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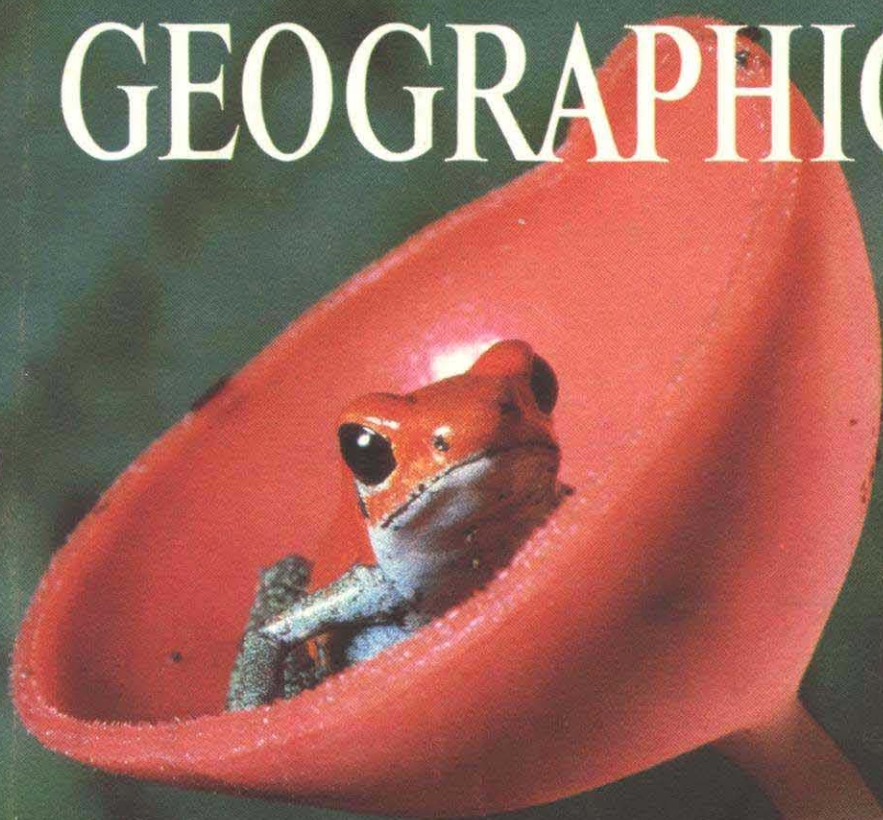
# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



## RAIN FORESTS



SEE "RAIN FOREST" WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 12, ON PBS TV

# What Future for the Wayana Indians?

Article and photographs by CAROLE DEVILLERS

SPOTTING the silvery gleam of a fish, Koyoweman slowly bends his bow and takes careful aim. Motionless, he awaits the proper moment. Suddenly his arrow comes to life, impales the prey, and drives it struggling to the bottom of the river. Dropping his bow, the young boy dives and returns seconds later with the fish in his hand and a victorious grin on his face.

As I watch, impressed by Koyoweman's skill, I wonder what future lies in store for him. By such means his people, the Wayana Indians, have survived for centuries in the remote rain forest of the Amazon region. Now, however, the Wayanas' distinctive culture is threatened with change and possible destruction by increasing pressure from the outside world. Very likely Koyoweman is practicing a dying art.

The Wayanas are a group of Indians of Carib stock numbering fewer than 1,000. Most of them live in scattered communities along the Maroni and Itany Rivers, between Suriname and the French overseas department of Guiana on the northern coast of South America (map, page 70). The Indians share the region peacefully with a tribe of Bush Negroes known as the Bonis, descendants of runaway African slaves from Suriname in the days when that country was a Dutch colony.

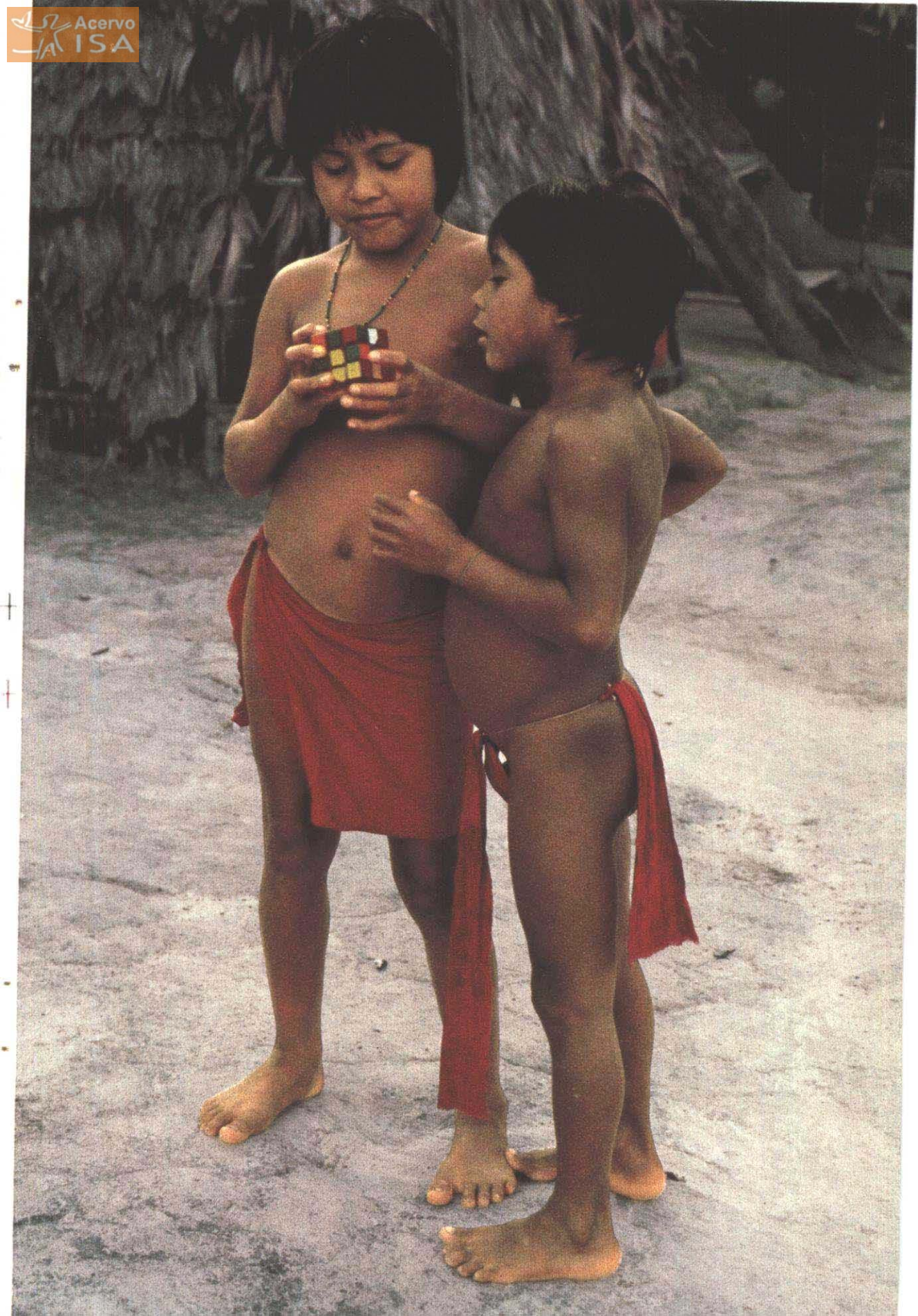
The Wayanas inhabit a shadowy world so dominated by rain forest that little of it is ever touched by sunlight. Canoes are virtually the only means of transportation in the network of rivers. To record the Wayanas' colorful way of life while it still survives, I have made my way to their home.

