society that is made up mainly of a criollo population. On the other hand, they are also realizing the practical benefits of being both Venezuelan citizens and part of the civil society. The Alto Orinoco Yanomami from Ocamo, Mavaca, and Platanal are increasingly aware of their Yanomaminess and their citizenship as a result of the intercultural experiences with other indigenous groups and with the national society represented by the criollos.

It is in these intercultural experiences that the Yanomami are dealing with the processes of politics of identities, in which they are producing particular discourses and actions questioning issues on national borders, citizenship, political participation, national constitution, municipality, and health and schooling systems. In this case, the political
articulation of Yanomami identities reveals a wide gamut of experiences that do not always imply contesting practices and struggling expressions (at least in the Venezuelan case) towards the national structures. Rather, what are implied are forms of negotiation, deception, and adaptation between the different cultural orders.

As this shows, the politics of identity are not to be viewed only as counter-hegemonic struggles that contest totalizing identity categories that pretend to comprise, erase, or conceal social and cultural particularities (Hale 1997, Schiller 1997). In this case, the politics of identity reveal a more subtle process of political self-awareness in which the Yanomami incorporate and adapt multiple identities that are interrelated as a consequence of their intercultural relationships with the national society. This process encompasses the many ways the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco negotiate and link their ethnic identities with regional and national icons as a strategy for gaining access to the resources offered by national institutions such as the municipality, the political parties, and the National Guard.

_Becoming Indian, becoming citizens. Merging natives and national identities_

Latin American nation-states have employed a wide variety of assimilation policies to incorporate indigenous groups into the economic, social, and political life of the nations. One of these nation-states forms of indigenous incorporation has been the process of ethnic erasure or cleansing whereby the state transforms the Indians into citizens while acquiring sovereignty over their lands. Scholars have stated that throughout history, colonizers have tried to divide Indian communities and to eradicate the very
category of “Indian,” arguing that they should cease to be Indian and become undifferentiated citizens of their respective countries (Maybury-Lewis 1991, Stavenhagen 1988).

This is an indisputable concern given the deleterious impact of the hegemonic state practices historically implemented among indigenous peoples. However, these subaltern groups have developed other forms of negotiation and articulation transcending the unidirectional controlling discourse of the state power. Specifically, in the last decade, they have participated more actively in political decision-making and have gained constitutional recognition in many Latin American countries, which are now considered by the governments as pluriethnic and multicultural nations. Taking into account the political and cultural changes of local communities within larger societies, indigenous peoples and nation-states have found common grounds and spaces for negotiation, and indigenous representatives are currently the ones who are demanding recognition as citizens in their respective countries. What used to be a dominant state policy of assimilation neglecting indigenous cultural differences and transforming them into generic “citizens” has now become the Latin American indigenous people’s political strategy to earn the recognition of their rights through constitutional frames.

In some way, it is a political transformation from state hegemonic routines into legal forms of emancipation that allow subaltern indigenous groups to demand specific

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114 The national constitutions of Colombia (1991), México (1992), Peru (1993), Bolivia (1994), Ecuador (1998), and Venezuela (1999), among others, recognize and support the ethnic and cultural diversity of these countries and claim rights for the indigenous peoples. Some of these experiences are well documented and analyzed in the recent volumes edited by Maybury-Lewis (2002), and Warren and Jackson (2002).
rights as cultural distinct groups as well as those privileges accrued to citizens and members of the national society. Nevertheless, reaching this level of abstraction in which they have had to reconcile pan-Indian identities (Bonfil Battalla 1977) with national affiliations has not been an easy process for the indigenous leaders and movements. In fact, multiple political, economic, and individual constraints have jeopardized these indigenous movements in Latin American countries. For instance, patronage relationships between main leaders and local communities, the manipulation of political parties, and the embezzlement of economic resources are some of the problems that indigenous representatives have had to confront from the beginning of state-community interaction.

In the case of Venezuela, indigenous organizations began to play a more direct role with the creation of CONIVE (the Venezuelan National Indian Council) and other regional groups such as ORPIA (Regional Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Amazonas) at the beginning of the 1990s. The new 1999 Venezuelan constitution, with its articles on indigenous populations, endorses the official recognition of the indigenous peoples into the national sphere regarding their rights on land, customs, education, self-determination, and health (Appendix A). The discussions and approval of constitutional articles on indigenous rights have officially redefined their status within the national society and have challenged their notions of “peoplehood” generating pan-Indian identities. This new constitutional frame is influencing the way each of the indigenous groups conceives and imagines itself as part of a nation that acknowledges them as culturally different “indigenous peoples,” and at the same time, as part of the national society.
With the approval of the new national constitution there is a clear recognition of the existence of the indigenous peoples within the Venezuelan State formation. The articles on indigenous peoples' rights started with the acknowledgement of the pre-existence of these cultural groups previous to the configuration of the Venezuelan State and the acceptance of their "primary rights" (derechos originarios) over the land where they have ancestrally lived. The gap between the state and the indigenous groups has become smaller from the moment they have been recognized, at least constitutionally, as part of the whole civil society in the current national legislation. The preamble of the Bolivarian constitution explicitly defines Venezuela as a multi-cultural nation:

The people of Venezuela, in use of their creative powers and invoking the protection of God, the historical example of our Libertador Simón Bolívar, and the heroism and sacrifice of our aboriginal ancestors, and of the founders and builders of a free and sovereign native country; with the supreme aim of refounding the Republic in order to establish a democratic, participatory and "protagónico," multiethnic and pluri-cultural society in a just, federal, and decentralized state... (Venezuela, National Constitution 1999:9).[^1]

The definition and recognition of Venezuela as a multiethnic and plural nation is a historically meaningful achievement for the indigenous movement insofar as it signifies the official acknowledgment of their rights as citizens and as indigenous peoples. However, as Toland has stated, the studies on statehood have shown that although the nature of the state society can be plural, the presence of pluralism with respect to ethnic groups may not have yet been fully realized (1993:2). This means that although the state,

[^1]: El pueblo de Venezuela, en ejercicio de sus poderes creadores e invocando la protección de Dios, el ejemplo histórico de nuestro Libertador Simón Bolívar y el heroismo y sacrificio de nuestros antepasados aborígenes y de los precursores y forjadores de una patria libre y soberana; con el fin supremo de refundar la República para establecer una sociedad democrática, participativa y protagonista, multirracial y pluricultural en un Estado de justicia, federal, y descentralizado... (Venezuela, National Constitution 1999:9) (emphasis added).
through constitutional laws, declares itself a plural entity, the ideas of pluralism and the recognition of cultural diversity are not always put into practice in national discourses and indigenist policies. This issue of the pluralism of the state with respect to indigenous peoples is tested within the context of the current political transformation of the nation-state and the Alto Orinoco Yanomami. In particular, it is seen through the Yanomami responses to the new national constitution, to the municipality, and to the state populist programs coordinated by the National Guard such as the “Plan Casiquiare 2000.”

**Facing the constitution**

On September 25 of 1999, five members of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) traveled on a military airplane from Caracas to Ocamo, in the Alto Orinoco. They wanted to present and discuss with Yanomami representatives the “Proposal of Venezuelan indigenous peoples and organizations to the National Constituent Assembly” regarding the articles on indigenous people’s rights. The proposal compiled the suggestions of several indigenous representatives who had organized local and regional assemblies, the “First Conference of the Indigenous Peoples of Venezuela” held in Ciudad Bolívar (Bolívar State) in March of 1999, and several other meetings in Caracas under the auspices of the Indigenous Rights Commission of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA). This document became the key manuscript that would change once and for all the neglected status of indigenous peoples in Venezuela’s legal system.

Although this document was drafted with the participation of numerous indigenous representatives from different ethnic groups and *criollo* advisors (who have
been named allies), it is also true that many groups and communities did not have the opportunity of being consulted. This was the main reason the representatives of the NCA were traveling to the Alto Orinoco: to discuss this proposal with the Yanomami. Four of the five representatives of the NCA were indigenous delegates themselves: Noél Pocaterra (Wayuu), Guillermo Guevara (Hiwi), José Luis González (Pemón), and Liborio Guaruya (Baniva). The fifth member was Aristóbulo Istúriz, the second vice-president of the NCA. In addition to the constituent representatives, other participants from national NGOs, the Catholic Church, and the media also flew from Caracas in order to witness this noteworthy event in which the Yanomami were going to be informed about the indigenous rights' proposal for the new national constitution.

Gathered in one of the spaces of the school in Ocamo, representatives of 24 villages from the areas of Ocamo, Padamo, Mavaca, Mavakita, Platanal and Cejal awaited the arrival of the members of the NCA. This group of Yanomami was impatient to find out what these very influential napé had to say about the recent political transformations taking place in the country with the establishment of the National Constituent Assembly and the elaboration of the new national constitution.

