

# 1 • INTRODUCTION: The Syntax of Culture

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*There are many gods, many spirits, and many people who live above the earth and below the earth. I know them all because I am a great singer. There is the one who created the baskets, and the baskets began to walk, and they entered the water after having eaten many Indians. They are the cayman alligators—you've only got to look at their skins to see that. An Indian doctor saw this spirit creating the first basket, and he managed to escape in time to avoid being eaten. It was a Yekuana. That's why our baskets are better made than anyone else's.*

— Kalomera, quoted by Alain Gheerbrant,  
*Journey to the Far Amazon*

I went to the Yekuana for the first time in 1976 as part of a grant from the Organization of American States to translate their creation epic known as the *Watunna*. While this translation was based on a Spanish version prepared over the course of nearly two decades by the French paleontologist Marc de Civrieux (1970*b*, 1980), I nevertheless wished to hear these tales told within their own context and language. So with a tape recorder perched on the top of my pack, I arranged to visit the village of Parupa, also known as Adujaña, on the upper Paragua River. But listening to stories among the Yekuana turned out to be an entirely different proposition than I had originally imagined. There were no neatly framed “storytelling events” into which the foreign observer could easily slip, no circles of attentive youths breathing in the words of an elder as he regaled them with the deeds of their ancestors. Rather, *Watunna* was everywhere, like an invisible sleeve holding the entire culture in place. Derived from the verb *adeu*, “to tell,” it existed in every evocation of the mythic tradition, no matter how fragmentary or allu-

sive. "That's *Watunna*," a Yekuana would say, and yet there would be no semblance of a narrative. To hear a story with anything remotely approaching completeness would take many years, and even then new details and episodes would continue to surface. But it was not only this open-ended quality of storytelling, the "stitching together" (*rhapsōidein*) of narrative into the fabric of daily life, that made recording myths so difficult. For even when tales were organized into self-contained units of expression, such as during the Garden and House Festivals, other problems still prevailed. First among them was the mode of composition, the specialized shamanic language unknown even to many of the participants themselves. Designed to communicate directly with the spirits of the invisible world, these songs had a purposefulness resistant to any electronic interference. And so, added to the difficulty of understanding these lengthy epics was a strict proscription against tape-recording them (Guss 1986b). In short, I soon began to realize that to understand even a single story among the Yekuana required a long and active apprenticeship.

It was this recognition, along with the initial limitations of my linguistic skills, that led me to seek another entrance into the mythic universe I had come to explore. For it soon became obvious that although I could not yet understand the myths as told, I could at least see them. It was with this in mind that I began to concentrate on basketry, particularly the round serving trays known as *waja*. Of course, it was hard to avoid focusing one's attention on these beautiful objects, not only because of their dramatic geometric designs but also because they were inevitably where the attention of the Yekuana one was speaking to was also focused. Conversation simply did not occur without someone making a basket. It was the principal activity of almost every male while in the village and, as such, orchestrated each dialogue, with pauses and transitions paralleling the critical moments of a basket's construction. To really communicate it often seemed one had to be making a basket. And so, it was not long before I too entered into the long process of becoming a basket maker.

My teacher was the eldest member of the village, a taciturn and brooding man named Juan Castro.<sup>1</sup> Although he had once been chief, his deposal had left him isolated and bitter. His days were now spent with his wife and daughters and small grandchildren, doing little else than weaving baskets. There were many times when we were the only adult males in the village, all the others being off hunting or fishing or

constructing canoes. I took advantage of these moments to pursue my interest in *Watunna*, to ask about details of stories, hunting lore, magic, rituals. But Juan Castro would have none of it. He would simply give me a blank stare and then, turning back to his basket, shrug, "*Yawanacädä*, I don't know." About basketry, however, he was always happy to speak. The names of designs, the form of a weave, the preparation of a cane, the location of a dye—these were subjects about which he concealed nothing. So it was that our long afternoons behind his house, surrounded by women preparing yuca, were occupied more and more with talk of baskets. Until finally I asked if he would not teach me how to make one.

No sooner had I done so than Juan Castro excitedly began preparing for our trip to find cane. Suddenly this quiet, even sullen man was ebullient, transformed by his new role as a teacher. In the weeks and months that followed, he closely supervised every aspect in the preparation of my basket: the cutting of the cane, the scraping of the sides, the application of the dyes, the peeling of the strips, the plaiting of the designs, the formation of the frame, the weaving of the finishing band and then finally its attachment to the body of the basket itself. There were many nights when, too tired to continue, Juan Castro took over the completion of a task, anxious that I should go on to the next. But it was not only Juan Castro who was my teacher. For I now entered the circle of elders gathered daily at the center of the roundhouse as a basket maker. And while it was with some humor that they accepted me, they nevertheless continued my education. Details were now exchanged concerning the intricacies of designs, the meaning of motifs, the proper usage of different baskets. Then, in 1977, on a cold and rainy afternoon, I was told the origin myth of the *waja*. Slowly, it became obvious that I was being introduced to a world as complex and extensive as that of the *Watunna*. In fact, it was a replica of the *Watunna*, a parallel symbolic system that would take just as many years to penetrate as the one I had originally come to study.