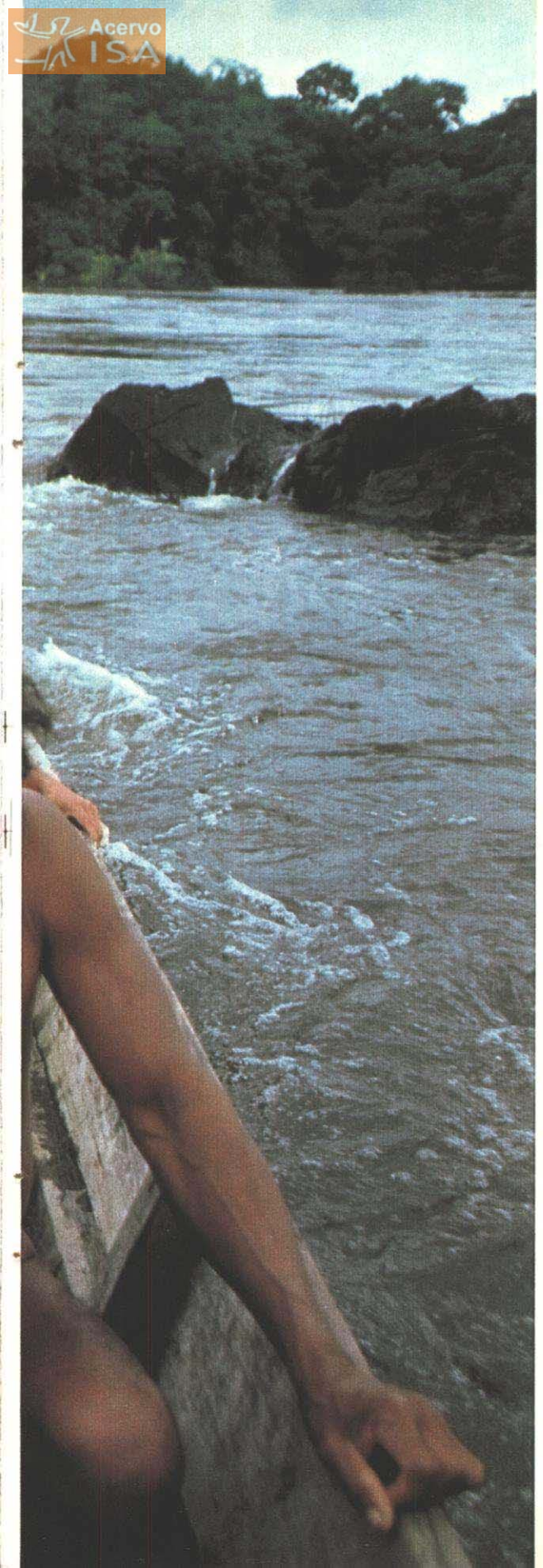
My introduction to the Wayanas came about through their adopted son, a 44-year-old Frenchman named André Cognat. In 1961, at the age of 23, Cognat quit his job as a steelworker in Lyon and set off to explore South America on foot and by canoe. He got as far as the Maroni River, where he capsized in treacherous rapids. He pulled himself half-drowned from the river and was later adopted by a Wayana couple.

From that moment Cognat devoted himself to the Indians. He was given a Wayana name—Antecume—and eventually married a Wayana woman and had a son named Lanaki. He established a small settlement known as Antecume Pata, or "Antecume's village," and began studying basic medical and dental techniques for the benefit of his adopted people. Over the years Cognat has served the Wayanas as housebuilder, nurse, medical adviser, tooth extractor, and

Free-lance photographer and writer **Carole Devillers** was born and raised in France. She has made her home since in the United States, the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, and, most recently, French Guiana.

***Plastic brainteaser** joins the invasion of machine-age products into the rain forest home of South America's Wayana Indians. Here on the border of the nation of Suriname and French Guiana, a department of France, these Carib-speaking people cling to traditional ways, even as the 20th century brings change and threatens the survival of their culture.*





unofficial spokesman to the outside world.

In my research on the Wayanas I came across Cognat's name and wrote to ask his help in visiting them. Then I flew to Cayenne, the capital of French Guiana. There, after presenting a medical certificate saying I had no communicable diseases, I applied for government permission to visit the Wayanas. During the week it took me to obtain permission, I had to listen to dire predictions about what lay ahead for me.

"You're going alone? You're out of your mind! First thing you know, you'll be raped. You'll have to pay for every picture you take of the Indians. They'll shoot arrows at you, they'll steal your belongings, they'll. . . ."

I paid no attention. I had heard the same sort of warnings before, when I set out to visit a remote village in the Sahara.* Such predictions nearly always prove to be unfounded, and the ones in Cayenne were no exception.

### Adopted Son Is True Wayana

After receiving permission to visit the Wayanas, I flew from Cayenne to Maripasoula, the last French administrative outpost on the Maroni River. There André Cognat met me, accompanied by two other Wayana men in a dugout canoe with an outboard motor.

Except for somewhat lighter hair and skin and a narrow beard, Cognat was indistinguishable from his companions. He was short and muscular, with shoulder-length hair and a kindly face that conveyed a sense of calm. Like his companions, Cognat wore only the traditional Wayana *kalimbe*—a red loincloth drawn between the legs and fastened by a cord around the waist.

Stowing my cameras and gear aboard the dugout, we cast off and headed upriver between lush green walls of forest on either bank. On the four-hour trip to Antecume

*See "Oursi, Magnet in the Desert," by Carole E. Devillers, in the April 1980 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.

***Foaming rapids** test the helmsman during a trip on the Maroni River, the Indians' main highway. Putting the Wayanas in closer touch with one another, outboard motors also increase their exposure to the outside world.*

Pata, Cognat spoke of his people with both affection and concern.