The dynamics of this encounter, which lasted around four hours, followed more or less the standard protocol for public meetings between Yanomami and important napé visitors, especially those who hold high-level government posts such as these members of

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116 The first three were the representatives of the indigenous communities elected for the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) on July 25, 1999. These indigenous representatives were later reelected as diputados (deputies) for the National Assembly on the elections on July 30, 2000. Liborio Guaruya was first elected for the NCA, as one of the two representatives for Amazonas State, and at the present is the Governor of this State.
the NCA. First, each Yanomami representative introduced himself and the village he came from. Next, they offered local handicrafts (baskets and bodily ornaments) to the NCA members (constituyentistas) who then took turns introducing and explaining the purpose of their visit to that area. Finally, the Yanomami welcomed again the members of the NCA, asked some questions, and requested the consideration of two written petitions regarding health issues and the situation of the municipality. The interventions of the Yanomami, as well as those of the constituyentistas, were translated from Yanomami to Spanish and vice versa during the whole meeting. All of the Yanomami who spoke were men. Some of younger leaders were dressed like any criollo, i.e., with pants, shirts, tennis shoes, and baseball caps, while some of the elders wore shorts, and still a few others attended the meeting carrying arrows and wearing loin cloths and bodily adornments. A few women sat around for a little while, but as soon as the representatives of the NCA began to speak they left the meeting area. It seemed that they had other tasks to attend to or were simply not interested in hearing what those napê had to tell the group.

The five members of the NCA explained in detail the purpose of their trip to the Alto Orinoco. Each of them addressed different issues about the relevance of drafting a new constitution for the Venezuelan indigenous peoples. They also talked about the difficulties and achievements of the indigenous representatives in this long political process, and the importance of getting the support of the Yanomami in this constitutional enterprise. Aristóbulo Istúriz, the second Vice-president of the NCA, began with a statement that stressed the need to consolidate a new democratic state as well as to integrate the indigenous peoples into the conformation of a “new” Republic.
This constituent process is very important for all of us. With this process we are not only going to endorse a new constitution but also we are going to initiate a process of re-founding the Republic of Venezuela. And part of the Republic is its territories, its institutions, and what is most important of our Republic is us, our women, men, and children, the people, and you Yanomami, you belong to this Republic like any of us, and that is why your opinion is so important at this time in which we are re-founding the Republic (Istúriz, recorded in Ocamo, 1999)

Here, the second vice-president of the NCA advocates not only a constitutional transformation but also the foundation of a new nation with the direct participation of the indigenous peoples. Specifically, he was asking the Yanomami to be part of this process of re-establishing the Republic as members of the national society in accordance with the notion of a “participative democracy,” a concept that was (and still is) one of Hugo Chávez’s political banners during the constitutional reform. In his address, this constituyentista placed the Yanomami within a larger social group, thereby incorporating them into the Venezuelan nationalist discourse. In a few words, the Yanomami were being asked to become Venezuelan citizens in order to participate in and support the process of re-founding the Bolivarian Republic.

Next, Noelf Pocaterra, president of the “Commission of Indigenous Peoples Rights and their relationship with the State” of the NCA, began her speech by calling attention to the extreme ambiguity of the “regime of exception” for indigenous peoples contained in article 77 of the old constitution (in effect since 1961). In her presentation, she emphasized how unfeasible this article was in regard to Yanomamí ways of life and the need for a new national constitution that would acknowledge the existence of indigenous peoples.
It is very important to know the national constitution. Almost 40 years ago, the alijunas (criollo, in Wayuu language) wrote a little book called the National Constitution. That little book [the 1961 constitution] tells us the ways in which the country should be governed; how this country called Venezuela should function... But that little book is not good enough for us. We indigenous peoples do not indeed become visible there. Well, we were mentioned but in a very bad way. Only one time, there is only one little word in two lines that talk about “an exception regime” for the indigenous people [referring to the 77 article]... So, we have had many problems. For example, that little book says that the only official language is Spanish. This means that the Yanomami language or any of the indigenous languages such as Pemón, Wayuu, Hiwi are not official languages.

Therefore, the indígenas have had many problems and this is why we have met on many occasions in Amazonas, Apure, Delta Amacuro, and Bolívar with our indigenous brothers. For over 20 years we have worked together and we have agreed in that our problems as indígenas are common to all of us. Thus, based on these common problems, we decided to work together. We [indigenous peoples] have a lot of problems that we have to solve,... like you folks that live so isolated and the garimpeiros (miners) do terrible things with the Yanomami territory. That is why we have so much trouble, because in that little book called the National Constitution we are not protected, we are not defended...

We are not begging, we are demanding our rights, demanding our rights as indigenous peoples that will be acknowledged in that little book that is the National Constitution. That is what we want and that is why we are here ... (Noelí Pocaterra, recorded in Ocamo, 1999).

In this presentation, Pocaterra highlights the inadequacy of the old national constitution and points out the minimal attention and relevance it awards indigenous issues. She called attention to how official statements have only recognized Spanish as “the” national language, disregarding the plurality of indigenous languages and customs. Because of these legal constraints and historical violations of indigenous rights, the indigenous representatives had worked together to overcome the many problems they faced including the incursions of illegal miners in Yanomami territory. Moreover, she called for the recognition of indigenous rights and the participation of the Yanomami in this process as members of the indigenous peoples. Through her talk, the constituyentista
appeals to the collective ethnic bond through the expression "indigenous brothers." She was encouraging the notion of ethnic solidarity among the Yanomami through the identification of common problems that have led them to engender pan-Indian identities. Through this speech, she was in different ways incorporating the Yanomami within the discourse of "becoming Indian."

The commentaries of the three other constituyentistas reinforced Pocaterra’s and Isturiz’s statements about the importance of “re-building the Republic” and drafting a new national constitution. They also added two other important issues to this discussion. The first one was the consideration and incorporation of the notion of “indigenous territories” or “indigenous regions” into the new constitution as political and administrative entities distinct from the ordinary municipalities. Second, they talked about the importance of indigenous political participation and their rights in the decision-making processes regarding their lands, customs, education, and ways of life.

One of them stressed the importance of upholding and making use of indigenous land rights within the wider territory that is Venezuela and urged the defense of their lands and the constitutional recognition of “indigenous territories” as special entities (González, recorded in Ocamo 1999). Liborio Guaruya, another of the constituyentistas, emphasized the idea that democracy should be promoted not only in the political centers in Caracas but also “practiced in each and every shapono.” He argued that it was in fact appropriate for the Yanomami to have a different type of municipality, one that would not necessarily include a mayor and councilors but rather an indigenous organization guided by the elders and young leaders (Guaruya, recorded in Ocamo 1999). The other
constituyentista encouraged the Yanomami to assert their rights for political participation and “to make decisions regarding the teaching of their language, the writing of their history, defending their territories, and defending Venezuela” (Guevara, recorded in Ocamo 1999).

Finally, one of them warned of the risks of being manipulated and co-opted by the conventional political parties. He encouraged the Yanomami to continue exercising their “traditional” forms of organization and to becoming aware of the deleterious impact of the criollo models and political clientelism promoted by the former governor of the Amazonas State Bernabé Gutiérrez, and the Yekuana mayor of the Alto Orinoco Municipality Jaime Turón, both members of the Acción Democrática party.

These discourses emphasized contrasting ethnic and national forms of identification. On the one hand, the members of the NCA stressed that with the new national constitution the Yanomami would be able to “decide their own future” and assert their self-management activities. The constitution would support their decision-making regarding their land, customs, traditions, education, etc. Moreover, with this new legal frame, they would be able to create their own municipality according to their own forms of political organization with a council of elders and without the conventional ruling figures such as mayors or municipal councilors. They explained that constitutionally they “could continue being Yanomami” and they could practice their culture while at the same time they were going to be “protected” as Venezuelan citizens.

In short, they were proclaiming that the new constitution would allow the Yanomami to assert their own ethnic identity. On the other hand, they warned that the
Yanomami should not be the recipients of manipulative practices by political parties, and that they should maintain "their traditions as Yanomami" while rejecting any proposal that encouraged them to emulate the criollos. The problem with these types of discourses is that they tend to generalize the relationship between indigenous groups and the nation-state, concealing the very specific characteristics and experiences of each indigenous group with the outside world. In this case, the Yanomami were integrated within the whole discourse of "being Indian" as if they had experienced the same colonizing processes as other indigenous groups in Venezuela.

Yanomami responses to the "constituyentistas"

The previous discussion of the constitutional proposal led a few Yanomami representatives to again welcome the discourses of the NCA members and to present a couple of written petitions. One of the Yanomami leaders stated that they were going to read the constitutional proposal and meet later with their people in order to discuss the content of these articles. Another delegate, who is an assistant nurse (auxiliar de enfermería) and who was a concejal (councilor) at the municipality, replied in quite well articulated Spanish.

We are going to explain this proposal to our people. When we are having our meetings while taking yopo [hallucinogenic snuff-powder], we are going to discuss this proposal with those representatives that do not understand right now [referring to the linguistic barrier]. I believe that this new constitutional proposal is going to be discussed with the indigenous peoples before it is approved. We are very pleased for that. We are also interested in this proposal. The old constitution [1961], that is dying (la moribunda) as you said, was never presented and discussed with us. I congratulate you because you came here to present the new constitution. Now we are going to discuss this new proposal in the communities. We are going to discuss, talk, study in detail and teach it to other people. This is
what we are going to do, explain it among ourselves to see how our support to your proposal is going to be.... (Feliciano, recorded in Ocamo 1999).