Juan Castro died of Kanaima magic just before my return to the Yekuana in 1982.<sup>2</sup> As I resumed my education as a basket maker, I wondered if he had known that he had answered all the questions I had pestered him with during my first months living in Parupa, if he had realized that the only way to explain the inner workings of *Watunna* was to enable me to participate in its creation. For while he had been uncomfortable, like most Yekuana, in speaking directly about *Watunna*,

by teaching me how to make baskets he had just as clearly initiated me into its secrets. Although this was not evident to me for some time, my ongoing work with baskets taught me that it made little difference at what point one entered the culture. Each activity, whether ritual or material, was determined by the same underlying configuration of symbols. Thus whatever an action's external form or particular function, it was involved in the same dialogue as the rest of the culture, communicating the same essential messages and meanings. It was truly a mutually reflective universe in which every moment was filled with the same possibilities of illumination as any other. To tell a story, therefore, was to weave a basket, just as it was to make a canoe, to prepare barbasco, to build a house, to clear a garden, to give birth, to die.

In a society such as the Yekuana's, it was possible to see the entire culture refracted through a single object or deed. Every part was a recapitulation of the whole, a synthesis of the intelligible organization of reality that informed every other. As such, the baskets provided a prism through which the Yekuana universe was reflected. One could see the basic symbolic organization that helped to determine the structure of every other aspect of the society. One could also comprehend the ethos and philosophy that inspired these symbols, the underlying meanings that the culture, in all of its parts, was organized to communicate. No less important than this was the ability to perceive the conflicts that each of these aspects attempted to resolve. Cast in a metaphor of endless dualities, the symbols in the baskets, like those elsewhere, confronted the most elemental oppositions between chaos and order, visible and invisible, being and non-being. The concept of culture which they presented was not simply one of communication, or what Geertz calls "a mode of thought" (1976:1499), but also of transformation, of the constant metamorphosis of reality into a comprehensible and coherent order.

As both an observer and basket maker, I was able to participate in this process of transformation, to experience culture not as the distillation of a set of abstract ideals but as an ongoing act of creation. To understand the *Watunna* I had originally come to learn demanded much more than just verbal skills. It required the use of all my senses or, more precisely, a reorientation to the nature of meaning and the manner of its transmission. The story that follows, like all good ethnography, is, therefore, also one of personal growth and initiation. Yet the details of that tale must await another book. The one told here is that of the Yekuana and the world they weave and sing into being every day of their lives.

## 2 • THE PEOPLE

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*Our first contact with the Spanish was a long time after their arrival in Venezuela. We met them when they came to find the famous City of Gold, El Dorado. They thought this was in our land.*

*A little while later, the Spanish tried to conquer us by force. Then we Yekuana, together with our neighbors, the Maco, Yabarana, and others, defended ourselves, and we overthrew the Spanish. That's why, for a long time, we called ourselves "The Unconquered" and "the ones who beat the conquerors."*

— Raphael Fernández  
*Ye'kuana: Nos cuentan Los "Makiritares"*

### "THE ONES OF THIS EARTH"

If it is true that a name reflects an inner essence, then the many used to refer to the Yekuana offer a profile of the varied character of this highland jungle people. The earliest mention of the Yekuana occurs in the report of the Jesuit priest Manuel Román, who in 1744 journeyed to the upper Orinoco to investigate rumors of Portuguese slave traders in the area. Somewhere in the vicinity of present-day La Esmeralda, he was surprised by a group of these Portuguese insisting they were not in Spanish territory but on a tributary of the Amazon. To prove their assertion, they invited Román to accompany them back along the route they had traveled, thus revealing for the first time that phenomenon known as the Casiquiare—a natural canal connecting the two great watersheds of South America via the Río Negro. To aid in this journey, Román enlisted the services of a Carib-speaking group of Indians living near the mouth of the Kunukunuma, a large river entering the Orinoco several miles below the Casiquiare. Román refers to these

excellent navigators in his reports and maps as the “Makiritare,” a name which was to dominate most written reference to them for the next two centuries. Like many ethnographic tribal denominations, Makiritare is not autogenous, but is borrowed from the neighboring group responsible for guiding the first whites to them. Names of places and tribes on Román’s map confirm his use of Arawak-speaking guides (de Barandiarán 1979:739); hence the term *Makiritare*, derived from the Arawak roots *Makidi* and *ari*, meaning “people of the rivers” or “water people.”

The terms used by ethnographers and explorers to identify the Yekuana usually indicate the direction of their approach. In 1838 the German naturalist Robert Schomburgk arrived among the Yekuana with the aid of Carib-speaking Pemon and Makushi guides. It is therefore no surprise that in his *Reisen in Britisch Guiana* (1847) he uses the Pemon name, Maionkong.<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that this name, translatable as “Round Heads,” derives from the Yekuana’s distinctive *totuma* cut that gives their hair the appearance of an inverted gourd. But another interpretation of this commonly heard name is that suggested by Armellada, who claims Maionkong means “those who live inside their *conucos*” (Salazar 1970:12). Although the Yekuana do not actually live in their gardens, the coincidence of these two definitions is notable, as there is a close symbolic relation between body care and gardening, which will be further discussed at length.

