

3 Indigenous Peoples of the Upper Caura: Ye'kwana and Sanema

The Upper Caura has been inhabited by indigenous peoples since the earliest historical records for this region which date back only to the mid 18th century. At that time the river was being used extensively by the Kariña and the upper reaches were also inhabited by Maco and Guinau peoples. After the *Real Expedicion de Limites* (1756-1761) first physically asserted Spanish territorial claims in the Upper Orinoco and Upper Rio Negro, a line of forts linked by canoes and portages was established from Angostura on the Lower Orinoco up the Caura over the watershed, across the Upper Ventuari and down the Padamo to La Esmeralda in the Orinoco headwaters. The trail crossed a number of indigenous territories and the burden on the local communities of maintaining and supplying these forts was evidently unpopular.⁵

Ye'kwana

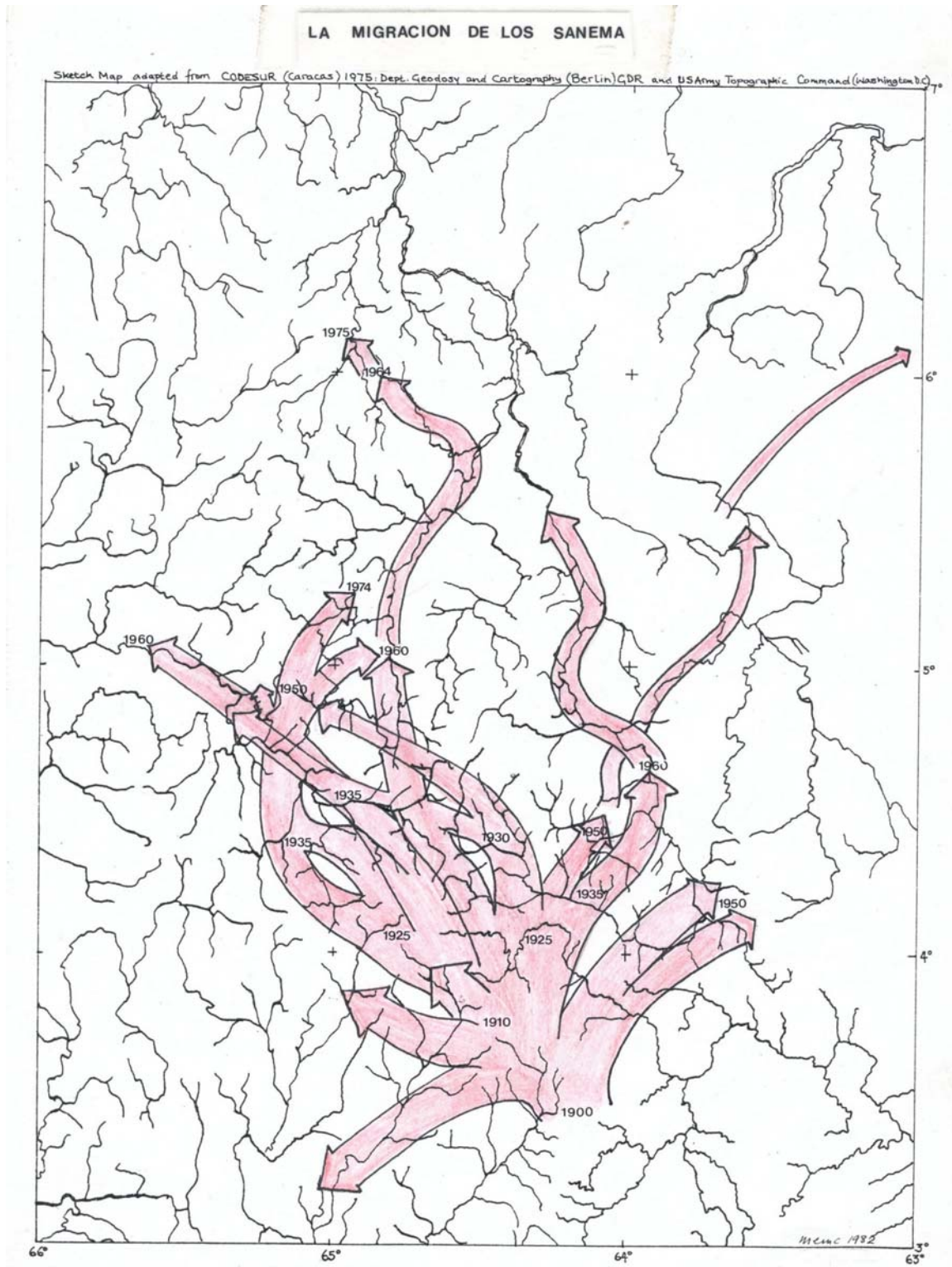
One of the most vigorous peoples in this region is the Ye'kwana, a Carib-speaking people (also referred to as Soto, Makiritare and Maiongong) who were at this time mainly living in the Upper Orinoco, along the Casiquiare, Kunukunuma and Padamo rivers. In 1776, the Ye'kwana coordinated an effective uprising against the Spaniards and these forts were destroyed, so causing the withdrawal of a permanent Spanish presence from the region except for the maintenance of a small settlement in La Esmeralda.