"Basically we are immigrants," he said with a faint smile. "The Wayanas once lived in northern Brazil and numbered about 3,000. In the 18th century another group called the Wayapis drove the Wayanas out, and they migrated here to Guiana. Only a few Wayanas still remain in Brazil.

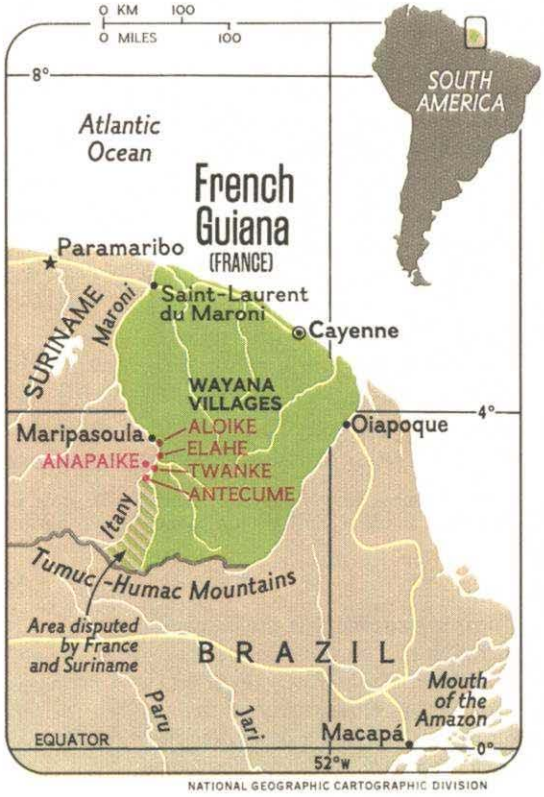
"By 1950," Cognat continued, "diseases such as measles and tuberculosis had reduced the Wayanas here to fewer than 500. It looked as if they might simply disappear. In 1961 the French government established a medical program for the Wayanas and later restricted visits by tourists to reduce the risk of epidemics.

"Today we number about 770. Medical conditions have improved, but we face other serious problems, such as alcoholism and the breakdown of traditional life under increasing influence from outside, mainly on our young people."

When I mentioned the warnings I had received in Cayenne about the Wayanas, Cognat merely shrugged. "I have heard such things," he said. "They are ridiculous rumors, spread by ignorant people. But even those who visit the Wayanas rarely stay long enough to learn the truth about us. Several years ago two foreign reporters came for what was to be an extended visit. They did not last a month. I hope you will do better."

When we arrived at Antecume Pata, a number of villagers came down to the water's edge to meet us. Like their men, the Wayana women go naked above the waist, wearing only the *weyu*, an apron that leaves the buttocks exposed, or the *kamisa*, a short wraparound tied at the hip. Young Wayana women often wear both, and some have recently taken to adding Western-style underpants beneath their kamisas, obtained through mail-order houses or from local Boni merchants. As for Wayana children, until about the age of six most of them wear nothing at all.

Antecume Pata is a typical Wayana settlement. The village occupies a small clearing beside the Itany River, laboriously claimed from the forest by primitive means—handsaw, ax, and brush fire. Cognat explained that although the Wayanas are an agricultural people as well as hunters and fishermen, the soil is so poor that they have no permanent fields. Instead, they grow their




***Conflict with a rival people*** *pushed the Wayanas from their ancestral home in the Tumuc-Humac region two centuries ago. Now most of their descendants cluster along the Maroni and Itany Rivers. Attempting to solidify claims to disputed territory occupied by the Wayanas (**map**), officials of French Guiana and Suriname compete for the Indians' allegiance by showering them with attention and gifts.*

*Once totaling in the thousands, the Wayanas here dwindled to fewer than 500 after contracting tuberculosis, measles, pneumonia, and other diseases from outsiders. Today, with dispensaries in three villages, their numbers are slowly rising. In Antecume Pata the village shaman is treated for a cut (**right**) by André Cognat, a Frenchman adopted by the Wayanas after his canoe capsized in 1961. Cognat stayed on and now acts as medical adviser, unofficial spokesman, and advocate for his people.*

crops—manioc, bananas, sugarcane, and yams—in temporary forest plots cleared by the slash-and-burn method.

Antecume Pata consists of eight families and as many houses, the latter raised on stout posts above the ground to protect them from rats and crawling insects. Furniture consists mainly of hammocks made of webbed cotton, which are slung inside the houses at night and in the space underneath during daytime for shade.

Guests in Wayana villages normally stay in the *tukusipan,* a communal hut used for special gatherings and ceremonies. But since I planned to stay several months, Cognat offered me a spare room in the small dispensary that he built and runs for the village at his own expense. Once I was settled in, he left me alone to become acquainted with Antecume Pata.

### Indians Slow to Welcome Guest

It took some time. Although the whole village must have been curious about the new *palasisi,* as Wayanas call a Caucasian, even the children did not come to inspect me for several days.

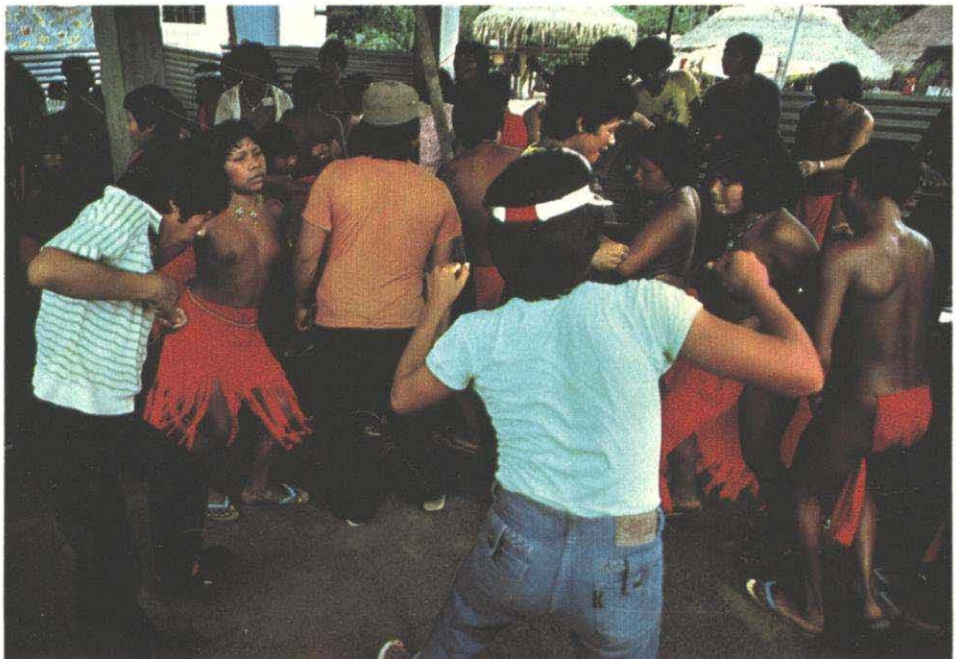
Cognat had warned me not to become impatient. "The Wayanas are difficult for Westerners to deal with," he had said on the voyage upriver. "To outsiders we seem selfish and unpredictable, and we have a habit of mocking everything—ourselves, our friends, and especially strangers. It's our form of humor, and it takes some getting used to. Few outsiders ever manage it."