In a strategic way, this Yanomami, who is a member of the Acción Democrática (AD) party in the Alto Orinoco jurisdiction (alcaldía), assembled several ideas that reinforced the Yanomami ethnic identities through the image of taking yopo and their active participation in the discussion of this proposal with other members of their communities. Moreover, he applauded the initiative of the NCA representatives in traveling to the Alto Orinoco to explain the new constitutional proposal, and criticized the fact that the previous constitution called the moribunda (the dying one) was never discussed with them.

An interesting aspect of this reaction to the NCA members is that this Feliciano is one of the most committed Yanomami to the Acción Democrática party, which was probably the political party that most contested and attacked the issuing of a new national constitution. In this sense, this Yanomami declared what the members of the NCA wanted to hear: that the document would be discussed and that there would be support from Yanomami for this constitutional endeavor. Furthermore, in spite of the articulation of discourses of becoming citizens, becoming Indian, and even being Yanomami promoted by the NCA representatives, what the Yanomami were actually interested in was the future of the Alto Orinoco Municipality and their participation in the political organization of this entity. This was evident in one of the petitions that they later read at that meeting.
After the speech of the Yanomami councilman, two other Yanomami representatives carefully read the two written petitions. The first petition referred to the Yanomami decision regarding the creation of an “Autochthonous Yanomami Municipality.” The second petition addressed the critical health situation of the Alto Orinoco Yanomami.

In relation to the first petition, the document pointed out that “el pueblo entero” (the entire people) agreed with the creation of a Yanomami municipality made up only of Yanomami. They claimed that they had reached this decision with the consent of 400 Yanomami who had gathered a few days earlier at the community of Hatakoa in the Mavaca-Orinoco area.

Regarding the creation of the autonomy [in their territory], in each etnia (ethnic group), we the entire people, we want an autochthonous municipality, which would be managed and administrated only by our Yanomami brothers. (Beltrán, recorded in Ocamo 1999).

This delegate also stated that none of them agreed with the Omawe Municipality proposal that had been previously presented by the representatives of ORPIA and the Salesian missionaries, because this project of municipality 

[D]oes not make any decision of what would be convenient for our future, this project talks only about culture, and does not justify anything, since we are proud of being Yanomami and besides we want to be identified according to the constitution, and to be identified according to the constitution as Venezuelans. (Beltrán, recorded in Ocamo 1999).

With this declaration, they were questioning the proposal of the Omawë Municipality because they thought that an entity with Yanomami characteristics and
organization would not have the same economic and political advantages as a typical criollo municipality. Eighteen Yanomami leaders signed this letter as the máximos dirigentes Yanomami (the greatest Yanomami leaders) who emphatically rejected the Omawé Municipality because they did not agree with the way the project was elaborated in the past. All these leaders are bilingual and have been educated in the intercultural schools managed by the Salesian missionaries. Some of them have been schoolteachers, other nursing aides, promoters of the cooperative, and representatives of SUYAO. The interesting point is that they signed this letter as the “greatest Yanomami leaders” when in fact among them there is not such category due to the political egalitarianism of the villages. This is a strategy to position themselves in a similar rank as the representatives of the NCA.

The second petition referred to the critical health situation of the Yanomami in the Health District No 4, in the Alto Orinoco, Amazonas State. The letter indicated that only 14 percent of the Yanomami in the Alto Orinoco received continuous medical assistance, 7 percent received only sporadic medical attention, while 79 percent did not receive any assistance at all. They requested the continuity of the immunization programs, the endowment of medicines and medical equipment for the health posts, and the expansion of the health system to other areas in the Alto Orinoco.

The difference between this letter and the one about the municipality is that the document about the health situation was elaborated in conjunction with the missionaries.

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117 They are actually referring here to each Yanomami village. The reference to etnia (ethnic group) is erroneously employed to designate communities or villages. This indicates that even for the most “assimilated” Yanomami leaders, notions such as ethnic groups are still complicated to conceptualize.
and the medical personnel that work in the local posts while the other one was mainly the 
resolution of a large group of Yanomami. This is not to say that the letter regarding the 
health situation has less importance than the municipality one, but it was clear that the 
Yanomami, on this occasion, were more concerned with the issue of the municipality. In 
this case, the health situation was not just a Yanomami concern; it was (and continues to 
be) a major problem that warranted statements by the missionaries, anthropologists, and 
medical personnel that work in the area.

Aristóbulo Istúriz on behalf of the NCA delegates formally received the two 
petitions and guaranteed that they were going to be submitted to the National Constituent 
Assembly. Actually he said that their decision about the municipality was probably the 
first indigenous request that contemplated autonomy for indigenous territories and he 
celebrated such initiative. However, the Yanomami were not necessarily requesting a 
“Special Municipality” based on the articles of the new constitutional proposal; they were 
instead asking for a Yanomami municipality that was not ruled by a Yekuana or any 
other non-Yanomami indigenous representatives. The other concern is that they wanted a 
Yanomami municipality but not the “Omawë project” that would have a special regime; 
they in fact wanted a political and administrative entity similar to criollo municipalities 
but ruled only by Yanomami.

This meeting represents one of multiple events the Yanomami have experienced 
in the last years related to national policies. For the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco, the 
discussion of a new constitution that deals with indigenous affairs was a novel event

118 For more details about the Omawë Municipality project see chapter 5.
related to the outside world. On the one hand, they were not totally aware of the implications of the previous constitution of 1961 or of other national laws regarding indigenous issues. On the other hand, although around 210 Yanomami of the Mavaca sector voted in the elections of the candidates for the National Constituent Assembly on July 25 of 1999, they were still confused and did not totally understand the scope of these main political changes in the national legislation.

This lack of understanding was evident during the Constitutional Referendum celebrated on December 15 of 1999 in which the new constitution was going to be approved or rejected. The national results for this election were that 71.4 percent of the voters supported the new constitutional proposal while 28.6 percent were against it at the national level. In the case of Amazonas State, 70.7 percent of the voters supported the new constitution.

However, the majority of the electorate of the Alto Orinoco Municipality and specifically the people from the Mavaca sector voted against this constitutional reform. In fact, this was probably the only municipality in the whole country where the negative answer to the new constitution obtained the majority of votes. This indicates that, in spite of the visit of the members of the NCA to the Alto Orinoco and the discussion of the articles about indigenous rights, many Yanomami were not aware of the implications that this new constitution would have in terms of their indigenous rights.

\[119\] In the Alto Orinoco Municipality nearly 65 percent of the electorate voted against the constitutional reform. In the Mavaca Parish (made up only by Yanomami), out of 210 electorate registered 77 votes supported the “No” and 63 votes supported the “Yes,” the rest of the votes were deemed void.
The answer to this contradictory response to a national legislation that would guarantee their rights as indigenous peoples comprised at least three issues. First, for many of them all these political changes were too new and still confusing to discern. The majority of the Yanomami never knew about the existence of the previous national constitution (1961) or of the implications of the so-often-mentioned article 77. Before they had become even minimally aware of the implications of a past constitution they were involved in a so-called democratic process in which the participation of the indigenes at the constitutional level was considered a major issue for the socio-political changes of the country (Bello 1999, SENDAS 1999).

Second, although the Yanomami were facing a complex process with the establishment of the National Constituent Assembly that was going to affect the relationship between them and the nation-state, they were more concerned with their immediate problems related to their active participation in the Alto Orinoco Municipality. In the last few years they have followed more closely the leaders of the alcaldía and have been strongly influenced by the members of the Acción Democrática, a party that totally rejected the new national constitution that would affect their interests as a political faction. The fact that the “No” electoral option to the new constitution did win in the Alto Orinoco turned this area into “the last adeco redoubt” and the AD politicians would take advantage of that.

Finally, because of the nature of their particular relationship with the nation-state, the Yanomami have not developed a mentality of the colonized that would drive them to have more aggressive responses to the national frontier expansion. That means that they
have not really experienced a feeling of domination; thus their responses are not similar to those other indigenous groups that have suffered from colonial and capitalist expansion. Leaders of other indigenous groups who embody the role of “organic intellectuals” have alerted them to the difficulties and struggles of other indigenous peoples regarding dominant state policies and the historical significance of the recognition of indigenous rights in the new constitution. However, the Yanomami are still searching for the cultural and social spaces in which they can articulate their native ways of life with outside institutions. In spite of being told of the benefits of a municipality that could be adapted to their social and political organization, the Yanomami are demanding instead a napê municipality, which would be run by them.

**Envisioning the municipality through constitutional laws**

After the visit of the National Constituent Assembly representatives to Ocamo, a group of Yanomami from the villages of the Mavaca-Orinoco area decided to organize a workshop to discuss the proposal on indigenous rights brought in by the *constituyentistas*. Through the Yanomami organization, SUYAO, and with the support of the Salesian mission, they asked the anthropologist, who worked at that moment as a consultant to their cooperative, and myself to conduct this workshop. The goal of this discussion group was that they wanted to read carefully this “Proposal of the Venezuelan Indigenous Peoples and Organization to the National Constituent Assembly.”

During three days (September 28-30, 1999) around 40 Yanomami representatives from eight *shapono* of the Mavaca-Orinoco area and two *shapono* from Platanal gathered
in one of the old SUYAO structures next to the Salesian Mission in Mavaca. The profile of these Yanomami representatives was the same as that of those who had participated in this type of “middle ground” meetings. All were men, bilingual speakers, relatively young, with a certain degree of knowledge of how things work in the napê world, and some of them had some influence over their communities because of being teachers, nursing aides, or the sons of an elder traditional leader (pata).

