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The Yanomamo during the Western Retraction:

1920 to 1940

This chapter encompasses the period after the fall of rubber, when the Western presence around Yanomamo territory was in retraction. Paradoxically, this is also a period for which our information about certain Yanomamo groups is greatly increased. Several ethnographers have reconstructed village histories for this time, and these can be combined with accounts from a truly superlative source of information: the narratives of Helena Valero.

Valero, a mestizo girl, was captured by Yanomamo in 1932 or 1933, shortly after she turned 13. For nearly a quarter of a century, she lived among the Yanomamo in an astonishing odyssey that took her from the Río Negro to the Orinoco and the Ocamo before she finally escaped to San Fernando de Atabapo in 1956. Subsequently, two narratives of her life were independently compiled: Yanomama (Biocca 1971), and Yo Soy Napéym na (Valero 1984). They record a life of hardship and heroism, and—fortunately for the purposes of this book—they tell of the daily life and political history of several Yanomamo groups during the time of Western retraction and return. Through Valero’s eyes, we can see how the Yanomami themselves experienced the varying Western presence into the 1950s.1

Yanomamo along the Río Negro

The rubber boom assumed major proportions along the Río Negro, but there is virtually no information available about its impact on the stretch
of river close to Yanomamo lands. One old Yanomamo was reported in 1927 to have spoken gerau, the trade language used in the area, suggesting a past history of contact—but that is our only hint. Reconstructions of population bloc movements show the Shamatari and others moving southwest from the Parima area after 1900 and the Kohoroshi-teri arriving at the headwaters of the Cauaburi, a tributary of the Negro, around 1920. These groups all seem to have been involved in intense warfare during the peak years of rubber and were still fighting—but less so—during the subsequent decade.

By 1920, rubber production had collapsed. The entire Rio Negro entered a severe economic and demographic decline in the 1910s and was thoroughly depressed and stagnant around 1924. But about that time, the new industry of balata tapping began to grow, first on the Rio Branco and then farther up the Negro. In chapter 8 we saw how this industry led to violent conflict between Yanomam and woodsmen and between Yanomam groups after the mid-1920s and how, by the mid-1930s, the woodmen had been driven out. A similar sequence of events took place along the Negro.

Between 1926 and 1929 there were several encounters—some violent—between Yanomamo and balata collectors along Negro tributaries such as the Cauaburi and Maia, and even close to the Negro itself. Yanomamo raiders killed at least four tappers and captured a woman and child (Cocco 1972:62–63; Comité 1983:45; Seitz 1963:17–18).

Farther down the Negro, the Demini and its affluent, the Araça, lead up to high country long inhabited by Yanomamo and Yanomami. There, the Yanomam had established contact with Brazilians: “Immediately above the first rapid...there is a maloka of Shiriana Indians who are in contact with the civilized population farther downstream and some of whom speak a little Portuguese. The chief maintains trade relations with the Yagua of the forests of the upper river” (Holdridge 1933:380). Reluctantly, this chief guided Holdridge’s party to the first of his trading partners. Evidently there were some tensions in the relationship, for the guides insisted that Holdridge’s men carry their weapons into the village. The upstream people’s initial wariness turned to cooperation when the explorer distributed cloth and steel (Holdridge 1933:380–81).

But there were also deadly conflicts in this area. In 1931, the “civilized settlements of the Araça were the scene of a spirited attack” by “nearly a hundred persons” who “might have been Yagua” (Holdridge 1933:380). The upstream people Holdridge visited blamed this attack on other people living ten days’ walk to the west-southwest (seemingly the vicinity of the Cauaburi) and noted that they themselves were “at war with the tribe” (1933:382).

From the beginning of the 1930s, Yanomamo repeatedly raided settlements and tapper camps along the Negro tributaries and even down to the big river itself. Raids occurred at least as far east as the Araça and as far west as the Demini, a small affluent of the upper Negro (not to be confused with the Demini). By 1933, few Brazilians dared to live in this land, although some had retreated to islands in the Negro. That year, a large party of Yanomamo even tried to attack one of the island settlements during a period of low water, but they suffered many losses as the settlers counterattacked by canoe. A punitive expedition by the settlers killed at least three more Yanomamo and captured six children. But from that point on, the Brazilians’ avoidance of this part of the river was so complete that only a few fleeting contacts with Yanomamo occurred for nearly twenty years. The sole exception was the Demini area, which saw a renewal of mostly peaceful contacts during the early 1940s (Cocco 1972:66–68; Seitz 1963:20).

The raid farthest west, on the Demini, is particularly significant, for it was there that Helena Valero was captured by the Kohoroshi-teri in November of 1932 or 1933 (Cocco 1972:104; Fuentes 1984:9). The Kohoroshi-teri were mentioned in chapter 9 as possibly being related to the Shamatari and as having been pushed by the latter towards the southwest.

