

# Life Among the Wai Wai Indians

Smithsonian Archeologists, Husband and Wife, Find British Guiana's  
Pygmy-size Bow-and-arrow Marksmen Facing Extinction

BY CLIFFORD EVANS AND BETTY J. MEGGERS

*With Illustrations from Photographs by the Authors*

**F**AR beneath our DC-3, British Guiana's dense jungle unrolled like a thick green carpet. Scudding above it, we could not help feeling that we were flying backward in time—back to that mysterious age before white men set foot in the New World.

Our destination was Gunn's Landing Strip, a dirt runway scratched from the wilderness in the Crown Colony's far south, almost on the Equator. Near there, along the upper Essequibo River, live the Wai Wai Indians, a remote tribe whose way of life has remained virtually unchanged through the centuries. These Garib-speaking aborigines, the only uncivilized people still left in British Guiana, are waging what is probably a losing fight against extinction or absorption. (See The Society's map supplement, Eastern South America, included in this issue.)

### In Search of "Live" Archeology

My wife and I had probed many a prehistoric site in tropical South America, but our present expedition promised to be different. This time, by observing the primitive Wai Wai as well as excavating sites, we hoped to catch part of our archeology alive.

As our plane lurched to a stop in the little clearing, we caught our first glimpse of the Indians. They stood by the crude runway, their light-brown skins glistening with red paint. Clad only in the simplest of breech-clouts and aprons and carrying long bows, they would not have seemed out of place in Columbus's time save for the strings of glass trade beads girdling necks, legs, and arms.

Beside these stocky Indians stood two of the American missionaries whose help as interpreters was to prove invaluable to us.

Hours later, after a hike through the "big bush" and an upriver journey by dugout canoe, we reached the missionary settlement which was to be our headquarters.

During the next few days we tried to find out about archeological sites. In response to our questions, the Wai Wai chief recalled places that had been pointed out to him when

a boy as "ancient" long-abandoned villages. All had names, some simple, some jawbreakers like "Totoyoguyaotontoh."

Almost every geographic feature in Wai Wai country, even each big river bend, has its name. To us, many of them looked alike. Not so to the Indians; they can locate Totoyoguyaotontoh, or any other spot, as easily as a New Yorker can find Times Square.

At dawn several days later we loaded a dugout and embarked on our first exploratory trip. Our guide was Charlie, a civilized Wapishana Indian from a village farther north, who had married a Wai Wai woman. His English words were few, and our conversations with him were thus limited to simple ideas.

Charlie, good-natured and willing, had one big drawback: he was a poor provider. Civilization had robbed him of his native hunting prowess; he had lost the art of silently stalking game in the forest.

Whenever Charlie went off hunting, distant shots would raise our hopes. Almost every time he returned to camp empty-handed.

"What happened?" we would ask.

"Me shoot monkey," he would answer gloomily. "Him stay, hang by tail."

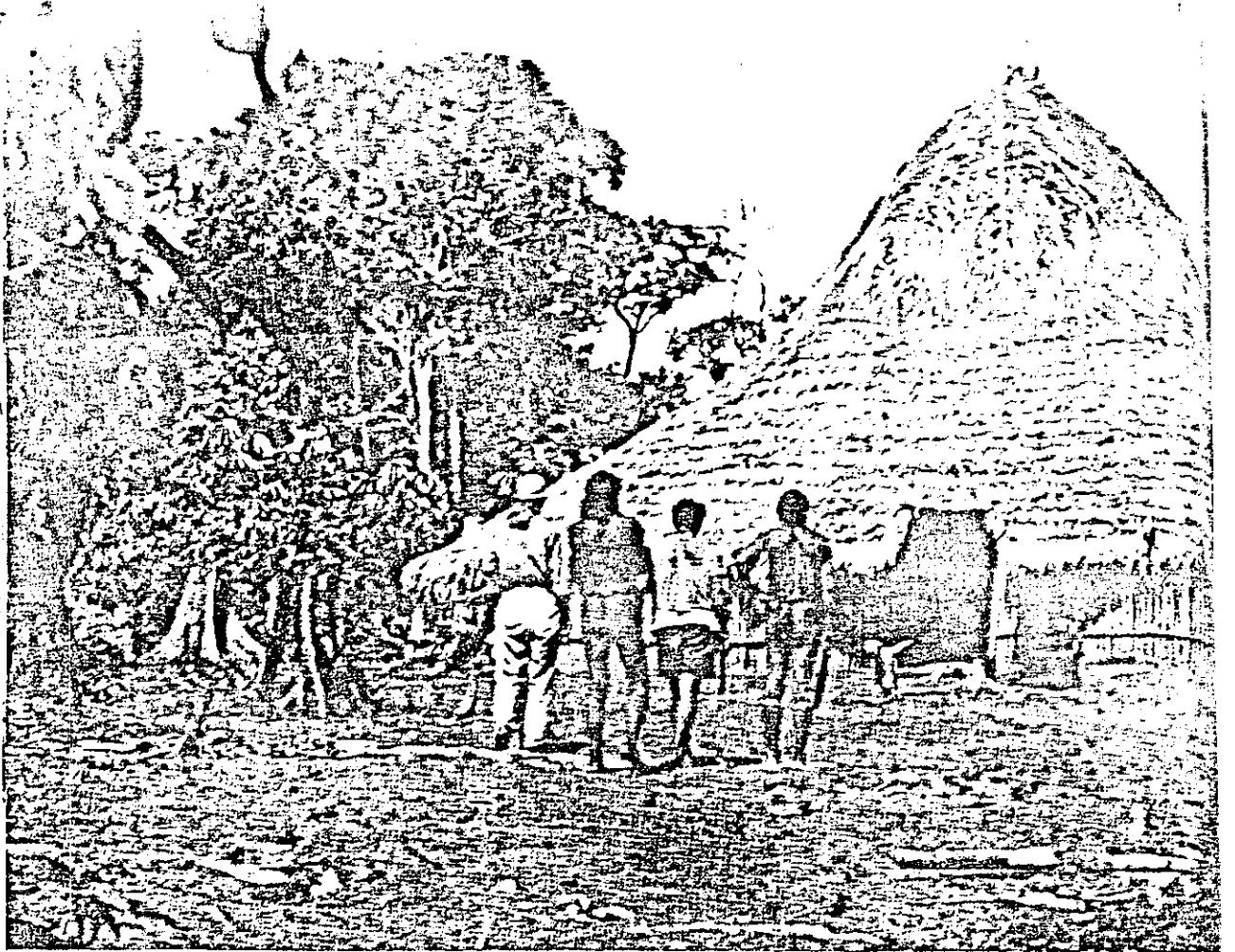
When provisions began to run low, we started looking for a Wai Wai hunter. Yukuma, a young stalwart, accepted the job, and we arranged to pick him up at his village early one morning. Delayed, we arrived hours late, but Yukuma had made no preparations. After all, what is time in the jungle?

### Hunters Prefer Bows to Guns

Eventually our hunter assembled his baggage, after taking time to go to the field and cut a dozen sticks of sugar cane. He piled the dugout high with cooking pots, a large basket of cassava bread, his hammock, two bows, stacks of arrows, the sugar cane, and his shotgun.

A few Wai Wai, we discovered, own guns, earned by working for the missionaries. But ammunition is scarce, and, anyway, too many gun blasts frighten off the game. For daily

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↑ A Barking Dog Challenges Visitors to a Wai Wai Village

Before the authors, Smithsonian Institution archeologists, studied the Wai Wai, few white men had visited this Carib-speaking tribe of British Guiana's remote rain forests. Here Dr. Betty Meggers and her Indian companions pause before Yewara village. Custom prescribes that they wait for a formal invitation to enter.