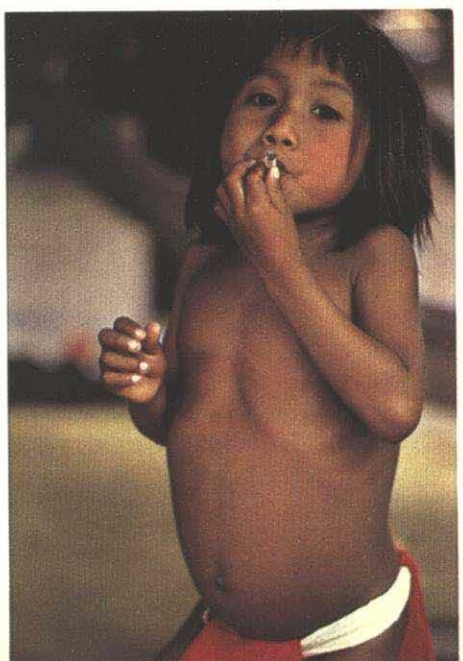
Gradually Antecume Pata's reserve seemed to thaw, and one memorable morning I was invited to go swimming in the rapids of the river.

"*Yepe, yepe, mehke!*—Comrade, comrade, come!" called a six-year-old named Ayupan from midstream as I strolled along the bank. He suddenly arched his naked bronze body against a moss-covered rock, letting the current sweep over him and crown him with a halo of flying droplets (pages 82-3).

Both the scene and the invitation were irresistible, and I slipped into the water some distance upriver from Ayupan. But I misjudged the current and suddenly found myself sucked away from the bank and launched downriver, bobbing like a cork.

Help! As I hurtled past Ayupan, I caught the flash of a puckish smile, and then I





***Times of leisure*** *often call for rounds of kasili* ***(above)****, a mild brew made from manioc root. One imbiber, in foreground, displays perfect Wayana table manners by drinking to capacity, then intentionally vomiting to enable him to repeat the process. The Indians now battle alcoholism, blamed not on kasili but on a cheap, strong rum sold by river traders.*

*Youths in T-shirts and jeans* ***(left)*** *turn out for a New Year's dance that throbs with taped rock music. With cigarettes from Europe and the United States now widely available, smoking has increased at all age levels. A child puffs away* ***(right)****, his parents unconcerned. To protect the Wayanas from such corrupting influences, the government of French Guiana now restricts visiting tourists to two of the Indian villages.*

collided with a large rock and was pinned to it by the current. Glancing ashore, I discovered that nearly all Antecume Pata, adults as well as children, was enjoying my impromptu performance.

Finally I made it back to the bank amid the smiles and laughter of the gallery of spectators. There was nothing to do but join in the laughter, and I did so until we were all nearly out of breath. After a time we trooped back to the village together. Antecume Pata, it seemed, had accepted me.

### From Poison Root to Cakes and Ale

In the days that followed, I began to take part in village life. From the women I learned such basic tasks as the preparation of manioc into food and drink.

In its natural state the manioc root contains a poison, hydrocyanic acid, which must be removed. The Wayanas extract the poison by peeling and grating the root into mush, then squeezing the mush in a tubular wicker press hung from an overhead beam. Once the poisonous juice has been extracted, the mush is turned into flour known as cassava and usually served as pancakes.

In addition to cassava, manioc supplies the Wayanas with their favorite beverage, a drink known as *kasili*. Kasili is made from fermented manioc root and is drunk by nearly everyone, children as well as adults. Women brew kasili, boiling the manioc in river water to remove the poison by evaporation. As the mash boils, the women chew cassava cakes and spit them into the pot so as to aid the fermentation process with saliva.

Kasili is allowed to "work" for several days—or for as long as the prospective drinkers can wait. The Wayanas are so fond of kasili that they deliberately drink to capacity, absorb the alcohol, then throw up and begin drinking again. Although kasili is not my favorite beverage, I learned to drink it politely whenever it was offered, which was frequently.

As I made friends among the villagers, I noticed that none ever called me by my name, Carole. To the younger ones I was either *yepe* (comrade) or *tasi* (sister) and to the older ones, *kami* (child).

In time I discovered the reason: To call me by name would be to single me out for notice by the *yolok*, evil spirits that lurk unseen among the Wayanas and to whom a spoken name conveys power over the owner. As a result, I too learned to use nicknames and indirect titles, such as "Ayupan's mother" or "the one who is with me."

Gradually my knowledge of Wayana life extended beyond the village, as I accompanied families on hunting expeditions and trips to harvest their fields some distance upriver. Through such trips I learned a great deal about living off the forest. My Wayana friends taught me how to find and collect iguana eggs by poking with a stick into the river's sandy beaches. I learned what insects produce the fattest, juiciest grubs and savored the crunchy texture of large ants eaten live. There was the delicate taste of wild honey fresh from the comb, the rich flavor of smoked iguana meat, and the sweetness of wild nuts and berries gathered in the cool of early morning in the forest.

Such knowledge and skills remain an integral part of Wayana life. Most men between the ages of 18 and 40 are employed as guides by French teams exploring Guiana's interior for minerals and other natural resources.

Such jobs pay well, enabling the Wayanas to buy outboard motors, guns, transistor radios, Western-style clothes, toys, expensive kitchenware—all the modern "conveniences" that are slowly infiltrating and changing their traditional way of life.

A quieter type of change is being carried on among the Wayanas by a young Frenchman named Jean-Paul Klingelhofer, who teaches primary school at a village near Antecume Pata. The school, the only one in French Guiana for Wayana children, is located in the village of Twanke, named for its headman.

During a visit to Twanke I spent several days with Jean-Paul and his 20 pupils, who come either from Twanke or by canoe from two neighboring settlements.

According to Jean-Paul, Wayana parents are well aware of the handicap that illiteracy represents in their growing contacts with the outside world. On the other hand instruction in French and other foreign subjects may weaken the children's sense of traditional values.

"That is why I teach the children to read and write phonetically in Wayana," Jean-Paul told me. "Of course I also teach them to

read and write French, which is the official school language. They are bright and eager to learn new things, but some subjects contradict what they have been taught at home. Arithmetic is a good example. In the Wayana language, numbers run only from one to ten, and anything above that is simply 'many.' Saving and planning ahead are also strange concepts to the Wayanas—who knows if there will be a tomorrow?"

