

FOLKWAYS ETHNIC RECORDS FE 4104

# music of the venezuelan yekuana indians

Recorded by Walter Coppens, Barbara Brändli, Jean François Nothomb





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SIDE 1

1. Yuwanade dēma (2:23)
2. Deer flute (:41)
3. Ayēja atújudu jēkēma otonejamēn (3:30)
4. Edanaka hani amōde (1:32)
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SIDE 2

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8. Tawaniwēychi (1:52)\*

\*Recorded in 1912 by Theodor Koch-Grünberg in Mauakuña  
All other bands recorded 1962-1970 in  
Jiwitíña, Kanarakuniña, Kuamaña, Venezuela.

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Recorded by Walter Coppens,  
Barbara Brändli, Jean François Nothomb

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

COVER PHOTO BY BARBARA BRANDLI

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# MUSIC OF THE VENEZUELAN YEKUANA INDIANS

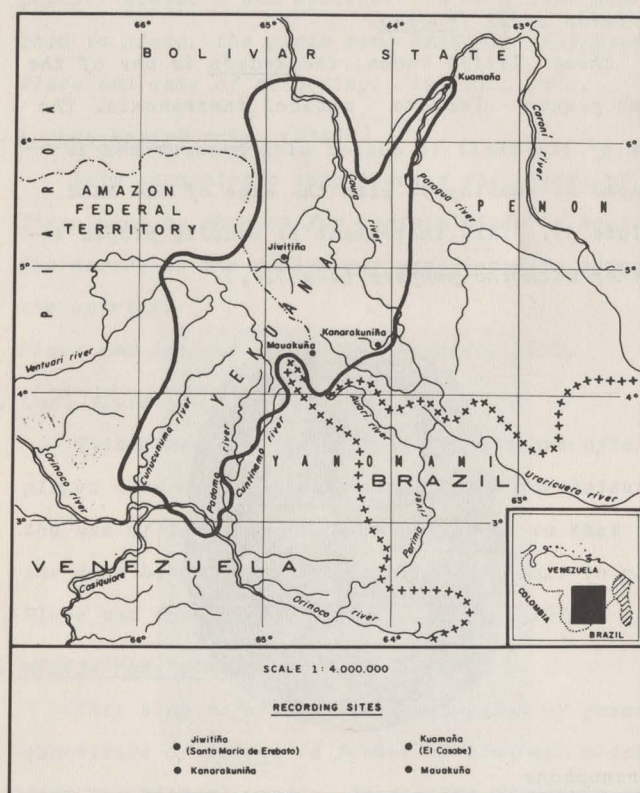
Recordings: Walter Coppens, Barbara Brändli, Jean François Nothomb  
Comments: Walter Coppens and Isaías Rodríguez V.  
Editor: Walter Coppens

Band 8, Side 2, recorded in 1912 by Theodor Koch-Grünberg in Mauakuñ.  
All other bands recorded 1962-1970 in Jiwitiña, Kanarakuniña, Kuamana, Venezuela.

## INTRODUCTION

The Yekuana Indians, also known as Makiritare, whose total population is estimated at 1.500 to 2.000 persons, are a people whose life is closely related to the rivers as is suggested by their tribal names, which can be translated as "curiara (dugout canoe) people" or "river people".

When discovered around 1758-1759 by the Spaniards, the Yekuana lived along several tributaries of the Upper Orinoco. They now occupy some thirty settlements along the following rivers: Cuntinamo, Padamo, Cunucunuma, Ventuari, Caura, Erebató and Paragua (see map). There is also a village in Brazilian territory, on the banks of the Auari, an affluent of the Uraricuera.



## YEKUANA AREA

Taken from: Mapa Etnográfico de Venezuela y regiones adyacentes  
(R. Lizarralde)

\* For strategic reasons the Yekuana have always tended to concentrate in the upper reaches of the river valleys which they occupy. The reason for this settlement pattern is closely related to the geographic characteristics of the tribal area. This region almost totally covered

by the Amazon tropical forest does not offer any access by land. The rivers, which constitute the only means of entry, have so many rapids and falls that navigation is impossible without the assistance of Yekuana guides. This, together with the absence of strategic natural resources which would have interested the Metropolis, explains how the Yekuana occupy such a vast territory while protecting it from massive penetration by non-indigenous elements. So it is easier to understand why the tribal culture has been relatively little affected by outside deculturating tendencies, thus maintaining its internal vitality.