← Wai Wai man wears bangs and carries a "vanity case" to apply his make-up.

Beaded Men Feel → Fully Clothed

Page 331: Fastidious dressers sprinkle eagle down on heavily oiled bangs, shave eyebrows, and daub bodies with red.

Upper right: Pigtails, the longer the better, sport toucan and curassow feathers. Monkey teeth dangle from belts.

Women pay less attention to daily make-up.

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Kudachromes by Clifford Evans and  
(lower right) Betty J. Meggers



fare the Indians rely on silent and deadly arrows. Yukuma, though obviously very proud of his firearm, often left it behind when he went hunting.

No longer did we want for fish or game. Whenever our dugout approached a sandbar where the Essequibo ran clear and shallow, Yukuma stood tense in the prow with his long bow ready (opposite). As we glided along, the string twanged and the arrow disappeared. Then the hollow cane shaft reappeared once or twice as the impaled quarry tried vainly to escape to deep water—and a large fish was added to our larder. Yukuma seldom missed.

At the first glimmer of dawn next day, when the dripping jungle rang with the melodies of waking birds, Yukuma reached for his bow and arrows and stole away. Then we heard him imitate a bird call, blowing on a leaf cupped between his hands, and a feathered creature replied. As the sounds continued, we could trace his progress under the forest canopy. Soon he returned with the too-talkative bird for breakfast, and a monkey to add its rich, sweet flavor to our evening stew.

The food problem solved, we turned full attention to archeology. We had come to the Essequibo country seeking missing pieces to a puzzle: Where did tropical forest Indians first develop such skills as agriculture and pottery making? What routes did these agrarians follow in their migrations?

Persistent Riddles from the Past

During the previous 20 years, scientists had progressed rapidly in unraveling the prehistoric past of western South America, Central America, and Mexico.\* The more that was learned about these areas, however, the more persistent became the unsolved riddles. Perhaps, it was suggested, South America's jungle-clad lowlands might hold the answers.

Little archeological work had been done in this matted wilderness. We had spent a year (1948-49) in survey work and excavation in Brazil, around the wide mouth of the Amazon. Other archeologists had done similar work in parts of Venezuela. But between these areas lay the almost untouched Guianas—British, Dutch (now called Surinam), and French—on South America's northeastern coast.

We wanted to close this gap. We had already determined that prehistoric Indians did not use the coastal route around the mainland and up the Amazon as a migration highway. Did they, perhaps, work their way through

the Guianas, using the Essequibo River as a natural route to the Amazon?

One by one we attacked the sites mentioned by the chief, some 30 in all. Many yielded only a handful of potsherds and other artifacts; a few were more generous. It was tedious and often unrewarding work, never producing such dramatic prizes as sacrificial altars, carved idols, or stone temples. But gradually from our pottery fragments a faint pattern of the life of earlier peoples began to emerge. To our satisfaction, it closely paralleled the firsthand picture we were getting of Wai Wai arts and crafts.

Shallow Diggings Yield Clues

By the time we finished we had determined that the area was not inhabited by pottery-making groups until comparatively recent times, probably within the last 300 years. Our diggings seldom sank more than a foot or so before all evidence of man's occupation petered out. By contrast, some of the excavations in Peru have produced artifacts from depths of 25 feet, covered with the remains left by centuries of succeeding civilizations.†

Thus we refuted previous theories that this was the original source of tropical forest culture like that of the Wai Wai. We know now that the skills of pottery making and agriculture first developed elsewhere and did not reach the Essequibo country until after European explorers came to South America in the 16th century.

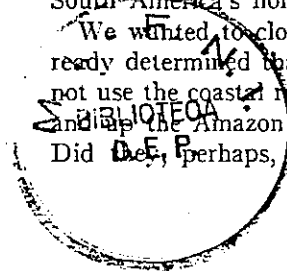
So, from an archeological standpoint, the layman might regard our findings, our 100 bags of potsherds, as unspectacular. But layman and scientist alike would find the Wai Wai people exciting as an example of archeology alive.

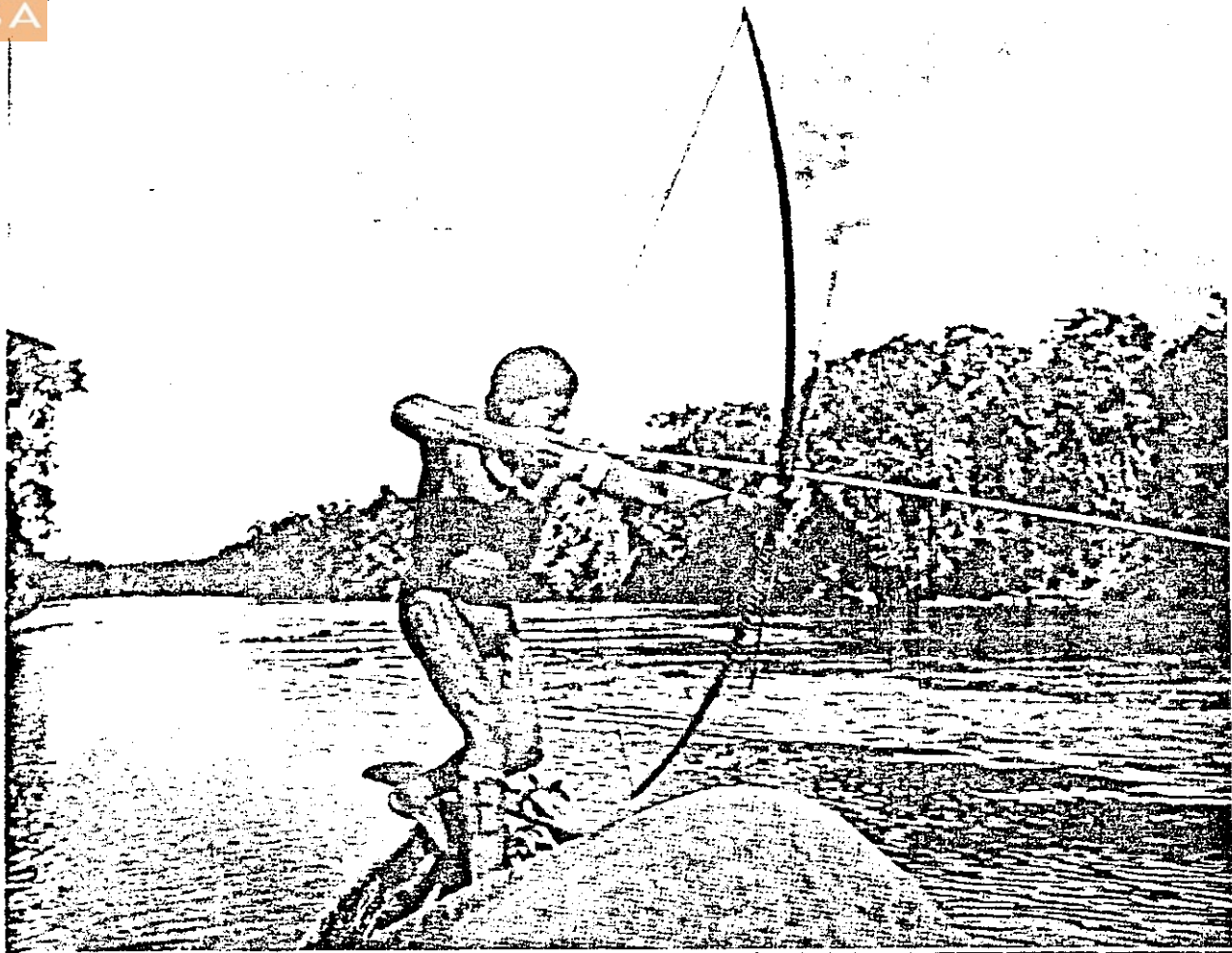
Having neither time nor language facility to teach Charlie and Yukuma archeological technique, we did almost all the digging ourselves. If the job dragged on, we sent the men hunting; otherwise they waited.

