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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006

100 COLOMBIA The TICUNAS, naive artists of the Amazon

100A The TICUNAS, at present some 15,000 in total, are dispersed in small communities along the Amazon river and live from fishing and agriculture. Men and women work side by side in family compounds made up of 5 to 6 persons. They are helped by their children who learn all aspects of work and by the age of 12 are able to perform like adults.

Eight upstream hours by rowboat to the north of Leticia, the main center of commercial trade in the area of the Amazon basin adjoining Colombia, Brazil and Peru, is located ARARA, with just 200 TICUNAS.

Arriving in ARARA one gets the impression of tranquility and space that no other place offers. Houses are built on separated wooden supports, 2 to 3 feet above ground level, protecting the inhabitants from floods during the rainy season, and helping to counteract the hot weather of the tropics. All materials used in the construction of housing are found and/or made in the same jungle.

In general the TICUNA house has plenty of space and, at the entrance, they have an area (living room) where there are usually two hammocks, a table, and chairs; hanging from the ceiling are several baskets which they use for domestic storage. Rooms are separated by wooden board walls. The bedroom is shared by parents and children and is always furnished with a mosquito net. The kitchen, at floor level, has a base of clay hardened by fire; a table is used to keep all utensils.

The spacious attic of a house is used for storage of farming tools, but most important is the social function girls in the family are kept in the attic for purification during an average of three months at the time they reach the age of puberty.

From wild weeds the TICUNAS obtain fibers to make cords for purses, hammocks, sacks, belts, etc. To make baskets such as the ones shown in slide 100C, the TICUNA picks up leaves of the WAMBE, another wild weed.

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100E The TICUNAS have their own language but receive Spanish education by radio schools, thanks to the efforts of the National Radio School of Sutatenze, which has been in operation for many years and reaches this remote part of Colombia.

The TICUNAS dress with ready-made clothing of brightly colored cotton trade in the market at the nearest town.

100F, ARARA has a chapel built by local people under the
100G, direction of Catholic priests (far right); bell tower
100H, is also seen. A mass is performed on holidays by a
100I priest coming from Leticia.

Although they have their own rituals, the Catholic Church is the only legal way of marriage among the TICUNAS, but, always prior to the marriage ceremony the couple lives together three to six months.

Materials used in the construction of the house are wood for walls and palm tree leaves for the roof, all joined by wild weed cords as can be seen in slides 100F and 100G interior view of the chapel.

The TICUNAS have an inborn taste for decoration, and their creativity is admirable. Their beliefs are captured on bark paintings on the main altar by a crucifix, all crafted by themselves. Notice tiger and snake on bark paintings, symbols of power, mystery, and fertility, which are also regarded as deities. (See also 100D)

For painting the TICUNAS use strong bark from a tree they like to keep unknown by strangers, obtained through a process of peeling, washing, and drying. The painted bark is called YANCHAMA in their native language. Colors are extracted from vegetable root, leaves and fruits. They represent on their paintings life and natural surroundings particularly animals. However, there is something remarkable in their geometric compositions, since not only the sense of space and color are of simplicity and harmony, but vegetation is incorporated to complement their work.

Crafts and bark painting are practically the only commercial line that gives the TICUNAS some freedom for acquiring goods, exchanging tools, and contact with outside society.

100J The TICUNAS also work the walnut and the "macana", making bows, arrows, harpoons, paddles, canoes, and a great variety of objects which show a refined quality of design.