Subsequent to this conflict with the Spanish, the Ye'kwana, who have long been famous for their very wide-ranging expeditions, began to extend their trading contacts with the Dutch (and later British) in Guyana to the east. Extensive trading expeditions down the Rio Negro and Rio Branco also brought the Ye'kwana into contact with Portuguese as far south as the Amazon and Manaus. From the early 19th century they gradually began to establish settlements in the Upper Caura and Upper Uraricoera. At the same time the Kariña, Maco and Guinau settlements on the Upper Caura began to withdraw north and east or were absorbed through inter-marriage by the dominant Ye'kwana. Over the following decades, Ye'kwana settlements were established further down these rivers and down the Ventuari to take advantage of a growing trade with *criollo* society but these settlements withdrew again to the highlands at the time of violence that accompanied the collapse of the rubber trade at the beginning of the 20th century. Since the 1930s, Ye'kwana settlements have once again begun to move downstream and eastwards. Two settlements were established in the Paragua river in the 1960s and other Ye'kwana have since moved below the Para falls on the Caura to have more ready access to markets.

The Sanema

The other main ethnic group of the Caura is the Sanema (northern Yanomami, also known as Shiriana, Guaharibo and Guaica), who at the time of the slave wars of the early 18th century lived in the southern Parima Highlands between the headwaters of the Orinoco and Upper Ocamo. From what we can reconstruct of their history, it appears that they began extensive trade with the Ye'kwana at least by the early 19th century and began raiding to acquire metal goods from neighbouring communities around that time. Pushed by other warring groups to the south and drawn north by trading and raiding opportunities in the Ocamo, Matakuni, Kuntinamo, Padamo, Parime and Auaris, the Sanema began to expand

⁵ For more details of this historical reconstruction see Marcus Colchester, 1982, *The Economy, Ecology and Ethnobiology of the Sanema Indians of South Venezuela*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Oxford and R. Brian Ferguson, 1995, *Yanomami Warfare: a political history*. School of American Research Press, Santa Fe.



into the Ye'kwana's territories at first causing the Ye'kwana to withdraw. By the 1930s, the Sanema, moving north from the Parima, were beginning to establish settlements in the Upper Ventuari and Merevari, reaching the Upper Erebató by the 1940s and settling at Kanadakuni in the 1950s. Since then their migration has not halted and they have continued to expand both in numbers and in terms of the area they occupy. Sanema settlements now extend into the Paragua to the east, northwards down the whole of the Caura to near Maripa and westwards down the Ventuari as far as Tencua. In the south they retain territorial control of the headwaters of the Ocamo, the Upper Matakuni, parts of the Padamo and Kuntinamo and the Auaris in Brazil (see map on preceding page).

The Ye'kwana did not give way to this process passively. After a period of retreat and dispersal,⁶ the Ye'kwana rallied. Under the leadership of an unusually persuasive 'Kajiichana' (chief), Kalomera, they intensified trade with the Pemon for shotguns and ammunition and gathered their forces to attack the Sanema. Both the Sanema and Ye'kwana recall a series of bloody encounters during the 1930s in the Kuntinamo, Upper Ventuari and Auaris in which large numbers of Sanema and some Ye'kwana lost their lives. Their bows and arrows outclassed by the Ye'kwana's guns, the Sanema were forced to adopt a subservient relationship in their future dealings with the Ye'kwana, a relationship which has only recently begun to change.⁷

It is the land use system of these two peoples, Ye'kwana and Sanema, which this report examines. Further downstream there has been a great deal of social movement and mixing and a much greater degree of interaction with the national society. As a result, the lower reaches of the river are now populated by diverse communities, principally *criollos*, Venezuelan nationals of mixed descent, but also including other ethnic groups such as Kariña, Pemon, Hiwi, Sanema, Ye'kwana and Maroons.⁸

The Hoti

In recent decades, a third indigenous people has also begun making very limited use of the natural resources in the Upper Caura. These are the Hoti, a hunting and gathering people with incipient agriculture, some 800 of whom live west of the Caura basin in the southernmost affluents of the Cuchivero River in Distrito Cedeño of Bolívar State and in the northern affluents of the middle Ventuari in Amazonas State. Since the mid-1980s, the Hoti, referred to as 'wadu wadu' by the Ye'kwana, who have had a long history of contact with these people in Amazonas, began to establish temporary hunting camps, and later small settlements and gardens, on the eastern side of the Serranía de Maigualida in the Upper Caura.

⁶ Nelly Arvelo, 1983, *The Dynamics of the Ye'cuana Political System: stability and crisis*. Document 12, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen.

⁷ Marcus Colchester, 1982, *The Economy, Ecology and Ethnobiology of the Sanema Indians of South Venezuela*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Oxford; Marcus Colchester, 1997, *La Ecología Social de los Indígenas Sanema*. *Scientia Guaianae* 7: 111-140.