At such times the contrast between an Indian who lives off the jungle and one who has been exposed to civilization was striking. Charlie simply sat and watched or wandered

\* See, in the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE: "Hunting Prehistory in Panama Jungles," August, 1953, and "Expedition Unearths Buried Masterpieces of Jade," September, 1941, both by Matthew W. Stirling; "Yucatán, Home of the Gifted Maya," by Sylvanus Griswold Morley, November, 1936.

† See "Finding the Tomb of a Warrior-God," by William Duncan Strong, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, April, 1947.





### Bowman Stalks Fish from a Dugout on the Essequibo

No matter how full the larder, hunter Yukuma never missed an opportunity to acquire fresh food for the expedition. Before daybreak he disappeared into the dripping forest seeking birds, monkeys, or perhaps a tapir, largest land animal of the South American jungle.

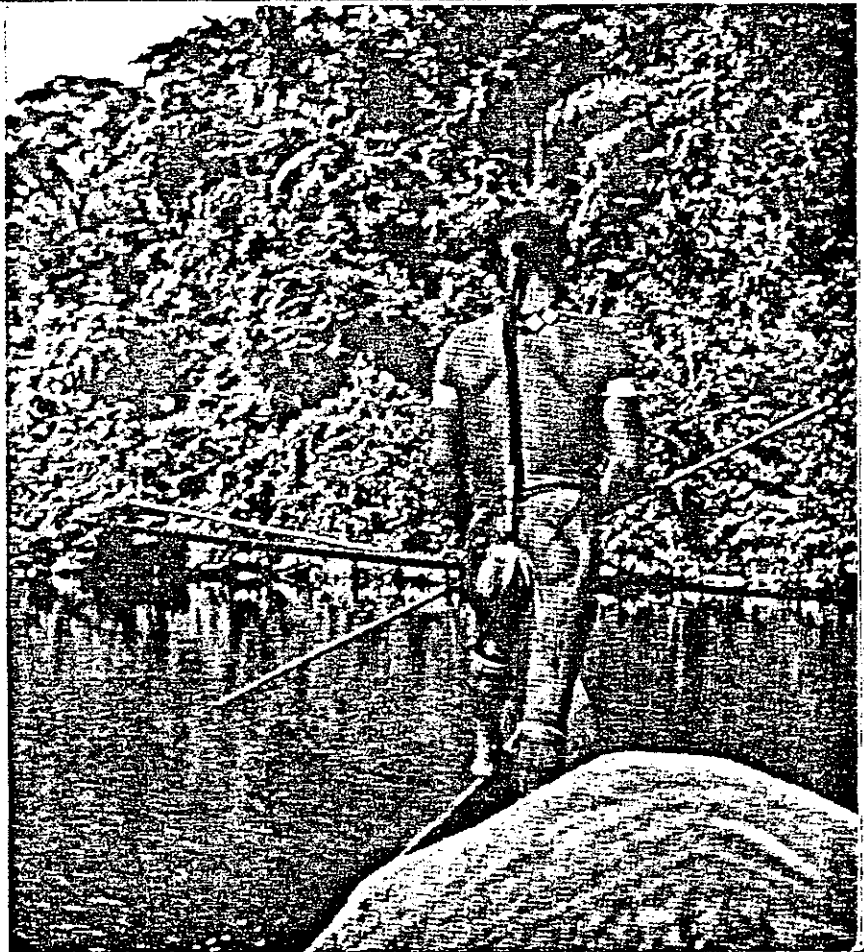
On boat trips to archeological sites, Yukuma always readied his long bow near sand bars where swift water ran shallow enough to reveal fish. His 6-foot arrows seldom missed.

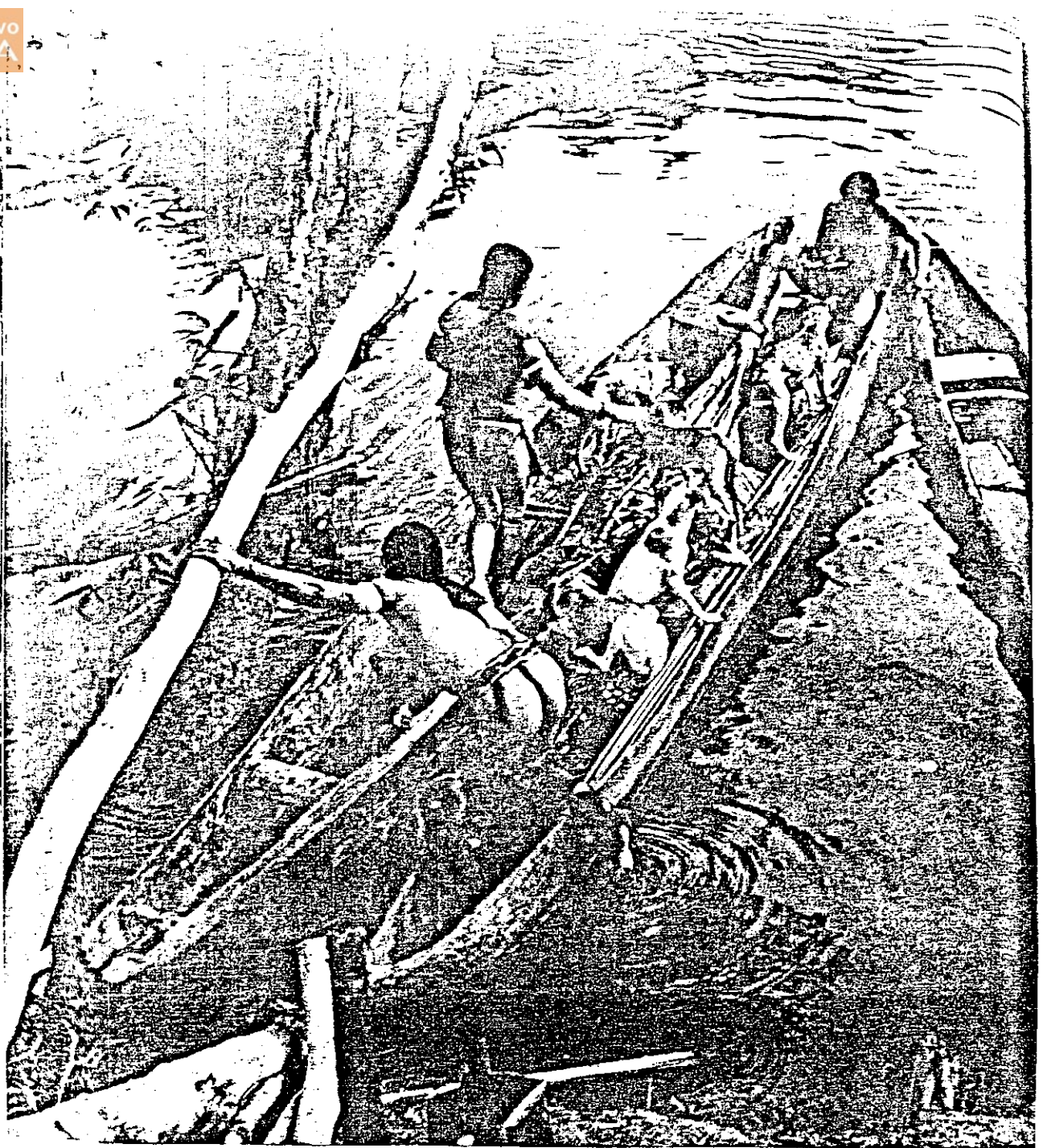
A few Wai Wai own shotguns but rarely use them because they frighten game.