Another name mentioned by Cesáreo de Armellada and others working with the neighboring Pemon tribes to the east is “Pawaná” or “Pabanoton.” Meaning “those who sell,” it is almost a generic term among Carib speakers for traders from a distant tribe (Butt 1973:16). The fact that Pawaná and Maionkong are nearly synonymous among their Cariban neighbors is a clear indication of the importance that trade plays among this highly mobile tribe that one writer referred to as “the Phenicians of the Amazon” (González Niño n.d.:7).

The first person to actually use the autochthonous term “Yekuana” was also the first ethnographer to spend a concentrated period of time among them. Approaching the Yekuana in a way that no other explorer ever has, Theodor Koch-Grünberg, on a three-year expedition sponsored by the Baessler Institute of Berlin, in 1912 climbed out of the Uraricoera basin of northern Brazil and, with the aid of Wapishana and Makushi guides, crossed the Pacaraima Mountains into the headwaters of the Orinoco. Once in Venezuela, his expedition quickly made contact

with Yekuana villages along the Merevari and Canaracuni. Over the next several months he gathered the material that was to form the Yekuana section of his monumental three-volume work, *Vom Roraima Zum Orinoco*.

Although throughout this seminal work Koch-Grünberg consistently uses the term *Yekuana*, he does so with some hesitation, believing that further investigation would reveal a more accurate division into four separate groups representing sub-tribes or clans: the Yekuana, Dekuana, Ihuruana, and Kunuana (Koch-Grünberg [1924] 1982:24).<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Koch-Grünberg was mistaken. These four indigenous terms, all of which have been used on occasion by various travelers to identify the entire tribe, indicate neither bloodlines nor sub-tribes but simply geographical areas of such distance from one another as to permit substantial linguistic variation. Yet for the Yekuana, these names have a mytho-historic significance that transcends mere regional identity.

"Yekuana," the first of these divisions, was believed by Koch-Grünberg to properly refer only to those Indians living along the Merevari or Caura rivers. Yet for the Yekuana this name refers to the whole tribe. Like its Arawak counterpart, the name reflects the Yekuana's prodigious skills in navigating the rapids of the Upper Orinoco and its tributaries. Derived from "tree" (*ye*), "water" (*ku*), and "people" (*ana*), it can be translated as "Water-Log" or "Canoe People."

A phonetic variation of this term, "Dekuana" is said by Koch-Grünberg to represent those groups living on the middle and lower Ventuari. And indeed, several myths tell of a numerous band of cannibalistic Indians known as Dekuana who formerly inhabited this area. However, as a result of their unrelenting belligerence, they were all but destroyed (Gheerbrant 1954:159–61). But the term *Dekuana* has greater significance: it is the name of the sacred mountain in the headwaters of the Arahame and Kuntinamo from which the culture hero Wanadi created the first Yekuana:

In order to populate the villages he made the new people. He took earth. He formed it into men. Then he sat down. He dreamed: "It's alive." He smoked. He shook his maraca. That's the way the new people were born; the ones of this earth, of today, now. First a man was born in Mount Dekuana, in the headwaters of the Arahame River. He was made with the dirt from that mountain. That's why he was called Dekuana, like us, his

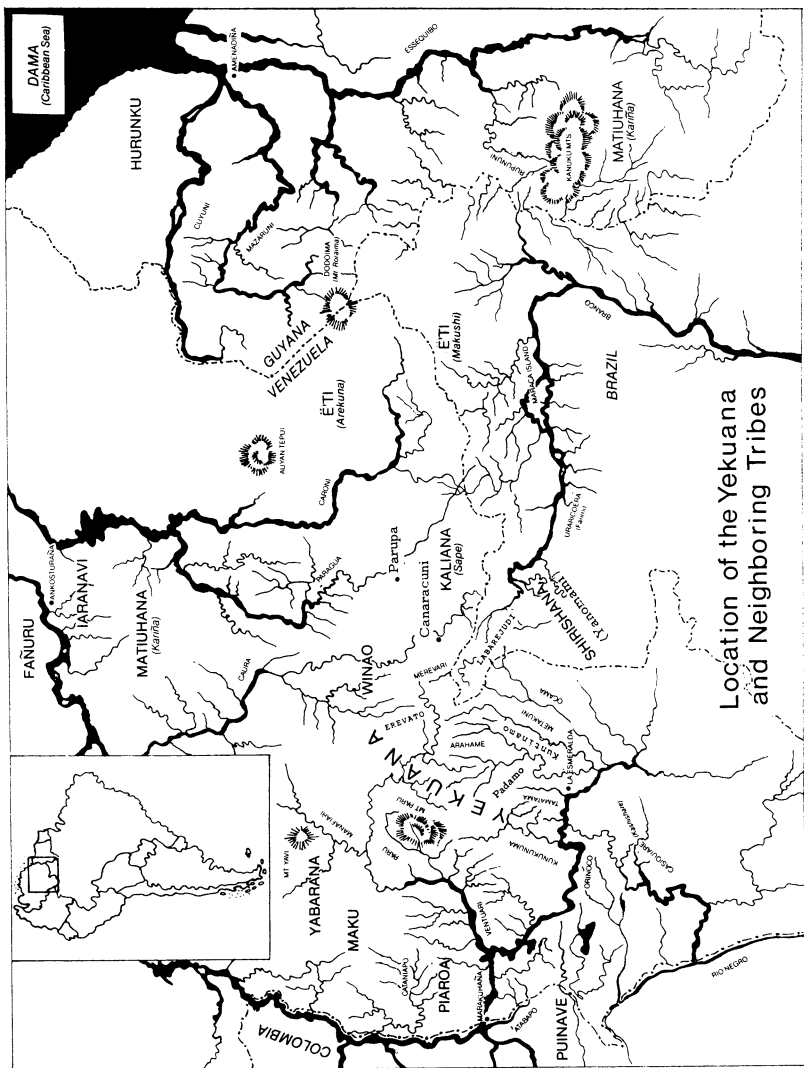
grandchildren. That man was the first Yekuana. Mount Dekuana was the beginning for us. (de Civrieux 1970b:56)