### A Yolok Keeps Husband Home

In addition to his teaching duties Jean-Paul occasionally serves as the local doctor.

On my second morning at the school a teenage boy named Tuwa rushed in and exclaimed: "Jean-Paul, my mother is about to die—she even stopped breathing!"

Grabbing his small medical kit, Jean-Paul called his wife, Francoise, and we followed Tuwa to his house. There indeed we found his mother, lying pale and motionless in her hammock, while her weeping husband held her hand.

All was confusion, with neighbors shouting, children crying, and headman Twanke adding to the din by firing off a shotgun into the air.

After a brief examination Jean-Paul assured everyone that Tuwa's mother would be all right. Turning to me, he said quietly: "She has only a little fever, and her pulse is normal. It's really psychosomatic. Her husband has been running around with other women too much lately, and she's making a scene to get his attention."

***In their usual state of undress,*** *young boys kick a ball in a downpour. Playtime still includes practice with bows and arrows, but adults now hunt mostly with shotguns obtained from the governments or bought with wages earned as guides on scientific expeditions into the bush.*

Despite Jean-Paul's diagnosis a shaman was called to exorcise the yolok that had obviously taken possession of Tuwa's mother. A small shelter of palm leaves was erected outside Tuwa's house. That night, on the shaman's orders, the patient was rubbed on the stomach, palms, and feet with gratings from a small tuber, and cotton thread was tied around her elbows, wrists, ankles, and toes. Then she was carried into the shelter to join the shaman.

There followed a wild rustling of the palm leaves, accompanied by loud sucking and roaring sounds, proof of the violent struggle between the shaman and the yolok. Eventually the shaman emerged carrying what appeared to be a small black pebble, which he said had caused the patient's illness and which he had exorcised from her body.

The husband's misbehavior was never mentioned.

The Wayanas take such matters casually and even tease one another about supposed infidelities. During my time in Antecume Pata, I stayed awhile with an older couple and helped the wife with daily chores. Then I visited another village and was given a ride back by two young Wayana men in their dugout. Later the wife teased me.

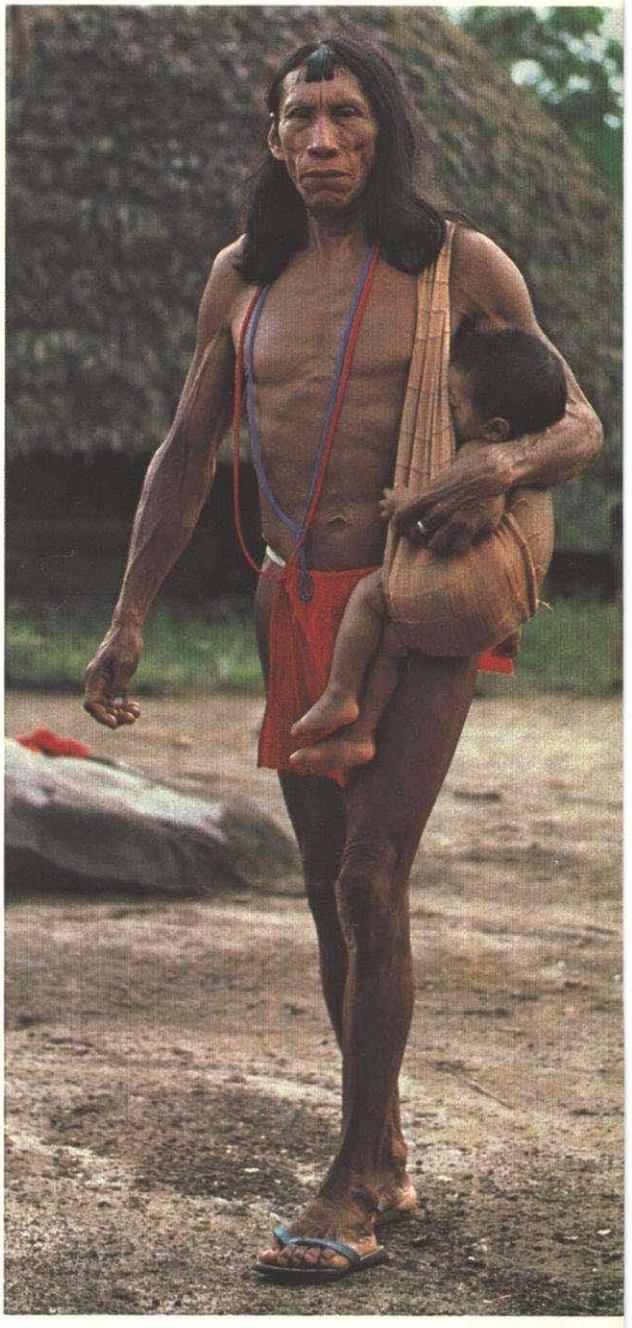
"Tasi, your coming and going all the time is just not right," she said, trying to hide a smile. "You are my husband's second wife, and now I see you coming home with two young men. What is that all about? Either you stay where you belong or you leave, that's all there is to it!"