→ Yukuma decorates his legs with a plant juice of India-ink permanence. A tarpaulin covers the expedition's gear.

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#### Moving Day: Dogs Outnumber Indians in Baggage-laden Canoes

Occasionally Wai Wai villagers become dissatisfied with neighbors or worn-out land and pull up stakes. These Indians prepare to shove off for another village. Dogs are favored pets of the Wai Wai. Like apartment dogs, they are walked morning and evening; women frequently carry them to the river for baths.

aimlessly about. Yukuma, however, made little baskets from palm leaves, sharpened the wooden points of his arrows, cleaned his gun, or practiced bird and animal calls. He was never at a loss for something to do.

Frequent stops for hunting and fishing delayed our work. When supper was assured, we became annoyed at further delays to hunt; to us it looked like overstocking. A jungle

Indian, however, knows that lean days follow good ones. Even when the larder bulges he neglects no opportunity to add to it.

Yukuma had a special interest in keeping us well stocked—his capacity for food was enormous. One day we kept a record of his consumption: one large bird, several pounds of smoked fish, half a huge cake of cassava bread, half a monkey, two long sticks of sugar

cane, six plantains, and large quantities of pepper-pot broth!

The Wai Wai show a keen sense of humor, and most of all they enjoy a joke on themselves. Yukuma was no exception.

Late one afternoon we returned to camp to find that a hawk, still hovering around, had helped himself to our cache of smoked fish, supposedly hanging safe in a basket from the ridgepole of our tent. Our provider doubled up with laughter, and several times during the evening he recounted the tale, chuckling with glee. What a joke! To think that a mere bird had outwitted the great hunter, Yukuma!

#### Signs of Tapirs at Riverbank

For us, as for the Indians, the Essequibo was a broad highway. Thick jungle, undisturbed by man, walled its banks monotonously for miles. Natural wonders, however, caught our fancy as we paddled along.

Here a bright-blue morpho butterfly glimmered overhead. There a pale-green spider crouched on his web of golden silk. High in the trees we spotted an ant nest, a lavender orchid, an oriole's cocoonlike nest. Bats clustered on the underside of a dead branch overhanging the water. Now and then along the bank appeared a slide where tapirs—largest land animals in the South American jungle—came to drink.

A heron, gleaming white in a universe of green, stood on a granite outcropping in the river eyeing a little fish skittering over the water's surface. Flights of gaudy macaws scolded incessantly as they passed overhead.

Rapids above the junction of the Kassikaityu and Essequibo Rivers added spice to our journey (page 336). Although experience gave us confidence in the dugout's strength and its ability to skim over submerged dangers, we always breathed a sigh of relief after we had left the rocks behind.

Sometimes we wished that we had a command of the Wai Wai tongue, or that Charlie understood more than a few English words, as we listened to our companions debate the wisdom of each proposed passage. Gestures and strong intonations marked the argument, while the hazardous stretch loomed closer and closer. Decisions were always reserved for the last possible moment.

One rapid barred our way three times on a certain trip. We were particularly relieved when our first try succeeded, and the second

passage followed the first with happy results.

Imagine our horror, the third time, when we discovered that Charlie and Yukuma had become bored with the well-tested route and were seeking a new challenge. Again the same discussion and gesturing, the same split-second decision, and we were off on a new tilt with disaster. The fact that we came through safe is a tribute to the skillful maneuvering of the Indians, not to their caution.

Charlie often could give us only the most tenuous idea of the distance to our goal.

"Far a little bit," he would say, or, "Two bends of river."

It was some time before we discovered that only turns of 90 degrees or more were included in Charlie's definition of a "bend." By our reckoning, the goal might be 20 bends away.

As we worked our way upriver, we varied our days with visits to Wai Wai settlements, where we often pitched camp.

In all this vast tangle of southern British Guiana, there is not a living soul aside from the missionaries and the Wai Wai, who number some 60 men, women, and children. These few people live in four villages close to the Essequibo, travel by water, and seldom penetrate the jungle except to hunt. Across the Brazilian border, on the headwaters of the Mapuera River, live another 60 or 70 Wai Wai whose way of life is indistinguishable from that of their Guiana kinsmen.

In the village of Yaka Yaka, the home of our hunter, we had opportunity to examine closely this way of life.

#### Single Hut Houses Entire Village

A single cone-roofed hut of pole and thatch construction housed the village of 10 people. Near by stood a lean-to where, as we approached, two men were busy with their morning toilet. One repeatedly combed his long jet-black hair, dressing it heavily with palm-nut oil; then he fashioned it into a tight pigtail and encased it in a long cane tube that hung to his hips.

The other drew red designs on his cheeks, using a little wooden paddle for a brush. A boy too young for such make-up watched fascinated (page 330).

Inside the crowded hut, women garbed in bead aprons, arm and leg bands, and necklaces were grating bitter cassava, or manioc, staff of life for thousands across the Tropics of South America. No one knows how primitive man discovered the use of this brown-



River Travelers Sometimes →  
Must Get Out and Push

British Guiana's southernmost portion is devoid of human beings save for several missionaries and 60 Wai Wai. The authors found this last uncivilized tribe in British Guiana—an example of living archeology—practicing the arts and crafts of their remote predecessors.

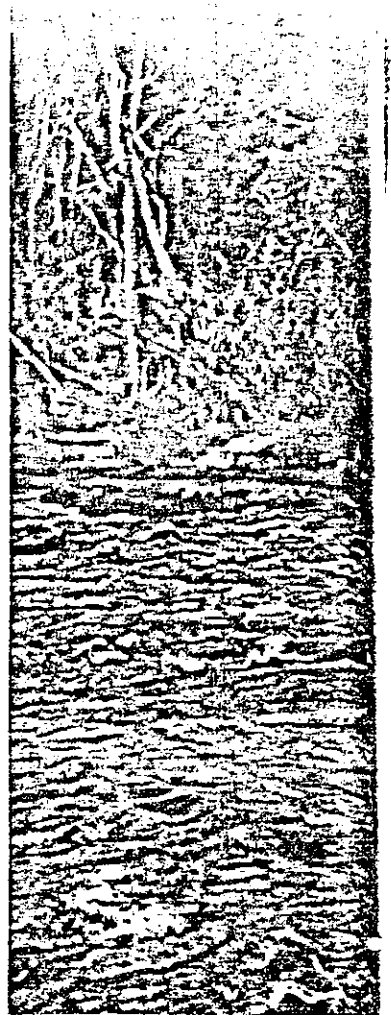
Wai Wai seldom probe the trackless jungle except to hunt. For them the Essequibo is a broad highway despite its menacing rapids. They measure distances in paddling time.

Here Dr. Evans, Yukuma, and Charlie, the last a Wapishana Indian guide, push upstream through a rapid.

← Happy Angler Hefts  
an Easy Half-hour's Catch

Fish abounding in the Essequibo and its backwaters are taken by poisoning, angling with steel hooks, and shooting with arrows. Harpoon heads attached to strong lines are used in the rapids.

