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Keeping It Oral: A Yekuana Ethnology

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keeping it oral: a Yekuana ethnology

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If "culture" becomes paradoxical and challenging when applied to the meanings of tribal societies, we might speculate as to whether a "reverse anthropology" is possible, literalizing the metaphors of modern industrial civilization from the standpoint of tribal society. Surely we have no right to expect a parallel theoretical effort, for the ideological concern of these people puts them under no obligation to specialize in this way, or to propound philosophies for the lecture room. In other words, our "reverse anthropology" will have nothing to do with "culture," with production for its own sake, though it may have a great deal to do with the quality of life. And if human beings are as generally inventive as we have assumed, it would be very surprising if such a "reverse anthropology" did not already exist [Wagner 1981:31].

Given the rather late exploration of the northern Amazon and the decidedly sporadic contact that the Yekuana Indians have had even up to the present day, it is surprising that they should have had their first intensive encounter with an ethnographer as early as 1912. 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, 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 report.

Since its publication in 1924, *Vom Roraima Zum Orinoco* (all references are to the 1979 and 1982 Spanish translations) has been a starting point for almost all ethnographic work in the region known as the Guianas. In report after report, Koch-Grünberg is reverentially cited in the initial pages as the pioneer in the area. This is certainly the case among the handful of studies appearing on the Yekuana (de Civrieux 1959; de Barandiarán 1979; Arvelo-Jimenez 1971; Coppens 1981). What is curious is that not one of these authors ever discusses what Koch-Grünberg's actual attitude was toward this small Carib-speaking tribe. For Koch-Grünberg dis-

Following a brief survey of early ethnographic contact, this paper focuses on the dynamics of what Roy Wagner has termed "reverse anthropology," the "metaphorization" of the foreign into one's own ideology. Through an analysis of various myths, the manner in which new historical realities have been incorporated into the existing symbolic structures of the Yekuana Indians of Venezuela is discussed. While attention is devoted to the transformation of the Spanish into a powerful negative symbol, it is the technology they introduced, particularly literacy, that is mainly focused upon. Issues such as cultural creativity, mythopoesis, and the relation between history and myth are all central to this discussion of oral cultures as dynamic systems of thought capable of accommodating new information and ideas. [Yekuana, symbolism, orality, narrative/myth, ethnohistory/"historical incorporation"]

liked them enormously and, in somewhat unethnographic fashion, made no attempt to conceal it.

In page after page he lacerates the Yekuana in a series of denunciations astounding to the contemporary reader. Showing little of the cultural sensitivity he was to reserve for other tribes (particularly the neighboring Taulipang), he in turn accuses them of moodiness, undependability, rudeness, lack of cleanliness, laziness, obstinacy, dishonesty, and quarrelsomeness. He is upset that the men continually return half-eaten bones to the communal pots. He cannot sleep because of the “lack of consideration” of his hosts, who converse at all hours of the night. He dislikes the fact that they laugh at strangers. And worst of all are the women:

The women especially robbed us as soon as they got the chance, even taking things which could be of absolutely no use to them, such as photographs, a bottle of quinine tablets and other objects. They even took bananas and cassava which they had just sold us moments before. . . . The coarse quality of the women can be extremely repulsive and it is not uncommon that their breasts are gigantic. . . . The men are easily influenced by them [1982 (1924):275, 301–302].

Given such feelings, it comes as no surprise when Koch-Grünberg claims that even the brilliantly designed woven baskets of the Yekuana “do not owe their origin to any conscious artistic sentiment but to a simple manual dexterity they have learned from tribes of a higher level, perhaps the Guinau, now degenerated” (1982[1924]:292).

But what is behind this hostility that Koch-Grünberg lavished upon the Yekuana alone amongst all the tribes he visited? It is no secret that the Yekuana belong to a pan-Guiana culture, sharing a host of cultural traits from socioeconomic organization to mythology and religion. Like the Taulipang he so admired, the Yekuana also live in small independent communities of 60 to 70 individuals. Their economy is an identical mixture of hunting and gathering activities and yuca-based horticulture. In simple hygiene and lifestyle, the Yekuana were surely not dissimilar enough from their Arawak and Carib-speaking neighbors to warrant anything approaching the animosity they evoked in him. And it is clear that no subsequent ethnographer has shown anything resembling such disdain. Perhaps the answer is to be found in two of the criticisms wedged among the many he lodged.

The first appears in the introductory sentence to the section entitled “Religious and Mythological Ideas,” in which Koch-Grünberg bluntly confesses his inability to engage the Yekuana in any real dialogue relating to their cosmological beliefs. He admits this, however, in a way that impugns the very existence of such beliefs, suggesting that the Yekuana are as unengaged spiritually as they are artistically:

My notes relating to Yekuana religious concepts are very sparse. A deeper penetration into these beliefs failed primarily because of the laziness of these Indians, who quickly lose interest in any work relating to spiritual matters, even, should they agree to begin, to the point of a single question concerning their language [1982(1924):317].

Koch-Grünberg’s suggestion that the Yekuana’s unwillingness to discuss religious concepts derives from their spiritual sloth and perhaps even the absence of such ideas is a remarkable deduction for an ethnographer as sophisticated as was this early pioneer. What is really conveyed in his accusation is the continued frustration of a fieldworker who cannot get his unwitting hosts to fulfill their role as informants. The Yekuana simply did not want to play “Indians” to this uninvited guest who had experienced such grand success up to this point. Their lack of passivity challenged Koch-Grünberg’s “ethnographic authority” (Clifford 1983) and led him to misread the entire culture. For all the criticisms listed above can easily be traced back to the anger of an ethnographer who has failed to establish the proper relation with his subjects. Moodiness, undependability, rudeness, lack of trust—all of these are evidence not of intrinsic character (or lack of it) but of the resentment the Yekuana felt toward an unwanted visitor who was relentlessly prying into the intimacies of their lives.

The second criticism may give us even more insight into the reason for Koch-Grünberg’s strained relations. It is included in the section entitled “Qualities of Character”:

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 Majongon are always strutting about with great self-confidence, as if the entire world were their domain" [1982(1924):302].¹

Not only were the Yekuana unresponsive, they were not humble. They could not be bought by gifts or awed by unknown technology. In short, they refused to be "primitive" or "simple," and in this refusal turned the tables around. Koch-Grünberg suddenly found himself in the uncomfortable position of being watched and studied. For, if we substitute the word "European" or in this case "German" for that of "Yekuana" in the above statement, we have the perfect description of an early ethnographer proudly striding into an unknown community that he quickly reduces to an object of study. What unnerved Koch-Grünberg to such an amazing degree was the fact that he (albeit unconsciously) saw himself. If anybody was to be an exotic object of study, it was the tall white stranger with the large moustache.² Undoubtedly, the Yekuana found Koch-Grünberg's insistent probing tactless and insulting. Yet, their intermittent interest in him (and the objects he had brought along to trade) confused him with its mixed message:

Never have I seen Indians as easily offended as these. . . . Their moods change like the sky in winter; one day they could almost kill you with their friendship and the next they hardly pay any attention to you at all [1979(1924):258].³

In failing to recognize that the Yekuana might have any clearly defined reasons for not revealing their religious mysteries, Koch-Grünberg forfeited the opportunity of initiating any real dialogue. Instead, the two sides merely observed one another with barely concealed hostility. For Koch-Grünberg's visit to the Yekuana was also an opportunity for them to "do fieldwork" among the *laranavi* or "whites." Not as a Western anthropologist would, of course, but in the way tribal peoples always have: through the visits (almost always unwelcome and unsolicited) of the missionaries, explorers, miners, and ethnographers who come, in one way or another, to colonize them. It is through such uncomfortable encounters that Wagner's "reverse anthropology"—the "metaphorization" of peoples into one another's ideologies—takes place (1981:31–32). In the case of the Yekuana, this "reverse anthropology" has served to reaffirm not only their ideology through the successful incorporation of the foreign into it, but also the tradition of orality that has permitted this incorporation to occur.