In the early 1930s, the Kohoroshi-teri consisted of three local divisions plus some people from other groups (Valero 1984:33, 541), all living around the headwaters of the Cauaburi (Cocco 1972:105). The Kohoroshi-teri had recently split off from the Karawe-teri (Valero 1984:43), some years after 1923, while they were living near the upper Siapa (Chagnon 1966:171). Subsequently, they began hunting and then moving long distances to the southwest. Their objective was to find nafe (foreigners) whose steel tools they could plunder (Chagnon 1966:21; Fuentes 1984:12; Valero 1984:27). By the time of Valero’s capture, they had pushed so far that they suffered from a lack of fully developed gardens (Biocca 1971:34, 39, 43, 46).

Perhaps the Kohoroshi-teri had grown dependent on steel tools through contacts during the rubber boom. One of their old gardens in the mountains above the Siapa lay close to rich stands of cocoa, balata, chicle, and rubber (Valero 1984:61)—all things sought by forest workers coming off the Casiquiare during more prosperous times. At any rate, their subsequent quest for steel and other Western goods
was unusually single minded and successful. Their movement southwest brought them closer to Cucuf, the only Brazilian outpost in the area still receiving regular shipments of supplies (Hanson 1933:590), and into an area where woodsmen still worked without fear of Yanomamo ("Mactu") (Valero 1984:21–24).

Valero (1984:25–26, 29, 31, 38–39) records substantial plunder brought in during the year or so she spent with the Kohoroshiwe-teri. From her family alone, during the raid in which she was abducted, they took four machetes, three axes, and many pots, along with other articles and manioc. Over their entire career of raiding woodsmen along the Río Negro, the Kohoroshiwe-teri must have acquired dozens of metal tools. Nevertheless, steel was still precious. Valero told Father Cocó (1972:181) that a man who had a machete slept with it on his chest, and one who had an axe always had it on his shoulder, and when resting would sit on it.

As the Kohoroshiwe-teri moved to the southwest, they were pushed from behind by the Karawe-teri and a Shamatarí group, the Matakewe-teri—both blood enemies of Kohoroshiwe-teri (Chagnon 1966:171; Valero 1984:31, 36). The origin of the Kohoroshiwe-teri’s war with the Matakewe-teri is not described. There had been at least one fight in which at least one Kohoroshiwe-teri woman died. During Valero’s stay, there was a nonlethal clash when Kohoroshiwe-teri men ran into a Matakewe-teri hunting party. The latter group, far from home, was led by Ruwahive, whose assassination by some Namowei years later is also described by Valero (1984:36–37). But the threat of the Matakewe-teri was soon overwhelmed by a more sanguinary reality.

Some months after the clash with the hunting party, visitors from Karawe-teri warned the Kohoroshiwe-teri of an impending attack by their people (one of the informers was given a metal pot). This war was said to have started over insults, and it involved some Karawe-teri men taking women. Having been warned, the Kohoroshiwe-teri moved a few days west (Biocca 1971:31, 34; Valero 1984:43–45)—but not far enough. Karawe-teri raiders routed the Kohoroshiwe-teri at their new home. They slaughtered several children and took many women captive, including Helena Valero. Plunder taking is not specifically mentioned in the account of the raid, but even in their panic the fleeing women did try to hide valuable Western goods in the woods or carry them as they ran (Biocca 1971:32–37; Valero 1984:45–51).

Now it was the Karawe-teri’s turn to feel threatened by Kohoroshiwe-teri, whom they feared would retaliate. After debate, some Karawe-teri decided to accept an invitation to a feast from some allies (the Shekerei-teri) north across the mountains, who themselves feared a raid by the Matakwe-teri. Valero went with them (Biocca 1971:51–53; Valero 1984:60–67). Sure enough, the Matakwe-teri struck the allies’ village while most of its men were out hunting. Ruwahive, the Matakwe-teri chief, led a force that killed several men, looted trade goods, and captured some women, including Valero (Biocca 1971:55–60; Valero 1984:69–71). After that, the Shekerei-teri moved “out of the path of Ruwahive” (Valero 1984:74).

Valero was taken by the Matakwe-teri to the upper Mavaca. They consisted of three local divisions under sons of the “retired” headman, Matakwe. But she did not stay long, for she was accused of poisoning someone and was shot with a curare arrow. She fled and, astonishingly, survived for seven months alone in the forest, making use of gardens she found. Finally, she turned herself over to a party of Namowei, who had begun visiting the Shamatarí to trade, and returned home with them (Biocca 1971:86–107; Valero 1984:91–115). With that event, in roughly 1935 (Cocó 1972:106), Helena Valero moved into the Orinoco area, where her testimony will be picked up later.