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**Pot Black and Seed Red→  
Offer Sharp Contrast to  
a Primitive Artist**

The Wai Wai lavishly smear red on their bodies, implements, and dogs because they believe evil spirits cannot see anything painted that color. They make pigments of the red coating of the urucú seed and soot mixed with cassava starch.

Although eight days by foot and canoe from civilization, the Wai Wai are beginning to feel the impact of the outside world. This Indian mixes paint in a tin can, and his wrist carries bracelets made of the seamed ends of smaller cans. His little tribe faces a losing fight against extinction or absorption.

←The tribe's chief, weaving a palm-leaf fishing creel, pays no heed to a boy notching an arrow. Pampered Wai Wai children play with large knives from the time they are able to toddle.

© Kodachromes by Clifford Evans  
(top left) and Betty J. Meggers





**In Wai Wai Land the Authors Eat as Wai Wai Do, Dipping Cassava Bread into Pepper Pot**

Bitter cassava, or manioc, a poisonous root, provides the Wai Wai staff of life. Women grate it into a pulp, squeeze out the deadly juice, and use the meal in crisp, thin cakes like the one shown on the woven tray. Charlie, a Wapishana Indian who guided the expedition, shares the meal. Married to a Wai Wai, he came from a savanna where Indians wear clothing. Yaka Yaka villager (right) weaves a bead apron.

skinned root, for its white flesh harbors a poison, prussic acid, that spells quick death.

But the Indians have learned how to get rid of the poison. As we watched, a Wai Wai woman stuffed grated manioc into a narrow and flexible basket shaped like a huge sausage, which hung from one of the house poles. Pulling on the lower end with a long stock, lever fashion, she stretched the basket, squeezing till the deadly juices ran out in a stream. Afterwards the flour is spread on a griddle and baked into a crisp, thin cake.

The laborious preparation of this cassava bread is a time-consuming task, and the most that a man will do to help is to sit on the lever that stretches the basket.

Among the Wai Wai there is a strict division of labor between the sexes. Men build the communal house, hunt and fish, clear land, plant, and sometimes help dig root crops. They also do all the weaving of hammocks, baskets, and cloth (opposite).

Women cook, chop firewood, tend children,

make cassava graters and pottery, weave bead aprons, fetch water, spin cotton, and carry in the root crops. Like women's work everywhere, their tasks are never done (pages 345 and 346).

No walls or screens partitioned the hut's interior; each family occupied the space between two roof posts. Every compartment boasted its own hearth for cooking and nighttime warmth, the smoke drifting through an opening in the roof.

**Women Tend Fire All Night**

Hammocks were draped between posts. A woman's was always slung beneath her husband's, for it is her duty to keep the fire going all night.

Feather ornaments, gourds of palm oil, and baskets hung everywhere along the wall. Cassava cakes and smoked meat were piled on racks. The ceiling itself bristled with dozens of 6-foot arrows stuck in the thatch. Lean dogs lay tethered on special platforms

built along the walls. Red paint daubed their coats, a protection against evil spirits. Although the Wai Wai worship no gods and offer no sacrifices, they believe that harmful spirits may appear unexpectedly and injure them if they do not take precautions. Fortunately, these demons suffer from a peculiar color blindness and can see nothing that is red. Thus the Wai Wai's liberal use of red paint on both dogs and humans is more than just ornamental.

#### Jungle Dogs Walked on Leashes

Though surrounded by thousands of square miles of jungle, the Wai Wai frequently keep their dogs on leash. Just like city apartment dwellers, they regularly walk their pets.

Late each day at base camp, as the heavy darkness began to settle over the jungle and the booming frogs and howling monkeys tuned up for the evening concert, we would spot the chief making his way into the forest, his red macaw riding on one hand and his favorite dog straining on its leash.

Hospitality among the Wai Wai demands that food be offered to visitors no matter when they arrive. Inside the doorway at Yaka Yaka a woman quickly laid a mat for us, first beating it on a dog to shake out loose dirt. In front of us she placed a large bowl of cassava starch and palm fruit, another of wine made from *cara* (a potato-like tuber) and a steaming pot of pepper broth, and cassava bread (opposite).

The broth set our mouths afire; fortunately, the starch drink quenched the flames, though it tasted about as appetizing as flour paste. The wine proved to be mild and sweet, but quaffing it was something of a feat. The lip of the heavy bowl curved inward, so that the wine flowed more easily into the drinker's nose than into his mouth.

Soon after our arrival we noticed smoke billowing from the jungle. Then, unmistakably, came the roar of flames and the crackling of brush.

On investigation, we saw Indians applying torches to huge trees that littered a clearing.

#### Palm Leaves, Expertly Woven, Will Thatch a Hut Securely Against the Rains





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Kodachromes by Clifford Evans

### Slash-and-burn Agriculture: Indian Farmers Raise Crops in a Field of Giant Jackstraws

Like most Indians in South America's tropical forests, the Wai Wai follow a simple but rugged pattern of communal agriculture. Land must be torn from the forest by brute force, and even then the jungle never quite lets go.

Poor soil forces villagers to clear new areas every two or three years. The timber, dense and wet even after drying several months, must be put to the torch repeatedly just to get rid of leaves and small branches. Larger branches are hacked off and the trunks allowed to lie. The meager patches left yield bitter cassava, bananas, plantains, sugar cane, and a potato-like tuber called *cara*.



Fanned by a steady breeze, leaves and smaller branches were blazing.

We had happened on a battle, one engagement in a war that has continued between primitive man and the all-consuming jungle for untold ages. The prize was a few acres of tillable land (opposite).

Wai Wai slash-and-burn agriculture is rugged work, requiring a man to be lumberjack as well as farmer. The poor soil wears out in two or three years. Then villagers must move, hack new clearings in the forest, and build another settlement.

Even with steel axes, felling the hardwood trees is a giant task. After burning off the smaller growth, men must spend days chopping branches from the fallen trees.

#### Fields Used, Then Abandoned

Ready to plant, a field remains strewn with stumps, and big trunks lie everywhere like giant jackstraws. Crops—manioc, sugar cane, cara, bananas, and pineapples—are planted helter-skelter among them; further clearing would be a waste of time and effort, since the land will be abandoned so soon. Almost never do the Wai Wai return to a previous site.

Perhaps because their tillable land is so hard-won, the Indians could never understand why the missionaries bothered to grow flowers. The Wai Wai do not even have names for individual flowers, although they have a name for every animal, bird, and fish.

Natural Wai Wai courtesy to strangers is shown in many ways other than the quick offering of food. One of the most welcome is the privacy they allow visitors.

During other expeditions our privacy resembled that of the proverbial goldfish under the curious stares of primitive peoples. This was never true on the upper Essequibo.

When we first hung our hammocks under a lean-to at Mawiká, not even the smallest tots came to stand and stare. This reflected no lack of interest, however. Whenever the time seemed proper, the Indians took full advantage of the opportunity to observe.

One of our camps was perched on the riverbank beside a path leading from a village. Several times a day all the women trooped by to bathe or fetch water, each carrying on her hip an infant, a puppy, or an older child who preferred riding to walking.

Often the entire company stopped at our camp to rest and to marvel at our camping equipment. Even the simplest gear caused

excited whispers and expressions of wonder. One woman was fascinated by our canvas bucket; on every trip she stopped, full of unbelief, to see if it still held water.

Our Primus stove captivated another aboriginal housewife. She used to show up just at mealtimes to watch it perform. Once she brought her husband; from her excellent imitation of the sound effects we could tell that she gave him a complete description of its workings.