The traditional settlement consists of a single conico-circular dwelling in which lives the whole population, varying between 50 and 80 inhabitants. This dwelling symbolically reflects some of the outstanding elements of the tribal cosmovision. Through it the people recreate their original world, exclusively Yekuana, such as it was ordered by their culture hero Wanadi.

The day to day subsistence of the villages is based on a slash and burn agriculture, in which the cultivation of bitter yucca ranks as the most important activity. Agriculture is supplemented by hunting and fishing, while recollection is of less importance.

The men fell the trees and clear the plots while the women sow and harvest most of the crops, particularly bitter yucca, which constitutes the Yekuana's daily bread. Only fertile women are permitted to plant this crop since the Yekuana believe the fertility of the soil is affected by the fertility of the woman who plants. Hunting on the other hand is a basically masculine activity. Both men and women fish.

Yekuana technology, highly adapted to the environment in which the group lives, reveals perfect mastery of the materials and a high degree of artistic proficiency. Basket weaving with its symbolic designs deriving from tribal mythology illustrates one of the most sophisticated craft traditions among Venezuelan aborigines. The making of curiaras or dugout canoes reflects the profound technological knowledge acquired by the Makiritare in exploiting their environment and fulfilling their needs as "river people". Until the last century, using these curiaras fashioned from a single tree trunk, they made long commercial expeditions to Georgetown the capital of British Guiana.

The traditional settlement is made up of several residential units which center on the parents and their



married daughters. The most influential people in the community are the headman and the shaman or witch-doctor.

The youth who aspires to be a shaman must undergo several years of rigorous apprenticeship under the tutelage of an elder shaman before he may practice. Once he has assimilated the techniques and the secret language of shamanistic duties, he faces the multiple responsibilities of the position: he will attend the sick, assure the community of success in hunt and harvest, and serve as guide for those souls making their last trip, to heaven.

Yekuana music not only interprets the supernatural world, but also relates to daily events. The selection reproduced in this record is not intended to represent a complete panorama of Yekuana music; rather it hopes to document some of the most outstanding musical styles of the group.

## MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

### 1. Idiophones

#### A. Rattle stick (*wasaha*)

On the upper part of this instrument a bunch of seed pots of a vine is fixed, which knock against each other when shaken and thus produce the sound (plate 1).



YEKUANA AREA  
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(R. Lissorrelde)

The rattle stick is used by the conductor of the dance to mark the rhythm of the circular movements executed by the chorus around the main post of the conico-circular communal dwelling. It is played together with the drum and the bamboo clarinets.

#### B. Shamanistic maraca (*madaka*)

The rattle consists of a dry calabash pierced

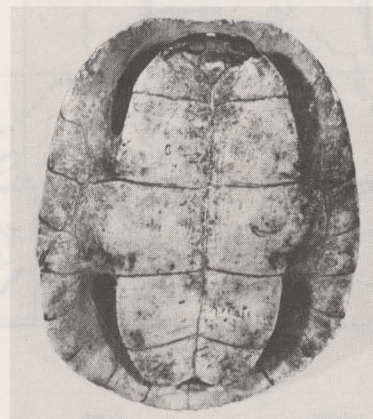
by a stick of heartwood, whose base is carved into a handle with twin anthropomorphic figures representing shamans in intense concentration (plate 2).



The sound of the maraca is produced by little stones and roots inside the calabash. The sacred nature of the instrument is related to quartz or crystal stones (*widiki*) sent by Wanadi.

#### C. Tortoise shell (*kodedo*)

Though little known, the *kodedo* is one of the most genuine Yekuana musical instruments. The rim of the shell is coated with beeswax and is played by rubbing it with the edge of the hand (plate 3). This instrument is usually played together with the panpipe (see 3.C.).



