



# The Wanano Indians of the Brazilian Amazon: A Sense of Space

*Janet M. Chernela*

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The Wanano Indians of the northwest Amazon have a social system that differs from those of most tropical forest tribes. Neither stratified by wealth nor strictly egalitarian, Wanano society is "ranked" according to rigidly bound descent groups. In this pioneering ethnographic study, Janet M. Chernela decodes the structure of Wanano society.

In Wanano culture, children can be "grandparents," while elders can be "grandchildren." This apparent contradiction springs from the fact that descent from ranked ancestors, rather than age or accumulated wealth, determines one's standing in Wanano society. But ranking's impulse is muted as senior clans, considered to be *succulent* (referring to both seniority and resource abundance), must be generous gift-givers. In this way, resources are distributed throughout the society.

In two poignant chapters aptly entitled "Ordinary Dramas," Chernela shows that rank is a site of contest, resulting in exile, feuding, personal shame, and even death. Thus, Chernela's account is dynamic, placing rank in historic as well as personal context.

As the deforestation of the Amazon continues, the Wanano and other indigenous peoples face growing threats of habitat destruction and eventual extinction. If these peoples are to be saved, they must first be known and valued. *The Wanano Indians of the Brazilian Amazon* is an important step in that direction.



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