All the Wai Wai eagerly accepted the opportunity to look "through" the ground-glass focusing plate in our camera. To see people upside down drinking out of a bowl and not spilling the liquid was a phenomenon they never tired of watching.

The Indians were much impressed by the size of white people (we stood a good foot above most of the Wai Wai) and told us that they envied our height. Amusement, too, was evident: One Indian cut a straw to the length of Cliff's foot and entertained his fellows hugely by comparing it, in clowning fashion, with his own.

Many things we did struck the Wai Wai funny bone. Usually it was when we inadvertently copied one of their customs. Once the chief caught us eating smoked meat with our fingers, as the Wai Wai do. Apparently the sight appeared as ludicrous to him as the scene he might have made dining at the Waldorf would look to us, for he doubled up with laughter.

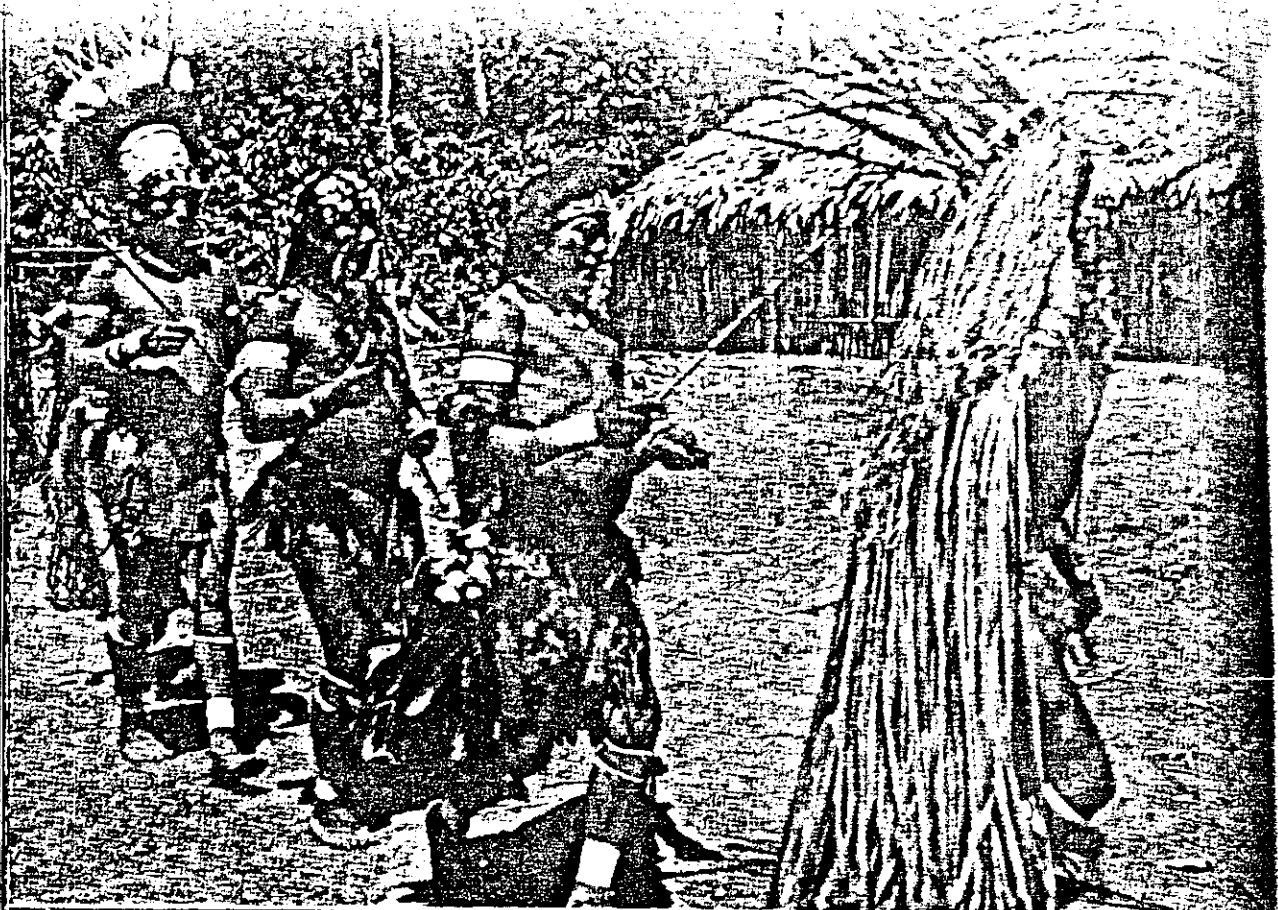
Another time we were forced by steep terrain and lack of suitable trees to hang our hammocks one above the other in the style of a Wai Wai couple. That sent the village into gales of laughter; everyone turned out to see that Betty's hammock was properly at the bottom.

#### Fishing with Poison

One morning as we arrived at an archeological site, we noticed several dugouts tied to the shore just ahead and peculiar activities under way at a near-by pond.

"Me not know," said Charlie in response to our queries; so we went to investigate. When we found that a group of Wai Wai were preparing to poison fish, we decided to watch and let archeology wait a few hours longer.

The Wai Wai had gathered quantities of a vine, one of more than a hundred poisonous plants which South America's Indians know





← Pendants in a Young Man's Necklace  
Are Brazilian Census Tags

Page 342, upper: Discovering that their caratubers (page 340) were in danger of spoiling, Yewara villagers turned the surplus into wine and called a marathon festival. On the appointed day shouts from the river announced the arrival of kinsmen with their dogs, hammocks, and cooking pots.

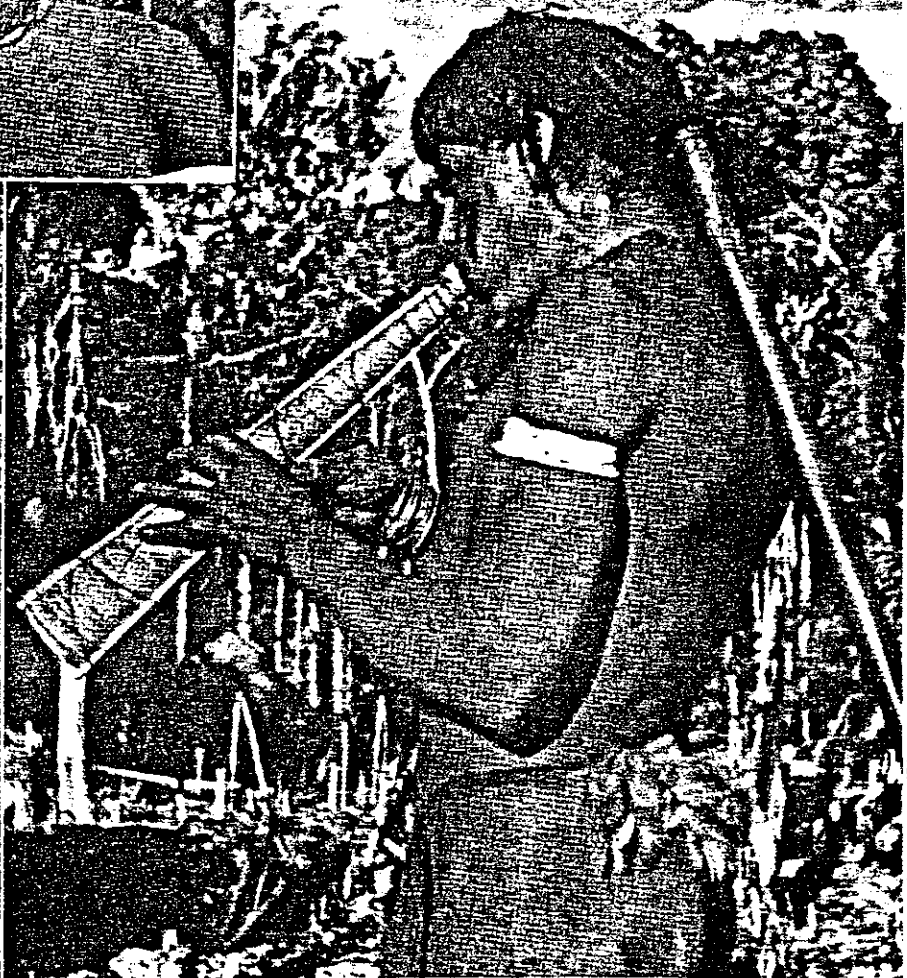
The festival lasted the better part of three days and nights. Time out was called only to let celebrants sleep off their exhaustion. A shuffling, circling dance that filled waking hours was punctuated by shrill whistles and howls and frequent pauses for drinking.