### Families Suffer Effects of Rum

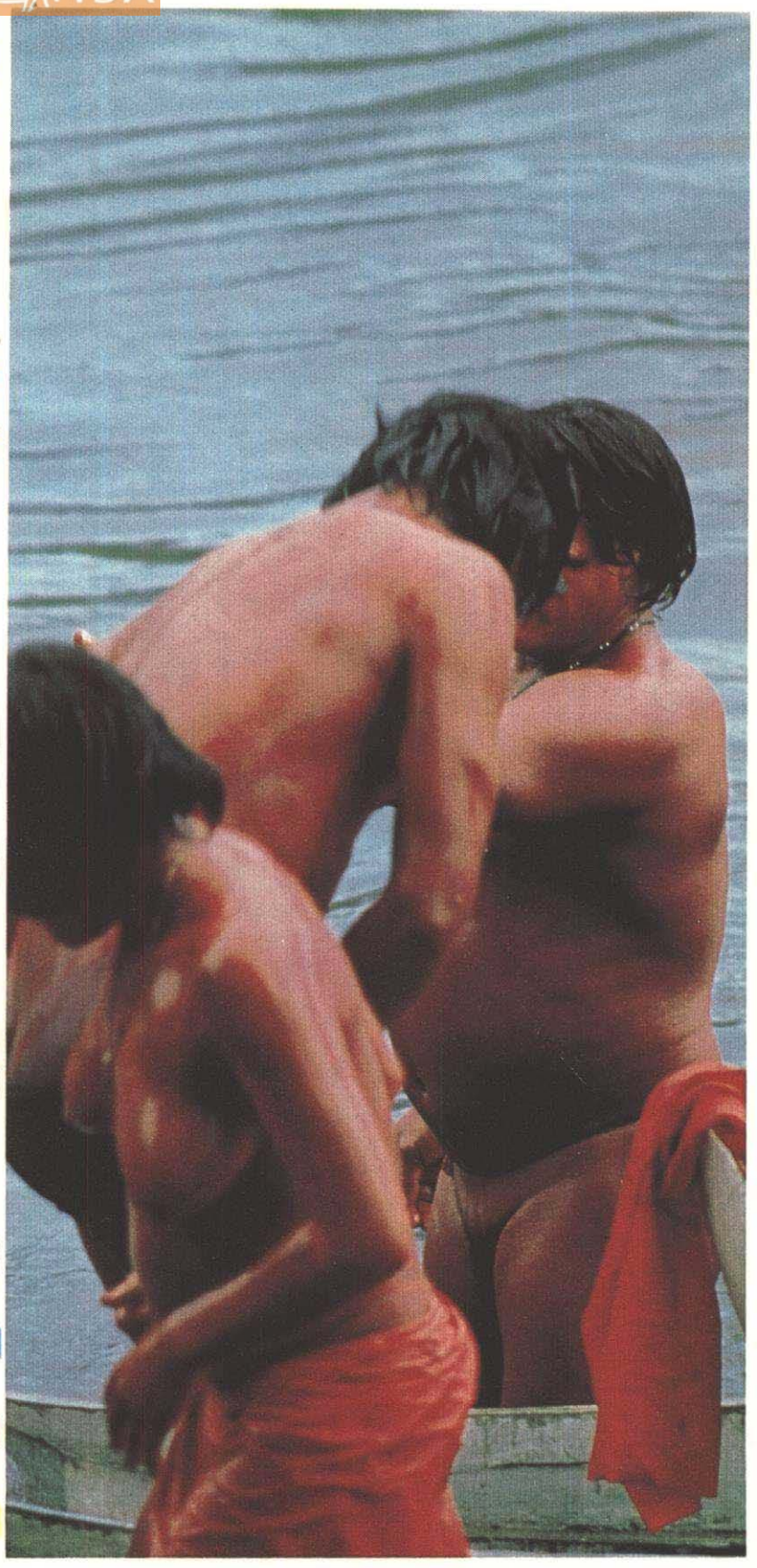
One very serious family problem among the Wayanas is drinking. One afternoon I saw headman Twanke on his return from a trip to Maripasoula. He was staggering across the village toward his house with the help of a neighbor. When they reached the stairs, Twanke had to be half-carried up them and led inside to be deposited in his hammock.

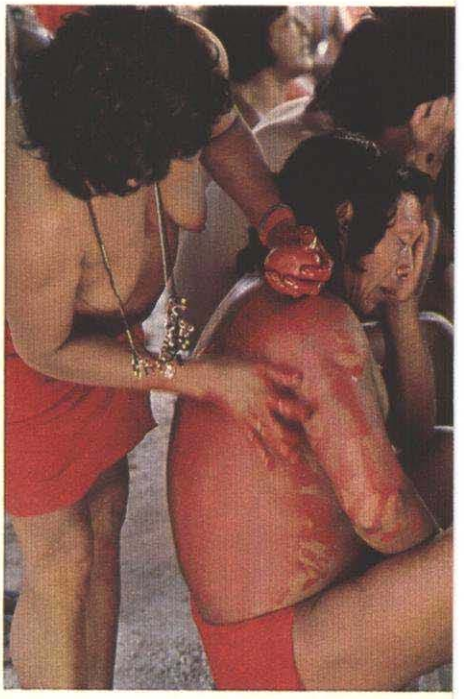
My first thought was that Twanke was sick, but a village woman knew better. "He is drunk!" she said with disgust. "Our village headman, drunk! But he is not the only one—other village leaders do the same."

The problem, I learned, was not kasili but tafia, a cheap rum sold in Maripasoula and



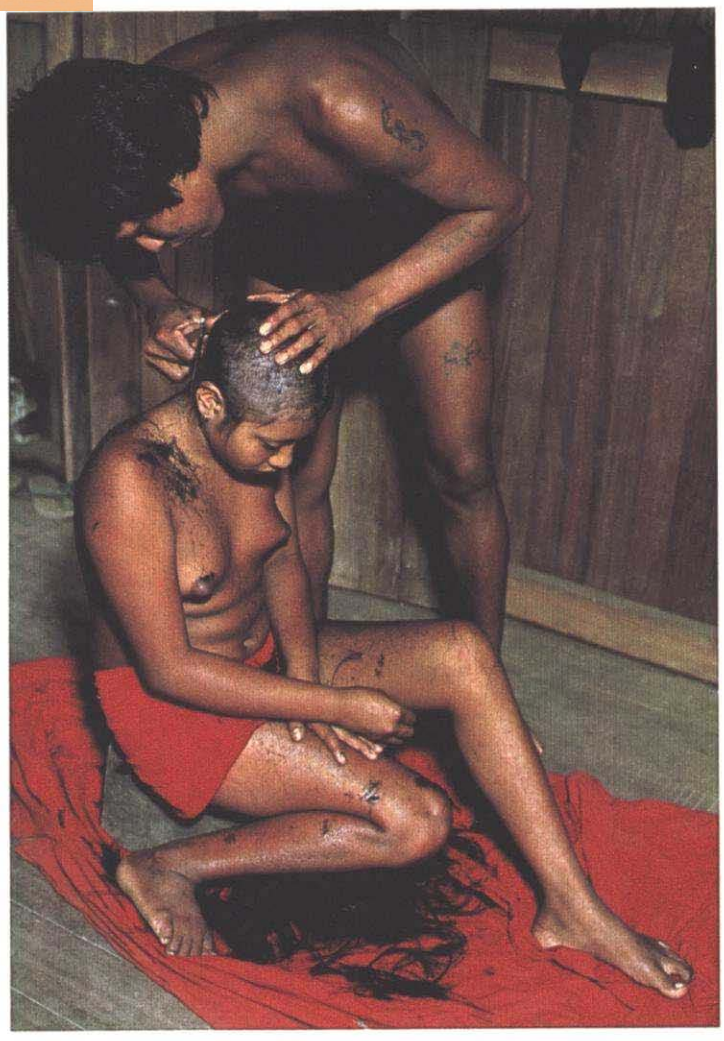
***Fabric of everyday life*** *finds domestic chores widely shared. A woman (**facing page**) spins cotton, which she will weave into hammocks, chief furniture of the home. Men construct baskets and other straw goods. A man toting a youngster (**above**) is a common sight since males help with child care. Authority is also shared; the village headman functions mainly as a mediator and seeks a consensus for major decisions.*