II

Koch-Grünberg had already noted during his stay in Venezuela that the Yekuana population was being greatly reduced due to the incursion of rubber-gatherers impressing the Indians as slave laborers. It was not until the year after he left, in 1913, that this reduction was to reach genocidal proportions. 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 people. 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 their villages and to murder and torture the inhabitants. De Barandiarán estimates that no fewer than 1000 Yekuana along with their 20 villages were destroyed before Funes's reign of terror came to an end in 1921 (1979:791).⁴ The Yekuana were never to forget these crimes. And by the time the next European explorer was to visit them in 1949, he was to find their communities even more difficult to approach than Koch-Grünberg had nearly 40 years earlier.⁵ He was also to find the Yekuana as resistant as ever to sharing the mysteries of their world.

Accompanied by three companions and supported by the Musée de l'Homme, Alain Gheerbrant left Bogotá, Colombia, in May 1949, descended the eastern slopes of the Andes, crossed

the *llanos* to Venezuela, and canoed up the Orinoco to the Ventuari. In search of Yekuana to guide him, Gheerbrant planned to reverse Koch-Grünberg's journey, retracing his steps all the way back to Boa Vista, Brazil. The record of this remarkable journey, published in 1952 as *L'expédition Orenoque-Amazone* (translated and published as *Journey to the Far Amazon* in 1954), is particularly valuable in that it is the only written description we have of the three greatest Yekuana leaders of this century—Kalomera, Cejoyuma, and Frenario. Laden down with hundreds of pounds of recording and photographic equipment (all of which was lost during the last several weeks of their journey), Gheerbrant and his companions visited all three of these chiefs' villages in the hope of taping and filming their rituals. Unlike Koch-Grünberg, Gheerbrant did not let disappointment turn into bitterness. Despite repeated rebuffs of his attempts to document their ceremonies, he never loses patience nor respect for his hosts.⁶ His account of what was no more than seven or eight months with the Yekuana is filled with accurate and perceptive detail. It is during one of his many attempts to convince the Yekuana to permit him to film and record that we receive our first clear indication that their resistance to any form of ritual documentation is not just the result of fear or hostility, but of a well-defined conviction. Gheerbrant, after an extended absence, has just returned to Kalomera's village in the headwaters of the Erebató, expecting that the village has been busily preparing a new roundhouse in order that he and his companions may film its lengthy inauguration ceremony:

I then spoke to [Kalomera] about the object of our visit this time.

"Where is the tribal hut?" I asked. "Where are the things you were going to make for us? When are the celebrations to begin? We have brought nine cases of *coroto* [trade goods] with us along the Ventuari. We don't want to lose any time. We want the celebrations straight away, and afterward we will go off together to the Brazilians over the Parima."

"We have not begun to build the hut," he said softly, "and I don't want you to come here with your machines."

And a moment or two later he added: "And I don't want to talk to you any more about Wanadi⁷ and such things, because that would be the death of us all."

Then he fell silent.

That was something of a facer, and I was nonplussed. Could anything be done? Was it really the passage of the airplane which had so upset him, or was there something else? I never discovered [1954:253].

Confused and disappointed, Gheerbrant speculates that it must have been an airplane that flew over earlier in the day which upset Kalomera so much. Like Koch-Grünberg, he can never really conceive of why the Yekuana might not want to share their world with him. Surely there must be some way to coax them into cooperating. But Kalomera was not just being irascible. His refusal to Gheerbrant was firm and well considered. Any recording of sacred ritual ("Wanadi and such things") would result in death to those participating in the ritual. It was the exact message I was to receive 35 years later from another Yekuana chief and shaman.

III

As the experiences of Koch-Grünberg and Gheerbrant illustrate, doing fieldwork among the Yekuana can be even more challenging than the normally arduous task of installing oneself in a completely alien environment, learning an unwritten foreign language, developing rapport with strangers who share few points of common reference, and finally gaining sufficient trust so that they reveal enough of themselves to make the whole effort worthwhile. Among the Yekuana, a strict taboo on the tape recording of any ritual singing further complicates this work if one's principal interest, as mine, is in ritual and oral narrative.⁸ Although not all Yekuana narrative is reserved for ritual situations, the best and most complete examples are those sung in the long *ademi* epics and the shorter, daily *aichudi*. The *ademi*, composed in a special sacred language, are performed in a type of syncopated responsive at the large collective festivals that inaugurate a new roundhouse (the *Atta ademi hidi*), celebrate and purify the new gardens (the *Adaha ademi hidi*), or welcome back a group of travelers who have been away for an extended

period of time (the *Wasai yadi ademi hidi*). All of these chants require a full 72 hours to sing and are the occasion for the most complete and faithful rendition of the *Watunna*—the “story” or “tradition” of the tribe. But the *aichudi*, resembling less a narrative than a long list of names, are also part of the *Watunna*. Unlike the *ademi*, they are sung by one individual over or for another in specific private circumstances. The majority of *aichudi* are connected to the Yekuana’s rigorous dietary restrictions that require each new food ingested after a fast to be “detoxified” or *amoichaadi*. The *aichudi* are also used to purify all new objects such as baskets, baby slings, hammocks, bows, arrows, blowguns, paddles, canoes, and musical instruments. As one would imagine, these multipurpose chants are in the process of being performed continuously. But it takes a keen eye (and ear) to spot the singer seated on a bench or lying in a hammock in the dark, nonchalantly and barely audibly chanting and then, every so often, blowing to spread the magic of the words.

The Yekuana consider the *ademi* and *aichudi* to be the most powerful protection they have against the dangers of contamination and disease potential in every encounter with the non-human world beyond village life. One woman summed up this faith in the chants by claiming that they were a form of “Yekuana penicillin.” And then again, during an *Atta ademi hidi* house ceremony, another person commented that it was “like a vaccination.” As indicated by the special secret language of these chants, their strength derives from their ability to communicate with and influence the invisible sources of power, which the Yekuana believe animate and control each living object. Nelly Arvelo-Jimenez explains this Yekuana concept in the following way:

All known systems of life, plant and animal, as well as technical and social aspects of society, have a double manifestation: an objective, tangible form and an accompanying invisible mirror image form.

These invisible forms are endowed with a share of the generalized supernatural power which, manifested in these invisible forms, is potentially uncontrollable and disruptive. This means that these invisible forms can turn against an individual and inflict misfortune and death. However, the art of manipulating the supernatural power and its concomitant manifestations can and must be learned [1971:184].