The Yanomami thoroughly analyzed the proposal and asked several questions regarding the main reasons for the constitutional shifts in indigenous matters. Each article was “deconstructed” using Yanomami examples and contrasted with some state indigenist policies regarding their “traditional ways of life,” specifically those related to the indigenous social, political, and religious customs. The Yanomami agreed with the first articles that declared that the “state should recognize” the existence of indigenous peoples and communities and should support and guarantee their collective rights to their lands.

Of course, we have a right to live here, in the urihi (forest), in our communities, to fish in the river and to hunt animals to eat. We have always lived here, we are not going to get rid of our land, and we do not want other napê to come here and live with us, this is our territory.” (Alonso from Platanal, 1999)

They agreed that the indigenous peoples have the rights to use, administer, and preserve the natural resources in their territories and that the nation-state should promote the protection of their environment. They did not have any objections to the articles that granted them the rights to carry out their economic activities based on forms of reciprocity, solidarity, and exchange, or to participate in the national economy through self-management projects such as the craft cooperative SUYAO supported by the
Salesian missionaries. Moreover, they agreed completely with the article that recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples “to preserve and develop their ethnic identity, cosmology, values, spirituality and their sacred and ritual places (current Article 121, Venezuelan, National Constitution 1999)

Sure, we are Yanomami and we have our culture… we have our customs. Our shamans need the *urihi*, and our kids need the *urihi*. The Yanomami only know how to live here [the forest]. We can go to other places, Caracas and Ayacucho, but that is just to visit, we do not want to live there. Our people live here, and our gardens are here. What would we hunt in the cities? Nothing. (Eleazar from Warapana, 1999).

They also came to an agreement regarding the articles about the indigenous rights concerning education, health and political participation. Unlike the previous articles that basically reaffirmed what the Yanomami have practiced all their life regarding the use of their territory and their self-sufficiency, these other articles emphasized the activities carried out by the outsider *napê* that have brought services to assist them in the areas of health and education. As some of them pointed out, they were satisfied with the educational regime carried out in the bilingual and intercultural school. They also stated that in spite of the presence of doctors, the malariology personnel, and nursing aides, they would actually ask for a more active participation of the health ministry. As one of them stated,

We feel fairly content with these *napê* centers. The school is fine; the kids are learning and are well cared in the school. I am a teacher at the bilingual and intercultural school and I am glad with my little school. I know that there are other Yanomami that want other type of school, one that is rule by the *alcaldia* but I believe that our school here in Mavaca is very good. (Paco from Shakita, 1999)
In fact they were asking for more schools and additional educational grades (levels) so that they could improve their Spanish skills and “learn other issues about the *napé* life.” On the other hand, they complained of the critical medical situation and the many cases of malaria, hepatitis, diarrheas and respiratory diseases that afflict them and their children, who most suffer the lack of medical attention.

Up to this point, they basically agreed with all the articles of the constitutional proposal. I would say that more than agreeing with the content of these articles, this group of Yanomami simply took for granted what they considered was obvious: their right to live in the way that has historically allowed them to survive in the rain forest. For them, there was a tacit understanding that everything the new constitution stated was unquestionable and evident because that was the way they had lived all their lives. Again, the constitution decreed what they had been practicing in order to survive.

The issue that really caught their attention and confronted them was the proposal for the creation of “Territorios Indígenas” (Indigenous Territories) or “Regiones Indígenas” (Indigenous Regions). This article proposed to include the *territorios* or *regiones indígenas* as political entities within the political-administrative division of the nation. This would mean that Venezuela would be divided in municipalities, *territorios* or *regiones indígenas*, the regional states, and the federal dependencies. The *territorio indígenas* was defined as a political territorial entity that would have a special

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120 The indigenous representatives of the NCA were still discussing the scope, feasibility, and adaptation of either concept for the new national constitution. That is why both expressions were submitted in the proposal.
regime for the effective function of its autonomy, while *regiones indígenas* would be a larger entity made up by *territorios indígenas* and would also have a Special Regime.

The establishment of *territorio* or *regiones indígenas* implied not only a constitutional change in the political and administrative order of the Venezuelan territory but also a shift in the organization of the conventional municipalities in indigenous areas. Here the discussion gave rise to several questions among the Yanomami: How would their participation work in these *regiones* vis-à-vis in the already established municipality? What did they really want, a *napê* municipality or a special Yanomami region?

For this group of Yanomami representatives the idea that indigenous territories were going to be different than standard municipalities caused a certain amount of apprehension. One of them pointed out:

*We want a *municipio* in Yanomami land. We don’t want that idea of *territorio indígena*, because if we have what would be only a *territorio indígena* we won’t obtain a municipal budget or job positions at the county level. We are not going to have all the things that the municipality has because they [criollos] would see us as Indians that do not need other things. (Rubén from Purima, 1999).*

They argued about the limitations of the *regiones indígenas* and the advantages that they already had with the current Alto Orinoco municipality. They began to establish the differences between one and another. They wrote two columns on the blackboard trying to visualize the advantages and disadvantages of both. On the one side the *municipio* was identified with the tasks of the mayor and the councilors. This type of municipality offered jobs, included a budget, promoted administrative activities, and was ruled by *napê* laws. The *regiones indígenas* were identified with councils of elders,
autonomy, and a special administrative regime. For them, it seemed that this kind of entity would not have a mayor, jobs, budget, or administration, and would have been ruled according to Yanomami laws. One of them stated,

We want a political entity with napê laws, but we do not want napê to govern the municipio. Besides, we have to remember that we already discussed this issue in the meeting at Hatakoa a couple of weeks ago, and we agreed that we do not want the Omawê Municipality project but the normal municipality that is like the napê municipality. (Patricio from Warapana, 1999).

Here again they were saying that they wanted a municipality like the napê have, but without the intervention of other indigenous peoples such as the Yekuana or the Arawak, who held the main municipal posts in the Alto Orinoco jurisdiction. The paradox of the regiones indígenas and the municipio is that while other indigenous groups were struggling for the recognition of the category of region (or territorio) indígena as an alternative way of conceiving indigenous territorial domains, the Yanomami were explicitly asking for a non-indigenous administrative entity represented in a standard criollo municipality. They requested that instead of the establishment of territories indígenas as the administrative-political figure for indigenous lands, these indigenous representatives should demand real municipios with all the benefits and duties that indigenous entities probably would not have. As one of the representatives from Platanal stated:

A napê municipality is what we want; we do not need a special regime. We already have our Yanomami laws in our villages, in our house. The municipality is something different, and it needs napê laws. (Juvenal from Platanal 1999).

For him, it seems that the cultural spaces between the municipality as a napê entity and his shapono as a Yanomami cultural locality are clearly different social
settings. However, considering the experiences of other indigenous groups in similar situations, we know that this kind of separation is a false illusion because the transformative impact of political parties and bureaucratic systems among indigenous peoples take place in any cultural setting, including their villages.

In any case, the terms región and territorio indígena were rejected during the plenary of the National Constituent Assembly on November of 1999 and replaced by the concept of “hábitat,” in which standard municipalities may well co-exist within indigenous traditional territories. Actually, the term “habitat” fulfilled much better the expectations of the indigenous representatives since this territorial designation not only encompassed a spatial domain but also the social activities of indigenous peoples. The term “habitat” was the one that was sanctioned for the final version of the national constitution that was submitted and approved during the Constitutional Referendum on December 15 of 1999.

After the workshop, the Yanomami wrote a letter to Nohelí Pocaterra and the other members of the NCA confirming that they agreed with all the articles of the proposal with the exception of the article on regiones indígenas. In relation to this one they wrote:

We agreed with the articles from 1 to 14 of the document that you gave us. However, we do not understand the section about regiones indígenas, and we would like more information about the regiones indígenas, the Yanomami territory, and about how the special regime would be applied to the Yanomami (Yanomami Representatives, Letter No 1, 1999).

Although the terms regiones and territorios indígenas were substituted by “hábitat,” what is relevant about this experience is that the Yanomami had other
expectations regarding the emergence of the new constitution. They did not see yet this process as a means to achieve new constitutional rights that would protect and support in the future indigenous peoples, but rather as an opportunity for expressing their most immediate needs and aspirations for direct participation in a municipality with criollo characteristics. All these political changes have been so recent for the Yanomami that they are still trying to understand and struggling with these supra-ethnic categories such as indigenous groups and these social principles such as gaining indigenous rights within a national society.

