

cultural geographies in practice

Science, art and the Yanomami: comments on an exhibition

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Multiple Yanomami

The Yanomami is a population of approximately 27 000 Indians who live in the Amazonian forest on either side of the border separating Venezuela and Brazil. They are also, in the phrasing of the anthropologist Stephen Nugent ‘extremely well known as products of the anthropological culture industry, icons of “classic” tribal Amazonian people’.¹ They have, in other words, been both under close and quasi-continuous scientific scrutiny since the 1960s and the object of different levels and strains of discourse concerning issues like the defence of indigenous human rights, the ethics of ethnographic investigation or the construction in academic writing of what could be considered a fictitious ethnic group (‘the Yanomami’). Their status as one of those privileged objects of ethnographic enquiry is mainly due to their geographical isolation and to the persistence of their cultural specificity.

In the early 1990s, alarmed by reports of threats to the Yanomami, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) created a special commission to investigate their situation in Brazil (where approximately 12 700 Yanomami live). This unprecedented move was motivated by the urgency of the case:

By 1990, the devastation of the environment, health, social organization and culture of the Yanomami, particularly in the State of Roraima but also in the State of Amazonas, had reached a scale and intensity that the Procurador Federal (Federal Prosecutor, the equivalent of the US Attorney General) of Brazil frankly described ‘genocidal’.²

This situation has been attributed by most observers to the invasion of Yanomami territory by thousands of miners and the ambiguous policy of the government.³

The report – based on a visit in Brazil of the chair of the Commission, Professor Terry Turner, the work of several specialists of Yanomami culture and the collaboration of consultants (including Davi Kopenawa, spokesman of the Brazilian Yanomami) – concluded by denouncing the violations by the Brazilian government of indigenous rights and calling for the creation of a permanently demarcated Indigenous Park with ‘full legal standing’.⁴ Drawing on the content of the AAA’s report, several US Senators and President Bush (Senior) pressed President Collor of Brazil, during his US visit in June 1991, to act in favour of the survival of the Yanomami.

This extraordinary initiative stemming from academic milieus was rather unexpectedly followed by practical effects. A few months later, in another report for the AAA, Terry Turner could indeed proudly announce:

The Brazilian Government has responded to these pressures by reversing its policy towards the Yanomami in the three essential respects called for by the Association’s report: official legal demarcation of the full territory of the Yanomami as a continuous area . . . ; expulsion of all miners from Yanomami territory . . . ; and an adequately funded campaign of medical assistance to deal with the devastating malaria epidemic the miners and their operations have caused.⁵

The discipline of anthropology appeared in this instance as a powerful ally of its object of study, struggling side by side with the leaders of the Yanomami for the recognition of their rights, and ultimately for their survival.

In 2000, another public and highly mediatic event shed a radically different light on the relationship between this subject matter of scientific analysis and their analysts. The event through which the Yanomami came back as a *cause célèbre* in the public domain was the publication by a renowned publisher of *Darkness in El Dorado: how scientists and journalists devastated the Amazon*, written by the freelance journalist Patrick Tierney.⁶ In his book, Tierney vigorously attacks anthropology and especially Napoleon Chagnon, author of *Yanomamö: the Fierce People*, a piece of well-known and widely diffused fieldwork on Yanomami culture.⁷ Tierney’s thesis is that the characterization of the Amazon Indians by anthropological discourse, and by Chagnon in particular, as an aggressive and violent population has been of critical importance in the attitude of the Brazilian government and the *garimpeiros* (goldminers) towards the Yanomami. Anthropology had, in other words, and according to Tierney, written the plot which had legitimized the hostile behaviour of these two actors towards the Indians.

This claim triggered a fierce polemic not only in the microcosm of English speaking anthropology (it was a main issue during the annual conference of American anthropologists in November 2000)⁸ but also in mass media such as the *New Yorker*, the *Guardian* or the *London Review of Books*. Journalists, as well as major figures in the discipline, such as Clifford Geertz, who reviewed the book for the *New York Review of Books*, or Marshall Sahlins, who did the same for the *Washington Post*, commented on and responded to the thesis and allegations developed in *Darkness in El Dorado* in a variety of ways.

In this case, anthropology was no longer staged as the spokesperson of an oppressed people but as the source of a performative knowledge, the discursive weapon of the oppressors.