Lower: Two small boys entering the hut dress in their fathers' discarded palm-frond capes. A heel betrays one lad camouflaged from head to ankle.

This pole-and-thatch hut houses the entire village, one of four in British Guiana's Wai Wai land.

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Kodachromes by Betty J. Meggers

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Kodachrome by Clifford Evans

↑ Young Man with a Horn Tunes Up for the Festivities

Bark horns, rattles, and reed flutes provide noisy rhythms for the interminable dancing. This youth encases his pigtail in a cane tube to conceal hair that has not yet grown to coveted waist length.



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**Carver Fashions a Stool to Be Used by Men Only**

Despite their isolation, 16th-century Wai Wai obtained European trade items from other Indians. Ever since, they have carved with steel rather than stone. This man, the tribe's best stoolmaker, can cut a log into a shaped seat within a day's time, using only machete and knife. Here he decorates his handicraft with soot-and-starch paint. Women sit on mats (opposite).

and use. Beaten to a pulp, the vines were placed in a palm-leaf basket and sloshed vigorously through the water, leaving a wake of milky sap.

Hardly had the Indian passed with his basket of death when small fish began to pop to the surface, gasping and turning over on their sides, for the sap paralyzes the gill action of the fish.

Then the excitement began. If someone tried to grab a fish, it showed sudden vigor and evaded capture. So the Indians set about freely with machetes and butcher knives, stunning their prey. Charlie echoed a typical fisherman's reaction when he muttered, "No

good," but the Wai Wai found the tiny fish a welcome addition to the evening's pepper pot.

As our work drew to an end, we learned of plans for a Wai Wai dance. The village of Yewara, finding itself overstocked with cara, decided to convert the tubers into wine and invited tribesmen from the other three villages for a celebration. We shared the invitation.

Late on the appointed afternoon we heard shouting downriver, and soon laden dugouts streamed into the Yewara landing. Dogs, children, hammocks, bundles of palm fibers, cooking gear, and food were pitched on the bank, and the visitors began to set up camp.

All the while, to our surprise, neither visitors nor hosts gave the slightest recognition to each other. Several of the Yewara villagers came down to the river for water, but they filled their jars just as if the overcrowded bank were empty. By Wai Wai custom the time had not yet come to greet the guests.

Amid the hanging of hammocks and kindling of cooking fires, men busied themselves weaving costumes for the dance—long capes of palm leaves and shoulder fringes of yellow fronds. Both sexes took painstaking care in decoration, applying fresh coats of paint, exchanging everyday aprons for fancier garb with feather fringes and tassels, and sprinkling the white eagle down in their well-oiled bangs. Much testing of bark horns, made for the occasion, filled

the air with raucous counterpoint (page 342).

Dusk fell; preparations were completed, and the visitors sallied forth to call on their hosts. Returning in the darkness, they donned dance costumes and again climbed the path to the village. We crouched with them at the edge of the clearing, wondering what sign would call them to emerge.

In the fire's dim light we could distinguish the men of Yewara, togged in fancy feather headdress, streamers, and leg and arm bands, as they circled the clearing in single file, keeping time to a solitary gourd rattle in the hands of the leader.

For a quarter of an hour we watched in



silence. Finally came the signal: the dancers stopped in front of the communal hut and stood in a line facing the cleared area.

Our party filed out in two lines, one for men, one for women. Amid the blaring of the horns and the insistent beat of the rattle they joined in the shuffling tempo, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. At intervals all the dancers broke out in shrill whistles and howls; now and then a cane flute replaced the horns, and a harmonica blown haphazardly added to the racket. Through it all babies slept unconcerned in their hammocks or in bark

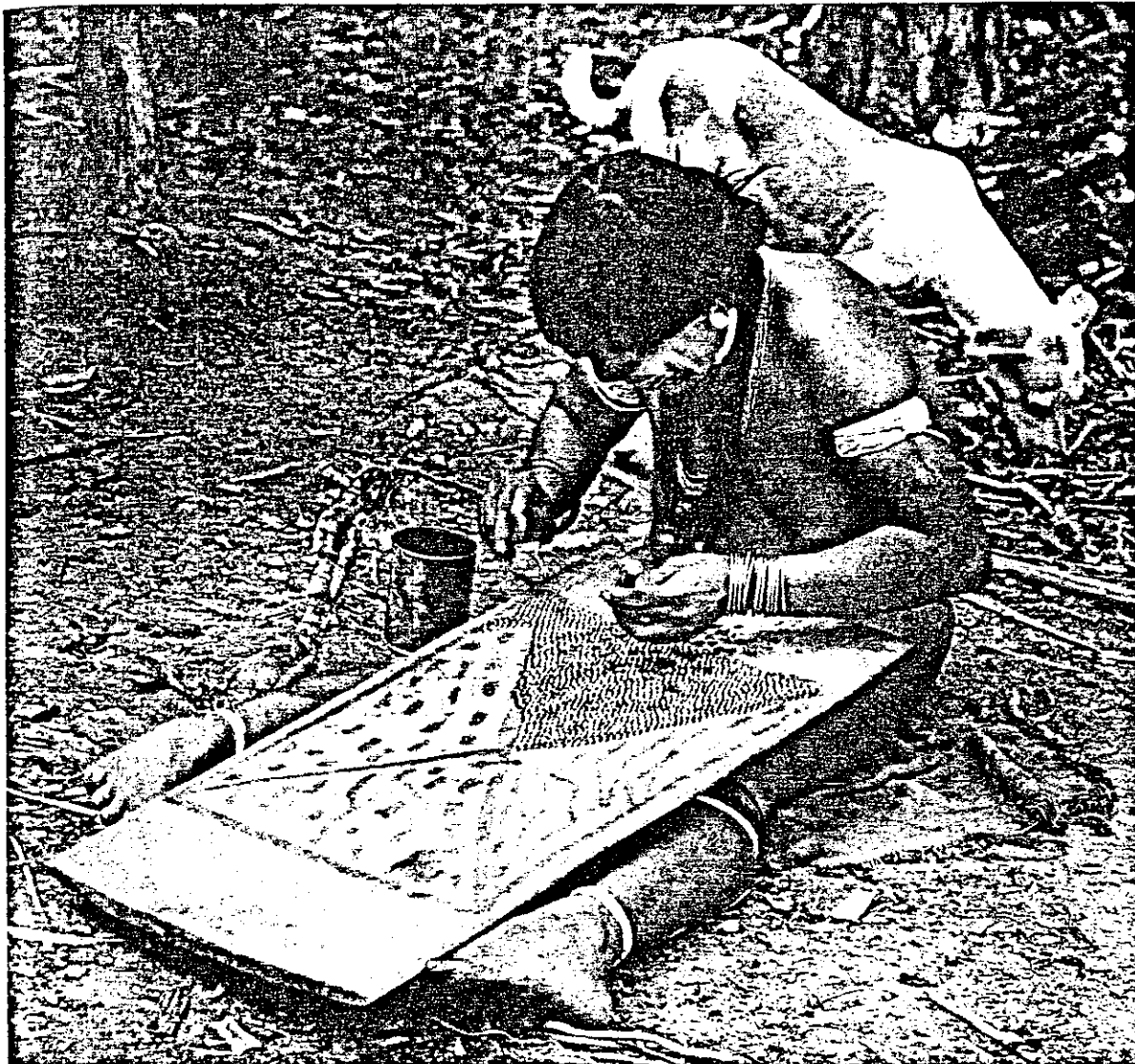
slings draped across their mothers' shoulders.