Valero’s leaving means a sudden shutdown in information for the southwestern Yanomamo front. It seems, however, that the following decades of increased isolation after the departure of the balateiros were a time of little war. Chagnon’s (1966:171–73) reconstruction does not mention any additional conflicts among the Shamatarí, the Kohoroshiwe-teri, the Karawe-teri, and others to their south. (Relations to the north are another story.) In 1954, when a missionary from the Negro made contact with southern Yanomamo, there was no indication of recent warfare (see Seitz 1963)—although war would quickly resume after his arrival. The missionary found his attempts to travel between villages complicated by residual animosities from past wars, but these were the wars of the 1930s described by Valero (Cocó 1972:96). A Kohoroshiwe-teri headman in 1962 described how, when he was a boy, there had been war with people from the mountains to the north—again an apparent reference to the wars just mentioned (Salazar 1967:154).

But for the years from 1920 to 1935, Valero and others provide enough information about developments among southwestern Yanomamo to allow a good application of the theoretical model. The Kohoroshiwe-teri arrived above the Negro when rubber had collapsed. Their interaction with the outside world at this time is unknown, but it must have been extremely limited. No specific wars are identified as
going on at this point, and at the least, Yanomamo political relations were much more pacific than they would be a few years later. In the mid-1920s, \textit{balata} tappers began going up rivers close to where Yanomamo lived. They met, and Yanomamo began to attack the tappers to take their steel and other goods. Those closest to the Westerners obtained many axes and machetes. Within a few years, political relations between the relatively wealthy Kohoroshive-teri and their old allies began to deteriorate, turning to war around the start of the 1930s.

When reasons are stated for these wars, which involved kin or former allies, they are of a personal nature—insults or conflicts over women. But these personal disputes erupt just as the Kohoroshive-teri begin to acquire more Western goods. No doubt they traded much of what they took into the interior, but with such limited supplies, they could not possibly even have begun to meet demand. (Valero [1984:35] mentions in passing that because of their plundering, the Kohoroshive-teri had many more bead necklaces than the Shamataris.) And plundering was a zero sum game. The victim was not there for a second attack.

By raiding the Kohoroshive-teri, their northern enemies could hope to obtain steel and drive their competitors out of their path, making it possible to establish their own gardens closer to the remaining \textit{balateros}. But just as they succeeded, there were no more \textit{balateros} left to plunder. At the same time, around 1935, the flow of Western goods began to pick up on the Orinoco, and the Shamataris began to look in that direction. Along the Yanomamo’s southern frontier, conflict may have intensified for a short time after the supply of steel was severed. But with such limited quantities in their possession, the Yanomamo’s local inequalities probably would not have lasted long, and geographic position would have lost its importance. The cessation of active warfare is to be expected.

**Retraction and Return on the Upper Orinoco**

On the upper Orinoco, a tottering creole economy utterly collapsed in the first years of the 1920s. The fall of rubber prices and the terror of Tomás Funes left the area largely deserted after 1921. Hanson (1933:578–90), passing through in 1931–32, reported the Venezuelan side of the border emptier of people than the Brazilian. Few Western goods entered the region, and those that did were brought in by Yecuana. San Fernando de Atabapo was in ruins, down to 60 residents. Still, some econ-
women and took the form of club fights and what seem to be a couple of raids. Dickey’s hosts denied ever retaliating with raids against their attackers.

The fact that they were by the river, along with their behavior when they saw Dickey, suggests that this particular local Yanomamo group had prior experience with *nape*. But that was Dickey’s only contact with Yanomamo in two trips along the Orinoco, though he encountered many signs of their presence (Dickey 1932:262–87). He mentions that they lived in fear of rifle-bearing *balateros* (1932:266), so he may have been observed but avoided by other Yanomamo groups.

Yanomamo above the Mavaca probably received very little steel in the years before Dickey’s visit. The farthest point reached by people working for Pérez Franco in the 1920s is said to have been Mavaca. It appears unlikely that independent Yecuana would have gone any farther, given the attacks by Yanomani on vulnerable Yecuana parties at this time (see chapters 6 and 7). On the other hand, Dickey’s reference to armed *balateros* suggests that some *nape* had been in the area recently and possibly clashed with Yanomamo. The unusually friendly group who came out to greet Dickey 1931 may have obtained a locally unusual amount of Western goods from these visitors, and that could be why they were currently experiencing problems with their former allies upstream.

