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From a journey to the Jibaro Indians in Ecuador

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The 3 months journey to the Jibaro Indians on the Rio Pastaza, in Ecuador, of which I propose to give a brief account in the following article, was undertaken in order to make films, collect zoological material for the Royal Museum of Natural History, as well as ethnographical objects for the Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Stockholm. The only white man who accompanied me was Mr. Henry Nielsen, a Danish resident of Ecuador.

The journey was undertaken in canoes from the small village of Puyo on the east side of the Andes, down the Rio Puyo to the outlet of that river in the Rio Pastaza. Here we stayed about a fortnight, had a larger canoe made and contracted with three Indians (one of them with his wife) who accompanied us throughout the journey. We followed the Rio Pastaza down to the tributary Rio Copotaza, where we pitched our main camp. This part of the Rio Pastaza — from the R. Copotaza and upward — is very rapid, and quite unnavigable in the rainy season. During our journey by canoe we were sometimes forced — when the river rose after violent downpours — to remain in camp for many days, until the waters subsided and the river again became navigable.

From our camp at the Rio Copotaza we made many minor excursions, on foot and by canoe, to neighbouring Indian abodes.

The return journey likewise proceeded via the Rio Pastaza — Rio Puyo. Violent rains rendered the journey difficult, and on one or two occasions we thought that we should be forced to abandon the canoe and cover the rest of the way back on foot. In order to lighten the canoe, we had now and again to procure Indians to take our equipment and our collections on their backs. Sometimes, too, we had to drag the canoe overland for long distances when the rapids became too turbulent and dangerous.



Photo: R. Blomberg.

Fig. 1. A simple type of Jibaro house.

Before we reached the Rio Copotaza we did not meet with many Jibaro Indians. Only at three places did we come across dwellings, which we visited. But as the Indians' huts are generally situated a good distance away from the river bank, it was often difficult to discover them.

Nearly all of the ethnographical material which I succeeded in obtaining through barter comes from the Indians around the Rio Copotaza, where several dwellings of various sizes were situated.

These Indians have bartered — directly or indirectly — from the whites various articles such as weapons, knives, cuffs and cloth. The goods bartered by the Indians consist mostly of blow-guns, which largely are manufactured in the neighbourhood of the Copotaza, as well as large netted hammocks. They have almost ceased to make cotton cloth themselves, and their beautiful objects made of feathers, brilliant birds, beetle's wings, human hair, etc., are becoming more



Photo: R. Blomberg.
Fig. 2. Interior of the Chiefteain Chumbela's large house.

and more rare. What they still diligently produce is earthen pots and very beautifully painted chicha bowls.

At a place called The High Pot, however, we encountered Indians who had accepted none of the objects offered by the whites, except their weapons. They were still dressed in their beautiful loincloths, had wonderful ornaments of tucan feathers and beetle's wings in their ears and hair, and not a single one of them had followed the latest fashion among the Jibaro Indians; that of cutting off their hair. When we wanted to barter some articles from them, and offered them a cheap, blue cloth which we had brought with us, and which was very useful for bartering with the Copotaza Indians, they refused it, did not think it good enough, proudly showed their own durable cotton cloth, and preferred to take looking glasses, knives, glass beads, etc.

The Jibaro Indians at the Rio Copotaza seemed to me, morally as

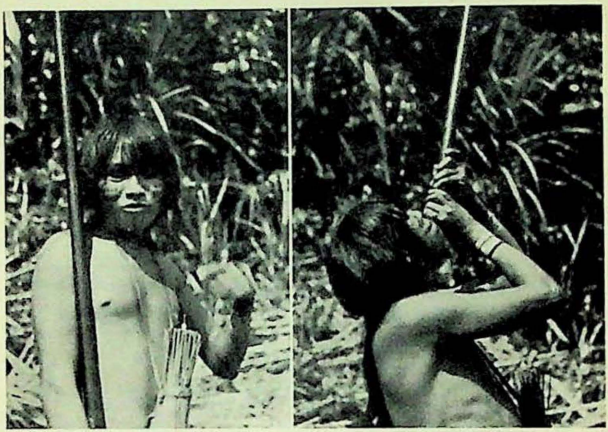


Photo: R. Blomberg.
Fig. 3. A Jibaro Indian from the Copotaza villa ge, with blow-gun and quiver.