Located in the Guiana highlands, out of which flow the major tributaries of the Orinoco River, Mount Dekuana is in the very center of what the Yekuana call Ihuruña, the "Headwater Place." This is the name of their homeland, a vast region of mountains, rain forests, savannas, rushing rivers, and waterfalls stretching all the way from the right bank of the upper Orinoco to the lower reaches of the Caura and Ventuari. To those who still occupy the most sacred and remote zones nearest the source of these rivers is reserved the term *Ihuruana*, the "Headwater People." Spoken of with the special reverence due to elders, the Ihuruana are considered the most knowledgeable and authentic Yekuana—untainted by the criollo influence that has undermined those groups who have migrated further downriver. Ihuruana is not a term exclusively applied to those of the upper Ventuari as Koch-Grünberg asserted, but is more of an honorary epithet for any Yekuana who maintains the traditional life-style of the tribe in the original area of its settlement.

Koch-Grünberg's fourth and final tribal division, the Kunuana, whom he claims "form the nucleus of the entire tribe," may therefore be closer to the actual Ihuruana. The Kunuana, he maintains, are the Yekuana of the Kunukunuma, Padamo, and Orinoco rivers—the Indians of Kamasowoiche, the original savanna in Ihuruña from which the first Yekuana migrated. But of all the divisions, Kunuana is in reality the most restricted geographically, referring only to those Yekuana of the Kunukunuma River, a group whose geographic isolation, early contact, and intensive evangelization have resulted in a certain degree of cultural variation from the rest of the tribe.

One term that Koch-Grünberg did not cite but which has been suggested by several ethnographers (Fuchs 1962, de Civrieux 1980) as an appropriate successor to the unfortunate but popular "Makiritare" is "So'to." For regardless of where a Yekuana may live, "So'to" is the accepted term for a "human" or "person." It is also the word for "twenty," the number of digits for each individual. But more importantly, "So'to" is an expression of the common culture and language shared by every Yekuana as distinguished from that of any other species, human or nonhuman. It is their unique heritage as bequeathed by the culture hero Wanadi and recalled daily in the body of oral lore and tradition known as the *Watunna*.





Location of the Yekuana and Neighboring Tribes

## IHURUNA, "THE HEADWATER PLACE"

With a total population of less than 3,100 people, the Yekuana are but one of the many Carib-speaking tribes that migrated north along the Amazonian waterways of Brazil, entering southern Venezuela several hundred years ago to begin the displacement of the Arawak bands who had preceded them.<sup>3</sup> Although it is impossible to say precisely when the Yekuana arrived, they were certainly well established in the Kunukunuma and Padamo area by the time the first Border Commission visited them in 1758.<sup>4</sup> In fact, there were so many Yekuana settled along the Padamo and its upper tributaries, the Kuntinamo and Arahame, that this river soon came to be known as the "Maquiritare." As for the other areas the Yekuana now occupy—the Ventuari, Erevato, Caura, and Paragua in Venezuela, and the Labarejudi in Brazil—it would appear that settlement occurred only after the arrival of the Spanish.

Much of this territory had been too hostile for the Yekuana to occupy any earlier. The fierce Kariña cannibals trafficking along the Caura and Ventuari rivers to the north were the Yekuana's habitual enemies, and it was only with their reduction by the Spanish that these large and attractive rivers became available for settlement.<sup>5</sup> It therefore comes as no surprise that de Barandiarán (1979:781) and Arvelo-Jimenez (1971:15) should estimate the beginning of this Yekuana expansion at around 1750. But there were other factors in this diffusion. Warlike bands of Yanomami, arriving from Brazil and the territory south of the Orinoco, began to attack the Yekuana, pushing them north. Known also as Waika, Guaharibo, and Shirishana, these newcomers proposed to dislodge the Yekuana in the same way the latter had the Arawak. The hostility between these two groups, which has been noted by travelers and ethnographers, raged for well over a hundred years, and according to tribal tradition only subsided around 1940, when a large group of armed Yekuana slaughtered a band of Yanomami in reprisal for past raids (Gheerbrant 1954:157, de Civrieux 1980:150–51,168). Today these two groups, though still suspicious of one another, coexist peacefully in a truce maintained by trade and labor exchange.