On display again

From May to October 2003, the Fondation Cartier in Paris added another layer to this complex history of the public display of and discussion about Yanomami culture.⁹ This prestigious and affluent art foundation hosted an exhibition entitled *Yanomami: the spirit of the forest*. It was intended as a dialogue between two forms of images. The first were the mental, immaterial images of Yanomami shamanism, the second the material images composed by a group of contemporary artists.¹⁰ These artists had either remained in the Watoriki community in north-western Brazil for a long or short stay, or developed their work on the basis of materials (drawings, texts) produced by members of the community. The idea was that there are interesting family resemblances between the two forms of images.

The result of this dialogue was a stunning, sensuous and coherent symphony of soundscapes, images and three-dimensional installations evoking in a non-paternalistic, non-exoticizing key an encounter between image-makers of different origins but with converging interests in the power of images. The project was lead by Bruce Albert, an anthropologist who has lived at regular intervals in Brazil since 1973, and Davi Kopenawa, one of the shamans of Watoriki. These two persons had been respectively member and consultant of the AAA's Special Commission in 1991.¹¹

The most convincing piece of the exhibition, to me, was the 32-minute film of the French documentarist Raymond Depardon on the shamans and hunters of Watoriki.



FIGURE 1 Raymond Depardon, *Chasseurs et chamans* (photogram), 2002. Colour film, 32 min. (Order of the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris. © Palmeraie et désert.)



FIGURE 2 Raymond Depardon, *Chasseurs et chamans* (photogram), 2002. Colour film, 32 min. (Order of the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris. © Palmeraie et désert.)

With his characteristic fluid camera movements and sense of framing, Depardon follows two scenes: the absolutely silent hunting in the rainforest and the polyphonic shamanic healing ceremony in the large circular collective house of the village.

The film leads us into the everyday geography of the Watoriki community – a geography whose core is an odological relation to the environment, i.e. the experience of the journey.¹² The journey of the hunters is of course organized around the search for game: fish in the riverbeds, animals in the forest and, more often than not, birds in the treetops.¹³ The hunting scene, in Depardon's film is a subtle choreography of body movements and glances. Attentive to the faintest sounds and movements, the hunters are shown listening to, aiming at and shooting at animals with their large bows.

The second scene is set in the collective house of Watoriki, the camera going from the apparent indifference of onlookers hanging in their hammocks to the activity of the shamans. Their journey is prepared by the use of a powerful drug, the *yakoana*, a powder based on the resin of a tree. The powder is blown into the nose of the shaman by another member of the community using a long hollow stick. The film shows the slow progression of a trance during which the shamans invoke spirit-images, the *xapir-ipe*, representing birds, reptiles or fish. The shamans call them, mimicking their song and movements, to 'bring them down' and 'make them dance'.¹⁴

By juxtaposing those two episodes of everyday life in Watoriki, Depardon conveys a strong impression of the intimate connections – or better, the absence of disconnections – between ritual and non-ritual practice, between a transcendental and a mundane geography. Hunting and shamanism are experienced by the spectator of the film as a continuity, as an activity taking place in one and the same world. The practice and observation of the environment on the one hand and the trance on the other are woven together by the threads we draw as we watch successively the two scenes.

Interesting is the fact that Depardon's film has no commentary. There is no scientific gloss, no authorized voice explaining what we see and hear, as there was nearly no comment on the other artworks of the exhibition. This silence about the 'context' was characteristic of an exhibition which was very discreet about the multiple layers of analyses and discourse produced on the Yanomami in the past, despite the role of Albert and Kopenawa both in the making of the exhibition and in the defence of Yanomami rights. No mention was made whatsoever of the recent controversy around the scientific study of that population. For an average visitor, unaware of the close and complex relation between politics, anthropology and the subject matter of the exhibition, the encounter with the Yanomami was relieved of the burden of past encounters between the West and these Amazonian Indians.

In this way the organizers of the exhibition experimented with art as a possible intercultural language, as an alternative to the language of anthropology, and thus as a means for a renewed dialogue between a Western cultural elite and the Yanomami, after the turmoil of recent public debate.

What art can perform in this context, whether it is capable of creating more than ephemeral pleasure and interest, to what extent a dialogue about the images really took place, whether the 'authorized voice' (of the scientist) was not just relocated elsewhere



FIGURE 3 General assembly for the defence of Yanomami territory, intervention of Davi Kopenawa, Watoriki, December 2000 (Photograph: Hervé Chandès © Hervé Chandès.)

(by the artist), are questions which it is impossible to answer – both because they require a long and careful examination of each work, which is outside the scope of this paper, and because the answers would be different in each case.

