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## THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF FLORENCE AND COLLABORATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY: THE YANOMAMI OF THE CATRIMANI REGION

**Abstract** - Traditionally the Yanomami people live in symbiosis with the Amazon forest. Contact with Western culture occurred very recently and often in concomitance with dramatic events like diseases and invasions of their territory. Over the last decades marked by deep crisis the Yanomami have become a symbol of the struggle for the survival of the Amazon forest and native populations. The section of Anthropology and Ethnology of the Museum of Natural History, University of Florence, holds a complete collection of objects of the Yanomami culture, coming from villages of the Catrimani region (Brazil). Here we present a research plan and the first results of a pilot to study the material culture in cooperation with the same Yanomami communities from whom the objects derived. It is our intention to begin a research program in which young Yanomami, using the collection as a starting point, will research their own culture so that the traditional knowledge and use of objects can be fostered and maintained, and also become a common patrimony of the Museum. The goal is to make the collection meaningful to young Yanomami encouraging them to appreciate their own cultural heritage. We hope that the research will strengthen their ties to traditional values, facilitate communication between different generations and finally allow them to make non-Yanomami people aware of their-cultural vision. It is also an opportunity to revitalize the museum, not only as a center of education and study, but as a vital place, open to a close encounter with native peoples and their current problems.

**Key words** - Amazon Basin, Natives, Material culture, Museology.

**Riassunto** - *Il Museo di Storia Naturale di Firenze e l'antropologia collaborativa: gli Yanomami della regione Catrimani* - Il popolo Yanomami vive tradizionalmente in simbiosi con la foresta amazzonica. Il contatto con la cultura occidentale è avvenuto in tempi molto recenti e spesso fu accompagnato da eventi drammatici come epidemie e invasioni del loro territorio. Negli ultimi 50 anni, nonostante periodi di grande crisi, gli Yanomami sono diventati un simbolo della lotta per la sopravvivenza della foresta e dei popoli nativi dell'Amazzonia. La sezione di Antropologia e Etnologia del Museo di Storia Naturale, Università di Firenze, conserva una completa collezione di oggetti della cultura Yanomami della regione del fiume Catrimani (Brasile). Il nostro progetto di ricerca è stato concepito e viene realizzato con la collaborazione della stessa comunità Yanomami da cui provengono gli oggetti. Gli Yanomami, utilizzando la collezione come punto di riferimento, saranno i protagonisti di un progetto di ricerca sulla documentazione della loro cultura affinché la conoscenza degli oggetti tradizionali possa essere favorita e mantenuta, e diventi patrimonio di conoscenza anche presso il Museo. L'obiettivo è di rendere la collezione significativa per i giovani Yanomami, incoraggiandone l'apprezzamento della loro eredità culturale, rafforzando il loro legame con i valori tradizionali, facilitando la comunicazione fra le diverse generazioni e permettendo infine che gli Yanomami stessi diffondano la loro visione culturale. È un'importante occasione per rivitalizzare il Museo non solo come polo educativo e di studio, ma come luogo vivo e aperto di incontro con i popoli nativi e con le loro problematiche attuali.

**Parole chiave** - Amazzonia, Nativi, Cultura materiale, Museologia.

### INTRODUCTION

The Yanomami are hunter-gatherers who also practice horticulture. Hunting and fishing provide much of their daily proteins intake. Hunting was traditionally done with bow and arrows through areas surrounding the village. Some arrow-points are covered with curare to immobilize more easily the monkeys who live in the canopy of the forest. The Yanomami also fish in small rivers and ponds using vines (timbò) and leaves (koaxana) that deplete the oxygen in the water and cause dyspnea in small fish which are collected with baskets. The Yanomami do not raise animals for consumption as food. The animals in the village (dogs, birds, small monkeys) are considered as pets. The Yanomami do not practice agriculture, but «horticulture». With axes, machetes and the use of fire small plots of land are created in the forest. With sticks and hoes the Yanomami cultivate bananas, cassava, sweet potatoes, tobacco, cotton and other plants for medicinal and witchcraft purposes. Social life is traditionally linked to extended families and tribal groups living in the same region. They live in a communal circular house. The suffix - *theri* added to the geographical indication of the village, provides the name to each tribal group. The collective dimension of their life is traditionally very strong (Saffirio, 1985). Although references to the Yanomami can be found in some early anthropological literature (Koch-Grünberg, 1917). The first sustained contacts with foreigners occurred in the 1950s when missionaries, rubber tappers and explorers reached these still mostly unknown regions (Zerries, 1956). The '60s marked the rise of scientific expeditions and intensive anthropological research (Biocca, 1965, 1966; Chagnon, 1977). In early 1973 construction on the Northern Perimeter Highway, also called BR-210, was the starting point of an invasion by gold miners, causing huge environmental damage, and cultural changes (Saffirio and Scaglione, 1982; Saffirio and Hames, 1983). It also facilitated the spread of diseases for which the immune system of the natives was not prepared. For example, the villages