It is not surprising therefore that the Yekuana should want to protect the greatest expression of this “art of manipulating the supernatural.” Although herbal lore, stone magic, and shamanism are also powerful tools in this manipulation, they are not as generalized and multipurpose as the ritual chants that form a continual shield of protection for each Yekuana community. The taboos against tape recording the *ademi* and *aichudi* are a safeguard against losing this preeminent weapon of defense. When Kalomera says it “would be the death of us all,” he is referring to the certain vulnerability the Yekuana would experience should they forfeit the protection of the chants that Gheerbrant wished to record. For the Yekuana claim that tape recording or even writing down these chants will destroy their power. As a result, the Yekuana believe that all those participating in a ritual event that is tape recorded will die. Put simply, the event will be robbed of its efficacy, and those meant to be protected by it will be left defenseless. It is also claimed that tape recording will rob the singer of his memory. Unlike Plato’s abstract theorizing that writing would destroy memory, the Yekuana are quick to cite specific examples of elders who naively agreed to record all the *Watunna* they knew and then later were unable to remember anything. Proof of this mnemonic theft was repeatedly said to lie in the unnerving fact that a recording “takes everything.” Unlike hearing, it is not selective but slavishly records every sound and utterance within range of the microphone.

Nor are these restrictions reserved for outsiders. Young tribal members who have traded for tape recorders or learned how to read and write have been refused permission to use these devices as aids in the study of ritual singing. As such, the taboo has been integrated into tribal ritual life with the same articulative structure that any other set of prohibitions (for example, dietary or menstrual) might have. Despite its recent appearance among the Yekuana, the tape recorder, along with writing and many other forms of Western technology, has been subsumed into the mythic world where divine precedents are set. With the creative ethnocentrism pecu-

liar to oral societies (elaborated in Ong 1982), the world introduced by the Europeans is simply relocated in the ongoing narrative structure of the Yekuana. Through a process of "historical incorporation" (Guss 1981), verifiable contemporary events are recontextualized within an already established mythic universe; calendrical time is replaced by that of the atemporal mythic, and historical personalities by the culture heroes and demons who inhabit it. Not only does this mythopoesis ensure the viability and health of such oral societies as the Yekuana by enabling them to adapt to new historical situations, it is also the mechanism by which these cultures legislate.⁹ To mythologize is to give authority. As Malinowski wrote, "[Myths] always state a precedent which constitutes an ideal and a warrant for its continuance, and sometimes practical directions for the procedure" (1954:110).

But the Yekuana myth counseling against the use of tape recorders and writing is much more than a simple "charter" for proper behavior. In the grafting of new sociopolitical realities onto the mythic structures of the old, it also becomes a powerful commentary on these new realities. Nowhere is the Yekuana perception of the European and his overwhelming material wealth as clearly articulated as it is in this myth that explains the origins of both. And like its written counterpart, this oral ethnology seeks to understand the strange and exotic by translating it into the metaphors of its own world, and by so doing, absorb it.

The following version of this myth was narrated to me in May of 1983 in the village of Parupa on the Paragua River. The narrator, who spoke no Spanish whatsoever, was the principal *aichuriaha* or "ritual singer" in the village. He told me the myth as a response to my continual requests to record ritual material. The reference to actual tape recorders is minimal, while that to writing, an older and more significant problem, is more notable. The references to both, however, are somewhat oblique, demanding a certain amount of textual analysis on both a historic-geographical and an ideological level. It is significant that, while references to this story were made on various occasions, the only other complete telling I heard was from a shaman in the village of Canaracuni on the Upper Caura. The fact that only these ritual specialists would tell such a tale explains something of its extremely complex and esoteric character.

Time went by and now everything was finally set up. But Odosha¹⁰ couldn't stop thinking about him. He just wanted to keep on following Wanadi, thinking, doing evil. He could stay here, but he couldn't take too much. Because Wanadi said when he was born, "I didn't do the right thing when I was born." Because he had the umbilical cord. Because he took the cord out, and if it wasn't for that, it wouldn't have turned out this way. Because he left the cord out there and Odosha was born from that cord. It was as if they were brothers.

But Odosha thought different. He thought evil. Because Wanadi wanted that Odosha to be like his brother. Because Wanadi loved him like a brother. Because he thought of him as his brother. Because he was born inside that same cord.

Since Odosha felt something for Wanadi in the beginning, since Wanadi treated him like a brother, he always asked him: "What did you dream, brother?"¹¹

So Wanadi answered, "I dreamt I shot tapir. I dreamt I cleared gardens."

Then Odosha said, "That dream means you're definitely going to die. Killing tapir that way, you're going to die."

Then Wanadi wanted to get away from him. He didn't like what he would say. So Wanadi left. He got away from there. Because he didn't like what Odosha used to say. Because it was like treason.

Then he met him there at some falls. He was preparing *barbasco* there to catch *fade*.¹² He had his two children there with him—not through sex but through thought.¹³

Kahushawa also had two children.¹⁴ And they were there with Kahushawa too.

When he saw him, he asked, "What are you doing?"

"We're preparing *barbasco*. We're looking for *fade*. If you want to catch some with us, come on."

"Yes, of course," said Odosha.

They were diving down below the water. When they dove down the third time, Wanadi's children didn't come back up. Because Kahushawa killed them there beneath the water. He trapped them there. Because Kahushawa had power too. So they didn't come back to Wanadi. Then Wanadi said to Kahushawa's children, "Go see where my children are."

Then Kahushawa's children went back down again. They were trapped there but they didn't say anything.

Then he thought his children back to him, resuscitating his children. And the children came back to him. They came back fine.

That's why we die now. Because Kahushawa discovered that. Because Wanadi didn't do it. It was Kahushawa who began that, killing people. Because Wanadi never thought of killing people, of dying. Wanadi only thought good. That was Kahushawa who began, who thought that.

Wanadi started off again. He met that one again at Attudi Falls.¹⁵ Wanadi was preparing another *barbasco*. They met there again. Kahushawa was following him. He asked him, "What are you doing?"

"We're just sitting here eating *fade*."

So Kahushawa was glad to find him again.

"OK, take some."

Then Kahushawa's children dove in. They dove down three times. The fourth time they didn't come back up. They didn't come out. That's how Wanadi got his revenge. When his children didn't come out, Kahushawa began to cry. He began crying for his children.

Then Wanadi said, "I didn't cry when you killed my children."

This is why we cry now when our children die. Because Kahushawa cried then. Because Wanadi didn't cry but Kahushawa did. And that's why we cry now.

When he killed his children, the children of Kahushawa, he left. Kahushawa just stayed there crying.

Now Wanadi thought of getting things to leave him, in order to leave him, to stop him. Because Wanadi didn't want him to keep following him. He was mad. And he thought of making oranges, mangoes, all the fruits. He made them to console Odosha. That's how he planted them.

Then he came to Angostura.¹⁶ He planted the trees there, the mangoes, the oranges. He met Iaranavi Arache.¹⁷ He left all his written papers there with Iaranavi. He told him, "Here, take them. All my written papers. Because a man is coming behind me. As a letter for Odosha."

When Kahushawa arrived there, he asked, "Where is he? When did he pass here?"

Then Iaranavi Arache said, "Oh, he passed a long time ago. See that enormous mango tree there? He planted it!"

From there he went to Caracas. There he made more things to console Odosha, to keep him even more. He made radios, tape recorders, all of that.

Then he went to another place, on the other side of Dama, the sea.¹⁸ And he made even more. He made clothes, planes, cars, all to console him.

Then Wanadi said, "Look, when that one who's following me arrives, tell him that I'm Wanadi. That Wanadi was here. That I'm Wanadi here!" Because he made everything there, great things like *wiriki*, like crystals.¹⁹ "So tell him, 'Well, look how shiny and brilliant it is, like glass.' Tell him then that I'm Wanadi." And that's how he made jukeboxes, everything—planes, cars—to stop Kahushawa, to divert him, to console him.