The early 1930s were unlikely times for much increase in contact between Yanomamo and Westerners along the Orinoco. In 1931, a sudden local credit crisis, in an economy based on credit, began to drive remaining creoles out of the region (Hanson 1933:586–87). In early 1932, Yanomamo again attacked La Esmeralda, immediately after a young German with dreams of colonization arrived there (Hanson 1933:583–84). Direct contact between Yecuana and upriver Yanomamo was also unlikely, since as late as 1935 the Yecuana expressed terror of the Yanomamo (Cocco 1972:70). In 1935, a local guide related that Yanomamo around the Manaviche did not have steel cutting tools (Cocco 1972:71). And as we will see later, the Yanomamo themselves recalled this period as a time of extremely little steel.

But 1935 seems to mark the start of renewed Venezuelan penetration of the upper Orinoco. That year Carlos Wendehake panned for gold just below the Raudal de Guajaribos, and on another journey went ten days’ travel beyond that barrier. In the same year, the marqués de Wavrin explored the area. During the 1930s, Luis Vegas went up several difficult watercourses, once reaching well above Raudal Guaira. On a handful of occasions, these men made peaceful contact with Yanomamo and gave them steel tools and other presents (Cocco 1972:70–71, 74). From the inside, Valero’s account (1984:114) indicates that *nape* began to travel along the upper river only shortly before she joined the Namwe around 1935.

Farther downriver, some Yanomamo had maintained contacts with Yecuana in the Padamo area and began more actively working with them around the middle 1930s. One Yanomamo man worked for Jesús Nogueira in Tamatama for two years. Another “Guajaribo” worked for tappers who were again making camp at La Esmeralda, until, after a dispute with them in 1937, he returned with a large party to plunder all they had (Cocco 1972:6). The late 1930s may also mark the introduction of malaria to the area, for it is reported that fevers killed many Yanomamo around the Padamo (Smaole 1976:50). Starting around 1940, the region saw a transition to a more intense level of Western activity, but that will be considered in chapter 11.

The Iyewei-Padamo Bloc

The northwestern Yanomamo who were most directly exposed to the Yecuana and the limited Western presence around La Esmeralda were the people described in chapter 9 as the Iyewei-Padamo bloc, which Hames (1983:405) calls the Haiyamo bloc. To anticipate later discussions, most of the Haiyamo people moved northwest into Yecuana country in the Padamo basin in two often-hostile divisions, each of which continued to subdivide along the way. A third migratory line split off from one of the Haiyamo divisions and headed down the Ocamo (see map 4). They became known as Iyewei-teri, and their residence alongside the Catholic mission at the mouth of the Ocamo marks the northern border of what I call the Orinoco-Mavaca area. Cocco’s (1972:110–15) detailed history of the Iyewei-teri line supplements Hames’s (1983:406–15) more general reconstruction of movements.

We left the Iyewei-Padamo people in chapter 9 around 1920, living in two antagonistic villages on the middle and upper Ocamo after several bloody clashes with southeastern neighbors during the rubber boom. The next quarter-century—the time of Western retraction—was more peaceful, although not without tensions, and was characterized by a series of fairly long moves toward sources of Western goods.

One line of villages, the Wakawaka sub-bloc, started at a place called...
Karesihbowei and moved to five new gardens during the decade from 1920 to 1930. At the second of the five sites there occurred the only reported killings for the entire period covered in this chapter, when Wakawaka attacked some Puunabiwe-teri who were suspected of trying to lead them into a slaughter (Cocco 1972:112–13). The Wakawaka then fled to the northwest, making three gardens and winding up in the headwaters of a lower Ocamo tributary (at a place called Hawari) around 1928 (Hames 1983:409–10).

There they temporarily merged with a group from the Shtari bloc whose leader had an established military reputation from the rubber boom wars (Cocco 1972:112–13). (The Shtari were themselves splitting into two geographic divisions around this time [Fredlund 1982: 35].) They stayed in this location for several years, making three gardens. People from this group were among those who pillaged La Esmeralda in 1929 (Cocco 1972:65), which, it will be recalled, followed some years of prior cooperation by Yanomamo with Yecuan and direct contact with Colonel Pérez’s family. Thus the move to Hawari apparently improved the Wakawaka’s access to steel.

While in this area, the Wakawaka developed close ties with the Auwei-teri, but eventually this alliance deteriorated into a bitter pounding match involving a conflict over reciprocity in marriages. Now fearing the Auwei-teri (Hames 1983:409, 410), the Wakawaka moved two gardens north to Mrakabowei around 1940, where they would be closer to Yecuan who were known to have “muchos machetes” (Cocco 1972: 113). This move paid off, because just around 1942, the Wakawaka became famous among Yanomamo for having obtained many Western goods from their “frequent relations” with Yecuan and whites (Valero 1984:245). Sometime in the process of moving about—Hames and Cocco differ as to when—the Lywe-teri people split off from the Wakawaka sub-bloc.

