

The Yekuhana live in Venezuela, on the northern bank of the Upper Orinoco River. *Yekuhana* literally means "wood/log-water-people" and refers to their water-log or dug-out canoes. The Spanish conquistadors gave them the name of Makiritare when they found them in 1759. Therefore, they are known by that name, as well.

The Yekuhana consider themselves the "true people," who descended from Wanadi's first human beings. They speak the original language, and anyone who lives with them and learns their language becomes one of them. Their oral literature reveals that shamans, animals, and evil beings are all able to change their form. Therefore, what identifies a true Yekuhana is language. They view those who do not speak their language and who are not familiar with the *Watunna*, which is the collection of their religious doctrines and the record of their ancestral people and events, to be animals. Moreover, being nonhuman, they are enemies of the true people and the Yekuhana are entitled to hunt them.

The Yekuhana live in a region that is both mountainous and forested, and its great waterfalls prevent easy access. This environment protected them from Spanish conquest, and their region remains largely unexplored to this day. Agriculture, their principal activity, is based on a sophisticated slash-and-burn method that requires systematic movement from one place to another within a given area in order to permit the land to recover its fertility. They have no domesticated animals.

Being a forest people, the Yekuhana also have neither stone nor metal. However, they have adapted trees and plants to build frame houses, weave baskets and bark cloth, and create dug-out canoes. They also use clay soil along their riverbanks to make pottery.

As is evident in the myth of Wanadi, the tribe provides the individuals within it with their identity, and in these societies, the shaman is as important as the chief. The shaman perpetuates the tribe's religious history by controlling the religious practices that reinforce its traditions. He is the tribal doctor, and he functions as the intermediary between the people and their divinities, who, like Wanadi, are usually mythological culture heroes.

In another version of the following myth, the primal creative force is Father Sun, who drops three eggs on Earth. When the first two eggs break open, Wanadi and his

brothers come forth. They represent all that is good in the universe, and, as culture heroes, they teach the ancestors of the Yekuhana people how to live well.

Because the third egg has become damaged by its fall, Wanadi rejects it and tosses it into the forest. This causes the third egg to break open, and Cajushawa comes forth, his heart filled with hostility. Cajushawa and his people, the *odosha* ("demons"), then multiply and live on earth. The human eye cannot see them, but they are responsible for all that is evil in life.

Wanadi and his brothers spend generations of time on earth, always trying to improve life. They introduce the cultivation of crops as well as social organization and religious practices. Meanwhile, they are always fighting against Cajushawa and his *odosha*. At last, they leave the earth to the Yekuhana and to Cajushawa. Thereafter, it is the responsibility of the Yekuhana to defend themselves against Cajushawa and his people.

The divinities in the *Watunna* are the Sky People, ancestors or "the old ones." Their ways provide the model for the behavior of their people. They reflect the law of the tribe, the tradition that itself is called *Watunna* and has been handed down from generation to generation in their oral tradition. The rituals in which the *Watunna* is recited include singing and dancing as well as the eating of cassava bread and the drinking of a special liquid. The people adorn themselves with jewelry and make bamboo flutes. They paint themselves with designs that reflect their myths. In the ceremony, a Master of Song will chant the myths that are the law of the tribe. The tribal elders know the traditions and have made contact with the spirits of their ancestors. In their society, they are respected and privileged.

The *Watunna* recited in ceremony is sacred doctrine, to be repeated exactly so that contact with the spirit world can continue. It is secret, and knowledge of it is limited to the initiated men of the tribe; thus, it is part of the initiation ceremony for the young men of the tribe. The end of the ceremony reflects the end of their initiation, and it closes with the initiates removing their costumes—feathered crowns, palm skirts, and sacred objects—and tossing them into the fire. In this way they take their leave of the spirits and prepare to return to their ordinary lives. Their final task is to stamp on the

coals of the fire with their bare feet. They believe that they cannot be burned because they have acquired a new and magical power.

In addition to the sacred *Watunna*, a secular form exists. This form is as popular as the sacred form is secret. Everyone, including women and children, is free to retell the great tales in any imaginative form. Consequently, the popular versions are many, varied, and depend on knowledge, memory, and personal interpretation. However, these forms, too, unite the members of the tribe by reinforcing their common bond of a common cultural history. Therefore, the *Watunna* and its heroes of old remain alive and in daily use in a variety of forms. A tale from the *Watunna* can inform and enrich any daily activity, whether fishing, hunting, or basket-making.

The myth of Wanadi is appealing because it conveys the vulnerability of human beings in an environment that is far more powerful than they are. As we read it, we can sense the flickering shadows of the forest, and the fear that it conceals enemies. We can imagine a world in which nothing may be what it appears to be, either good or evil, and we can understand the importance of the shaman, with his magical ability to protect his people. We can sympathize with the Yekuhana people because we realize that we are vulnerable in our own environment, as well, because much that can happen to us, such as illness, storms, and war, is beyond our control. Moreover, we can understand the continuous and unending battle between good and evil that is externalized in the myth but that occurs within every human being in the form of endless temptations that, if we gave into them, would harm others or ourselves. Finally, we share the hope of the Yekuhana people that by resisting these temptations, we will be able to make our homes, our communities, our country, and, therefore, the world, a better place to live.

The following version of Wanadi's myth has been adapted from Marc de Civrieux's *Watunna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle*.