From there he went to Kahu Awadña, "the foot of Heaven." There he made more than he already had: houses completely of glass, floors, everything sparkling, all more beautiful than he had made before. And he put people there to keep Odosha away from him. Then he gave them a paper.

He thought a lot about this, about how to stop Kahushawa.

"I am Wanadi. Because from this point on there is no more Wanadi. Because look at these houses—pure *wiriki*, shiny, brilliant. No tin!"²⁰

And he took *aiuku* to get away from there.²¹ He took his children and his woman Kaweshawa. And he never came back again.

And Kahushawa arrived there and he stayed there in that village, the last one that Wanadi made.

And so, you have many forms, but Wanadi made them all, to console Kahushawa. That's the reason you say you have so much there—motors, boats, radios. . . . You say, "Look at those poor Indians who have nothing." But all those things you have there, Wanadi made them. He made them so Kahushawa would stay with them.

And so Kahushawa stayed there in that village that Wanadi made at the end. And from there, Wanadi left. He opened the door to Heaven and he never returned.

IV

To properly understand the ideological and symbolic import of this myth one must first look at the historical circumstances out of which it was fashioned. In addition to its parabolic significance is what Johannes Wilbert (1979) has called the "ethnogeographical dimension" of myth,²² the mapping of new universes that mythic structures enable oral societies to inhabit. For Wanadi's journey is one of conquest (and reconquest), in which the story of the European incursion into the Yekuana world is simply reversed. The initiative is no longer that of the Spanish or Dutch, but rather that of the Yekuana culture hero, Wanadi. He relinquishes no power; it remains his actions that are responsible for all creation. The history of this contact is accurately chronicled, yet by reversing it the Yekuana position at the center of the universe is maintained and a severely threatened order reaffirmed.

Using the same four-part structure familiar to most Yekuana spatial and temporal concepts, the narration takes its listeners on a voyage not just to the source of all material power but also to the very edge of the universe at Kahu Awadiña, the “foot of Heaven” or “Hell.” The four stages of this descent recreate with remarkable accuracy the historical contact the Yekuana have had with the Spanish, the Dutch, and finally the Americans. The initial contact, established in 1758 by a Spanish border commission, was surprisingly positive. Anxious to gain the Yekuana’s support in their struggle against the Dutch and their Carib allies, the Spanish loaded the Yekuana down with presents, inviting them to join in the construction of the new Orinoco village of La Esmeralda between the mouths of the Padamo and Cunucunuma rivers. The Yekuana in turn supplied their new friends with wild cocoa and served as guides in the explorations of the Upper Orinoco. When the Spanish founded the new city of Angostura (Ciudad Bolívar) in 1764 in order to secure the entire river, they invited a delegation of Yekuana chiefs to visit the new community and witness the many material and technological marvels firsthand. Impressed with both their generosity and strength, the Yekuana concluded that the Spanish must also be one of Wanadi’s creations. Their white skin was said to be the result of the white clay the culture hero had used to create them and their material goods, gifts that he had given them to bring to the Indians. In this incarnation of goodness, the Yekuana named him Iaranavi:

He was the rich man, Wanadi’s shopkeeper, friend to the poor. He was always travelling around, trading goods. Our grandfathers travelled to Ankosturaña too 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 relationship was soon to sour. By 1767 the Spanish had embarked on a more aggressive policy of colonization of the Upper Orinoco. In an attempt to secure the entire region, an expeditionary force was sent out to build a road and 19 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. This also marked their first exposure to Christianity, as Capuchin missionaries were dispatched to actively convert them. Amazed by this sudden change in behavior, the Yekuana decided that this was not Iaranavi, but rather a different species altogether. Fañuru, as they called him,²³ was a creation of Odosha. 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). The locus of power had suddenly shifted from the provincial capital of “mangoes and oranges” to the real center of colonial control—Caracas. In a myth that parallels this political realignment as well as the flight of Wanadi from Odosha described in the preceding tale, the Yekuana recount how the *Fadre* and Fañuru, led by their chief Kahiuru, forcibly brought Wanadi to Caracas to undergo an inquisition and eventual crucifixion:

“Who are you?” they asked him. “Where do you come from? Who’s your father?”
 “I’m Wanadi,” he answered. “I come from Kahuña [Heaven]. My father is Wanadi.”
 The *Fadre* didn’t like that answer. “You’re a liar! You’re not Wanadi. You’re Odosha,” they said.
 “I’m Wanadi,” he said again. “*Wanadi inedi*, Wanadi’s son. I’m Wanadi’s *damodede* [double]. He sent me here as chief.”
 “You’re lying,” they said to him. “And for that lie we’re going to kill you.”
 Then they began whipping him with vines, asking: “Whose village is this? Whose house? Whose Earth is this?”
 “It’s all mine,” said Wanadi. “I made it all. I made you too.”
 “Liar! It’s all ours. Nothing is yours. We’re going to punish you for that.”
 And they beat him again.
 Then Kahiuru said: “Okay. We couldn’t kill him with gunpowder. Now we’ll try again.”
 He sent for a post to hang him from. It was shaped like a forked *Kruza ake*, a cross. That’s what they called it. When they brought *Kruza ake*, they nailed him there with iron points. “That way he won’t escape,” they thought.
 “It’s done,” they said. “Now let’s leave him on the road to die.”
 “Good,” said Kahiuru. “Now he’s going to die.” Kahiuru was strong too. He knew a lot. He didn’t like Wanadi. He called Wamedi, the rooster. He sent him to the mountain to watch *Kruza ake* and tell them when Wanadi died. “Wanadi’s dead” is what you’ll sing,” he told him.

They stayed in Karakaña, waiting for Wamedi's call. When the sun rose, Wamedi sang. "*Wanadi nistama!*" he screamed. "Wanadi's gone!" That's what he sang. He didn't sing the death song. He sang "He's gone," and that's all. Kahiuru, the Padre, and the soldiers came to see what happened. They looked at *Kruza ake*. Wanadi was hanging there. He wasn't moving. He was dead. He was there. "Here he is," they said. Rooster went right on singing. He was singing: "Wanadi's gone!" "He isn't gone," they said, yelling at Wamedi. "He's right here." "Wanadi's gone!" Three times Wamedi sang that way. "Shut up!" said Kahiuru. "You're a liar. You're a worthless guard." Wanadi was like a corpse. It was a trick. He had already gone. He had taken his *damodede* out of the body. He had gone back to his home in Kushamakari. Wamedi knew that. The Padre and the Fañuru didn't. Wanadi was just hanging there like an empty shell. It was just his body. He had gone back to Kushamakari. Wamedi didn't sing anymore. They beat him with sticks and clubs. When Wanadi arrived, Kaweshawa and his in-laws rejoiced. They called all the people together. "Wanadi isn't dead!" they shouted. People came from all over to celebrate. In Karakaña, the Fañuru stopped looking. "We killed him," the Padre said. "It wasn't Wanadi. It was Odosha. We punished him. We beat him." They kept *Kruza ake* as proof, as a sign. That's their reminder. Later, they made lots of crosses. They like to make crosses to show people. They say: "On this post he died." They didn't know. They don't know. They say they killed him. It's not true. They couldn't. He tricked them and got away [de Civrieux 1980:152–153].