Far more destructive than the raids of the Yanomami was the incursion of the rubber gatherers that began early in this century. By 1913, this had degenerated into full-scale genocide. In May of that year, Tomás Funes, a rubber merchant, marched into the provincial capital of San Fernando de Atabapo and murdered the governor and 140 other peo-

ple. For the next eight years, Funes ruled the Territorio Amazonas as an independent fiefdom with no ties whatsoever to the central government in Caracas. Not satisfied with the enslavement of the Yekuana male population for the gathering of rubber, Funes sent out expeditions to destroy villages and to murder and torture the inhabitants. De Barandiarán calculates that no fewer than one thousand Yekuana along with their twenty villages were destroyed before Funes's reign of terror came to an end in 1921 (1979:791). The migration northward that the Yanomami had encouraged was now accelerated, with a large group of Yekuana moving away from the Territorio Amazonas entirely and settling along the Paragua River in the southern part of Estado Bolívar.

But the diffusion of the Yekuana from their original homeland in the upper Padamo and Kunukunuma was not just northward. Their furthest migration, recounted in a series of legends called the "Waitie," was eastward toward Brazil, at one point penetrating to the island of Maraca on the Uraricoera River. Unlike their resettlement on the Ventuari and Caura, this move was less the result of hostile pressures than an attempt to exploit new trade possibilities created by the arrival of the Europeans.

After Manuel Román's brief visit in 1744, contact was firmly established with the appearance of an official Border Commission sent out to both verify the Jesuit explorer's claims of an Orinoco-Amazon link and to adjust the southern limits with Brazil. Led by two lieutenants, Francisco Fernández de Bobadilla and Apolinar Díez de la Fuente, the expedition also hoped to investigate the availability of cacao and any minerals that might lead to that ever-illusive kingdom known as El Dorado. Arriving in 1758, they soon made contact with Yekuana living around the mouth of the Kunukunuma, as well as along the Padamo. Goods were exchanged and an alliance quickly forged that promised to give the Yekuana protection from the Kariña slave traders who regularly attacked them in search of slaves for themselves and their Dutch allies. Initial contact was so cordial that the Yekuana concluded these new visitors must be the creation of their culture hero Wanadi. Their white skin was simply the result of the color of earth used in their formation, and their miraculous gifts of iron and cloth, presents bestowed upon them in Heaven. The Yekuana called this new being Iaranavi and in 1760 eagerly assisted in the creation of a joint community to be known as La Esmeralda, located on the Orinoco midway between the mouths of the Kunukunuma and Padamo. They also traveled hundreds of miles to

the new Iaranavi capital of Ankosturaña (Angostura, present-day Ciudad Bolívar) where they traded canoes, baskets, and cassava for machetes, knives, hooks, and cloth.<sup>6</sup>

[Iaranavi] was the rich man, Wanadi's shopkeeper, friend to the poor. He was always traveling around, trading goods. Our grandfathers traveled to Ankosturaña to get goods from Iaranavi. They learned how to trade there, how to exchange their stuff for the things they didn't have. (de Civrieux 1980:148)

But this relation was soon to sour. By 1767, a new governor had been installed in Angostura and the Spanish embarked upon a more aggressive policy of colonization on the upper Orinoco. In an attempt to secure the entire region, a new expeditionary force was sent out to build a road and nineteen small forts connecting Angostura with La Esmeralda. This ambitious plan, which to this day has never been accomplished, was to cut directly through the homeland of the Yekuana. Refusing to cooperate, the Yekuana were forcibly relocated and set to work on chain gangs. They were also exposed for the first time to the ideas of Capuchin and Franciscan missionaries sent out to administer their conversion. Amazed by this sudden change in behavior, the Yekuana decided that this was no longer Iaranavi, but a different species altogether. Fañuru, as they called him, was not a creation of Wanadi, but of his demonic arch-rival Odocha.<sup>7</sup> Along with their allies, the *Fadre* (Padres, "Priests"), they had come from Caracas to overrun their friend Iaranavi in Angostura (de Civrieux 1980:11, 154). Left with no alternative, the Yekuana organized several neighboring tribes and, in a single evening in 1776, rose up and destroyed all nineteen forts, driving the Spanish out of the upper Orinoco for what turned out to be the next 150 years.

The sudden severance of all contact with the Spanish created a crisis for the Yekuana, who had developed a trade dependency upon them. In a period of less than two decades their economy had been dramatically transformed by the availability of iron and other European trade goods. In an attempt to escape Spanish reprisals and to locate new sources for these goods, a group of Yekuana crossed the Pacaraima Mountains and entered Brazil. Led by the legendary dynasty of Waitie chiefs, they descended the Uraricoera River, creating settlements all the way to the mouth of the Traenida beside Maraca Island. It was here that

they established trade contacts with the Makushi. But they soon tired of dealing with intermediaries and decided to trace these new goods to their source, embarking on a long and dangerous journey to the principal Dutch fort of Kijkoveral in the mouth of the Essequibo. This journey by dugout canoe along the Uraricoera, Río Branco, São Joaquín, Tacutu, Mahu, Rupununi, and finally the Essequibo, took well over a year and was the greatest odyssey ever undertaken by any member of the tribe. When at last they had come to the Caribbean, they were so amazed by its size that they pronounced it the shore of Lake Akuena, that mythical lake located in Heaven. They also claimed that the Dutchman must be the new favored child of Wanadi. They called him Hurunku and his village Amenadiña:<sup>8</sup>