President Chávez's Casiquiare 2000 Plan

Using the expressions “we are all the same nation,” “we are the same people” and “aboriginal brother, we are all the same root, and we are the same essence…” President Hugo Chávez Frías spoke to a crowd of Yekuana, Yanomami, and Arawak indigenous representatives in La Esmeralda in November of 1999. The purpose of Chávez’s visit to La Esmeralda, the county seat of the Alto Orinoco municipality, was to launch in a pompous ceremony the Plan de Asistencia Social al Indígena del Estado Amazonas, Casiquiare 2000 (Social Assistance to the Indigene of the Amazonas State Plan, Casiquiare 2000) known as Plan Casiquiare 2000 and coordinated by the National Guard. The main goal of this program was to provide social and integral assistance to the indigenous populations of the Amazonas State in the areas of agricultural production, education, health, infrastructure, and the issuing of official identification cards.
As a strategy of the Bolivarian governmental rhetoric, Chávez and his ministerial team sought the support and participation of the entire Venezuelan population in the process of "re-founding the Republic" as soon as the constitutional referendum granted the new "Magna Charta" on December 15, 1999. That included also the participation of indigenous peoples such as the Yanomami inhabitants of the frontier zones. In this speech, Chávez constantly referred to the importance of the indigenous peoples in the development of the nation. He emphasized that the "indigenes were the original Venezuelans" with whom "we [the rest of the population] have an historical debt" because the conquistadors and later the criollo groups have abused and oppressed them. Although the president recognized that the indigenous people had been dominated and conquered, he rapidly brought up the issue of indigenous participation through "the reinsertion, concentration, and dignificación\textsuperscript{121} of our aboriginal brothers" in the national Venezuelan territory.

Chávez stated in his discourse that all the Venezuelan people needed to be united because "we are the same cause, the same people," and all the indigenous caciques, chiefs, and leaders should be aware of the tremendous value of being united in order to re-build the Venezuelan motherland. In other words, in spite of the acknowledgement of indigenous people's rights in the new constitution, Chávez's discourses aimed to incorporate them not so much as culturally distinctive people within a "multiethnic and pluri-cultural society" as mandated in the constitution, but more as a population that had

\textsuperscript{121} For Chávez, the "dignificados," are "the people who have been suffering, beaten down, and humiliated" (quoted in Anderson 2001) and who have been traditionally the victims (damnificados) of inappropriate state policies.
been socially oppressed. In this case, Chávez proposed the incorporation of the indigenous peoples into the national society more as social groups, thus transforming them into a *social class* comparable to the poor people who live in shantytowns of the big urban centers. For the president of the Bolivarian Republic, indigenous peoples became part of “the same people,” the dispossessed and excluded who have been historically oppressed like the rest of the population that live in poverty. In order to solve this social problem, the development program Casiquiare 2000 Plan would fulfill the needs of the indigenous communities of the Alto Orinoco. The Yanomami are one of those indigenous peoples who have experienced the scope of these policies that intend to assimilate them within the all-encompassing discourse of the social dispossessed within a national societal scale.

The *Plan Casiquiare 2000* is an extension of a wider national program called *Plan Bolívar 2000* that was created as a governmental strategic program to improve the social conditions of the Venezuelan population with scarce resources. With the total support of President Chávez, the National Armed Forces coordinated both plans, which carry out the development of social programs among rural and urban communities to “support Venezuelan people.” Under that motto, the military forces and in particular the National Guard played a key role in the application of these development policies in the Alto Orinoco region. Thus, the National Guard is the institution in charge of coordinating, designing, and carrying out the different projects for the “promotion of the indigenous peoples in Amazonas.”
This Plan was endowed a multi-million budget,\textsuperscript{122} with which apparently it was going to solve the main social and economic problems of the indigenous communities in the areas of health, education, transportation, and self-management projects. All this political discourse emerges under the assumption that the indigenous people were in need of and requiring those services. The goal of the National Guard was to provide the Alto Orinoco communities with agricultural tools, outboard motors, and solar electricity systems for operating short-wave radios, generators, aluminum canoes, and manioc grating boards to purportedly promote the social development of the indigenous peoples that live in the Alto Orinoco.

However, the creation of this program was not the result of local consultations or dialogues with the members of the indigenous communities, but rather a one-sided decision made by the upper military command. Even the civil component that was advising the Casiquiare 2000 Plan regarding the local participation in these types of projects questioned and later abandoned their consulting tasks because of the unilateral resolutions made by the officials of the National Guard. In this sense, this program (set up also under the premise of local participation) actually concealed development schemes established by military forces for incorporating indigenous peoples within state programs. The whole ideology behind this program in fact recreated the paternalistic policies of traditional political parties that had been highly condemned by Chávez, and in which generous budgets had been spent on social development schemes for indigenous

\textsuperscript{122} The economic support of this program came from the national institutions FUS (\textit{Fondo Unico Social}) and FONVIS (\textit{Fondo de Inversión Social de Venezuela}), as well as from the Inter-American Development Bank.
communities without any self-management considerations. In the same way, the Casiquiare 2000 Plan failed to take into account the socio-cultural reality of the Yanomami and other indigenous peoples and simply ended up giving away tools and outboard motors to the communities. After the setting up of the Casiquiare 2000 Plan with the endorsement of the president, several commissions went to the Alto Orinoco to assess the situation of the Yanomami.

In a period of 6 months at least 14 different regional and central commissions traveled to Mavaca, Ocamo, and Platanal, repeatedly asking nearly the same questions about social matters such as health, schools, problems of transportation, and lack of medicines. Some of these "comisiones oficiales" even arrived with ludicrous proposals such as the implementation of the "niños de la calle" (children of the street) project intended to protect homeless children who lived in urban centers.

Another absurd suggestion, according to a public official from CONAVI\textsuperscript{123} was the "endowment of houses" that would be adapted to the "Yanomami life style." What this governmental authority figure seemed to ignore is that the Yanomami have lived in \textit{shapono} that are perfectly adapted to their environment. What was even more incredible is that this governmental official was offering houses (\textit{criollo} style) to the Yanomami right after the terrible flood of December of 1999, which took place in Vargas State close to Caracas, in which thousands of people lost their homes, and several other thousands died. The critical situation in the north of the country certainly required the total support of this institution to the victims of this tragic natural disaster, that is why seemed quite

\textsuperscript{123} CONAVI, Consejo Nacional de la Vivienda (National Housing Council).
absurd offering *criollo* houses to the Yanomami while other people were desperately needed them.

In sum, these state policies carried out among the Yanomami and other indigenous peoples in Amazonas aimed not to create an intercultural dialogue between the national institutions and indigenous representatives and communities but merely to incorporate them as citizens and grateful recipients of development social programs. In spite of the clear recognition of indigenous rights in the constitution, which represents a positive transformation in the relationship between the nation-state and indigenous peoples, there is a gap regarding the official and legal discourses and the application of state policies. The implementation of these policies continues neglecting the participation of minority groups in the processes of decision-making. Thus, the rhetoric of “participative democracy” has concealed in some way the reproduction of paternalistic models of social integration applied among indigenous peoples.

*Outboard motors, boats, and matohi*

When the Yanomami realized that president Chávez was indeed going to show up in La Esmeralda, the bilingual leaders of the different villages began to organize and discuss their potential strategy for making their requests. Other indigenous representatives, Yekuana and Arawak from La Esmeralda, informed them that the best way was to make communal requests -- not individual -- because, according to National Guard officers, Chávez wanted to see how “the communities were organized.”
Regarding the National Guard, the Yanomami were neither aware of the role of this institution and its relationship with the president nor of the main purpose of the Casiquiare 2000 Plan. The Yanomami only knew that if the president was going to travel to La Esmeralda “to be and share with the indigenous peoples,” they were going to take advantage of his visit to indigenous territory.

Around 25 letters from different villages of the areas of Ocamo, Padamo, Mavaca, Platanal and Mavakita were written and submitted to the presidential team. In those letters, the Yanomami requested outboard motors, boats, tools, hammocks, mosquito nets, river ambulances, and manioc grating boards, among others. Several dozen Yanomami showed up dressed in loincloths and wearing bodily adornments and painted torsos. In the Yanomami language, a representative from Ocamo welcomed and blessed the president while Yanomami children gifted him with native crafts. The Yekuana and Arawak representatives gave similar speeches and handed other crafts to him.

The Yanomami were excited by the idea that they were going to receive outboard motors and other mathohi (manufactured goods). They said that Chávez was a nice person and a good president because he was going to “repartir mathohi para todos” (to distribute goods for everybody) and because he had assured them that he was going to fulfill his promises. After the presidential visit, the Yanomami began to wait impatiently for the arrival of the commodities and the outboard motors considered by them one of the most precious thing that they could ever have because they make river transportation easier and faster and bring status to the villages.
For several months they waited in such an eager mood that it was even reasonable to expect that they would have performed a ceremonial worship when the National Guard helicopters showed up bringing the commodities, as in an Amazonian version of the cargo cults in Melanesia. Although they did not carry out any ritual worship, they did arrange a sort of local organization around the promised goods. The Yanomami leaders spent considerable amounts of time discussing what they were going to do with that equipment in advance. Some of them wrote several letters requesting information about the status of their demands and others even traveled to Puerto Ayacucho and Caracas to ask about the donations that Chávez had promised to bestow on their communities. Some Yanomami from the more isolated communities, as in the case of Hokoto (located a several days’ trip inland), even decided to stay for months in one of the riverine shapono of the Mavaca area so that they would not miss out in the distribution of the awaited commodities.

While they were waiting for the outboard motors, the National Guard began to distribute in almost 30 villages some of the other manufactured goods the Yanomami had requested in their letters such as agricultural tools, soccer balls and nets, fish hooks, and some hammocks. The distribution of all these gifts seemed an opulent exhibition of Western goods in a military setting. In Mavaca, for example, members of the neighboring villages gathered in the Shakita and organized a big fiesta with criollo music and soccer games to celebrate the happening. In this process of obtaining goods, the Yanomami followed the specific “orders” of the colonels and mayors of the National Guard. For instance, they raised the national flag, sang the national anthem, and received the military
officers in the villages in a new welcoming protocol consisting of showing them the identification cards that certified their status as official Venezuelan citizens. At the same time, the elders and some young Yanomami wore their distinctive red loincloth and feather adornments as native identity markers that would please the military officers taking photos of the occasion for the institutional records.

