



Ye'kwana of Venezuela

Description of Project

The Ye'kwana are the indigenous inhabitants of the Caura River basin. (The Caura River is a tributary of the Orinoco River in Venezuela). Earth Bound conducts workshops with the Ye'kwana on topics such as resource management of forest products used in traditional basket weaving, basic business skills training, and marketing options to generate income from the sale of baskets. Our partners are the Kuyujani, which is the Indian Council of the Ye'kwana, and HealthShare, an NGO providing health personnel, equipment, and training to indigenous communities along the lower Caura River. Future plans include web site development and computer skills training for the Ye'kwana.

History and Geography

Ye'kwana means canoe people. The river is essential to them, intricately woven into all aspects of their lives.

They are a Carib-speaking tribe that migrated from Brazil several hundred years ago. Due to the warring nature of neighboring indigenous groups and the rubber trade there are reportedly only around 3000 Ye'Kwana today.

Despite their low numbers, they are an indigenous group that has very much protected and held true to their traditional lifestyle. Most of the Ye'Kwana presently live in Venezuela with only one group still residing in Brazil. They live in the remote regions that surround the river basins of the the Erevato, Venuari, Caura, and Paragua Rivers.

Lifestyle and Baskets

In addition to what the river provides the Ye'Kwana rely on their land to provide the food that they consume. Within this plot of land they grow bananas, pineapples, sugarcane, chili peppers, squash, sweet potatoes, and tobacco. The tubular vegetable called bitter yucca or cassava is the staple of the Ye'Kwana diet.

In order to consume bitter yucca (manihot utilissima) the Ye'Kwana must go through an elaborate process to prepare it as it contains poisonous prussic acid. Much of the beautiful basketry that the Ye'kwana produce for sale are pieces or modifications of pieces that are used in this process.



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The yucca is first peeled and grated. The grated pulp is then stuffed into a long woven tubular sleeve called a tingkui (the most difficult of all the baskets to make). The tungkui is hung on a hook, a pole is inserted into the bottom to apply pressure and stretch the tingkui. As the tingkui stretches it narrows and squeezes the prussic acid out of the pulp.

Once the pulp is dry and chalky, it is pressed through a round woven sieve called a manade, after which it has the consistency of flour. The flour is then used to make large flat cassava bread which is cooked on grills.

While the women are the ones in charge of the cassava production it is the men who weave most of the baskets. It is a matter of great importance and survival that the men develop expertise in weaving the various styles of baskets, and so most boys begin practicing weaving baskets as early as 10 years old. Traditionally, it is only after a young man proves his weaving skill that a father considers a young man an acceptable marriage prospect for his daughter.

The men of the Ye'kwana are responsible for weaving the tudi – the carrying basket, the wariwari - fan for the cooking fire, the waja tingkuihato, and the waja tomennato (painted waja).