

# The Yanomami Collection from the Museum of Natural History, University of Florence: Anthropological, Historical and Educational Value

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## Introduction

In 2009 Francesca Bigoni was invited by the Scientific Council of the Museum of Natural History, University of Florence, to study a collection of artifacts from the Yanomami of the Amazon and to prepare legends. The collection is conserved in the section of Anthropology and Ethnology of the museum, but had not yet been studied or put on exhibit.

The section of Anthropology and Ethnology is located in via del Proconsolo 12, in Palazzo Non Finito and preserves an extraordinary range of artifacts collected during several centuries from the most diverse geographical regions. During a period of positivism under the influence of the new Darwinian theory of evolution, Mantegazza laid down the basis of anthropological science in Florence. In 1869 he founded the National Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology, which later became a section of the Museum of Natural History, University of Florence.

South America is especially well represented in the section. Through South American collections it is possible to travel over the historical route that ethnological collections have made beginning from the Renaissance to modern concepts of anthropology. The oldest objects Mantegazza acquired for the Museum were artifacts belonging to the Medici family. These include the fabulous Tupinamba mantels made with the red feathers of *Ibis rubra*. These mantels were already in Florence by the beginning of the 1600s. Mantegazza spent years in South America where he travelled as a young medical doctor, a very important formative phase of his personal life and scientific career. His interests in the natives of South America is still reflected in the number of artifacts that he included, from various sources, in the Museum that he founded and that directed for many years. Other notable collections from the Gran Chaco include objects courageously collected by Guido Boggiani in the second part of the 1800s.

The extraordinary collection of artifacts of the Yanomami comes from the Amazonian forest of Northern Brazil and is the ultimate acquisition of the Museum. These objects were collected in the early 1990s following modern anthropological criteria and provide a complete

documentation of the material culture of the Yanomami in the Catrimani region of Brazil.

The collection is a significant representation of the Yanomami culture, history and anthropology and it is a valid example of human adaptation.

## Materials and Methods

The objects had been catalogued and the collection was referred to as the "Collection Saffirio-Damioli", after the names of the collectors. It was possible to consult some documents that accompanied the collection and confirmed its entrance in the Museum. The oldest document is a descriptive list in Portuguese with Yanomami and Portuguese names of objects prepared by Guglielmo Damioli in 1993. The documents of the Museum formalizing the donation were completed with a translation of the list into Italian. Errors in translation can explain some discrepancies found in the descriptions of the objects. Another precious source of information was a book published in 1996 by "Il Capitello" by Damioli and Saffirio on the same population "*Yanomami: Indios dell'Amazzonia*". The objects were not on exhibit, but were well preserved in the storerooms of the Museum. With the indispensable help of the personal of the section, the material was unpackaged and compared with the documentation written in Portuguese and Italian. Particular attention was made correcting and revising the catalog of the Museum.

## Results

A number of discrepancies became apparent between the catalog of the Museum and the objects. There were errors in the attribution of names and the use of objects. To solve some of these problems it was necessary to reconstruct how the collections was acquired by the Museum and to contact the original collectors.

Through the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh (PA), Francesca Bigoni was able to contact Giovanni Saffirio coauthor of this publication. The Carnegie Museum owns a rich collection of the same Yanomami tribal group and contains additional artifacts, photographs and drawings (Fig. 1) collected and curated by Giovanni Saffirio who is