⁸ Jose Marcial Ramos Guedez, (2001, *Contribución a la historia de las historias negras en Venezuela colonial*. Caracas p.30) citing Humboldt notes that these Maroons are descendants of slaves escaped from the Dutch plantations on the Essequibo who established a settlement named San Luis de Guaraguaraico by 1800. They currently form the main population of Aripao.



Hoti elder (Caño Iguana, 1976)

Contacts commenced in the late 1980s when small family groups of Hoti, crossing the watershed from the upper reaches of Caño Asita, began to make occasional visits to the Sanema settlements in the headwaters of the Majagua – at Majaguaña and Wasaiña. Sanema hunters made a number of reciprocal visits to the Hoti's hunting camps. On all these occasions limited barter and exchange of goods occurred. Communications were restricted as the Hoti are monolingual. Somewhat later, the same or other Hoti families began to establish hunting camps in the headwaters of the Yudi, descending the river for short visits to the Sanema villages of Yudiña and Ayawaiña. Over the following decades these same Hoti, thought to number about 20-60 persons, began making regular visits to the Ye'kwana community of Saishodunña, where they exchanged their labour for trade goods. In the last ten years, these Hoti have been permitted by the local Ye'kwana to settle in the mid-Kakada river, from where they continue to make wide-ranging hunting, gathering and trading trips. Their presence in the Ye'kwana and Sanema territory is fully accepted by the local communities and their pressure on the environment is considered insignificant. Indeed, independent studies of Hoti resource use systems show that their customary systems of resource use enhance, rather than deplete, biological diversity.⁹

⁹ Eglee L. Zent y Stanford Zent, 2002, Impactos Ambientales Generadores de Biodiversidad: Conducta Ecológicas de los Hoti de la Sierra Maigualida, Amazonas Venezolano. *Interciencia* 27(1):9-20.

Conceptions of territory and biological resources

In common with many indigenous peoples of the Americas, both the Ye'kwana and Sanema peoples have rich mythologies which constitute the founding charters of their societies.¹⁰ These bodies of myth and legend establish the identity, the sacredness of language, cultural norms and values of these societies and celebrate the very close spiritual ties that exist between people and their environment.¹¹

One of the founding charters of the Ye'kwana, relates the story of the culture hero Kuyujani, who travelled the length and breadth of the Ye'kwana's territory naming and giving spiritual power and significance to key locations and features. According to the Ye'kwana of the Caura, Kuyujani travelled to all the watersheds and mountain tops of the Upper Caura as well as traversing the rivers and trails. He named these features with the names that they still have today, and prominent elements in this landscape, such as waterfalls, cliffs and rocks, are still considered powerful, even frightening, places which should not be interfered with or looked at by the uninitiated, as they continue to house spirits that may cause harm or disease if not treated with respect.

The tales of Kuyujani and many other myths and legends thus legitimate the Ye'kwana's strong sense of having proprietary rights in their territory, which was created and named by their ancestors and which has been entrusted to them to care for, cherish and maintain. It is the shamans and ritual specialists of Ye'kwana society who are considered to be the ones who retain and pass on this millennial knowledge of the connections between daily life and the spiritual powers which underpin it, although some parts of this detailed lore is held in common by nearly all adult members of the society. The Ye'kwana also gain ready access to these spiritual powers through their use of plants as cures, poisons, charms and remedies. A large number of these plants are cultivated in small gardens near to their houses but several hundreds of other wild plants are also known about and used on a regular basis.

Sanema myths and cosmovision are also profoundly entwined with their knowledge of the environment. Yet, where the Ye'kwana appear to give special importance to plants in their lore, the Sanema give greater prominence to animals – insects, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals – and their shamans recruit the powers on these animals, manifest in their songs and chants, to cure disease, regulate natural forces, counter enemies and restore social harmony.¹²

Sanema tales of origin also explain the qualities of human life and existential problems of existence in terms of natural forces. For example, human frailty and weakness results from humans having been created by the mythical trickster from softwood trees. Most diseases result from attacks by vengeful spirits of animals that have been killed and eaten by Sanema. The main task of the very numerous shamans in Sanema is to interpret these diseases, caution people for infringing the numerous food prohibitions which are meant to regulate and define their place in society and recruit the assistance of spirit allies to restore balance between society and nature (the next photo shows collective shamanism – *polemo*).

¹⁰ Marc de Civrieux, 1992, *Watunna: un ciclo de creacion en el Orinoco*. Monte Avila Editores, Caracas; Marcus Colchester, 1991, Myths and Legends of the Sanema. *Antropológica* 56:25-126.

¹¹ Jonathan D. Hill and Fernando Santos-Granero (eds.), 2002, *Comparative Arawakan Histories: Rethinking language, Family and Culture Area in Amazonia*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana.

¹² Marcus Colchester, 1992, The Cosmovision of the Venezuelan Sanema. *Antropológica* 58:97-174.



It is hard to exaggerate the degree of intimacy and the immediacy of relations that the Sanema feel they have with the natural environment that they depend on.