In spite of the cheerfulness caused by the arrival of these mathohi (goods), the Yanomami were waiting for the great prize: the outboard motors. For almost eight months they waited until a military commission notified them that they would soon receive the motors. However, the Yanomami representatives first had to go to La Esmeralda in order to take a motor repair workshop. After that, they would receive the long-awaited outboard motors. The vice-president of Venezuela, Isaías Rodríguez, officially distributed the motors in an equally huge ceremony on July of 2000. The Yanomami as well as the Yekuana and Arawak were delighted with these 25 and 40 horsepower machines. Out of 54 outboard motors given to the Alto Orinoco indigenous villages, the Yanomami received 29 in that huge event in La Esmeralda.

Several months later, in April of 2001, Hugo Chávez returned to La Esmeralda to hand out aluminum boats, a few other outboard motors, and several fiberglass river ambulances, and to inaugurate the first local radio station for the people of the Alto Orinoco set up by the National Guard. A tense situation arose, however, when a group of Yanomami showed up with bows and arrows and dressed in black war paint. They were disappointed and angry because the ambulances intended for them were being sent down river to the Rio Negro area (Anderson 2001). The National Guard had purchased boats
with the wrong technical specifications, which made them inappropriate for the shallow conditions of the Orinoco River in that area.

For the Yanomami, the receiving of goods, whether they are from the municipality, the regional government or Chávez's Casiquiare 2000 Plan, amounts to pretty much the same thing. They adapt to the requirements and expectations of these different national institutions. They just go along with what the politicians and other state representatives require and demand in order to obtain the desired mathohi. Although these behaviors can be perceived as submissive and even passive, the Yanomami are in fact adopting strategies of negotiation whereby they take advantage of the opportunities that napē policies and actions make available to them.

As a form of eliciting information about Chávez and his party, I once asked a young Yanomami leader whether his community (affiliated with the Acción Democrática party) should or shouldn't receive the goods and outboard motors given out by the president, considering that they fiercely antagonized Chávez's party. He replied that I was right in that his community was not going to vote for Chávez's party in the coming elections, but that they were going to receive all those commodities anyway:

We are Yanomami, and we also have our rights as indigenous peoples. We are also Venezuelan, and we deserve to have our little things, we also need those things to improve our shapono. (Gustavo from Purima 2000).

With this identity statement he seemed to reaffirm his ethnicity as Yanomami as well as his nationality as Venezuelan. After uttering in a very formal tone the learned discourse of a politicized leader, he relaxed and mentioned other reasons for their
apparently inconsistent behavior towards the president’s party. Finally, he said with a smile on his face:

We told the people of *Movimiento Quinta República* [Chávez’s party] that we were going to vote for them, and we did all what they told us to do, but we did not tell them the truth, we are not *mohoti* (silly). You know, we wanted to receive all those commodities too, so we said that we were going to vote for them. (Gustavo from Purima 2000).

Another Yanomami who was listening to the conversation began to laugh in a way that endorsed the mischievous response of his friend and also stated that he was doing the right thing. It was obvious that they knew they were deceiving the politicians, and moreover they were even deceiving the president of the Venezuelan Republic. But for the Yanomami, the idea of deceiving somebody, particularly an outsider (and getting away with it), is an attribute that is applauded by everybody.

We cannot deny that this enormous development program had an irreversible cultural impact among the Yanomami, and we know that the supposed goals of self-management more strongly reflect the desires of governmental officials than of the indigenous peoples themselves. This was evident in the fate of the outboard motors during the following months. Many of them were damaged soon after being received, others sank in the waters of the Orinoco through mishandling, and the others simply ended in the hands of one or maybe two of the most influential family groups of each village. Thus, the idea that these outboard motors were going “to facilitate the development of the communities” was certainly a utopian pretension of the policy makers.
Wrapping up ideas

This chapter attempted to discuss the influence of recent political changes in Venezuela regarding the issuing of a new national constitution, the establishment of the Alto Orinoco municipality, and the setting up of the National Guard’s development programs among the Yanomami of the Mavaca, Ocamo, and Platanal areas. Specifically, it accounts for the impact of this institutional frontier expansion in the emergence and conceptualization of novel forms of identification among the Yanomami.

In this process of facing state policies and discourses, the Yanomami have recently been surrounded by discourses that endorse multiple identities. These are not compatible with their inward forms of social identification based on kinship ties and inter-village networks. Instead, in this new scenario, the Yanomami are dealing with wider ethnic and national identity categories that tend to reinforce the notion of “Indian,” as a supra-ethnic category. The Yanomami, through the interaction with other indigenous groups and the knowledge of the constitutional articles on indigenous rights, are becoming increasingly aware of their own status as an indigenous people. They are also realizing the advantages and, perhaps to a lesser degree, the disadvantages of becoming citizens with the use of identification cards and with the awareness that there is a legal frame that supports their rights as Venezuelan citizens.

Finally, in this flow of ethnic and national affiliations, the Yanomami are asserting their strategies, playing along with the different institutions and nape policies that intend to subsume them within discourses of criollization while transforming them into a dispossessed social class. It is clear that in this complex process of redefining their
politics of identities with respect to the napê expansion, the Yanomami are at this moment basically taking advantage of the paternalist programs instituted by regional and centralized state institutions. However, all these intercultural experiences with the outside world have guided them to rethink and become more aware of their ethnic differences. And although they perhaps feel currently enchanted with the criollo model that the municipality tries to insert into the communities, it is this process of self-awareness that may allow them to eventually assert themselves in the active establishment and configuration of these cultural boundaries in their own terms. With this I am referring to the emergence of new and more challenging Yanomami responses to the national frontier expansion and state institutions.
CHAPTER 7
FORGING COMMON SPACES FOR CULTURAL INTERACTION:
CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Yanomami Conference

Shakita, one of the shapono located in the Mavaca area with a population of 130 Yanomami, was the chosen village where around 550 Yanomami and nearly 70 napê gathered together to talk and discuss about the current situation of the Yanomami in Venezuelan territory. La Conferencia Nacional Yanomami (The National Yanomami Conference) was the title of this major event held on November 19-23, 2001 in the Alto Orinoco. The goal of the conference was to foster an intercultural dialogue between the Yanomami and the governmental and non-governmental organizations that work among this indigenous people in order to assess the policies and programs that are being carrying out by different national and regional state institutions in the Alto Orinoco area.

Representatives from 50 Yanomami villages of the Alto Orinoco traveled by river from Ocamo and the Upper Ocamo, Mavaca and the Upper Mavaca, Platanal and Orinoco up river, Padamo, and Cejal. Additionally, members from 3 villages of the distant Parima highlands arrived by plane first to Ocamo. Official representatives from at least twenty governmental and nongovernmental institutions from the Health, Education, Environmental, and Defense Ministries, the regional and municipal government, and representatives from national human rights commissions, missions, indigenous organizations, research institutions, universities, and the media traveled from Caracas and Puerto Ayacucho by plane and by river to participate in this conference in Shakita.
This event represented a great challenge for the Yanomami, because for the first time they were going to discuss face-to-face with official representatives of regional and national institutions the current situation of their communities in their own environment and in their own terms. Traditionally, indigenous peoples must travel from their local communities to the cities to submit their requests and to ask for attention from the urban bureaucrats. On this occasion, however, the napë members of different institutions had to spend four days in a not very comfortable site (by urban standards) of the tropical forest listening and talking about education, health, environment and permits, and political participation that constituted the four main topics that the Yanomami had decided to discuss with the outsiders. As one of the General Directors of the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports stated: “This is an historical conference that will define not only the future of the Yanomami in Venezuela but will also set up the new parameters for intercultural encounters with other indigenous peoples in the country.”

Certainly, the Yanomami National Conference, as a particular indigenous event, requires a sort of “thick description.” The analysis of this event must address not only the different levels of organization and participation of the Yanomami and the governmental officials, but also the discourses and interpersonal relations established among the many participants.
How did the idea come up?

The origins of this conference lie in a particular juncture in which some members of the Venezuelan Yanomami Commission\(^{124}\) were looking for answers to the Yanomami situation, especially regarding health issues and local participation. Coincidentally, on one of their visits to Caracas, a couple of Yanomami representatives from Mavaca suggested to commission members the organization of a meeting with the nape to talk about the many issues they were facing as a result of the increasing presence of state institutions in their territory (Jesús Ignacio Cardozo: Personal communication). The indigenous delegates proposed hosting a new conference, similar to the one organized in 1990 in Caracas, which had resulted in the creation of the Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve and the Parima-Tapirapecó National Park in Yanomami territory.

Eleven years had elapsed since the “International Conference on Yanomami Habitat and Culture” organized by FUNVENA, a local NGO, and new issues and problems had emerged as a result of other forms of state expansion. As in that first conference, I had the opportunity to participate in this new event, not only as an ethnographer that intended to grasp the details and examine the impact of conference, but also as someone who has worked with the Yanomami and encouraged them to organize and carry out these encounters with the outside nape.