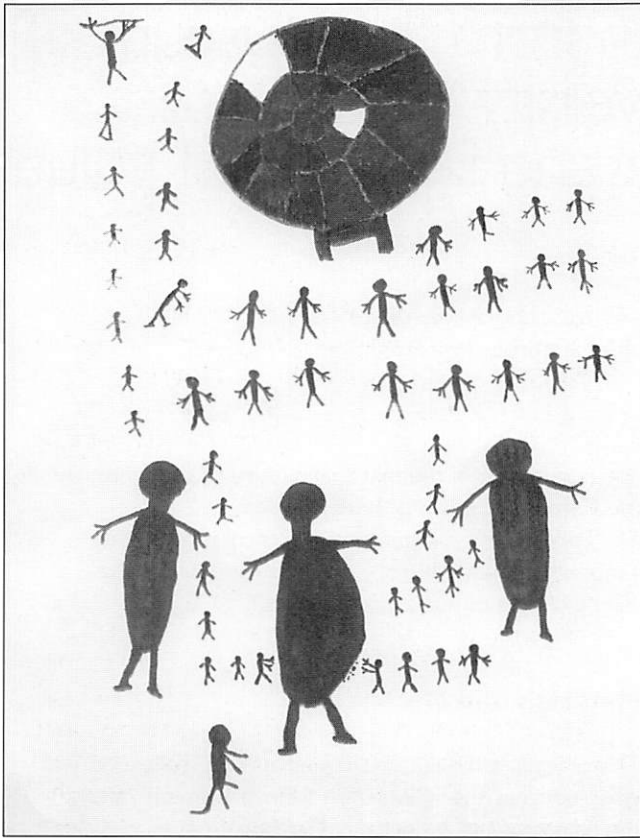


Fig.1. Drawing by Mario-Putu (9/8/1991). Mario and Pedro, the two oversized xamans (bottom), call "hekurap" spirits to come down from their house (top) to help the 13-year old Nadia, the central figure, to deliver her baby.

an Italian citizen and belongs to the Consolata Society for Foreign Missions of Turin (Italy). He has spent 21 years among the Yanomami of the Catrimani river.

**Donation of the collection.** From the museum's documentation it was not clear how the acquisition was made. The initial phase of the donation came in 1993/94 through contacts with Dr. Tasselli (Ricercatore Facoltà di Scienze, University of Florence). Giovanni Saffirio met Tasselli when he came to Florence to present the project "Casa de Cura - Hekura Yano" of Boa Vista (Roraima, Brazil) at the Slow Food Presidio of Florence. From 1994 to 1997 the Slow Food Association send a monthly contribution to help indigenous mothers to provide traditional food to their children who were patients at the "Casa de Cura - Hekura Yano". When the Consolata Missionaries donated the collection of the Yanomami material culture, Dr. Tasselli contacted Prof. Brunetto Chiarelli who was, at the time, director of the Museum. The first part of the collection was brought by Guglielmo Damioli to Tasselli. A second part of the collection was shipped by Saffirio to the University of Florence in 1994.

**History of the Collection.** Saffirio worked among the Yanomami from 1968 to 1977 and from 1985 to 1995. After the construction of the highway BR-210 (1973-1976) and the dramatic measles epidemic of 1977, Saffirio felt the urge for an anthropological training to better prepare himself to aid the Yanomami under distress. He requested and was granted permission to study Cultural Anthropology in the United States. He completed

his education at the University of Pittsburgh where he obtained the PhD degree in March 1985. His PhD dissertation was based on data from two field trips among the Yanomami (1981 and 1984). Scientific articles also resulted from this period of research (Saffirio and Scaglione, 1982; Saffirio et al., 1983).

The collection now in Florence was made during the early 1990s. The scope was to cover all aspects of the material culture of the Yanomami. Before Saffirio studied Cultural Anthropology in the United States, he learned correct collecting methods in 1968-69 from the ethnologist Rene Fuerst who was gathering Brazilian Indians materials for European museums. Fuerst reported his experiences in a book published in 1998 entitled *Adieu l'Amazonie mémoires d'un ethnologue engagé*.

Later on Saffirio completed a PhD degree in Anthropology with a thesis on the "Yanomami's ideal and actual kinship terminology" (Saffirio, 1985). Given his training and experience, Saffirio was highly competent to make an anthropologically valid collection. The collection is strictly related to the adaptation of the Catrimani and Ajarani Yanomami at the end of the XX century to the tropical rainforest environment disrupted by the impact of the western culture threatening their very survival not only culturally but also physically. While the Yanomami struggled to survive, the Consolata Missionaries were on their side. They helped the Yanomami with medicines, vaccines and bilingual-education, the most important tools to cope with the new situation.