Now they saw a village there called Amenadiña. It wasn't a So'to village, but a spirit village. The chief of Amenadiña was Hurunku. He was Wanadi's friend. He went to Heaven with all his people to visit Wanadi. That's why such big boats would come to Amenadiña. They'd travel across Dama, the Sea, and go to Wanadi's village, to Motadewa. Hurunku's boats would leave empty. Then they'd come back across Dama full and unload all the goods from Heaven in Amenadiña. They'd just go and come back, go and come back. (de Civrieux 1980:170)<sup>9</sup>

A combination of factors that included trade agreements with the Makushi, Yanomami hostility, and isolation from the main branch of the tribe, led to the Yekuana's eventual withdrawal from Brazil. By the time of Koch-Grünberg's arrival in 1912 only one community remained on the east side of the Pacaraima Range. (Today the situation is much the same, with the village of Fuduwaruña, located in the headwaters of the Uraricoera on the upper Labarejudi, the only Yekuana village left in Brazil.) However, the Yekuana continued their special trade relation with the Dutch (and subsequently the British) and, as historical records corroborate, continued to make the remarkable journey from the headwaters of the Orinoco to the mouth of the Essequibo on the Caribbean. In 1840, the German explorer and naturalist Robert Schomburgk reported his astonishment at meeting a group of these navigators on the Rupununi headed for Georgetown (Coppens 1971:35). A missionary named W. H. Brett also reported encountering them in British Guyana during one of their long voyages in 1864 (Butt 1973:10). And even into

this century, with goods accessible to them at much closer locations, they have been known to make such journeys (*ibid.*).

Not only Europeans have recalled these epic voyages. The collective body of oral tradition referred to by the Yekuana as *Watunna* is filled with detailed accounts of not only their migration into Brazil and subsequent voyage to Amenadiña, but of the entire history of Yekuana contact with Western culture. Through a process of "historical incorporation" (Guss 1981c, 1986b) these verifiable events are recontextualized within an already established mythic universe; hence the recasting of such occurrences as the Spanish-Yekuana conflict after 1767 into the familiar dualistic motif of Wanadi's battle against Odosha and his forces of darkness (such as the Fañuru and the Fadre).<sup>10</sup> History becomes its own exegesis as calendrical time is replaced by that of the atemporal mythic, and historical personalities by the culture heroes and demons who inhabit it. But this mythopoesis is far more than a mnemonic device with moral overtones. It is one of the many ways in which the Yekuana transform the foreign into the currency of their own culture, making it safe and familiar. Through such adaptability to new historical situations the Yekuana are able to reaffirm a cosmology that forever locates them at its center.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC HISTORY

The ability to "metaphorize" (Wagner 1981:31) new historical realities into the symbols of one's own universe is an important mechanism through which any culture maintains its vitality and psychic health. The success of the Yekuana in confronting a hostile European ideology for more than two hundred years is a testimony to their creativity and resourcefulness in responding to the potentially catastrophic influx of both spiritual and material contradictions. Instead of permitting these challenges to undermine the stability of their society, the Yekuana have consistently defused them by incorporating them into the traditional structures that order their world. By continually reaffirming these structures along with the values they represent, the Yekuana have achieved a level of organization and self-esteem unique among the tribes of Venezuela today. This self-assurance has been noted by travelers and ethnographers who often, as in the following statement of Koch-Grünberg, react with surprise to what they perceive as an attitude of superiority:

The Yekuana are arrogant beyond belief. They consider themselves a chosen people and without any reason look down on all the other tribes. As Robert Schomburgk has already said of them: "They are a proud and conceited tribe. The Maionkong are always strutting about with great self-confidence, as if the entire world were their domain." ([1924] 1982:302)

What Koch-Grünberg perceived as arrogance was the Yekuana's unabashed confidence in the absolute propriety of their way of life as opposed to any the Europeans might wish to substitute for it. Combining this attitude with an already existing institutionalized xenophobia (fed by two hundred years of intermittent abuse) and a highly disciplined social organization, it is no surprise that the Yekuana have survived so successfully. For of all the Carib-speaking tribes that once dominated Venezuela, none have succeeded in maintaining their cultural identity as have the Yekuana.

An additional factor in this ability to resist the devastating effects of acculturation (and worse) that have befallen so many neighboring groups has been the Yekuana's ability to isolate themselves behind an almost impregnable landscape. The rivers along which their thirty villages are located—the Padamo, Kunukunuma, Erevato, Ventuari, Caura, and Paragua—are all tributaries of the Orinoco, with their sources in the high *tepui* and mountains of southern Venezuela's Guiana massif. It is a rugged landscape of dramatic contrasts, with huge tabletop mountains rising directly out of the jungle floor to heights of over eight thousand feet. Understandably, few outsiders have been able to penetrate this dense rain forest homeland with its natural barriers of rapids and waterfalls. Aside from the twenty years of contact during the eighteenth century and the influx of rubber gatherers in this one, the only Europeans to enter Ihuruña have been the isolated explorer and ethnographer.

