

5 Traditional Cultural Practices

This chapter of this study seeks to identify the main ‘traditional cultural practices’ applied by the Ye’kwana and Sanema to ensure that the customary uses they make of natural resources, summarised briefly in Chapter 4, are ‘compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements’. It needs to be appreciated that this is a challenging task. This is not just because their customary uses of natural resources are themselves so varied but also because the almost the whole of the Sanema and Ye’kwana lifeways are intimately woven into their conceptions of themselves as peoples, both as they relate to their environment and amongst themselves. The systems of customary law that regulate resource use are not discrete from the general norms of society. On the contrary, the norms relating to resource use are also those: by which the Sanema and Ye’kwana define themselves as individuals with different genders, reproductive states and at different life stages; by which they determine how individuals should relate to each other; by which they make general political decisions and allocate power; by which they relate to the spiritual forces that are believed to underlie all physical existence; and by which health and disease, curing and necromancy are ascertained, controlled and applied. Faced with this complexity, this chapter can only hope to elucidate some of the more obvious connections between society and nature.

Gender roles, labour and exchange

Ye’kwana and Sanema men and women have differentiated roles in society. It is the men who hunt, do most of the fishing, fell trees, clear gardens, construct houses and canoes, weave tessalate and hexagonal basketry and make hammocks. It is the women who take primary responsibility for childcare, collect wild fruits, weave corded basketry, spin cotton, prepare meals and do most of the harvesting from gardens.



Sanema woman spinning cotton



Ye'kwana man in traditional dress

However, among the Sanema, the division of labour is not strict and hunting may be the only activity which females never engage in. The contribution of labour of Sanema men and women to the subsistence economy is about equal.

Among the Ye'kwana, the division of labour is somewhat stricter. Ye'kwana men play a very limited role weeding and harvesting food from gardens, which is considered a woman's domain. Whereas it is common for Sanema married couples to share the work load in the gardens, Ye'kwana women tend to work in their gardens in large all female groups and their self-esteem and value in society are expressed through their productiveness in providing cassava bread, starchy gruels and fermented drinks (*yarake*). Seasonal rituals, from which men are excluded, are held by Ye'kwana women to celebrate the planting of new gardens.

The subsistence economies of both the Ye'kwana and the Sanema are for the most part the discrete affairs of individual households or hearth groups but labour exchanges between family units are based on generalised reciprocity. Collective activities such as fish poisoning and larger hunts are shared endeavours. Other onerous tasks such as clearing gardens and, among the Ye'kwana, house construction are also carried out communally but in the Ye'kwana case those working for the house-owner or the communal dwelling are rewarded with regular beverages for their efforts. Only when goods, such as canoes, are produced for sale or barter are labour exchanges more carefully reckoned and paid for through direct or delayed reciprocity.

Norms of sharing: wealth and redistribution

The autonomy of households in terms of production is however complemented by a major social emphasis on the sharing of food. Indeed the norm of food-sharing can be considered one of the fundamental values of both Sanema and Ye'kwana societies.



Sanema norms define how game is butchered and shared. Specific, named cuts are customarily offered to kin and affines in defined categories (Shimadawoche, 1983)

Among the Ye'kwana, most adult males eat together two or three times a day in the communal roundhouse (*öttö*), the food being brought from individual households into the *öttö* for general consumption. Among the Sanema, the norm is that all game, fish and collected animals is shared out equally among all the households of a village, ensuring that men, women, children, the aged and the infirm all get a share of the produce from the food-quest. The refusal of individuals and families to share their food with others signals a breakdown in the society and usually results in the fission of the community.

One result of this food-sharing norm is that scarcity of food especially game is quickly felt almost equally by all members of the community at once. Livelihood strategies are thus reassessed communally by the whole community when making collective decisions about whether to organise hunting or gathering expeditions, to go off on trek, or relocate the village.