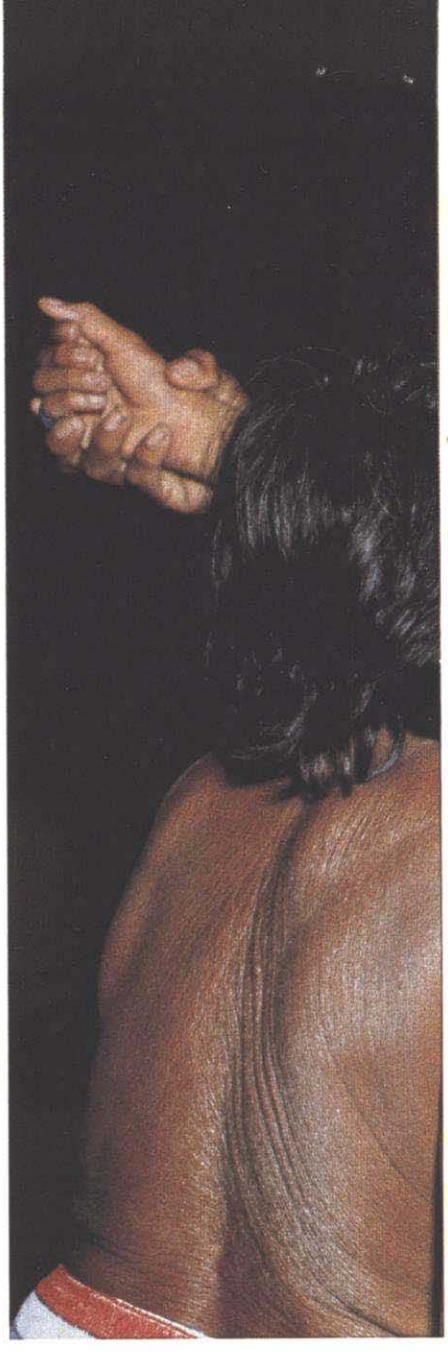




***Soothing grief,*** *a woman uses a cake of dye called roucou* ***(above)*** *to anoint Indians of Twanke, marking the end of the mourning period for the deceased wife of the village headman. Made of crushed seeds in a nut oil base, roucou takes days to wear off. Later, ritual bathing in the river* ***(left)*** *begins a celebration enlivened by prodigious drafts of kasili.*

*The manioc plant used for making the traditional drink also supplies a staple of the Wayana diet—cassava cakes. Besides manioc, the Indians grow sugarcane, bananas, and yams on fields cleared by the slash-and-burn method. The plots are used until the thin rain forest soil is exhausted, then abandoned for new ones. The forest offers nuts, eggs, and insect larvae for the taking.*





***Crucible of pain*** *called marake ushers a girl into adulthood* ***(right)****. As her husband holds her hands, her grandmother administers the sting of black ants embedded in a frame. After the ritual, the hair of another initiate is shorn* ***(above)****, signaling a time of seclusion and fasting. Males also endure the rite, designed to test the ability to withstand the rigors of life. Some submit to marake several times during their lives.*

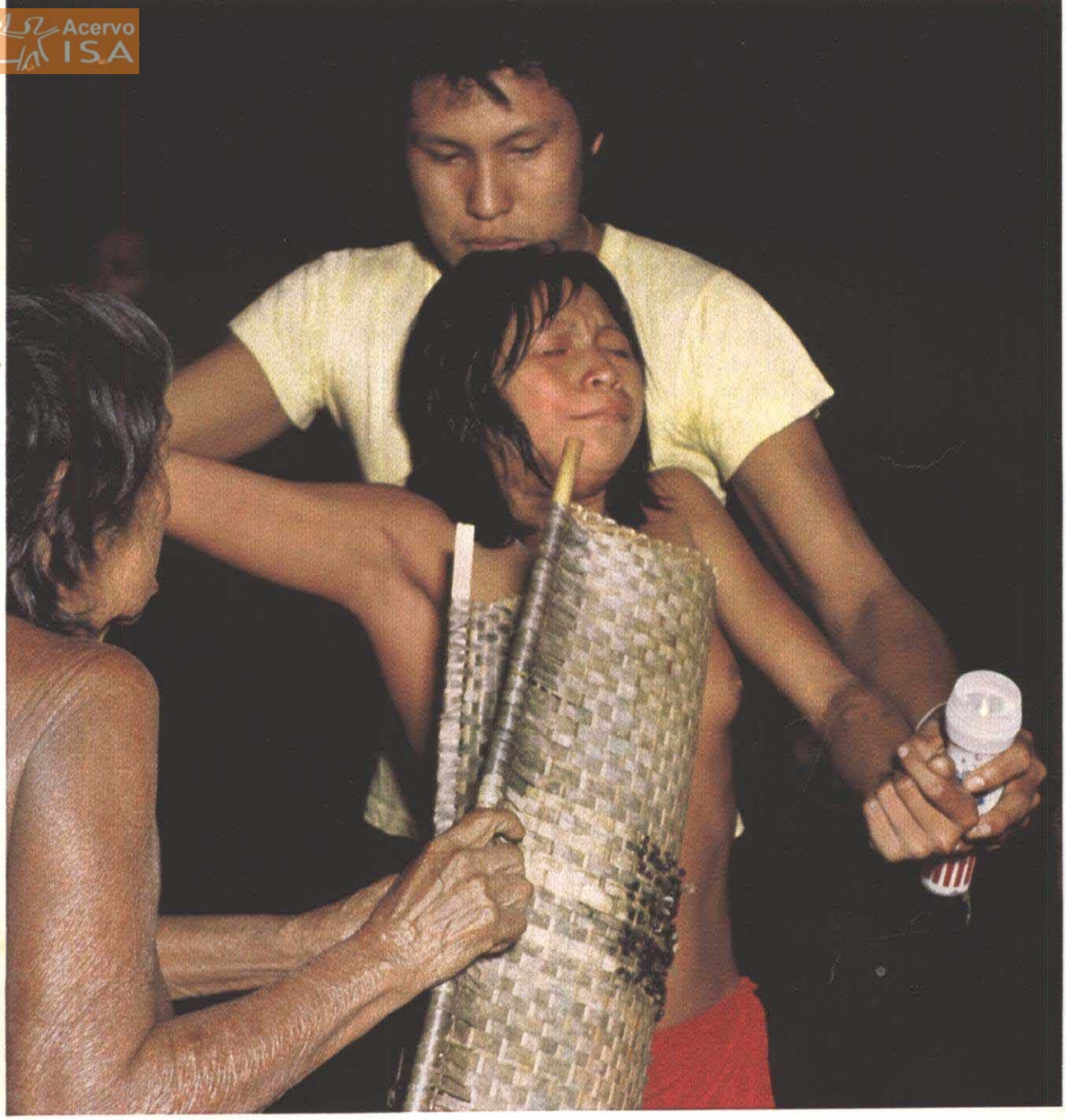
other places along the river. Wayana men, accustomed to the relatively mild effects of fermented kasili, cannot cope with the distilled power of tafia.