By the time of Alexander von Humboldt's brief visit to La Esmeralda in 1800, the only European settlement to ever exist in the region was already nearly defunct (1852,2:434).<sup>11</sup> And by 1818 the few Catholic missionaries remaining in the upper Orinoco were forcibly removed by order of the new Republic. In 1838, while making his memorable journey from British Guyana to the upper Orinoco by way of the Merevari (upper Caura) and Padamo, Robert Schomburgk observed that the Yekuana in this area were already embattled with bands of Yanomami pushing north. His account of his ascent of the Orinoco reports only

one family remaining in La Esmeralda. A French explorer named Jean Chaffanjon passed through this same region fifty years later in a renewed attempt to discover the headwaters of the Orinoco. His contact with the Yekuana of the Caura and Kunukunuma is detailed in his memoir, *L'Orénoque et le Caura* (1889).

It was not until Theodor Koch-Grünberg's expedition of 1911 to 1913 that any serious study of the Yekuana was undertaken. Visiting several communities along the Caura, Ventuari, and upper Padamo, Koch-Grünberg documented Yekuana material culture, depositing his collection of photographs, recordings ("phonograms"), and artifacts in the Berlin Museum of Ethnography. Hindered by inadequate translators and his own inability to speak Yekuana, he confessed his frustration at being unable to penetrate the mysteries of their religion and mythology ([1924] 1982:317). It was while returning to the Yekuana in 1924 as ethnologist for the Hamilton Rice Scientific Expedition that this important pioneer of South American ethnography died of malaria in Brazil.

Twenty-five years later a young Frenchman named Alain Gheerbrant along with three companions left Bogotá, Colombia, in an attempt to reverse Koch-Grünberg's journey and retrace his path all the way back to Boa Vista. After descending the eastern slopes of the Andes, they crossed the *llanos* to Venezuela and canoed up the Orinoco to the Ventuari in search of Yekuana to guide them. The record of this remarkable journey, published in 1952 as *L'expédition Orénoque-Amazone*, is particularly valuable in that it is our only written description of the three greatest Yekuana leaders of this century—Kalomera, Cejoyuma, and Frenario. Laden down with hundreds of pounds of recording and photographic equipment, Gheerbrant and his companions visited all three of these chiefs' villages in the hope of taping and filming their rituals. Unfortunately, a canoe accident during the last days of the journey resulted in the loss of these invaluable documents. Nevertheless, Gheerbrant's written record of what was no more than seven or eight months with the Yekuana is filled with accurate and perceptive detail, presenting us with the most readable and enjoyable account we have of Yekuna life.

Sustained and systematic investigation of the Yekuana did not begin until the early 1950s, when not only ethnographers but also missionaries and government officials began to enter the region with greater frequency. This period of renewed interest was inaugurated by a well-publicized 1952 French-Venezuelan expedition to discover the



headwaters of the Orinoco. One member of this expedition who became interested in learning more about the Yekuana guides and porters accompanying it was Marc de Civrieux, a young paleontologist who had migrated to Venezuela from France in 1939. Using this opportunity to make contact with various Yekuana living along the Kunukunuma, de Civrieux began a relationship that was to last for twenty years. Returning again and again, he dedicated himself to the collection of the myths and legends that were to compose his *Watunna: Mitología Makiritare*, an invaluable contribution to not only Yekuana ethnology but to that of all of South America (1970*b*, translated as *Watunna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle*, 1980).

Other investigators to work in this region during this period were Meinhard Schuster along the Padamo and Kunukunuma from 1954 to 1955 as part of the Frobenius Expedition, and Johannes Wilbert and Helmuth Fuchs along the Ventuari, albeit on separate expeditions, in 1958. It was also in the Ventuari area that Nelly Arvelo-Jimenez, from 1968 to 1969, did the fieldwork for the only dissertation ever done on the Yekuana. Entitled *Political Relations in a Tribal Society: A Study of the Ye'cuana Indians of Venezuela* (1971), it is an analysis of how social control is exerted in the absence of institutionalized political authority. A particular focus of Arvelo-Jimenez, both in this and subsequent works (1973, 1977) is the process by which Yekuana villages are formed and dissolved.

During the same period in which Arvelo-Jimenez was conducting her fieldwork, Walter Coppens was working with various Yekuana groups along the Caura, Erevato, and Paragua. Based on sporadic visits of no longer than one month, his studies deal with issues of acculturation (1972, 1981) and intertribal trade (1971). More recent work among the Yekuana has been carried out by Raymond and Ilene Hames, who conducted a preliminary survey of Yekuana basketry on the Padamo from 1975 to 1976, and by Alcida Rita Ramos, who concentrated on relations with the Yanomami while working in the only remaining Yekuana community in Brazil in 1974.

Of particular interest is the work of Daniel de Barandiarán, a former missionary with the Fraternidad de Foucauld, who helped to found the community of Santa María de Erevato in 1959. Despite a highly polemical style and the lack of anthropological training, de Barandiarán's work is nevertheless informed by years of daily contact with the Yekuana. He has produced several important studies, including

those on Yekuana shamanism (1962*b*) and the roundhouse (1966), and is the author of the only two articles on the Yekuana language, published under the pseudonym of Damian de Escoriaza (1959, 1960).