The other line of movement described by Hames (1983:406–12)—that of the middle Padamo group—is not discussed by Cocco and therefore lacks supplemental detail. In general outline, the timing and direction of events in the Padamo group’s history are strikingly similar to those of the Wakawaka’s. The Padamo people too moved northwest toward the close of the rubber boom, fleeing enemies. They began the 1920s along the Ocamo at a place called Tokonabowei, downstream from the Wakawaka people. There they spent a decade without any indication of violence. Around 1930, raids by the Madodoi-teri (a Shtari group [Fredlund 1982:35]) to their southeast prompted them to move northwest to the Matacuni, to a site called Apihabowei. They spent another decade there without reported incident, but then again felt threatened by the Madodoi-teri and moved to an effluent of the Padamo around 1940. They were still in this area, at a place known as Kowaci, a few years later when they fissioned into two distinct lines—but that story, and the continuing history of all these northwestern Yanomamo, will be continued in chapter 11.

For all the northwestern Yanomamo, from the post-rubber contraction around 1920 through the gradual intensification of Western penetration in the late 1930s, the only killings that are specifically noted are those of the Puunabiwe-teri by the Wakawaka in circumstances that suggest a spontaneous, unplanned clash (see Cocco 1972:112). It may be more than coincidental that the killers were from a group known to be working with Yecuan in the late 1920s. Of course there could have been other, unreported deaths as well—indeed, the Puunabiwe-teri are known to have been in another lethal clash. Certainly, there are indications of moments of high tension, especially around 1940, when the Western presence in the region began to intensify. But in general, this time and place is a pacific contrast to the years of rubber and to later times of more intensive Western contact.

Hames (1983:419), like his colleague Chagnon, argues that long-distance “macro-moves” are “induced by intertribal raiding.” I concur that war can prompt people to relocate, but unlike Chagnon and his associates, I argue that improved proximity to sources of steel is an even more general determinant of long-distance movement. As mapped by Hames (1983:406; and see map 4), macromoves show a consistent pattern of relocation to the headwaters of rivers and then down the rivers towards the sources of Western goods. The indicated village fissionings represent, behaviorally, the selection of different options in approaching these sources. Moreover, in Hames’s listing of the causes of 22 macromoves from 1920 to 1970, only 5 are the results of being raided, and 5 more were caused by fear of raids. In contrast, consideration of access to Western manufactures fits well with all the listed movements, and the information provided by Cocco about the Wakawaka line reveals such access to be the explicit objective behind at least some of their relocations.

Before turning to the Namowei population bloc, I should cite some limited information about other Yanomamo groups living north of the Orinoco. For the area just south of the Lywe-Padamo population bloc, Valero (1984:437) learned of a war, perhaps during the late 1930s, between the Punabiwe-teri and the Watupawe-teri to their east. At least
one man, the father of Valero's second husband, was killed. This war pitted people on the lower Ocamo—that is, those with better access to steel—against people in the highlands of the middle and upper Ocamo. As we shall see, this axis along the Ocamo remained a line of intermittent violence through the 1960s.

"Barafiri" is the name of a dialect of Yanomamo spoken by people who live some 50 miles east of Hames's research area in the Parima highlands. About them, Smole (1976:76, 93, 235, 237-38) makes two references to what is apparently the same event: an intense war between an alliance of Jorocoba-teri and Docodicono-teri against an alliance of Yoreshiana-teri and Boreawawa-teri. This war is said to have occurred "during the 1920s" (1976:93) and "sometime prior to 1935" (1976: 235). For the Jorocoba-teri, this would be the only war in their known history. Both date and context are so vague as to preclude any attempt at analysis. However, the possibility of a trade connection is suggested by the fact that around the 1920s the Yoreshiana-teri had been acting as a conduit for trade into higher lands.

The Namowe as Valero Met Them

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the Orinoco above the Mavaca had extremely little outside contact, although, as we have seen, some balateros and the Dickey expedition did come through. Valero was taken in by the Namowe around 1935 (perhaps early 1936), just as new creole penetration began. Through her eyes we see the Namowe some two decades after the most prosperous years of the rubber boom had ended.

When Valero arrived, the Namowe consisted of five main divisions (Valero 1984:117-18) that periodically joined and dispersed. Three are of limited importance in future discussions: Rashawe-teri, Yaminawateri, and Porehipiwe-teri. Two are central: Patanowa-teri and Wamitama-teri. The Wamitama-teri were led by an unusually forceful man named Fusive, or Husive. This man, who would become Valero's first husband, was a prototypical war leader and an exemplar of the kind of uaiteri (fierce) woman-taker emphasized in the work of Napoleon Chagnon.