well as bodily, very degenerate. The explanation probably is that they need make no effort whatsoever in order to obtain an abundant subsistence. The river is full of fish and the woods of game, and everything grows exceedingly well there. For instance, the manioc already yields a crop after 4 months, and I saw roots wrighing up to 30 lbs. By way of comparison I may mention that at Puyo the manioc gives a crop only after one year, and the largest roots weigh 4 lbs. Moreover, they proved to be not particularly good hunters. Chumbela, the chief at the Copotaza, one day sent out eight Indians on a hunting expedition, and we sent two of our Indians from Puyo. The eight Jibaro Indians returned with only half as much game as our two Indians, and yet they all used the same weapon: blow-guns with curara-poisoned arrows.

Whether the Jibaro Indians round the Rio Copotaza still produce



Fig. 4. A Jibaro woman with a painted clay bowl.



Photo: R. Blomberg.
Fig. 5. A Jibaro Indian painting his face.

tsantsas — the shrunk heads — I cannot say. We did not succeed in bartering a single one — we did not even see any — (only a tsantsa of a sloth, and this I successfully bartered), but the Indians we had brought with us from Puyo asserted that these Copotoza Jibaros still make a practice of shrinking heads. In explanation of our not seeing any and of the Indians' denial that they still made tsantsas they said that the Indians were afraid that if the authorities got to know about it soldiers would be sent out to capture them — as had happened before.

Such tsantsas as are to be found in Ecuador are mostly from the Rio Zamora. Here tsantsas have become an object of trade. Generally an Indian obtains a gun — an article very much in demand — for a tsantsa, and the result has been a regular "tsantsa industry". Nowadays a real tsantsa is very seldom obtainable, and by "real"

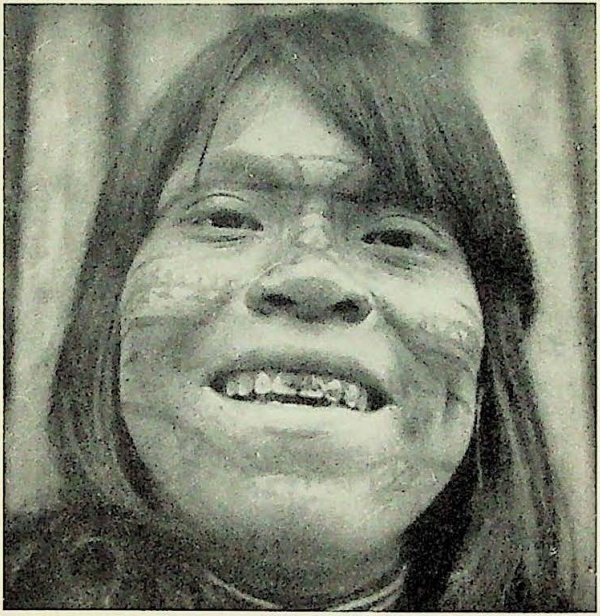


Photo: R. Blomberg

Fig. 6. A Jibaro Indian showing typical facial painting. From the Copotaza village.

I mean a tsantsa of an Indian killed in fight and shrunk from religious motives. They are mostly heads that have been cut off corpses, and one can even buy tsantsas of small children.

It is strictly prohibited to export tsantsas from Ecuador without a special permit, which does not however prevent hundreds of them

from being smuggled out every year, and as the price is comparatively good the ghastly industry still goes on.

We had no real difficulty in getting on with the Jibaro Indians, and I found them pleasant and agreeable. Only on two occasions were they ill-disposed towards us, and it might perhaps have led to unpleasant consequences if luck had not been with us. Once it happened that an Indian woman was taken ill the day after I had filmed her, and of course I was considered to be the cause of her illness. On another occasion, as bad luck would have it, a Jibaro Indian died — poisoned, it was said — the day after we had visited him, and we were pointed out as the murderers. If we had not by chance encountered a troop of soldiers who had been sent out to our assistance, the whole episode might have ended badly.

I had also the opportunity of bringing home with me to the museum a very beautiful collection of ethnographica from the Jibaro Indians at the Rio Zamora as a gift from the Swedish Consul at Guayaquil, Mr. Ivan Bohman. This collection was brought together by a Swede, Mr. Rolf Levin, a resident of Ecuador, during a journey in the Zamora district.