### 2. Membranophone

The only membranophone used by the Yekuana is the double-ended cylindrical drum (*samhuda*) made from a section of tree trunk hollowed by machete and knife. The two ends are covered with skins, jaguar or howler monkey skins being preferred, sometimes those of deer or peccary. Each skin is held on by a thick vine ring which is tied directly to the opposite one with a cord (plate 1).

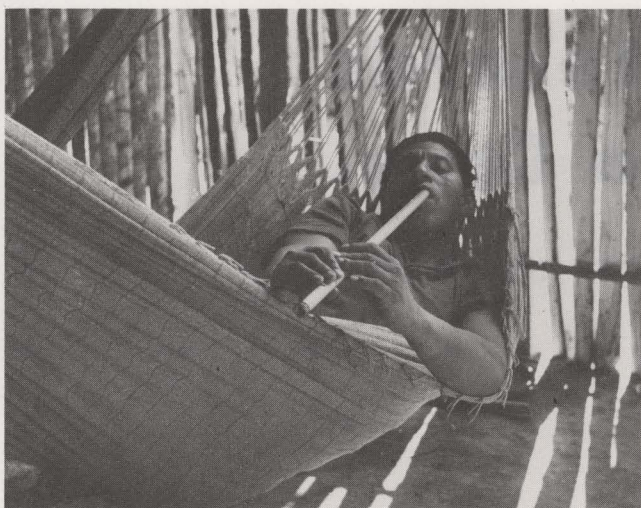


The drum is held about hip high and played with one stick, marking the rhythm of movements in dances, or as self-accompaniment by a singer.

### 3. Aerophones

#### A. Cane flute (hito / wichu)

This is a cylindrical and end-blown flute which has an airduct and is played by inserting the mouthpiece between the lips. The instrument has a triangular aperture a few centimeters below the mouthpiece. At the lower level of the aperture the flute has an internal wall of beeswax with a narrow slit in its upper part through which the air passes. Air blown against the edge of the triangle produces the sound. The lower part of the instrument has five finger holes and one opposite the first; these holes are used to modify the sound being produced. The flute ends at a closed knot which <sup>usually</sup> has an appendix carved in the shape of an animal head (plate 4).



The Yekuana play this instrument during moments of leisure.

#### B. Deer-bone flute (kawadi deje)

This instrument, widely spread among many native tribes of Venezuela, is made from a deer tibia. This is a flute without airduct, which at the top end has a notch sometimes covered with beeswax. In the central part there are three finger holes, and between the first and second an internal beeswax wall with two or three apertures which serve to propagate the sound. The exterior holes and the internal wall determine the pitch of the instrument (plate 5).



The use of the deer-bone flute requires certain practice: the player puts the top end mouthpiece between his lips and blows against the edge of the instrument.

#### C. Panpipe or whistle (suduchu)

This instrument has five pipes made from a species of small bamboo. Each pipe is cut to a different size to produce different sounds. (The panpipe is not reproduced on this record).

#### D. Bamboo clarinet (tekeye / wanna)

This instrument is always played in duet, one being considered male and the other female. The music played on these clarinets symbolizes the movements and songs of a mythological animal pair (plate 1).

The clarinet is made of thick bamboo open at both ends. About twenty to thirty centimeters from the mouth end, the tube is blocked by a node. In the center of this node a hole is perforated, one-two centimeters in diameter, which holds a green cane of a slightly smaller diameter. This valve, closed at the lower end and open at the top, reaches the bamboo mouth piece. The valve is split lengthwise and has a string tied around which can be moved up or down to modify the sound. The clarinet is played by introducing the valve between the lips.

#### E. Conch trumpet (hanawkwa)

The Yekuana obtain their conches through a trading network which reaches Guyana via a series of indigenous intermediaries.





They use the trumpet, which is blown through a hole bored at the apex (plate 6), to announce important events such as the departure for or the return from a long trading expedition or, in former times, the return of a warring party.

It is to be noted that only the men play the above mentioned instruments.

#### EXPLANATORY NOTES

##### Side I

##### 1. yuanade dēma (2'23")

This song, invoking the good spirits to protect the members of the community, is performed at communal feasts such as the building of a dwelling or the preparation of a new plot for planting.

Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1966.

##### 2. Deer flute (0'41")

This instrument is played during the Yekuana's moments of leisure, always in a recreational context.

Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1970.

##### 3. ayēja atūjudu jēkēma otonejamēn (3'30")

When the roof and the greater part of the walls of the conico-circular dwelling are finished, the inhabitants of the village - before occupying the new house - organize a great exorcising ceremony. The reason of this ritual is that of expelling those evil spirits that have infiltrated the dwelling.

The soloist sits at the outer circumference while the chorus swirls incessantly around the central pole - the visible way to heaven - echoing the soloist.

Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1966.

##### 4. edanaka hani amōde (1'32")

The women chant this exorcism on planting or harvesting yucca, to stop the bad spirits from affecting the fertility and the growing of this "tree of life".

Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1966.

##### 5. Twin clarinets (1'03")

This recording picks up the dialogue between the male clarinet which gives the <sup>melody,</sup> and the female clarinet which answers. The male imitates the squawks of a little starving parrot; the female reproduces the parents' answer.

Place and date of recording: Kanarakuniña, 1968.

##### 6. mēdējēne (4')

The first part of this chant is directed to the different Yekuana villages, praying for the good health of their inhabitants, that there be no fever or other illnesses. In the second part, the song becomes a shamanistic invocation to the spirits which might affect the health and wellbeing of the Yekuana. The last sequence is the conclusion to the previous one.

Place and date of recording: Kuamaña, 1970.

##### 7. Welcoming music (3'13")

When a party returns after a long absence, a welcoming drum is sounded; those who arrive, dressed in palm skirts, play the bamboo clarinets. These instruments join once inside the communal dwelling, which is the center of the social interaction of the community.

Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1966.

##### Side II

##### 1. Paddle stroke rhythm (2'10")

Though strictly speaking not musical, this paddle sequence performed by a crew of eight Yekuana represents one of the multiple rhythms adopted by the "curiara people" when moving along the river. These rhythms change according to the different situations which might arise: the sudden appearance of game, going through rapids, etc.

The Yekuana play the paddle rhythm between strokes. In that moment, the top part of the paddle hits the edge of the dugout, producing the percussive sound. The other instrument used in this sequence



is the conch trumpet, which announces the departure or arrival of the canoe-men.

Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1970.

2. adejedamo dëma (2'09")

This chant is an invocation to the good spirits of various plants, to assure the fertility and plentiful harvest of the crops.

Place and date of recording: Kanarakuniña, 1968.

3. Tortoise shell (2'16")

This sequence is another example of the music played by the Yekuana to celebrate the return to the village of a party which has been absent for a relatively long time. The sound of the shell is repeated at fixed intervals. In the background, the rhythm of the drum and of a cane flute can occasionally be heard. Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1962.

4. sichukë (0'45")

From an early age Yekuana girls spend their time learning family chores. One of these is looking after younger brothers and sisters. To calm them down or put them to sleep, the girls sing delicate lullabies. Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1968.

5. kajudu kajiyë nañe (2'46")

This shamanistic song invokes the spirit of a liana used by shamans for certain kinds of healing. The maraca is the medium par excellence to summon the spirits. Place and date of recording: Kuamaña, 1970.

6. Cane flute (0'51")

This flute and the deer bone flute are often played alternately. As an instrument for leisure, the use of the cane flute is preferred to that of the deer bone one, which is more difficult to play. Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1970.

7. mëdëje nañe mëdawakukë (2'30")

This song refers to the consumption of great quantities of yadaki (a fermented beverage obtained from the bitter yucca). When a lot of yadaki is drunk, people become intoxicated and tumble about like river fish. This image can be applied to other animals.

Place and date of recording: Jiwitiña, 1962.

8. tawaniwëychi (1'52")

Between the years 1911 and 1913, the German explorer Theodor Koch-Grünberg made an extensive trip

to the South of Venezuela and the North of Brazil, collecting on that opportunity abundant ethnographic material. We include in this record one of his recordings, of obvious historical interest, made at the beginning of the Century by the cylinder recording system.

This sequence is a chant in which the shaman invokes the spirits with the voice of Tawani, difunct great shaman of the Yekuana.

Place and date of recording: Mauakuña, 1912.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Translation: Cristina Mac-Veigh

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