But art is not the only means used by the promoters of the exhibition to renew conversation with the Yanomami.

Radical ethnogeography?

Another interesting aspect of the Cartier project was indeed invisible to the eyes of the visitor, but present in the catalogue. Parallel to the ephemeral exhibition in Paris, the Fondation Cartier is supporting a longer-term project in the Yanomami territory which started in 2002 and ends in 2005. And here again the issue can be read as the attempt to forge an intercultural language, but this time in the field of science and in the context of recent developments in the area.

In 1992, and as a consequence of the events mentioned above, the Brazilian government decided to dedicate a 96 650 km² piece of land to the exclusive use of the Indians, the *Terra Indígena Yanomami*.¹⁵ Despite this decision, the Terra Indígena is still under the menace of the *garimpeiros*. The incursions of the miners continue today;¹⁶ mining firms have deposited requests for prospecting titles at governmental agencies that correspond to 60 per cent of the territory.¹⁷

In this context, the Cartier Foundation, in collaboration with the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and the Comissao Pro-Yanomami (CCPY), a Brazilian NGO, is realizing an ‘ethnogeographic project’.¹⁸

‘Ethnogeography’ is a term used by French cultural geography, and especially by Paul Claval, to describe a cultural geography focusing on collective representations of space and environment.¹⁹ In other words, a form of cultural geography for a long time marginal in the French-speaking world – which has focused traditionally on material culture, – and interested in issues that have been central to the so called new cultural geography in the English speaking world since the late 1980s.²⁰

What is interesting here is the potentially radical ethnogeography of the Cartier project. The aim of the project is to produce a geographical knowledge of the territory providing information for the defence of territorial rights (monitoring invasions) and the environmental restoration of the zones deforested by the miners. For that purpose, the project uses both remote sensing and fieldwork.²¹

The satellite images are ETM+ shots from Landsat 7. These images will be used in a capacity-building project with young Yanomami professors, which is part of CCPY’s bilingual education programme for the schools of the area.²² The interest of those images of the environment is that they allow for a grasp of the extent of Yanomami land, and help visualize the effects of different land uses in and around the *Terra Indígena*.

These images are complemented by a survey on the ground, to collect anthropological, botanical, zoological and pedological information, and by an ‘ethnomapping of the use of natural resources by the Yanomami’.²³ The goal of the fieldwork is literally to put the Yanomami on the maps, as their settlements and toponymy are absent from present

official cartography.²⁴ The attribution of Yanomami place names to precise locations on these new maps is, as geographers know, an important aspect of the process of political recognition. Baptizing places and diffusing these names is, in other words, an attempt to construct irreversibilities in the collective representations of the Amazon forest.

Methodologically, the interest of the project lies in its ambition to blend technologically sophisticated Western geographical tools – but turned, so to speak, against the Westernization of the territory – and indigenous knowledge, zenithal and horizontal views of the environment, cartographic space and symbolic space. The use of remote sensing for the study of indigenous populations, and of the Yanomami in particular, is not new.²⁵ What is innovative, however, is the creation of a GIS with the collaboration of an Indian population and with an acute awareness of the limits of GIS systems for the description of the human geography of the Yanomami, and for that matter all human geographies. Strict boundaries and homogeneous spatial units, postulated by GIS, are for instance inadequate for the apprehension of a culture in which mobility is central and where patterns of land use are complex. This is not, however, considered as a ‘bias’ in the research process but as part and parcel of a project which is also interested in such methodological challenges.²⁶

The research thus raises interesting questions concerning the plasticity of contemporary mapping technologies. If mapping is strategically important for the process of political recognition, to what extent can GIS really be turned into an adequate tool for the representation of Yanomami culture?²⁷ How can a specific Yanomami geography – i.e. the importance of odological space so evocatively rendered by Depardon’s documentary – be communicated to a larger audience? And, more generally, to what extent can ‘emic’ categories describing this geography fit within the language of cartographic reason?

How this knowledge about Yanomami geography is, in other words, actually produced, shared and used *in situ* will be of critical importance to the radical nature and success of the project.

Considering the present early phase of the project’s development, no serious replies can be given to these queries yet; but if this research is developed with the same sensitivity and intelligence which was at work in creating the Paris exhibition, it will certainly be a project worth further scrutiny and discussion.

Notes

¹ Stephen Nugent, ‘Anthropology and public culture: the Yanomami, science and ethic’, *Anthropology today* 17 (2001), p. 10.