Underlying the historical implications of this confrontation is the much greater spiritual enigma posed by these first missionaries. Wanadi, they claimed, was actually the Devil (Odosha) and yet, to destroy the Devil, they had killed God (Wanadi). As proof of their assertions, they not only showed the Yekuana a reproduction of the execution (in the form of a cross), but also a small rectangular object called a Bible that they swore contained the Word of God. But Wanadi's words were in the *aichudi* and *ademi* he had left the Yekuana to protect themselves against Odosha and his Odoshankomo. If the Padre and the Fañuru believed they possessed Wanadi's words, then he had tricked them in the same way he had when he left the shell of his body (corpse) hanging from the *Kruza ake*. The Bible, Wanadi's "written papers," was only another deception to convince Odosha, the Padre, and the Fañuru that they had already found him. As such, writing (and eventually tape recording) could never be used to transcribe Wanadi's words. The Book that said "I am God (Wanadi)" and "Here is the word of God" was simply another ruse to prevent Odosha from pursuing him. Literacy was created by Wanadi not to reveal the truth but to conceal it.

The conflict described here and elsewhere in the *Watunna* between Wanadi and the Fañuru has actual historical antecedents in the rapidly degenerating relationships of the 18th-century Spanish and Yekuana. Finally, in 1776, unable to tolerate any further degradations, the Yekuana led a coalition of tribes in a rebellion that destroyed all 19 forts in a single night and drove the Spanish out of their territory for what would be nearly 150 years. Two decades of contact, however, had created new dependencies, which the Yekuana were now obliged to fulfill elsewhere. No longer able to trade in Angostura, they turned to their late allies' habitual enemies, the Dutch. Making journeys of anywhere from one to two years, the Yekuana travelled into Brazil and then via the Rio Branco and Sao Joaquin into Guyana, where they crossed over to the Rupununi and finally the Essequibo, taking this river all the way to its mouth and the main Dutch outpost of Kijkoveral.²⁴ The Yekuana called this island fort, located within view of the Caribbean Sea, Amenadiña. For them it was a magic city one step closer to Wanadi's storehouses in Heaven. The Hurunko, or Dutch, whom they witnessed crossing this ocean (*Dama*) to Heaven, had now become Wanadi's favored people.

Now they saw a village there called Amenadiña. It wasn't a *so'to* (human) village, but a spirit village. The chief of Amenadiña was Hurunko. 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* and go to Wanadi's village, to Motadewa. Hurunko'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.

Wanadi has huge stores in Heaven. They're filled with mountains of goods for his people. Hurunko and his people are in charge of it all. They're the only ones who can cross *Dama* [de Civrieux 1980:170].

Across *Dama*, which sits at the center of a circular earth, is the other unexplored half of the world known as Coyojiiña. Closed to all but shamans and spirits, this realm is easily confused with Heaven, which also has a large sea at its center. In fact, Heaven, with its eight different houses, is the invisible mirror image of the earth. In the story of Amenadiña, the Yekuana explorers believe they have arrived at the shore of Heaven. In Wanadi's flight from Odosha, he crosses this sea in the hope of convincing his pursuer that he has already entered it. In order to do so, the goods he creates are even more spectacular and sophisticated than those of his first two stops in Angostura and Caracas. In keeping with the historical model, this unnamed world on the other side of *Dama* (America? Europe?) is the world of an unknown higher technology. If Caracas is the site of the creation of tape recorders and radios, it may be because the Yekuana have experienced them in their world on this side of the universe. After all, Caracas is not only the seat of the Ministerio de Juventud's indigenous radio network, it is also the starting point for all anthropologists and their tape recorders. But cars and planes are not part of the Yekuana's half of the universe, nor are they even manufactured in it. These come, like the French and American missionaries of the last 30 years, from another shore.

Unable to stop Odosha, despite the repeated messages left on his inventions, Wanadi creates the closest replica of Heaven possible. Like its fourth house in which the Lake of Immortality, *Akuena*, is located, this fourth and final stop of Wanadi's is given an aura of magic and preciousness. But this aura is an illusion and the magic quartz crystals with which it is said to be constructed only glass and mirror. Like the world of most material objects, it is one without content or inner strength. It is the ultimate world of surface, "shiny and brilliant," in which the image of Odosha is reflected wherever he looks. Not merely on the surfaces either, for in his desperation to stop Odosha, Wanadi "put people there to keep Odosha away from him." He created the demons, the *Odoshankomo*. Finally, Odosha believes he is in Heaven and has found Wanadi. But he is only in the "Foot of Heaven," at the extreme edge of the universe and the furthest end of materialism. Although he believes he has entered into a world of pure light, the "glitter" he sees reflected everywhere is only an illusion. As every Yekuana knows, Kahu Awadiña is a land of darkness and decay.

V

Wanadi now becomes a *deus otiosus*, indifferent to the problems of the world he created and playing no further part in it whatsoever. But the record of his adventures retains their heuristic importance. The battles he fought with Odosha, and which ultimately drove him from the earth, remain the quintessential models of duality so central to the Yekuana concept of the universe. As the myth of Wanadi's flight from Odosha demonstrates, these models are extremely generative, enabling the Yekuana to effectively synthesize new historical realities as they erupt into their world. The sophisticated technology and new lifestyles introduced by the Europeans did not devastate the Yekuana world view as they might easily have done, but were used as another example to reaffirm it. The Fañuru and Fadre were immediately conceptualized as manifestations of Odosha, and their material objects turned against them. Instead of subverting the Yekuana, Wanadi turns the tables completely, using this technology to deceive the Spanish, who imagine they have invented it. The incorporation of these new events is smooth and natural. Inserted into easily recognizable motifs, this narrative becomes yet another signpost in the treacherous navigation of life in a hostile universe.

The entrance of the Spanish into the Yekuana world is translated into the symbols of duality that dominate every aspect of their life. The conflicts of light and darkness, of visible and invisible, are transposed onto the struggle between these two adversaries. The Spanish and their

wealth of goods become synonymous with the world of form and illusion that blocks man from the true sources of power that dwell behind it. In a process strikingly similar to the Melanesian “cargo cults” discussed by Roy Wagner, the Yekuana have used “the extensive bias of the other as its symbol” (1981:32). For as Wagner makes clear, the essence of the cargo cults was not a tribal people’s naive attempt to attain Western goods, but rather a sophisticated “metaphorization” of these visitors in a way that comprehended them. The Yekuana reading of the Spanish, while making no pretense of coveting their goods, notes the same fetishistic relation to production and material possession that the Melanesians perceived among their Western visitors. And while both these groups resolve their contact in different ways, their similar metaphorizations are clearly the result of a need to respond to the advent of a radical new definition of power.

Underlying the selection of goods that Wanadi creates in his flight from Odosha is a persistent discussion about sacred language and the most effective means of communicating it. For beyond the simple creation of these material objects in order to entrap Odosha is the choice of the objects themselves. At all four stops, Wanadi leaves one or more instruments for the recording of words. In Angostura, it is the book, his “written papers.” In Caracas, it is tape recorders and radios. In the land beyond *Dama*, it is that greatest of all shrines to multivocality, the jukebox. And finally, in Kahu Awadiña, it is the primary book once again that says, “I am Wanadi. Because from this point on there is no more Wanadi.” Although certainly aware of cameras, film, and perhaps even television, the narrator forgoes any mention of technology to record images.²⁵ The emphasis is solely on the aural. The visual image may be evocative or beautiful, but only the word is transformative and magical. It is in the word that ultimate power resides and it is over this power that the conflict between Wanadi and Odosha and the Yekuana and the Fañuru and Padre arises.