Ironically, it is de Barandiarán, in his most recent work, who counsels against the dangers of increased centralization among the Yekuana (1979:795). For the village of Santa María, which he was so instrumental in organizing, was not only the first Catholic mission located in Yekuana territory but also the principal model for the demographic upheaval that threatens to revolutionize Yekuana settlement patterns. Unlike communities of the past which never exceeded one hundred people, Santa María was not formed by a handful of extended families intending to remain in the area only as long as the gardens and surrounding supply of game lasted. This was meant to be a permanent community, with a constantly expanding population. The economy was not to be based on the traditional mix of subsistence horticulture and hunting and gathering, but on a cash crop, which in the case of Santa María was coffee. The Yekuana were to form their own metropolis, replete with school, infirmary, airstrip, radio, and generator, and in this way, it was theorized, would best defend themselves against the encroaching criollo world.

Today, with a population of over four hundred people, Santa María is the largest Yekuana community to ever exist.<sup>12</sup> But it is not the only one of its kind. In the late 1960s, a former Yekuana national guardsman named Isaías Rodríguez appeared on the Ventuari announcing his intention to organize a large settlement on a plain called Aseniña. Meeting with initial resistance from several upriver villages, Rodríguez eventually attracted enough supporters to form the successful community of Cacuri. With substantial backing from Jesuit missionaries, cattle were shipped in to form an economic base and enough facilities provided to continue to attract additional Yekuana from even further away. Incorporated as the Unión Makiritare del Alto Ventuari (UMAV), Cacuri now has a population of over three hundred people and an office and representatives in Caracas.<sup>13</sup>

An equivalent experiment also exists on the Kunukunuma River. But unlike the Catholics who helped organize Santa María and Cacuri, the Protestant founders of Acanaña—the New Tribes Missions—have no pretensions of discovering ways of adapting Yekuana values to new social realities. For them, all of Yekuana culture is a form of diabolic possession that must be exorcised. As one shaman from the Kuntinamo explained it:

They forbid all our customs, our drinks, our *Watunna*, our music and our way of life. For me this is serious. The missionary Jaime Bou [the head of New Tribes] arrived here with a law they had passed accusing my fathers and my grandfathers of being liars, saying that our *Watunna* and our way of life is negative. He lacked respect when he said that about our culture. They're destroying our way of speaking to our fathers. They're creating a huge gap. (Mosonyi et al. 1981:238)

A nondenominational Protestant organization based in the United States, the New Tribes Missions arrived in Venezuela soon after World War II. After an unsuccessful attempt to establish themselves in the Ventuari area, they began to penetrate the Kunukunuma. By the end of 1958, they had attracted enough Yekuana converts to found the village of Acanaña near the mouth of the Kunukunuma. Like Santa María and Cacuri, Acanaña has also drained smaller upriver communities of their members. Yet in other ways this new community has been far different from its neighbors to the north. Whereas the Catholic missionaries of Santa María and Cacuri have not demanded conversion and play only limited roles in the organization of these communities, proselytism is at the very heart of Acanaña's existence. An evangelical community where the practice of Yekuana traditions is strictly forbidden, Acanaña has been set up with the express purpose of training Yekuana to be sent out as missionaries among both their own and neighboring tribes. This strategy has not only failed to win converts outside of the Kunukunuma area, however, but has resulted in the increased isolation of the Kunuana. As Arvelo-Jimenez observed:

Baptist evangelization has provoked a wide schism between evangelized and traditional Yekuana such as was never known before. Those who have not given up the traditional way feel very much threatened by the religious zeal of the evangelists. They despise the converts and at the same time fear their tactics for gaining more and more Yekuana to their side. (1971:22–23)

This conflict, paralleled in other groups where the New Tribes Missions have located, such as the Panare and Piaroa, has recently gone beyond the level of intratribal strife to one of national debate. A barrage of publicity that has included symposia, congressional investigations,

books, and such award-winning films as Carlos Azpurua's "Yo hablo a Caracas" (1978) has galvanized the Venezuelan public against the activities of these American-based missionaries and has forced a reassessment of official indigenist policy.<sup>14</sup> For the first time, a national coalition of artists, politicians, academics, and indigenist leaders has banded together to demand not just the expulsion of these missionaries but also legislation to guarantee the rights of the approximately seventy-five thousand Indians remaining in Venezuela (Arvelo-Jimenez 1972:41).

Yet while such developments can only be positive for the Yekuana, the real decisions affecting their future remain their own. For although Acanaña and other New Tribes missions in the Kunukunuma area clearly threaten their cultural and territorial integrity, the greatest challenges to their traditional way of life may be those taken on their own initiative. The decision to relocate in larger, permanent settlements such as Santa María and Cacuri is one which the Yekuana have negotiated among themselves (albeit with material incentives provided by Catholic missionaries). The debate is not simply between "Creyentes" and nonbelievers but also between Yekuana of smaller upriver communities and those of the newer centralized ones.<sup>15</sup> Exactly how these new settlements, with their commitment to cash crops and nonindigenous technology, will affect the fabric of Yekuana life may not be determined for some time to come. Ihuruña, defended by natural barriers, strong leadership, and disciplined organization, is still the unconquered homeland of the Yekuana. Yet today it is a culture at a crossroads, challenged by an ideology that knows no borders.