This was the Shoreweko Dance. So far as we could learn, any symbolic or religious significance was lost beyond the reach of memory; it is preserved purely as a social affair. But what it lacked in meaning it made up in endurance.

Every half-hour at first, and more frequently as energy waned, a large bowl of purple wine passed among the celebrants. At 4 in the morning the night's festivities came to a halt, and only then because of a heavy shower.

#### **Chips of Stone Driven into a Spongy Board Make an Effective Cassava Grater**

British Guiana's savanna Indians subsist on cassava meal, but they have lost the art of making cassava graters. For these they must rely on the more primitive Wai Wai. Charlie (page 338) periodically makes trips "outside" to swap Wai Wai graters for beads, knives, and other trade items. When this woman finishes her tedious task, she will apply a coat of milky latex to keep the chips from falling out.





**Lacking the Potter's Wheel, Indians of the Americas Make Vessels from Coils of Clay**

Essequibo clay, rolled between the hands and coiled in layers, is shaped with the fingers and scraped smooth with a piece of gourd. Baked in an open fire, it makes serviceable pottery. Scraps of such vessels uncovered by the authors provide chief evidence of the Wai Wai's predecessors.

Hardly anyone stirred out of his hammock the second day; the night's exertion had been too much. But by dark the dance resumed, and again the third day from noon to dusk.

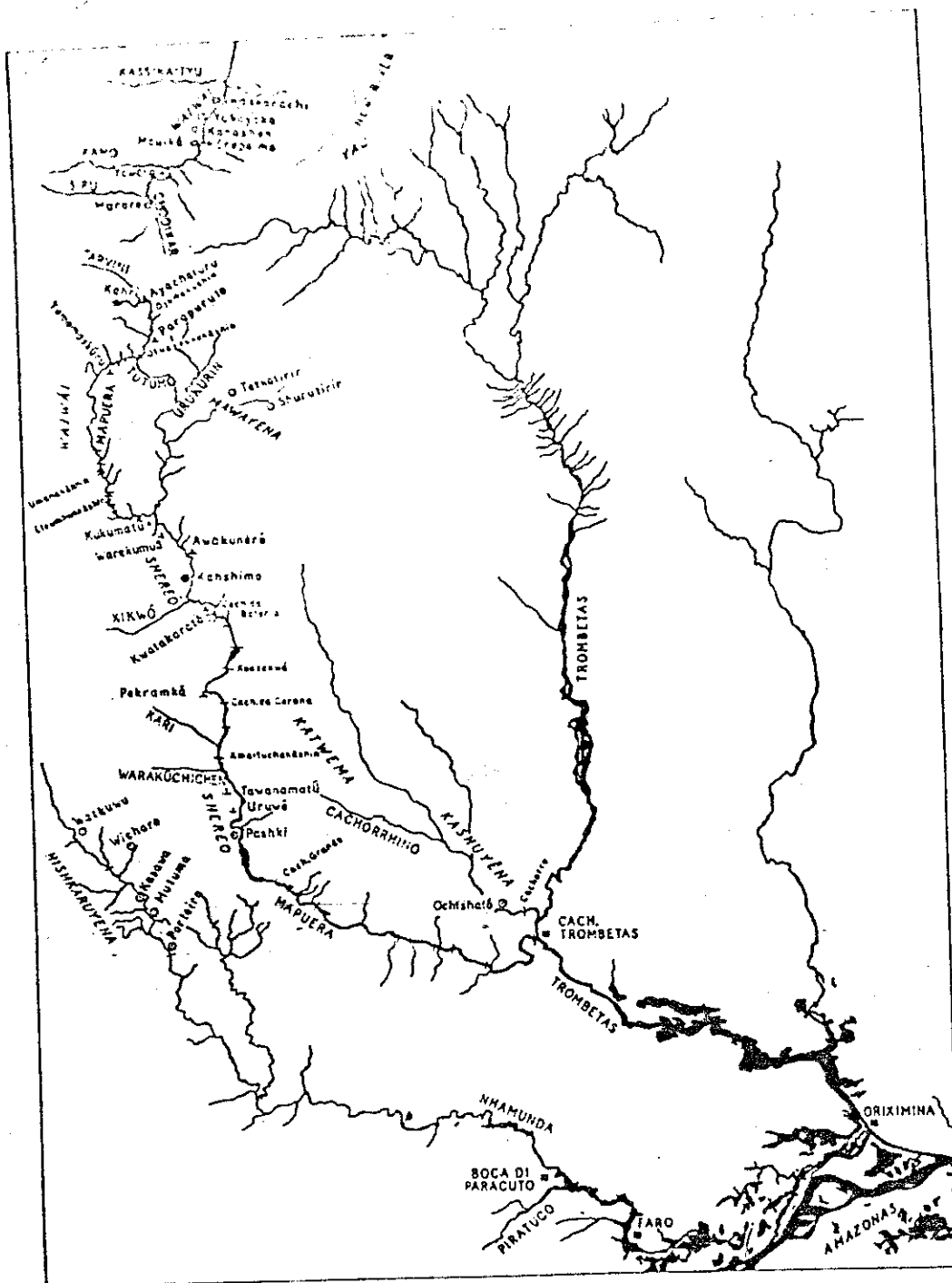
As the Shoreweko came to a close, so too did our life with the Wai Wai. It was time for us to return to Georgetown, the capital of British Guiana.

We had come to the upper Essequibo by air, in an hour and a half. We returned afoot and by dugout, enduring eight days of exhausting travel before the tropical forest gave way to the savanna and contact with civilization.

As we ended our excursion into the past, we had ample time to reflect on the life of these simple and friendly folk. We can stoutly echo the words of an early English explorer, Robert Harcourt, whose book, *A Relation of a*

*Voyage to Guiana*, described in 1613 this region and its people: "The naturall inhabitants of that Countrey are a loving, tractable, and gentle people...with those barbarous people we may live in safety, without suspicion of trechery, or dread of danger..."

What of the future of the Wai Wai? An epidemic of smallpox or measles could wipe them out, as it did their predecessors, the Taruma. And even though they maintain their slim numbers, they can scarcely avoid powerful influences from the outside world, far away as it is. Already the pottery vessel is giving way to the white man's enamelware, and an oil tin takes the place of the time-honored earthenware griddle. In any case, few men in years ahead may see the Wai Wai as we saw them.



Sketchmap of the Upper Essequibo-Mapuera-Nhamundá region. - The village to the north in the Waiwái region carries the name of Aakoniotó, whereas the name of Waskarachí covers the "little savanna" where it is located.