Notions of property: gardens, hunting zones and territories

The strongly collective emphasis of community life does not imply an absence of notions of private property. Tools and utensils, canoes and houses are considered private property. Gardens are considered to belong to the male head of households by the Sanema, to the senior female of a household among the Ye'kwana. Moreover, the norm is for families have their own gardening areas, which ideally provide room for expansion of their cultivations without impinging on the areas owned by other families. Where large communities are close together, boundaries are agreed about where one community's farmlands begin and the other's end.

Corresponding to their distinctive livelihood strategies, the Ye'kwana and Sanema have somewhat different proprietary notions regarding hunting and gathering areas. The more sedentary Ye'kwana communities have an explicit sense of having their own, albeit quite distant, hunting areas and they have an explicit system for zoning their hunting grounds and rotating them between areas that are actively exploited and those that are allowed to 'rest' (*somajö*). According to this system, quite large areas, usually river or creek basins, are set aside for a matter of a year or two so game can replenish itself.¹⁷ The Ye'kwana also have complex norms that are designed to regulate where, how and how often fish-poisons should be used, explicitly aimed to ensure that fish stocks are not damaged.

Among the traditionally more mobile Sanema, there are no comparable notions of community 'owned' hunting zones and the pressure on resources is spread out not by zoning and rotation but instead by relocating communities (see below). However, within any one community, individual Sanema hunters do establish their own hunting trails which are considered to 'belong' to them and they have loosely exercised prior rights to valuable resources encountered along such trails such as honey, palm grubs and trees useful for making canoes.

¹⁷ cf Raymond Hames, 1980, Game Depletion and Hunting Zone Rotation among the Yekuana and Yanomamo of Amazonas, Venezuela. In: Raymond Hames (ed.) Studies in Hunting and Fishing in the Neotropics. *Working Papers on South American Indians* 2:31-66.

Polities and jurisdictions

Ye'kwana society is profoundly egalitarian, although leadership roles are recognised and the authority of the village 'headman' (*Kajiichana*) respected, his power is strictly limited. A Ye'kwana headman consolidates his power through the kinship network, recruiting support by influencing marriages so that his village will be strengthened and stabilised by gaining young sons-in-law who will move into the village to be with their wives. Central to Ye'kwana perceptions of social life is the concept of the village as an enduring, undivided and unitary entity that is substantially independent of other communities.¹⁸

The headman of the community gives it leadership and has the duty of mediating all transactions and trade with outsiders. He is expected to appoint a deputy. Formal meetings of the council of elders (*Inchonkomo*) are preceded by conferences between the headman and his deputy and then community decisions are achieved by consensus. By this means a strong sense of common purpose and community solidarity is, ideally, achieved.¹⁹ Formally, however, the headman has few powers to enforce his will on community members who choose not to follow collective decisions, and the main sanctions on misbehaviour come through peer disapproval, publicly voiced criticism, ostracism and, in some regions, the withdrawal of food-sharing.

However, the day to day authority of the headman, and the council of elders he is able to recruit about himself, is complemented uneasily by the role of the shaman (*jü'wai*) whose spiritual authority and power is feared and respected. Ye'kwana shamans play a very influential role in the making of strategic decisions about resource use, notably in advising on when villages should relocate, which sacred areas should be avoided and which areas are favourable for new settlements.²⁰

In addition to the village level authorities, the Ye'kwana also have a higher level body known as the *Öyaamö*, which brings together the headmen of several villages. Customarily active only when villages in defined areas feel the need to jointly confront serious problems, such as illness and warfare, the *Öyaamö* has recently re-emerged as a critical institution for dealing with the national society (see below).