One father, a normally gentle man, has been known to beat his whole family after a few drinks. "Kasili makes you happy," declares the man's son grimly. "Tafia makes you mean."

Other problems besides alcoholism darken the future of the Wayanas, among them the growing influx of tourists. Since 1971 foreigners have been allowed to visit two villages near Maripasoula—Aloike and Elahe.

### A Traditional Culture Demeaned

Here increasing numbers of tourists regularly descend on the villages' few families and behave like visitors in a zoo. They bribe the bare-breasted women to pose for pictures with them and pay men to do the same brandishing hunting bows and arrows that they long ago abandoned in favor of shotguns. The effect on the Wayanas is one of



degradation, not merely in their own eyes but in those of their children, on whom the future of their culture depends.

Probably the worst display of outside influence on the traditional Wayana way of life occurred on New Year's Day at Anapaike, a village on the Suriname side of the Maroni River. I joined some 200 Wayanas there, gathered from other villages for a three-day celebration that seemed to borrow the very worst from the outside world.

Absolute bedlam greeted me at Anapaike. The newest hard-rock hits blared at ear-splitting level from three entertainment booths filled with young Wayana men and women swaying and gesticulating like puppets in T-shirts, jeans, dark glasses, and Afro wigs (page 72).

Most of the young people smoked and drank, but I was not prepared for the sight of one five-year-old I knew. He stood calmly puffing on a cigarette beneath his parents' seemingly unconcerned gaze.

It is hard to assess the long-range effects of

such developments, but the signs are ominous. Several days after the New Year's celebration an 18-year-old from Anapaike named Yoiwet tried to hang himself. He was discovered in time by a fellow villager and saved. He remarked later that his life seemed so beset by problems that he could no longer cope with them. The news was deeply distressing to Cognat, not only because Cognat had helped to raise Yoiwet as a child, but also because three other youths from Anapaike had succeeded in killing themselves during the previous year.

### Ant Test Binds Wayanas Together

At least one custom here remains unchanged and constitutes a powerful force for preserving the group's cultural identity. Known as *marake,* or the "ant test," the ceremony is administered for the first time to children at the age of puberty.

Marake begins with dancing and the recounting of myths. The child is given kasili to drink to lighten the ordeal that follows. A *kunana,* a wicker frame with as many as a hundred stinging ants inserted in it, is applied to all parts of his or her body. The recipient is expected to remain both silent and still—the ultimate test of a true Wayana.

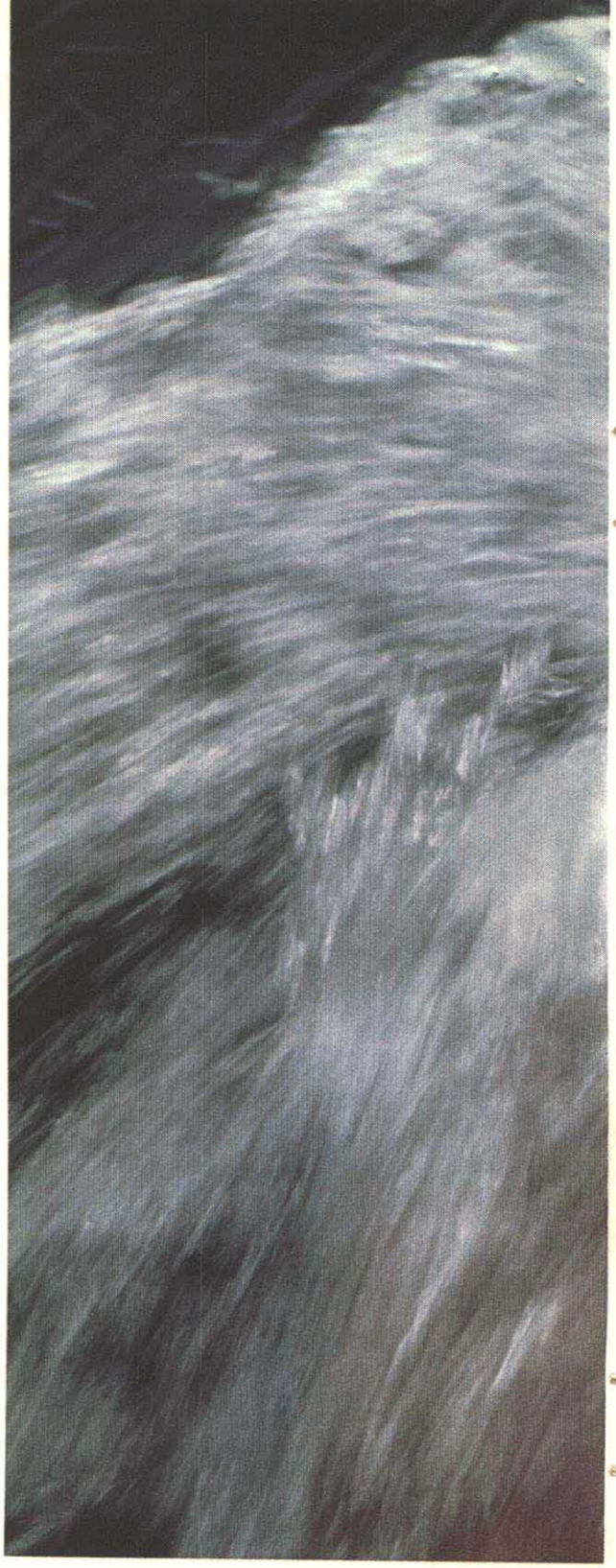
While such customs prepare young Wayana men and women for physical hardship, the question remains whether they can survive the moral and psychological pressures increasingly thrust on them by the outside world.

Cognat is concerned but hopeful. "So long as we continue traditions like marake," he told me, "we will keep our identity and our spiritual strength. The day marake goes, that day will be the end of the Wayanas."

My four months among the Wayanas came to an end, and I said good-bye to Cognat and my other friends. Tuwa, the young boy from Twanke, was one of the last to say good-bye. Although as a teenager Tuwa is particularly exposed to pressures from the outside world, he remains among the most devoted to his people's traditions.

"Tasi," he said, "how many seasons before you come back to us? No matter when you return, we will still have marake and we will still be Wayanas—you can always count on that."

I wish I could be as certain. □



***As if lost in a daydream,*** *a six-year-old boy luxuriates in the cascading Itany. Though the future of his people is in doubt, anthropologists are impressed*

*by the Wayanas' ability to absorb the ways of civilization while keeping a strong cultural identity. At the school in Twanke, children are taught to read and write in French as well as Wayana. But they take pride in using their native language when writing to express their deepest feelings.*