**Content of the Collection.** The collection donated to the Natural History Museum of the University of Florence has 142 objects. They represent all aspects of the Yanomami material culture including fire-making-kits, baskets for the transport of goods, preparation and consumption of food, tools for hunting and fishing, clothes, ornaments made with feathers and animal skin, hammocks, toys, as well as ceremonial items and materials used for body painting. The collection includes also tools used by the Yanomami to manufacture the items of their material culture (Bigoni et al., 2009).

The authors examined the field information of each object making corrections and additions in the museums records. For example, a problem arose while identifying hammocks made with different materials: algodão (cotton), cipò (vines), embira (bark). A poor translation from Portuguese to Italian had identified them as "reti", "nets" in English. One object catalogued as a "flute" is not a musical instrument, but a decorative object made with feathers pressed inside two pieces of reed held on the chest by a string. Three tubes were described as instruments to blow the drug "epena" inside the nose. However, one of them, a full wooden stick, is not hollow and has carved decorations on its foot and at the top. It was used as a decorative object during celebrations with feathers glued on the top.

## Discussion

Throughout their history the Yanomami developed a culture well adapted to the difficult environment of the Amazon rainforest. The arrival, since the early seventies,



Fig.2. Sofia, a young Wakathautheri girl sitting on a cotton hammock with a necklace made of western beads (early seventies). There are traditional Yanomami objects and food (hammock, woman apron, basket, bananas) and Brazilian objects (two flashlights, an aluminum pot and a western sack with unknown items inside).

of highway workers, gold-miners, loggers and farmers forced them to cope and adapt to a new situation (Fig.2). The Consolata Missionaries working among them since 1965, respect the Yanomami traditional way of life and their spiritual beliefs. They do not try to “convert” them to Christianity, they teach them new skills, offer them medical treatment and bilingual education trying to ease the difficult process of adaptation, safeguarding, at the same time, their physical and cultural survival.

The impact of the Brazilian society has had dramatic consequences for the Yanomami and in particular for the villages of the middle Catrimani river. In September 1973 the Brazilian military government began the construction of the road BR-210, also called “Perimetral Norte”. Hundreds of workers came from all over Brazil to cut trees and operate machines. The dirty road caused lasting environmental damages to the Amazon rainforest, the extinction of some animal species in the area and the death of many natives. In a two-month period (June-July 1974) in the area of the mid Catrimani, 12 Yanomami died from measles. From February to June 1977 a second measles epidemic killed 68 Yanomami. Altogether a total of 80 natives died during a four-year period, more than 25% of the entire population of the region. In 1986 the discovery of gold in the area led to an invasion of the Yanomami territory by thousands of prospectors that caused an environmental disaster: the pollution of waterways and land by the mercury used during the process of extracting gold (Sing *et al.*, 2003). Many Yanomami died of previously unknown diseases (Tuberculosis, Leshmaniosi etc.). There were numerous instances of violence because the natives were seen as an obstacle by the gold-miners. The consequences of these destructive events are still negatively impacting the Yanomami.

It would be quite interesting to compare the Saffirio-Damioli collection with the one collected thirty years earlier by the Salesian Luigi Cocco and described by Mario Forno (1965) in “*Rivista di Antropologia*”, “*Contributi ergologici di una recente collezione torinese alla conoscenza degli amerindi Guaica (Yanoama)*”. The Cocco’s collection seemed designated to be part of the Museum of the University of Turin, but we could not find any information about its location.

Finally, the collection of artifacts from the Yanomami people of the Amazon rainforest of the Catrimani region in northern Brazil, is still waiting to be adequately known and appreciated because does not have yet a place in the exhibition hall of the Museum, Palazzo Non Finito of Florence.

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