Sanema social norms vest even less power in their headmen (*kaikana*). Indeed the very word for a village headman has only recently been adopted from the Ye'kwana. Villages recruit members agnatically and headmen are considered to represent particular descent groups rather than communities. When communities meet for feasts and funerals, political relations are established bilaterally between many different men of the different villages through ritual dialogues (*wasamo*) in which the men pair up and competitively engage in word exchanges using a special language only used for this purpose. A headman has no authority to punish another person for misbehaviour instead can only challenge miscreants to formalised duels in which antagonists exchange an even number of blows. Strict equality between the headman and other members of the community is thus maintained. Although decisions are often reached by conferences of all concerned elders (*pata töpö*), consensus is

¹⁸ Nelly Arvelo-Jimenez, 1971, *Political Relations in a Tribal Society: a study of the Yecuana Indians of Venezuela*. Latin America Studies Programme, Document 31, Cornell University.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ David Guss, 1986, Keeping it Oral: a Yekuana Ethnology. *American Ethnologist* 13: 413-429. 'In Amazonian indigenous societies, where shamans are also political leaders, their power is of an economic nature insofar as their ritual knowledge is considered indispensable to ensure the success of productive and reproductive activities.' (266).

not insisted on, and the right of individuals to hold their own opinion is widely respected.²¹ Likewise the authority of shamans is also more limited since the norm among the Sanema is that as many as eight in ten men are active shamans, meaning that power is widely diffused and not vested in the figure of single prominent individuals.²²



Sanema men engaged in *wasamo*, ritualised trade talk to establish relations

²¹ Cf. Marcus Colchester, 1995, Sustentabilidad y Toma de Decisiones en el Amazonas Venezolano: Los Yanomamis en la Reserva de la Biosfera del Alto Orinoco-Casiquiare. In: Antonio Carrillo, and Miguel Perera (eds.) *Amazonas: Modernidad en Tradicion*, SADA-Amazonas- CAIAH, Ministerio del Ambiente y los Recursos Natural Renovables and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, Caracas: 141-174.

²² Marcus Colchester, 1982, The Cosmvision of the Venezuelan Sanema. *Antropologica* 58:97-174.

Settlement patterns

The most important way that community pressure on resources is regulated and controlled is during the process of selecting sites for new settlements. As noted, village sites are often chosen by shamans who gain knowledge about the spirits through dreaming and conversing with their spirit allies. They take into account factors such as soil quality, access to good drinking water from creeks, vicinity of neighbouring settlements and the availability of game.²³

