

REMOVING ANY LINGERING THOUGHT THAT 'PRIMITIVE' MEANS 'CRUDE'

Life Along the Amazon Today



The Shipibo tribe of the Peruvian Amazon were once a fierce and warring people, but they have adjusted well to the pressures of civilization. The women are the workers of the tribe, weaving the cotton, tilling the gardens and making pottery. They are treated with great respect by the men. This woman's skirt is of her own weaving but her blouse is trade cotton; her top necklace is of old Peruvian silver coins, the lower one and the nose ornament are of aluminum from plane wrecks. She is a friend of the photographer, who took her oldest son with him to visit Lima.

by Jay Louthian

Iquitos, on the Amazon in Peru, where my wife and I spent four years collecting Indian art, reeks of rain, hot rusty corrugated iron, the vices of military governors trying to preserve the life-style of the conquest, and the greed of the "patrons" who exploit the Indians.

Scientists flow through Iquitos in a steady trickle, dry season or wet. As they came in and out we would hear fascinating stories about palm trees, pirhanas, cannibals (what really happened when Michael Rockefeller got lost in New Guinea), new hallucinogens, rare birds—and we slowly became aware of the incredible variety

of the jungle. Some of the scientists stayed in Iquitos a long time, and we took to calling them by the name of the specialty. There was Steve, the Passion Flower Man, searching for new varieties and always hoping that he would discover the rumored Poison Passion Flower. A more tragic figure was the Banana Node Man, locked in hopeless combat with a root disease which would render the banana, long a staple of the poor, extinct in the Amazon area within five years.

We too were busy, looking for examples of the work of the last great primitive craftsmen of the world—

the Indians of the Amazon. Our gallery of Indian art, the only thing like it in the jungle, became known to the various tribes through our radio messages requesting authentic material from remote areas. Indians from tribes rarely seen in Iquitos began to appear with the river traders, and they spent much time in the gallery examining and admiring the work of other tribes totally unfamiliar to them.

The Indians make nothing to sell. Their carefully made ornaments, like those worn by Wing and his wife, Ki'o, in the photograph by Dr. Robert Carneiro on the cover of RAGS, should remove any lingering thoughts



The Waika are one of the most primitive tribes in the Amazon valley; their name means killer. Not contacted peacefully until 1954, they're now debilitated by malaria, dysentery and tuberculosis. They use their hallucinatory snuff Nyakwana (painstakingly prepared from the bark of two trees, which makes every living thing seem gigantic or minuscule) as an intoxicant when living near civilization. The remote branches of the tribe use it only once or twice a year for divination or in preparation for war. The ornament of feathers is always worn on the left upper arm.

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The Indians of the Amazon paint and ornament themselves almost universally. The paints are generally vegetable dye, like alchiote, a red seed which produces a blood-red paste when mixed with fat. Blue-black comes from the juice of the Genipap tree's fruits. Indians paint themselves for almost any big occasion—warfare (it is thought the paint frightens the enemy), courting, even just plain amusement.

Some designs are traditional with certain tribes. The Shipibo, for instance, paint the same geometric patterns on their bodies as on their pot-

tery and fabrics. Other tribes place great store in individual inventiveness. Many Indians stick bird down or aromatic leaves and flowers on their bodies with tree sap. More permanent ornaments are made of seeds, teeth, perfumed woods, feathers, animal and reptile skins, iridescent beetle wing cases—indeed, almost anything that lasts. They ornament their heads, ears, lips, necks, shoulders, arms, waists and legs—sometimes all at once. They paint, tattoo, scar and perforate themselves as regularly as they make pottery, ornaments and cloth.

Indians live as a integral part of

the environment, working with it, not fighting against it. The Indians I knew did not suffer from ennui or alienation or any of the fretful dissatisfactions which seem almost to form the framework of modern technological living. When the Indians had nothing to do, they would simply sit down, in any position, and go into a Yoga-like state of peaceful meditation.

By the dawn of the 21st century, there will almost certainly be no truly primitive people remaining on the face of the earth. If there is anything we can learn from them—and I think there is a great deal—then we had better learn it now. ☞



These are Kai-ya-ree dancers, Yukuna tribe, on the Miritiparana' River, Colombian Amazon. The masks of the two central men are made of wood painted with native dyes. Their skirts are made of fiber, half dipped in dye. Their shirts are bark cloth. Little is known of this remote tribe except by Dr. Richard Evans Schultes, Director of the Harvard Botanical Museum and one of the last great adventurer-scientists, who lived with them for several years while researching the plants in their area.



This Amahuaca was photographed at Varadero, on the headwaters of the Inuya River, Peruvian Amazon, coming out of the jungle to visit a neighboring tribe. Visitors in the Amazon stop by a stream just short of their goal and wash the dirt and sweat from their bodies. Then, using the stream or a trade mirror, they carefully paint their body and face with inventive designs in huito, a blue-black vegetable dye. Their best seed belt and bandolier is worn; the headdress of palm fiber is carefully arranged. Then, shouting loudly to warn their hosts, they enter the village. Note: The end of the penis is almost always tucked under a belt or string. The Amazon Indians have a great preoccupation with modesty and would be shocked, indeed, to see a man without this form of protection.