Yekuana confidence in the ability of *aichudi* and *ademi* to successfully communicate with the supernatural is based on a commitment to orality. The language of chants is powered by the breath that animates them, blowing or “taling” the words to the forces they are meant to influence. Words are not simply uttered or sung but infused with the actual spirit of the chanter who, breaking at certain points in the performance, disseminates them with short, rapid blowing. As Audrey Butt Colson observed among the neighboring Akawaio, “When a person blows it is that person’s own spirit or vitality which is projected in the breath and which is sent to perform certain work” (1956:49). Such “taling,” in conjunction with the proper words, can be used for almost any situation from healing to causing disease, to purifying food and artifacts, to protecting one’s home and gardens, to preventing storms, or to calling game. In contrast to the active immediacy of this tradition, the missionaries wished (and still wish) to substitute the passive word of the written page.

The conflict between Wanadi and Odosha and the Yekuana and the Padre is also a struggle between two forms of magic: orality and literacy. Wanadi’s victory over Odosha is clearly a vindication of the orality of the *Watunna* over the literacy of the Bible. The message is not only that Odosha has been deceived and forever relegated to the powerless world of external form, but that the written word is incapable of transporting one beyond it. Odosha believes he has found God and entered Heaven, yet the Yekuana know that he is eternally trapped in a world of deception. Without the living word that can never be written or recorded, he is powerless and vulnerable. He is without access to the supernatural world of the invisible where the fates of those in this one are determined.

This conflict of competing claims between orality and literacy has been noted in various societies where the latter has suddenly been introduced (Goody 1968; Ong 1982). Oral societies with no reading or writing skills will often attempt to use the magic of the written word in ways entirely different from their original intention. In Senegal, nonliterate warriors protected themselves by wearing shirts with sacred Arabic script and amulets on them (Oldknow 1982:44). Among the Nafana of northwestern Ghana, soups (*siliama-glue*, Muslim soup) are

made from the water used to wash writing slates in order to ingest the power of words that cannot be deciphered (Oldknow 1982:44). And in Guyana, Carib-speaking Indians merely invoke the idea of the “Book” to give validity and strength to a recently formed religious movement known as Hallelujah (Butt Colson 1960, 1971). In these and many other instances, the intent of the nonliterate society is somehow to pry the word off the page, to co-opt its power and reintegrate it into an oral context. As in the commonly misinterpreted “cargo cults” discussed above, one should not be too quick to conclude from these examples that they simply represent the ingenuous attitudes of nonliterate peoples toward a more complex and sophisticated technology such as writing. In most instances, the “borrowing” of the word’s written power is the direct result of a literate society’s insistence that the Book—be it Bible, Koran, or other—has more power than the oral word. The solution of these oral groups, while possibly skeptical, is unquestionably pragmatic.

While subjected to the same ecclesiastical claims regarding the great magical properties of the Bible and its ability to transform their lives, the Yekuana have made no similar attempt at a pseudoliterate incorporation of writing. Their response has been an outright rejection of any use of sacred writing and, through the means of myth, the unequivocal association of it with the forces of death and darkness. The fixed word of the page is a form locked in space, inanimate and without hope of transformation. Odosha and the written word will coexist eternally, condemned to a material existence, which no inner illumination will ever dispel. It is this existence, however, which will return again and again to challenge every generation of Yekuana. And so might Walter Ong have been speaking for the Yekuana when he wrote that

one of the most startling paradoxes in writing is its close association with death. This association is suggested in Plato’s charge that writing is inhuman, thing-like, and that it destroys memory. . . . The paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers [1982:81].

The failure of written magic to appeal to an oral culture such as the Yekuana is in part due to the abstract nature of writing itself (Ong 1982:49). Whereas the oral magic of the *aichudi* and *ademi* respond to the pragmatic, daily needs of the Yekuana, the power of the Bible was explained in terms of sin and redemption, both nonexistent concepts in their world. The Bible might claim absolute authority for the Word but in a language untranslatable into Yekuana. For them, every being is guaranteed entrance into Heaven (Kahuña) upon death, as their *akato* or “doubles” automatically return to the source from which they have come. Even the *akato* of those who commit incest and murder will eventually, after a period of wandering, reenter Heaven. And as for those who break certain dietary or hunting taboos, their punishment is not eternal damnation but bad stomach aches and empty traps. Entrance into the invisible world of the supernatural is not viewed as an existential problem of Salvation, but as a practical question of daily survival: to eat, and to defend one’s family, one must be able to communicate with and influence the unseen powers that control their lives. The authority of the oral is in its specificity to its environment, its ability to respond and adapt. The written word of the Bible, in challenging that authority, could not help but be seen as a threat to the very lives and well-being of the Yekuana. As such, it is no surprise that it was discredited as being one of Odosha’s many weapons (albeit created by the culture hero) for stealing Wanadi’s people away from him. The following is how one Yekuana explained this connection between writing and the devil, or as he called it, that “Creyente [Believer or Evangelical] lie”:

Fiyoto Anadiña (Hell) is a *Creyente* lie.²⁶ They say Yekuana won’t go to Kahuña if we drink, dance, smoke, sing. I say, “Fine! I don’t want to if they’re there.” They have a lot of *Watunna*. Strong. I’ve seen it. “Here,” they say. “Look, take this paper.” I’ve seen the words there. They have *Watunna*, Kahuña, *Akuena*, everything. THAT’S ODOSHA! There, in that mountain. There, like Caracas. He has everything—houses, *conucos* (gardens), cars, lots of people. His city is called *Fhwiti’ca*. That’s his village. That’s where the Evangelicos come from. I don’t want anything to do with them. They come say, “Here, take this paper.” I know them. When I was a little boy they came. Others, yes [meaning nonmissionar-

ies). But here we don't want them. I don't know words, how to read. I have *Watunna*, Wanadi. The other one is called Kahushawa. That's Odosha's name.

Although the Yekuana may dispute the magical power and absolute authority of the written word, there is one area in which they find themselves in surprising agreement with Western views of literacy. This is in the primacy of writing in relation to material advancement. In the story of Wanadi's flight from Odosha as well as in other myths and statements, writing is placed as a clear prerequisite to other technological discoveries that follow. Stated in the language of oral narrative, a belief emerges that can be compared to the "literacy hypothesis" of Jack Goody, which, simply stated, claims that only with alphabetic literacy was it possible for Western people to develop the critical and logical mental skills that enabled them to achieve the scientific and technological advances of the last several hundred years (1977:37). As held not just by Goody, but also by Havelock (1963), Ong (1982) and others, without this transformation in reasoning capacities brought about by literacy, there would be no scientific and technological revolution as we know it. The Yekuana of course do not state this theory in the same way. Nevertheless, the connection between technological discovery and literacy is clearly stated, with the primacy of the latter unquestionable. This occurs not only in the story of Wanadi's flight from Odosha, wherein writing is the first invention made by Wanadi, preceding all others, but also in a separate myth recorded by de Barandiarán in 1959. Here it is clear that writing must exist before any of the other three great achievements of Western man—iron (technology), silver (money), and the horse (mobility)—can come into being:

The Fañuru were people of Wanadi. Wanadi made them together with the Yekuana on the sacred savannah of Kamashowochiña. He made the Yekuana with dark earth and the Fañuru with white, the same as the laranavi [all whites in general and Venezuelan patriots in particular]. Kumariawa had a special feeling for the laranavi and Fañuru when Wanadi, her son, made them. Wanadi didn't give them cassava or hunting dogs but, because his mother insisted, he gave them paper made from the bark of a tree or from cotton. With that powerful paper, laranavi and Fañuru, still good then when they were just created, got three more special gifts from Wanadi: iron, silver, and the horse. Without a written petition on paper no one in the world could ask for or receive iron, silver, or the horse.