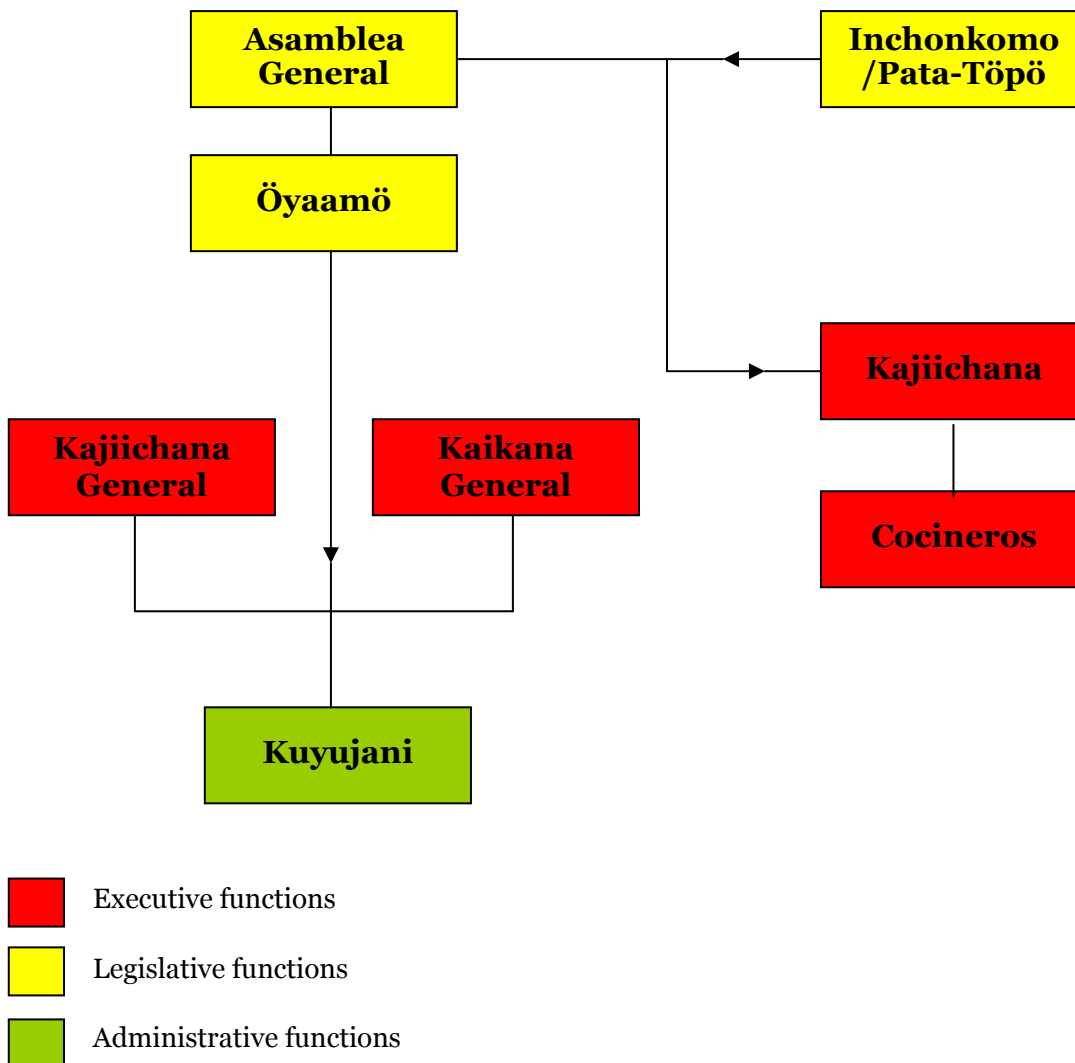
New villages are only established after extensive consultations and often involve neighbouring settlements in very long drawn out discussions and negotiations which may take place over several months or even years. During these processes, full scope is given to examining the relations between the communities, establishing whether other communities have proprietary rights in the proposed areas and assessing the suitability of the area for livelihoods. Particularly for the Ye'kwana, for whom the investment in establishing a new village is very significant, such decisions are not undertaken lightly as the ideal is that a new village will endure for a very long time.

The consequence of this thoughtful and highly consultative process of decision-making is that Ye'kwana villages are very widely spread out across the whole river basin, thereby ensuring that pressure on natural resources is kept to a minimum.

Customarily the Sanema move their more simply constructed villages with much greater frequency than the Ye'kwana. Rather than carrying out hunting expeditions in distant hunting zones using canoes to reach them, the Sanema rely on the resources in the immediate vicinity of their villages. As resources become locally depleted, food-sharing norms ensure that the whole community quickly and simultaneously sense the diminution. Dissatisfaction with the locale grows and the community becomes increasingly disposed to suggestions of relocation. By frequently moving their villages, their load on the environment is attenuated.

²³ Cf. Marcus Colchester, 1997, Conservation Politics: the Upper Orinoco-Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve. In: Andrew Gray, Alejandro Parellada and Helen Newing (eds.), *From Principles to Practice: Indigenous Peoples and Biodiversity Conservation in Latin America*, Forest Peoples Programme and International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen: 131-154.

Ye'kwana and Sanema Systems of Self-Governance



The Sanema have adopted the institution of the *kaikana* (chief) – from the Ye'kwana term *Kajiichana* – in most of their larger settlements. The institution of the ‘*cocinero*’, who is charged with the coordination of labour for collective activities, including meals in the men’s house, has been adopted by fewer Sanema communities.