A sixth group typically, but not always, considered as Namowe was the Praratipwe-teri, who would shortly come to be known as Bisasiteri—the people with whom Chagnon began fieldwork in 1964. When the Namowe were at the place called Namowe, the Praratipwe-teri were nearby at Morata, and they apparently crossed the Orinoco together (Cocco 1972:111). One should not imagine, however, that these divisions had fixed memberships. Along with unending mergers and divisions, smaller groups and individuals regularly moved from one larger group to another, or even lived off by themselves. In addition, the dispersed residence pattern was consolidated for defense when there was danger of war (e.g., Biocca 1971:205).

In chapter 9, I described the Namowe as involved in several wars and as moving westward along the Orinoco during the rubber years, winding up at a place called Hahoyaoba around 1920. As their history is reconstructed by Chagnon (1966:151-53), they were there joined by old allies from their previous locations, now divided into two villages: Hanuwe-teri and Aheatuwa-teri. But poor fertility in the area prompted a move across to the south side of the Orinoco, to Patanowa, sometime between 1925 and 1930. Patanowa is located near the upper reaches of a stream that flows into the Orinoco some distance below Raudal de Guajaribos—the same general area inhabited by nineteenth-century Yanomamo who participated in the indigenous trade. Chagnon (1992a:88) characterizes this area, the Shanishani drainage, as a repeated area of settlement for groups heading west and south.

Valero (1984:164, 170, 324, 437-38) provides some information on recent Yanomamo history as she recalls the Namowe explaining it. When matched against Chagnon's account, it appears that Valero collapses several moves over a quarter of a century into one story, "how the Namowe came to live on the south side of the Orinoco." The general picture is that where they once lived, they were "not lacking in anything" (1984:164), but they were continually attacked by enemies (Watupaewa-teri and Takowe-teri) who lived high in the mountains.2

The one act of aggression Valero actually describes is supernatural in character. The Namowe found some broken and burned pieces of glass, mirror, and fabric. Yanomamo believe that by burning such Western substances a shaman can send the diseases associated with Westerners (and see Valero 1984:38, 158, 470, 506). The Namowe concluded that their enemies had burned these items—which "surely they robbed... from the nape, who knows where" (Valero 1984:170)—to make them ill. Subsequently, the Namowe fell victim to a deadly epidemic, which, along with raiding, forced them across the river to Patanowa. There they initially suffered from hunger for lack of an established garden, although they did find some food in an old garden of unknown origin.

Understanding developments in the 1930s requires knowledge of the social geography of the Namowe in their new location (see Biocca 1971:99, 120; Valero 1984:131, 141, 151, 156, 158, 167, 197, 252).
Some distance to their east were their old allies, the Hasupuwe-teri (then called Irola-teri) and that group's nearby offshoot, Ashatowa-teri. Farther to the east, apparently close to the Orinoco somewhere past Raudal Guaca, were the Aramamise-teri, relatives of the Shamatari. (Some Aramamise-teri visited the village of Karawa-teri during the brief time Valero lived there [early 1935?], bringing machetes and other items they had obtained from passing hacens.)

To the south were Shamatari villages in the Siapa drainage and upper Mavaca. The west was empty to the Mavaca and beyond; much of the lower land in this area is uninhabitable swamp. To the north, downstream and on the other side of the Orinoco, were the Sitoya-teri (soon to be called Mahakato-teri), and upstream from them, their allies, Yabitawa-teri and Watanami-teri. (Some Watanami-teri were mentioned earlier as temporarily having joined with the Kohoroshiwe-teri above the Río Negro.) Beyond those groups were others, verging into the northern Yanomami described in a previous section.

During their first years at Patoine in the late 1920s, the Namowiei had no reported enemies and were on good terms with their later foes, the Shamatari (Chagnon 1966:153). But as Valero was told, there was some tension and even violence. Sometime around 1931, a raid and counterraid took place between Namowiei and Shamatari (Valero 1984:119, 123), but she gives no reason for the quarrel. One Namowiei and a number of Shamatari were killed, and many Shamatari women were captured, some of whom later escaped.

The Namowiei also had conflicts, but not clear bloodshed, with people to their east. Fusive captured an Aramamise-teri girl he found bathing in a stream, who became his second wife, and he sought to take women from another group near the Aramamise-teri (Biocca 1971:129, 142). Tensions developed between the Namowiei and their once and future ally, the Haspuwe-teri (Valero 1984:121, 176)—tensions provoked by Fusive’s making off with a Haspuwe-teri woman during a feast (she became his third wife) and by the theft of the hallucinogen yopo from a garden (see note 15). (The extremely fierce Fusive would continue to involve his people in violent conflicts in the future, ultimately to his own undoing. In the conclusion to this book, I will consider Fusive as a study in agency.)