The idea of arranging a similar event also coincided with the concerns of other scientists, indigenous representatives, missionaries, and official personnel that worked in

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\(^{124}\) The whole title of this commission was: “Comisión de Investigación de las Denuncias sobre Atropellos y la Situación Actual Yanomami de la Vicepresidencia Ejecutiva de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela.” This commission was investigating Tierney’s accusations regarding scientific unprofessional conduct (Tierney 2000) and the current Yanomami situation in Venezuela.
the Alto Orinoco and who agreed to participate in a meeting where the representatives of
the different national institutions would talk face-to-face with the Yanomami
representatives. As one of the Yanomami organizers told me later,

> [G]etting together in a big meeting, as the *criollos* do when they need to discuss
about important things, would allow us to talk *shaririwé* (straight, clearly, 
frankly) to the *napé* who work in health, education, environmental issues, and
politics. It is very important for us finding agreements on how the *napé* are going
to work with us in the future (Javier from Koparima).

The proposal for organizing a Yanomami conference was later shared with some
other leaders from Mavaca, Platanal, and Ocamo, who agreed with the idea of having “a
big meeting with the *napé*.” In the meantime, members of the *Dirección General de
Asuntos Indígenas*, DGAI (General Office of Indian Affairs), the Yanomami Commission
of the vice-presidency of the Republic, and local NGOs committed themselves and their
institutions to support, assist, and coordinate, in conjunction with the Yanomami, this
national conference.

Although the DGAI played an important role in providing funds, and institutional
and logistical support for this event, the Yanomami were in fact the principal organizers
of the conference. They elected a steering committee with several coordinators by
geographical sectors and with different responsibilities; they designated a president and
vice-president, and set up *comisiones de trabajo* (task groups) that were going to be in
charge of transportation, gasoline, food, security, firewood, cleaning, building, cooking,
etc. In planning, carrying out and monitoring all these tasks and responsibilities, the
Yanomami coordinators became aware of the many details they had to take care of and
assignments to fulfill in order to bring together “Yanomami from different villages with napé from different institutions.”

During several months, various meetings between the Yanomami organizers and DGAI and Yanomami Commission officials took place both in Caracas as well as in the Alto Orinoco in order to coordinate and supervise the numerous preparatory issues regarding logistics, organization, and the topics that were going to be discussed at the conference. The organizers carefully planned with some anthropologists and personnel of the DGAI how, when, where, and why this conference would take place in accordance with Yanomami desires and expectations. For instance, at the beginning, DGAI officials proposed to hold the event in La Esmeralda for logistical reasons, but the Yanomami rejected that suggestion, arguing that La Esmeralda was not in Yanomami territory. Instead, they decided that Mavaca was certainly a Yanomami space and they chose the shapono of Shakita as the most appropriate village because of the size, location, and accessibility to other Yanomami and to outside visitors.

It was predictable that the organization of an event of such caliber would generate certain discrepancies between the Yanomami and the napé coordinators because they had to find common grounds in the decision-making process. However, the major difficulties did not arise between the Yanomami and the members of the Yanomami commission and the DGAI but rather among the napé institutions and among the Yanomami themselves. On the one hand, some of these state institutions were demanding a special participation in the organization and the inclusion of different agendas to be considered at the conference that did not necessarily fit the interests and needs of the Yanomami. Doing
that, these institutions were trying desperately to legitimize their so-called official status in an indigenous territory; but this did not happen. On the other hand, the national political factions in different ways also tried to take advantage of this Yanomami event promoting political proselytism among the members of the villages and creating differences and divisions among the Yanomami themselves.

For instance, the representatives of the municipality attempted to annoy some Yanomami by saying that the conference was a "political event" coordinated by the PUAMA, PPT, and MVR political parties which were opposed to the municipality, and by the Salesian missionaries who have criticized the policies of the mayor. The fact is that the only indigenous organizations that supported the event were SUYAO, ORPIA, and CONIVE. The relationship between the Yanomami coordinators of the conference and ORPIA organization upset the Yanomami followers of the Acción Democrática (AD) party because ORPIA had also been quite critical of the political maneuvers of the mayor Jaime Turón. Those Yanomami from the AD party were also discontented because, according to some politicians, this meeting with the napé was going to be organized without the active participation of the councilmen of the alcaldía. Moreover, the fact that this conference was going to take place in Shakita, an anti-Acción Democrática village, upset even more the members of the alcaldía and other Yanomami that work for this institution. It seemed that the differences created by the political parties among the Yanomami were really creating a gap between these two groups of indigenous representatives: those that supported ORPIA and were identified with the PPT party, and those that supported the Yekuana mayor and the Acción Democrática party.
The conference itself

The Yanomami from different villages were arriving to Shakita little by little from close and distant villages. The napé were arriving by groups according to their institutions and depending on the logistic situation. Although there was a tentative schedule, the program changed almost every day due to the incredible numbers of people and topics the Yanomami wanted to address and discuss among themselves and with all these government officials. Out of the four days of the conference, the Yanomami decided to spend the first two days in closed meetings among themselves trying to reach agreements on how they would approach the government officials. During this time, the napé visitors sat around impatiently trying to sort out their own institutional differences and disagreements. Finally, after two days, the Yanomami announced that they were ready and the napé were incorporated into the discussion.

The four mayor themes discussed, in sort of round tables, were Education, Health, Environment, and Political Participation. First they argued about the health situation in Yanomami territory; here they raised important issues about the role of the Health Ministry and the performance of the physicians as well as lack of medicines and other medical equipment. Second, they talked about education; they discussed about the differences between the intercultural and bilingual schools run by the missionaries and the new schools proposed by the alcaldía. Third, they discussed about environmental issues such as the granting of official tourist and research permits, the national park, the use of the lands, and the demarcation of indigenous territories. Finally, they argued about politics; in this round table they passionately discussed the creation of a separate
Yanomami municipality. Here again, there was a confrontation between those Yanomami who wanted a separate municipality and those that preferred to stay and live in the Alto Orinoco Municipality.

After they talked and discussed about these themes with the different governmental officials, members of NGO's, and other napê participants, the coordinating commissions wrote drafts of final agreements for each of the themes (round tables). The Yanomami representatives of the different shapono and the members of the national institutions present signed these actas compromiso (pledges) as formal commitments between the Yanomami and the napê.

As I stated before, this conference was a very complex event that requires a further and deeper analysis. However, I should stress that the organization of such an experience enabled the Yanomami first to talk directly to the national institutions, and second, to encourage these national institutions to work together with them in order to find solutions for their major problems on health, education, and political participation. These types of cultural encounters represent significant advances in allowing for Yanomami voices to be heard by the national society in the new intercultural contexts created by the recent state expansion.

The fact that representatives from national institutions, mass media, and NGOs accepted the Yanomami's invitation to travel to the Alto Orinoco in order to have direct contact with their communities signifies that it is possibly an intercultural dialogue. This type of cultural exchange becomes part of the new strategies adopted by both state and indigenous communities in searching for more equitable grounds on which to negotiate
their varying interests and cultural differences. This intercultural dialogue would constitute not only the best guarantee of the Yanomami’s physical and cultural survival but would also meet the new constitutional precepts regarding indigenous rights and the recognition that the nation is a multiethnic society.

This is not an easy process, however. There are many elements set against it such as the frequent contradictions among state institutions, the tense political relations that exist among the various political parties present in the Alto Orinoco, the differences between Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and the rampant political clientelism and demagoguery. Nevertheless, the intercultural dialogues promoted in events such as the National Yanomami Conference, are interesting examples for which, even in extremely distant places and under conditions of accelerated cultural transformations, indigenous movements are demanding clear answers from the governmental and nongovernmental sectors of the Venezuelan society.

Closing ideas

This research attempted to reveal how the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco, Amazonas State, Venezuela, have responded to the current expansion of the national political structures through diverse strategies of accommodation and negotiation. In order to understand these local responses and the Yanomami interplay with the national Venezuelan society, I have placed their cultural encounters or the “contact situations” in an historical and political frame, highlighting the forms of representation and the nature of the intercultural relationships between the Yanomami and the napé.
The nature of the relationship between indigenous groups and the national expansion, the legal frame that rules the incorporation of indigenous peoples to the nation-state, and the engendered practices of indigenous peoples who attempt to articulate different cultural systems have produced different forms of cultural engagement. In this dissertation I have considered the engaging practices as a framework to account for the experiences currently lived and felt by the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco in relation to the outside (napê) way of life. I believe that due to the character of the relationship with the nation-state and other external agents in the past, the interaction with the new national political structures and the influences of other external agents, the Yanomami are defining, in a selective process, which strategies they should employ to approach the national system in the most effective way. By examining these strategies, I assess historically the cultural encounters and the cultural resilience displayed by Yanomami who have lived under the influence of missionaries, criollo groups, and other indigenous peoples.

I emphasize throughout the dissertation the many ways the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco manifest and conceive the nation-state through their participation in the national political structures, through the Alto Orinoco Municipality and other political institutions, and through their embodiment of national symbols and ideologies. As we have seen, the current Yanomami expressions of cultural engagement with the national society have not been an unexpected phenomenon, but rather are the result of an ongoing historical process of the national expansion. These relationships with the outsiders began with the first explorations to the Alto Orinoco, carried out in the middle of the eighteenth century.
that increased with the establishment of missions in the middle of the 1950s. Since then, several other external agents such as explorers, governmental personnel, scientists, tourists, miners, and more recently, politicians have directly influenced the social and cultural dynamic of the Alto Orinoco Yanomami.