² Terry Turner *et al.*, ‘Report of the Special Commission to Investigate the Situation of the Brazilian Yanomami’ (American Anthropological Association, 1991), www.aaanet.org/committees/cfhr/rptyano2.htm

³ An estimated 40 000 goldminers invaded the territory between 1987 and 1992. Parts of the government had been in favour of the creation of a national reserve in the 1980s while others, the military sector in particular had, for geostrategic reasons, developed efforts to counter the project.

⁴ Turner *et al.*, ‘Report’.

- ⁵ Terry Turner, 'New life for the Yanomami. association plays key role in major shift in Brazilian policy', *Anthropological newsletter* (Sept. 1991), www.aaanet.org/committees/chfr/rptyano7.htm
- ⁶ P. Tierney, *Darkness in El Dorado: how scientists and journalists devastated the Amazon* (New York, Norton, 2000). Tierney is also Visiting Scholar at the Center for Latin American Studies, University of Pittsburgh.
- ⁷ Napoleon Chagnon, *Yanomamö: the fierce people* (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968).
- ⁸ Most of them contested both the facts presented by Tierney in his book and his version of the role of anthropology in the 'Yanomami problem'.
- ⁹ Created in 1984 by the president of the firm Cartier International, the foundation aims at supporting contemporary art and diffusing its knowledge to a wide audience. The building on the Boulevard Raspail, where the exhibitions have been shown since 1994, was conceived by the French architect Jean Nouvel. Website: www.fondation.cartier.fr
- ¹⁰ Claudia Andujar, Lothar Baumgarten, Vincent Beaurin, Raymond Depardon, Gary Hill, Tony Oursler, Wolfgang Staehle, Naoki Takizawa, Adriano Varejao, Stephen Vitiello, Volkmar Ziegler.
- ¹¹ Bruce Albert was also asked to comment on Tierney's book both in the press and in academic journals when it was published, which he did critically. See Bruce Albert, 'Research and ethics: the Yanomami case, Brazilian contributions to the *Darkness in El Dorado* controversy', *Documentos Yanomami* 2 (Brazilia, Pro-Yanomami, 2002).
- ¹² From the Greek *odos*, 'way'. For a discussion of 'odological space' versus cartographic space, see Pietro Janni, *La mappa e il periplo: cartografia antica e spazio odologico* (Rome, Bretschneider, 1984).
- ¹³ Hunting accounts for 60% of men's daytime activities in Watoriki.
- ¹⁴ Bruce Albert, 'Les images-esprits', in Bruce Albert and Davi Kopenawa, *Yanomami, l'esprit de la forêt* (Paris, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2003), pp. 60–61.
- ¹⁵ Albert, 'Les Yanomami au Brésil', in Albert and Kopenawa, *Yanomami*, p. 40.
- ¹⁶ www.proyanomami.org.br/frame1/noticia.asp?id=1617
- ¹⁷ Albert, 'Demain', in Albert and Kopenawa, *Yanomami*, p. 182.
- ¹⁸ Bruce Albert and François-Michel Le Tourneau, 'De la carte mentale au SIG: réalisation d'une base de données géographique par et pour les Indiens Yanomami (Brésil)', mimeo (presentation of the research project), 2003. Many thanks to François-Michel Le Tourneau for communicating me this project.
- ¹⁹ See Paul Claval, 'Champs et perspectives de la géographie culturelle', *Géographie et cultures* 1 (1992), pp. 7–38, and Paul Claval and Singaravelou (eds.) *Ethnogéographies* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995).
- ²⁰ Needless to say that these distinctions mentioned here between geographical traditions in different linguistic 'worlds' have tended to blur in recent years, for better and for worse.
- ²¹ The first results in the form of satellite images with Yanomami place names are available on-line at: www.proyanomami.org.br/sat/img_sat/
- ²² The programme is therefore bilingual not only in terms of verbal languages.
- ²³ News in the *Boletim* 27, 'Equipe de pesquisadores faz levantamento preliminar em área devastada por garimpo', published by the Comissão Pro-Yanomami. The bulletins are available on their website: www.proyanomami.org.br
- ²⁴ François-Michel Le Tourneau, 'Cartographie', in Albert and Kopenawa, *Yanomami*, p. 192.
- ²⁵ Albert and Le Tourneau, 'De la carte mentale au SIG', p. 12.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–14.
- ²⁷ Parallels can be drawn here with the discussion about Public Participation GIS (PPGIS) in contemporary planning practice.