But as Valero arrived on the scene, the Namowiei and Haspuwe-teri had reconciled and were just restarting mutual feasting. The Shamatari had sent a peace delegation some time before, saying they would forget revenge and let the Namowiei keep the women they took. The two had begun trading, but not feasting. They were friends again, “but not much” (Valero 1984:119). The clash with the Shamatari seems to have occurred shortly after Dickey passed through the area, but I would hesitate to assert a connection or offer any other explanation for these conflicts. Indeed, these particular fights seem to fit better with Chagnon’s views on Yanomami warfare than with my own.

These conflicts notwithstanding, the Namowiei saw themselves as having lived in peace after the wars that drove them from Konata and Wareta, their residences first north and then south of the Orinoco during the boom years of rubber. Repeatedly, old leaders who counseled against military action during the conflict 1940s referred to wars they had fought in when they were young, and they warned the new crop of young, belligerent men that they had never experienced real war and so they should not disturb the peace (Biocca 1971:218; Valero 1984:238, 320, 324, 335). For example, as tensions built toward the first serious killings around 1942, one said: “To be killing people, pay attention to how we had to come from Konata, from Wareta, from Namowiei, from Hahoyaoba, to now live far from the other Yanomami, and with so much work. Now we are at peace, we should not look for more fights. If we return to make war, we will have to abandon these gardens, leave for other places and start all over” (Valero 1984:227). On one of these occasions (Valero 1984:238), Fusive responded by calling the elders cowards.

The time around the 1930s was remembered by the Namowiei for its absence of steel—as would be expected, given their relative isolation. Some of Chagnon’s (1977:33) older informants recalled having no steel when they were young—although this story may be the Yanomami equivalent of walking seven miles to school—and they spoke of the difficulty of clearing gardens with fire and the stone axes they found. One informant, a man born around 1925, recalled that when he was a young man, his group had only one piece of steel obtained from Ycua via several intermediaries. Everyone in the village used the piece (Chagnon 1977:14, 34). Valero confirms this kind of shared usage and notes that villages actually grew in size just to preserve access to the common edge (Colchester 1984:296). Axes possessed by some Namowiei are identified as having been taken “a long time before from rubber workers” (Biocca 1971:144–45). Little steel means little reason to fight. That situation would change.

Leaving a State of Peace

Soon after Valero arrived among the Namowiei (early 1936?), some of them returned from a visit to the Sitoya-teri and Watanami-teri, to whom
they traded dogs, “carrying some machete [algun machete] which the SitoYa-teri were beginning to receive or rob from some whites” (Valero 1984:124). Perhaps a year and a half then went by without any major political events, during which very occasional contacts with outsiders took place along the Orinoco. But tensions had risen. The Namowei were visited by some men from Aramamise-teri, who warned that other Aramamise-teri and Konabuma-teri (a Shamatari group living in the southern fringes of the Shanishani drainage [Chagnon 1992a:84]) were planning to raid them. The Namowei took this rumor seriously (Valero 1984:141).

Indicative of how unwarlike the Namowei had become, they then did something I have not seen reported anywhere else: they entered into a sustained program of military training and practice. About twice a month, all the men would gather to receive instruction from older men, practice shooting and dodging blunted arrows, and divide into teams that would attack and defend the village (Valero 1984:141).

The aggressive Fusiwe—who had taken Valero as his fifth wife (Biocca 1971:110–38; Valero 1984:125–61)—decided to lead an attack on the Konabuma-teri. He recruited a substantial group of men from all the Namowei divisions and led them to the Konabuma-teri village. But the attack was an almost comic failure, for the hidden raiders were given away when an old man made a lunge for a passing young woman. Fusiwe’s disorganized forces took flight, with the Konabumateri in pursuit. They did not catch the Namowei only because they did not know who they were or which way they were headed. The only casualty was the lecherous old man, who was hit by a curare arrow but survived, only to face ridicule on his return home. No further clashes followed this event (Valero 1984:142–51).

A similar but far more deadly clash at this same time involved the Namowei’s allies, the Hasupuwe-teri. Shortly after a visit to the Namowei in which they had received some steel, they were attacked by an otherwise unknown group, the Oshipiwe-teri, from their east (Valero 1984:151). As Valero explained it to Cocca (1972:387), the Hasupuwe-teri and some allies had been heading toward the Oshipiwe-teri, planning to raid them and training for war as they went along. But during one of their simulated battles near the enemy’s home, they carelessly walked into an ambush in which about six of their men were killed—a military disaster.

These two sorties by the Namowei and their Hasupuwe-teri allies show several similarities. Both took place shortly after steel tools began to be given out by the new visitors along the Orinoco. Both went against more isolated groups, both were associated with an unusual level of military training, and both ended in failure, one comic, one tragic. The timing and alignment of enemies fit theoretical expectations, but according to the theory, the initial attack should have come from the isolated groups. The Namowei were expecting just such an attack. Perhaps these two attempted strikes represent an unusually calculated, and maybe insufficiently motivated, attempt at preemption.