The Yekuana knew how to write in his own way in the beginning—with pictures on the bark of trees that formed the walls of their houses. But Wanadi's mother, Kumariawa, didn't want drawings. She wanted lines in the writing. That's why she had paper given to the laranavi and Fañuru her son had just made.

When the laranavi and Fañuru got the paper from Wanadi, they immediately wrote three requests with three words which only Wanadi alone understood: "iron," "silver," "horse."

That's why the laranavi and Fañuru were stronger than the Yekuana right from the very beginning, because they knew how to write on paper [1979:752–753].²⁷

Whether writing is being credited here with the magical power it is denied elsewhere may be deceptive. Responsible for making "the laranavi and Fañuru stronger than the Yekuana right from the beginning," literacy is treated with a certain amount of ambivalence. On the level of strict historical interpretation, the primacy of writing to other Western technology may simply reflect the Yekuana appreciation of the importance of literacy in gaining access to the materially privileged world of modern Venezuela. Certainly this is the message to be gleaned from missionaries encouraging them to "accept the Word of the Lord and enjoy the wealth of his bounty." This awareness is also evident in the Yekuana decision to single out certain youths to be taught the basic skills of reading and writing in order to serve as interfaces for their communities. And yet the "iron, silver, and horse" evoked in this story are also other manifestations of the material goods Wanadi created in order to deceive Odosha. As such, it may be read not only as another, somewhat elliptical, version of Wanadi's flight from Odosha, but also as a fascinating reversal of Goody's "literacy hypothesis."

The Yekuana, in acknowledging the primacy of literacy in the creation of a more advanced technology, are not concluding, as have Goody and others, that this technology has resulted in greater power. Their elaboration of this chain of events has been done to demonstrate the reverse: to show how literacy, and particularly sacred literacy, has led to a direct diminishment of power. Odosha, in accepting the material gifts (which began with "Wanadi's written pa-

pers’)), has denied himself access to the invisible world of the supernatural. Believing he has already found Wanadi, he will never discover him nor any of the unseen resources his presence represents. If real power lies in the “invisible mirror-image forms” that control the objective, visible ones (Arvelo-Jimenez 1971:184), then the material goods that have seduced Odosha have left him impotent and emasculated. Odosha is defeated because he is eternally cut off from the inner reality of Wanadi’s world. And at the same time, he is the Devil because he believes he possesses it.

But the conflict acted out by Odosha and Wanadi is an unending one, not just in the mythic world of narrative but in the daily life of every Yekuana community that is challenged with the encroachment of products and values from the dominant European culture just beyond its borders. The projection of this contemporary struggle between the Yekuana and Spanish into the familiar motifs of the *Watunna* provides a perceptive commentary on these interlopers while at the same time adopting them as a powerful negative symbol. As such, these adversaries reproduce the existential struggle incorporated into all aspects of Yekuana life. Along with the opposing forces of orality and literacy, they become markers in a labyrinth of dualities which, for the initiated listener, has but one meaning: to provide an access to power.

notes

¹Majongon (or Maiongkong) is the Pemon name for the Yekuana. It is not surprising that this is the one that Robert Schomburgk used for them in his *Reisen in Britisch Guiana* (Leipzig, 1847), as his approach to the Yekuana was through the neighboring Pemon territories to the east. A botanist in the employ of the British, Schomburgk visited the Yekuana briefly during his passage through the Upper Orinoco in 1838–39. In addition to Maiongkong and Yekuana (the proper term these Indians use to identify themselves), Helmuth Fuchs (1962:170) recorded 48 other names that have been used to refer to them. Among the most important of these are the Arawak name, Makiritare, which like the word “Yekuana” means “water people,” and the Yekuana term So’to, meaning “people” or “twenty,” the number of digits each human being possesses.

²“The curiosity of these Indians constantly verges on impertinence. In Motokurunya the women who, with rare exceptions, had never seen a white person, sat down right around our hammocks without any fear whatsoever, wanting to see everything, to touch everything, even our white skin in the parts covered by our clothes. They would get in with us under the mosquito nets, behaving in such a way as if we had all lived together for years in intimate familial contact” (Koch-Grünberg 1982[1924]:302).

³Further evidence of the ambivalent relations that existed between Koch-Grünberg and the Yekuana is to be found in the following remembrance of his visit by Chief Kalomera 40 years later. What is interesting in this account, recorded by Gheerbrant, is not only the positive sentiments but the fact that they are entirely dependent on the quantity of goods exchanged. In the memory of the tribe, Koch-Grünberg is recalled, as are many other anthropologists, as simply an overgenerous trader:

“You know,” he said, “I have met a lot of people. There aren’t only Venezuelans among the whites, I know that. Do you know Captain Cardona? He came to visit me too. He is a Spaniard. I also knew a German. But that was a long time ago and I was very young. He had dozens and dozens of cases with him. And what beads he had in his *coroto* (trade goods)! When a muchacho brought him a paujil or agouti for food, he would take a calabash and scoop it into one of his cases and bring it out full of beads to the very brim. ‘Open your hands,’ he would say to the muchacho, and when the man did so he would pour out the whole calabash filled to the brim with beads into his hands. That was *coroto* if you like! He was a German. A great chief. He had come a very long way to see the Indians” [Gheerbrant 1954:210].

⁴De Barandiarán’s figure of 1000 massacred Yekuana is based on the 20 villages whose destruction he has been able to confirm, with an estimated population of 50 inhabitants in each (1979:791). Although de Barandiarán’s account of Funes’s reign of terror is probably the best, others are to be found in Wilbert (1966) and Arvelo-Jimenez (1973). According to the most recent indigenous census of 1984, the present Yekuana population is estimated at 3100 (Censo Indígena, Fundación La Salle, personal communication).

⁵Funes’s persecution of the Yekuana not only led to massive destruction and suicide, but also to the relocation of various tribal members. Some of these groups fled to the Paragua River to the east while others went into Brazil or simply moved further up into the mountains of the headwaters. For a vivid description of these new strongholds, see Gheerbrant’s remarkable accounts of his arrival at Cejoyuma’s and Frenario’s villages (1954:255, *passim*).

⁶Statements such as the following occur throughout Gheerbrant’s record of his time spent among the Yekuana: “And there was nothing violent or vehement about it all. In everything these men did and said

there was the same abiding principle of tact, discretion, and moderation which seemed to preside over the whole life of the Maquiritares [Yekuana]" (1954:209).

⁷Wanadi is the Yekuana culture hero responsible for human life as it is known today. Created by Shi, the sun, Wanadi descended to earth in three different incarnations to create both people and the artifacts of culture that give their lives definition. Although permanently absent from the present turmoil of Yekuana existence, Wanadi remains the symbol of all sacred knowledge and tradition.

⁸Although the Yekuana do share a homogeneous belief system as defined by the *Watunna*, it is not entirely accurate to refer to them, as I have here, as a single entity. Each of the approximately 30 Yekuana villages spread along the Padamo, Kuntinama, Cunucunuma, Caura, Ventuari, Erebató, and Paragua rivers is a completely autonomous community with its own chief and shaman. Nevertheless, my experiences in the villages of Canaracuni and Parupa in 1977–78 and 1983–84, as well as that of other fieldworkers elsewhere, have convinced me that the taboo on tape recording, while possibly obeyed in differing degrees from one community to another, has now been adopted by all the Yekuana.