Thus, it is essential to position the recent Yanomami participation into national politics within a historical political context of the Venezuela State formation. Based on the many ways in which the Yanomami have been historically and ethnographically represented, my research attempts to account for the different dominant practices exercised by Venezuelan State institutions and explore how these national structures have gradually co-opted and integrated the Yanomami into the national system. Placing the cultural encounters between Yanomami and napé within this historical, ethnographic, and political frame has allowed me to understand how the discursive rhetoric of the state regarding the indigenous peoples has been inextricably related to the geographical location of these groups that have been “politically” confined in an out-of-the-way area such as the Amazonas State.

It is clear that the Yanomami are experiencing new encounters with the national frontier expansion represented in the state political structures. And those groups that live in the Mavaca-Orinoco area, including those settled in Ocamo, Padamo and Platanal, have undergone the highest degrees of cultural transformation due to their relationship with outsiders – napé. In spite of the cultural changes spawned by different external agents (missionaries, centralized governmental agencies, and scientists), I proposed throughout the dissertation that the establishment of the Alto Orinoco Municipality and
the politicization of the indigenous areas have accelerated more than any other foreign
institution the cultural transformations of the Venezuelan Yanomami.

The approaching forms to these foreign models have paradoxical effects among
the Yanomami. On the one hand, with the national expansion, the Yanomami have the
benefits of health services, access to intercultural and bilingual schools, the advantages
given by the national constitution in the recognition of their rights, and the support of
other indigenous organizations such as ORPIA (Organización Regional de los Pueblos
Indígenas de Amazonas) and CONIVE (Consejo Nacional Indio de Venezuela). On the
other hand, these “Western” discourses, which I identify as the criollo models represent,
as the Yanomami themselves express it, a “better form of organization” that they want to
emulate. In that sense, the interaction between Yanomami society and the national society
is seen as a dialectic process that reflects the contradictions between their ways of life
and “modern” napé style life.

These internal struggles of redefinition of their identity can be observed when the
Yanomami point out in their meetings that although they maintain “their customs and the
old ways of life,” they also want to obtain the goods and the benefits of the napé world.
As some of them have stated, “we are looking for a new path” in order to reach the napé
lifestyle. This idea is closely reflected in this Yanomami phrase: Heitehe, kamiyê pêmakí
puhii taopê, aí tute pêmakí puhii tarayouha ta totihitawê (Now, what we want is a new
pathway, one that would be better).

I wanted to conclude this dissertation with the brief description of the Yanomami
National Conference because this type of event represents the constitution of common
spaces for intercultural dialogues between the Yanomami and the national institutions that assert major policies on health, education, environmental issues, and political participation. In this case, the Yanomami conference was not the consequence of a fortuitous encounter with the napé or the enforcement of state policies applied by a particular national institution; this was a Yanomami event that intended to open the channels for an intercultural experience.

This was not an easy encounter either for the Yanomami or the napé. There were not many previous experiences in which the indigenous groups that have lived "relatively isolated" and have been constantly portrayed as the "primitive people" had the opportunity to challenge and argue in their own terms the purview of the national institutions in their own territory. The Yanomami active participation in this conference contradicts yet again the idea that indigenous people are merely passive receivers of assimilation processes provoked by national expansion. On the contrary this is a clear example of a strategy of accommodation by which they select the means and procedures for getting closer to the national society.

It is maybe premature to assert that the Yanomami of the Alto Orinoco have developed well-organized proposals that challenge state policies or criticize the impact of the municipality, for instance. As I mentioned throughout the chapters of this dissertation, each village is an autonomous and independent entity, and familial and personal interests preclude the consolidation of more encompassing voices that represent the whole ethnic group. However, in spite of these difficulties, the Yanomami are struggling in finding
common grounds that enable them to access the resources, services, and benefits of the outside world, while trying to preserve much of their ways of life.

When the Yanomami say, "We are looking for a new path," they are certainly trying to find "border areas" for intercultural dialogues. These commons space of cultural interaction also named "middle grounds" (White 1991, Conklin and Graham 1995), "transcultural spaces" (Pratt 1992), or "hybrid spaces" (Bhabha 1994) constitute not only new themes for social analyses, but are in fact the current everyday experiences of indigenous peoples who attempt to obtain recognition as indigenous people and as citizens in a nation called Venezuela.

It would be naïve if we (the anthropologists) believe that their desires in approaching the national political structures occur in a seemingly harmless process of cultural transformation, and that all their strategies of incorporation are the most suitable for their cultural development. That would be a false illusion, a mirage of "cultural agency" if we contemplate these social changes without a critical stance. Every single decision that the Yanomami make as a group, community, family or individual to get closer to the napê way of life has social and cultural implications that can be irreversible. It could be also dangerous to concentrate on the everyday life of this indigenous people as the exclusive result of their encounters with the national society, ignoring other intimate forms of cultural expression. However, what I do believe is the necessity for a reflexive assessment of the indigenes’ decision-making and actions in relation to the outside world. This analysis should consider, above all, Yanomami points of view and expectations within broader cultural contexts, in spite of the predictable (not just
imperialistic) "nostalgia" that these cultural transformations, in different degrees, make echoes in our consciousness as anthropologists.
Chapter VIII

Article 119

The State will recognize the existence of the indigenous peoples and communities, their social, political, and economic organization, their cultures, practices, and customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitats and original rights over the lands that they ancestrally and traditionally occupy and that are necessary to develop and guarantee their ways of life. It shall be the role of the State, with the participation of the indigenous people, to demarcate and guarantee the right to the collective property of their lands, which will be inalienable, non-expendable, non-sequestrable, and non-transferable according to the terms of the Constitution and the law.

Article 120

The profit exploitation of natural resources in indigenous habitats by the State will be carried out without harm to the cultural, social, and economic integrity of them, and it is subject to previous warning and consultation of the respective indigenous communities. The benefits acquired from these profits by the indigenous peoples shall be in accordance with this Constitution and the law.

Article 121

The indigenous people have the right to maintain and develop their ethnic and cultural identity, their cosmology, values, spirituality, and their sacred and worship sites. The State will promote the worthiness and dissemination of the cultural manifestations of the indigenous peoples, who have the right to their own form of education and to an intercultural and bilingual education regime, considering their own socio-cultural particularities, values, and traditions.

Article 122

The indigenous peoples have the right to an integral health that takes into account their practices and cultures. The State will recognize their traditional medicine and complementary therapies, in accordance with bio-ethical principles.

Article 123

The indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and promote their own economic practices, based on reciprocity, solidarity, and exchange; their traditional productive activities, their participation in the national economy, and to define their priorities. The indigenous peoples have the right to professional training services and to participate in the production, execution, and doing of specific programs of training,
technical, and financial assistance services that strengthen their economic activities within the framework of local sustainable development. The State will guarantee the male and female workers that are members of indigenous peoples the benefit of the rights in accordance to the labor legislation.

**Article 124**

The collective intellectual property of the indigenous peoples in regard to their technological knowledge and innovations is guaranteed. Every activity relating to genetic resources and the knowledge associated with them will pursue collective benefits. It is forbidden the patenting of these resources and the ancestral knowledge.

**Article 125**

The indigenous peoples have the right to political participation. The State will guarantee indigenous representation in the National Assembly and in the deliberative bodies of federal and local entities with an indigenous population, in accordance with the law.

**Article 126**

The indigenous peoples as cultures with ancestral roots are part of the Venezuelan nation, State, and people as unique, sovereign, and indivisible. In accordance to this Constitution, they have a duty to safeguard the integrity and the national sovereignty.

The term people should not be interpreted in this Constitution as having any implications in regard to the rights that this term may confer under international law.
# APPENDIX B

## POLITICAL TERRITORIAL DIVISION OF THE AMAZONAS STATE

**VENezuela, 2000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Official Name of the Entity</th>
<th>Capital</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amazonas State</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Alto Orinoco Autonomous Municipality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Acanaña</td>
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<td>Cacurí</td>
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<td>Santa Lucía</td>
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</table>
22 February 1999

Hortensia R. Caballero, Ph.D. Candidate
C/o Ellen Basso, Ph.D.
Department of Anthropology
Haury Building, Room 210
PO Box 210030

RE: ARTICULATING ETHNICITY IN A NATIONAL CONTEXT, POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION AND GENDER ROLES AMONG THE YANOMAMI INDIANS OF
THE UPPER ORINOCO, VENEZUELA

Dear Ms. Caballero:

We have received documents concerning your above referenced project. Regulations published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [45 CFR Part 46.101 (b) (2)] exempt this type of research from review by our Committee.

Please be advised that clearance from official authorities for site(s) where proposed research is to be conducted must be obtained prior to performance of this study.

Thank you for informing us of your work. If you have any questions concerning the above, please contact this office.

Sincerely,

John D. Palmer, Ph.D., M.D.
Chairman
Human Subjects Committee

JDP/js
cc: Department/College Review Committee
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Wright, Winthrop  

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