In 1938 or 1939, the Namowei invited the SitoYa-teri, Watanami-teri, and Yabitava-teri to a peach-palm feast (Biocca 1971:119–24; Valero 1984:153–60, 200). At this time the SitoYa-teri, in addition to their contacts with nape along the river, had developed links to another group, the Shawarawe-teri (part of what Hames [1983:411] calls the Haiyamo people), who were living near the Padamo River, and through them obtained Western goods provided by Yecuana. The SitoYa-teri wanted to be better friends with the Namowei. When they came to visit, presumably they brought gifts. What actually happened at the feast is not described, but bad feeling developed for some reason. Coincidentally, at the time of the feast Helena Valero had again fled into the woods. When the invited guests left for home, Fusiwe and some other Namowei men seized upon a pretext—that the visitors might have encountered Valero on the trail and taken her along—to chase after them.

They caught the SitoYa-teri by themselves and took at least seven of their women. (Since the SitoYa-teri lived close by, all but a few of these women shortly escaped back home.) “The SitoYa-teri, cowards, did not do anything. They were very fearful in that time” (Valero 1984:158). As is commonly the case, the Namowei were deeply divided over this extremely provocative move. Some did not participate, and they strongly criticized the aggressors, calling attention to the fact that the Namowei already had to worry about possible attacks from the south. One man warned that the SitoYa-teri were “friends of the white men. They will come with the whites to kill you” (Biocca 1971:124).

But no nape was going to risk his neck for the SitoYa-teri. Yanomami canons of revenge notwithstanding, the SitoYa-teri took no retaliatory action at all. Why? In terms of the theoretical model, the SitoYa-teri would have been in a very vulnerable position at this moment: relatively wealthy in Western goods, yet without any real military advantages. They probably already faced a situation that existed in acute form by 1942, in which, threatened by people in the mountains to their north, they desperately needed to secure their southern flank. They simply
could not afford to get into a shooting war with the Namowei. On the other hand, if the Sitoya-teri were forced away by such severe provocations, perhaps some Namowei could move into position as “friends of the white men.”

For a few years after they took the Sitoya-teri women (1938–41?), the Namowei remained very short on steel cutting tools (Valero 1984:161, 197). They continued to worry about the evil intentions of the Aramamise-teri and especially the Konahuma-teri. But then the Aramamise-teri had a stroke of luck: they were visited by nape who gave them tools, clothes, even hats (Valero 1984:167, 169). The Namowei still had not met any nape face to face, but they wanted to. Fusive and Shamawe, the leader of the Bisaqasi-teri, along with some others, set off on a long exploratory hunt closer to the Orinoco where the nape passed. Apparently they found a deserted camp or cache, obtaining some machetes but also contracting a nonlethal fever (Valero 1984:169–71).

Some time later, some Namowei went on two long treks to the north side of the Orinoco, but they were frightened back to the south side when they encountered tracks of possible “enemies” (Valero 1984:197–201). As Valero later told Cocco, they went on these trips “with the decided intention of encountering the nape and asking them for machetes and axes, but they were also decided to kill them if they said no . . . They never encountered any whites” (Cocco 1972:376).

There are signs that internal tensions among the Namowei also rose as the Western presence on the upper Orinoco began to intensify around 1940. About this time, two Namowei divisions, the Yaminawea-teri and Wanitimia-teri, had a club fight provoked by the theft of tobacco from a garden (Valero 1984:201–203). Other serious quarrels may date to this period. Still, these tensions did not commonly lead to killings. In the 1940s, they did.

11

Maneuvering into War: The Yanomamo, 1940 to 1950

This chapter is the first to concentrate almost entirely on the Orinoco-Mavaca area. That area, as I define it, encompasses the Namowei, the Shamatai to their south, their Hasupwe-teri allies to the east, and, north of the Orinoco, the Uhepeki bloc (Sitoya-teri and others) and the southern elements of the Iyewe and Padamo blocs. For the years from 1940 to 1950, there is very little information about any Yanomamo except those within this area. Virtually nothing is known about the southwestern Yanomamo overlooking the Río Negro or about those living in the Parima highlands, and the little information available about the Yanomamo to the north of the Orinoco-Mavaca area will be presented after the following reconstruction of local historical context.

Orinoco-Mavaca history is another story. The 1940s saw an unsteady but significant increase in the Western presence in the area, facilitated by the introduction of gasoline-powered motor launches (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1943:13) that allowed much greater capacity for movement and supply. For the 1940s, more historical reports become available, anthropologists’ reconstructed village histories become more complete and detailed, and above all, Helena Valero continues the story of her life among the Namowei. Taken together, these sources reveal some of the complex maneuvering related to the intensifying Western presence and show how Yanomamo politics culminated increasingly in war.