⁹South American Indian myths abound in examples of this mythopoetic creativity. Especially common among tribal groups who survived the initial onslaught of the European invasion are myths explaining the genesis of these unwelcome strangers. In almost every instance, their origin can be related to some conflict occurring within the tribe itself. The whites share a common ancestry from which they were separated but to which they are now returning in order to avenge themselves. For selections of such tales one is referred to the motif indexes of the UCLA Folk Literature Series, Johannes Wilbert, editor.

¹⁰Whereas Odosha is the general name for all the evil and negative forces of the universe, Káhu or Kahushawa is the specific name for the devil himself. In this sense, Kahushawa may be said to be the master or even culture hero (*arache*) of the Odosha or Odoshankomo ("Odosha People"). The narrator of this story regularly interchanges the two terms in a manner that is perfectly clear and natural to any native listener. Also made clear in this story is the fact that Wanadi and Odosha, that is, good and evil, have their origins in the same source.

¹¹The dream interpretation described here is a reference to the daily communal practice among the Yekuana of analyzing their dreams for omens, both good and bad. For more on Yekuana dream theory, see Guss 1980.

¹²An important fishing technique common throughout the Amazon, *barbasco* refers to any variety of vines (*Lonchocarpus sericeus*, *Piscidia guaricensis*, and so on) that are beaten and then released into the rivers, destroying their oxygen content and thus stunning the fish and forcing them to float to the surface. The *fade* that is being fished for in this story is a small bony fish known as *coroncha* in Spanish.

¹³Until the first incest, which Odosha tricked Wanadi's two children into committing, all procreation was by thought alone. Only then did sexual or material reproduction begin to occur. In another version of this story (personal archives) the confrontation at the waterfalls between Odosha and Wanadi is precipitated by this incest, which has led to the first menstruation (of Wanadi's daughter) and the first death (of Wanadi's son). This distinction between the manner of birth is an important one, as it restates the conflict between Odosha and Wanadi as that between material and mental production.

¹⁴See note 10 above.

¹⁵Attudi Falls (Spanish, *Atures Falls*) is located just below the provincial capital of Puerto Ayacucho, the traditional first stop on the way to visit the Spanish.

¹⁶Founded in 1764 with the purpose of securing the entire mid- and lower Orinoco against foreign incursion, Angostura (Yekuana, *Ankosturaña*) is located at the narrowest part of the river, hence the name which means "narrow." This name, however, was changed in 1866 to the present-day one, Ciudad Bolívar. It should also be noted that mangoes and oranges are not native to South America but were brought by the first Europeans. The geographical model of the myth is thus extended to agricultural products, which in the Yekuana journey to the Spanish would be the first thing they would come into contact with.

¹⁷Iaranavi refers to the first whites created by Wanadi at San Fernando de Atabapo. Unlike the Fañuru associated with Odosha, these whites were considered honorable and good. The term *Arache* might be translated as "master," "grandfather," or even "culture hero," as each species is said to have such a prototypal figure responsible for giving it its form along with its particular culture. The fact that Wanadi meets with "Iaranavi Arache" quickly locates us in the mythic time of the first beings, as Wanadi too is often referred to in ritual narrative as *So'to Arache*, or "Master of the Humans."

¹⁸*Dama* is the "Sea" that occupies the center of the earth and is connected by waterfalls to its parallel structure in the center of Heaven known as Lake Akuena. Identifiable to us as the Caribbean Sea, *Dama* is said to have had its origin in a great flood caused by the twin heroes Iureke and Shikiemona (de Civrieux 1980:80–82).

¹⁹The symbol of absolute purity, *wiriki* are small quartz crystals known as "the shaman's power stones." Every shaman, during his initiation, must travel to Heaven to receive his own *wiriki*, which he then puts into his maraca along with the roots of the shaman's drugs, *aiuku* and *kaahi*. When a shaman dies, his maraca remains on the Earth but his *wiriki* return to Heaven with him. The Yekuana say that not only did Shi, the sun, use *wiriki* in order to create Wanadi, but that originally all people were created from them.

²⁰Although Yekuana have traditionally roofed their houses with thatch, many of the younger tribal members have been attempting to obtain the laminated sheets of tin so common in the criollo border towns. "No tin" is an ironic reference to this roofing material and the conflict of lifestyles it has come to symbolize.

The narrator is making fun of these structures while at the same time acknowledging that the fourth and final city that Wanadi built for Odosha is not an ordinary, criollo one, but rather an otherworldly, supernatural one.

²¹A hallucinogenic snuff in wide use throughout the South American rain forest, *aiuku* is variously known among other tribes as *ñopo*, *yopo*, and *vilca*. Made from the seeds of a large leguminous tree (*Anadenanthera vilca*), which is commonly found in savannah areas, the Yekuana say that it also grows along the shore of Lake Akuena, and restrict its use to shamans.

²²For more on the concept of myth as map or, as Johannes Wilbert calls it, “an ethnoecological blueprint of residence, subsistence and territoriality patterns,” see Wilbert 1979.

²³The word *Fañuru*, which is used to denote the evil race of whites in contrast to the honorable Iaranavi, derives from the Carib *Pañoro*, which in turn derives from *Español* or “Spanish.”

²⁴During this period the present-day country of Guyana was occupied by the Dutch, who only ceded it to Great Britain in 1814, at which time the Yekuana began trading with the English. For more on these incredible journeys and how they have been incorporated into Yekuana mythology, see Coppens 1971, Butt Colson 1973, and Guss 1981.

²⁵The only reluctance I ever encountered to being photographed came from a shaman who claimed that the resultant image could be used to cast spells. Whereas it was conceivable, he conjectured, that it might not do any harm, it was also possible that the photograph might be taken and hung up in a place where people continually staring at it could cause harm or illness to the person in the photograph.

²⁶*Fiyoto Anadiña*, which literally means “lead pot,” is probably a concept introduced to the Yekuana by the missionaries who began appearing among them at the end of the 1950s. Conjuring up the image of sinners being boiled forever in enormous cauldrons, it is a notion of afterlife far different from that usually discussed in the *Watunna* or elsewhere. In this statement by a young man who was training to become a ritual singer (*aichuriaha*), the term *Watunna* is simply used to denote “tradition,” be it oral or written. *Kahuña* is the word for Heaven, and *Akuena* the sacred lake at its center. *Fhwiti’ca* is an alternative name for Odosha’s village that is referred to elsewhere as *Kahu Awadiña*. In asserting that this is where the Evangelicos or “missionaries” come from, the speaker reaffirms their connection to Odosha.

²⁷An interesting variation of this story, which leaves out the esoteric element of writing and begins with the advent of the horse, is the following one recorded by Gheerbrant as narrated to him by Kalomera:

“[Wanadi’s mother] made two dogs,” he said, “and she put one on each of the two mountains that face each other across the water. One mountain was the home of the first whites, and the other mountain was the home of the first Indians. The whites and the Indians fed their dogs, looked after them and educated them, and built little houses for them to sleep in. But the dog of the white men grew and grew and finally became the horse on which they mounted and set out to explore the world, conquering country after country and discovering the land of iron where your knives and your hatchets come from. But the dog of the Indians did not grow like that. It remained a dog. It was useful only to hunt, and all we discovered was the land of stone where my fathers and my grandfathers got their hatchets and their knives of stone. That wasn’t fair, my friend. Give us horses and we’ll give you stone. Agreed? No, clearly you don’t agree. That’s what’s wrong between the Indians and the whites” [1954:219–220].

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