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along the Catrimani river were affected by a first outbreak of measles in 1974 and by a second even more dramatic pandemic measles in 1977, that killed more than 25% of the local population. Today the Yanomami are fighting for the recognition of their constitutional rights. Here we present a research plan and the first results of a pilot study. Hopefully in the future we will be able implement a full scale research project based on the premises only briefly outlined here.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The collection, donated in 1997 by the Consolata Missionaries to the Museum of Natural History of Florence, is made of more than 140 artifacts collected by Giovanni Saffirio, anthropologist and missionary who lived with the Yanomami of the Catrimani River (Roraima, Brazil) from 1968 to 1995. The collection is significant for its completeness and precise documentation of every aspect of the traditional life of the Yanomami (Damioli and Saffirio, 1996). The artifacts were collected in early 1990s: tools used daily for carrying and consuming food, weapons for hunting and fishing, hammocks, clothing, objects and ornaments associated with ritual ceremonies, toys and even tools used for the manufacture of the objects.

#### Step 1: Research done on the collection

Francesca Bigoni contacted the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh, PA and started an internet dialogue with Giovanni Saffirio. The Yanomami artifacts previously photographed and catalogued, were examined and compared with information, pictures and movies taken in the early '90s by Saffirio (Bigoni and Saffirio 2010, in press; Bigoni *et al.*, 2011).

#### Step 2: Yanomami case and analysis of their traditional culture

In the last few years a wide debate has arisen about a new approach to Anthropological studies, and the Yanomami case has been at the centre of the discussion (Borofsky, 2005). The project falls within what has generally been designated as self-representation or better Collaborative Ethnography in anthropology (Butz and Besio, 2004; Rappaport, 2008). However, given space limitation we had to restrict our attention to outlining the essentials of our research plan. It is impossible therefore to provide more than a superficial discussion of the many issues raised in conducting modern ethnological research. We can note however, that our research project holds promise as an important anthropological development by improving the collaborative relationship between the scientific com-

munity and the Yanomami. The Yanomami are considered the subject and not an object of science. They are allowed to present their view-point and understanding of their own culture to scientists and the outside world in general.

Our project was developed thanks to Corrado Dalmonego and the team now working in the Catrimani Mission (Roraima, Brazil). Dalmonego is coordinating the research done by Yanomami and is the go-in-between the Museum of Florence and the Yanomami communities of the region.

Young Yanomami with the participation of elders and leaders, are conducting research on their traditional material culture now in rapid transformation. Some artifacts are still used daily, some have been modified and others are not manufactured anymore. The collection housed in the Museum of Natural History of Florence is important for this kind of investigation, and at the same time will be enriched by reports and observations made by the Yanomami themselves.

#### CONCLUSIONS

We foresee important results for the Yanomami people and the Museum of Natural History of Florence as this project develops more fully and advance from research planning and the simple pilot study illustrated here to a full research program. Yanomami elders will provide information to young Yanomami, saving knowledge that may be otherwise lost, while young Yanomami will be stimulated to study and preservation their own culture. The knowledge about the artifacts, how they were made and used will be preserved. The cooperation between young Yanomami and the Florentine scientific community will make the artifacts more meaningful to young Yanomami, encouraging the appreciation of their cultural heritage, strengthening their bonds to their traditional values and facilitating communication between different generations.

For the Section of Anthropology and Ethnology of the Museum of Natural History it is our hope that the Yanomami collection will go beyond the simple «conservation» and «exhibition» of artifacts, revitalizing the museum as a vibrant place of communication with the public. The collection and the knowledge about the people who manufactured the objects will make the visitors of the Museum of Natural History of Florence more familiar with a native population and their struggle to survive. The conservation of the biodiversity of the Amazon forest is also directly connected to the survival of the Yanomami. New future initiatives like the research plan outlined here will promote the educational mission of the Museum of Natural History of Florence by spreading respect and concern of the «different» cultures living on our planet. A cordial collabora-



Fig. 1 - Material for the research at Catrimani with photographs of the objects from the collection in Florence, which the young Yanomami use for interviewing elders.

tion with a native population will increase the reciprocal understanding, comprehension and appreciation.

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