

By: Safaary 2008 Science Editor

Jivaro: The Tribe of the Shrunken Heads

Of the Amazon

The Jivaro are amongst the most famous tribes of the Amazon area, due to their habits of shrinking the heads of the enemies killed in war. The Jivaro tribes inhabit an area larger than Switzerland on the eastern slopes of the Andes, in Ecuador, Brazil and Peru, in one of the densest rain forests. The Jivaro villages are made of very large huts, up to 20 m (66 ft) in length, and oval. Around the walls the beds of the family members are placed and a cooking fire is lighted in the center. The hut has two doors: a principal door for men and a back door for women. Each hut hosts a patriarch, his wives and sons and the families of his sons. The common houses are called jivarias. Two or three jivarias can make a settlement. The settlements are surrounded by a palisade and the path going to the village is carefully hidden and filled with traps meant to impede the advance of the enemies. The villages were always built on tall river banks, so that the villagers could see what was going on the waters of the river. The huts are made of strong wooden plates which cannot be penetrated by javelins. Each house has a small watch tower. The roof is made of palm leaves. Even so, during the fierce fights between the tribes, these houses could not resist the enemy who fired the roofs and waited for the exit of the semiasphyxiated dwellers to pierce them with their spears. The Jivaro shaman was charged with preserving the magical powers of the tribe. He was solicited in case of disease, or for a magic filter for getting the love of a young woman or abundant hunt. The shaman also prepared the poisons used by warriors during their war expeditions, like curare, the paralyzing venom obtained by mixing the juices of various vines. Other venoms were achieved from poison dart frogs. The shamans also prepared drugs administered to warriors to increase their courage and aggressiveness. These drugs caused visions, hallucinations, and even temporal madness. Those using the drugs apparently were able to forecast the results of the planned expedition through these hallucinations. The height of the Jivaro is medium, the skin dark and the body strong and robust. The hair is worn long, with a fringe over the forehead. On their nude torso and forehead, the Jivaro paint geometrical motifs, and they adorn their heads with crowns (tahuaspas) made of vivid parrot or toucan feathers. A crown required 20 toucans! Jivaro also wear collars made of seeds, monkey bones, jaguar and peccary teeth, beetle elytra and feathers, including strings of stuffed small birds, like hummingbirds. The men wear metal earrings, ear pegs and bead strings. Around the waist, they wear a cloth that covers them down to the feet and is secured with a belt made of human hairs. The war combativeness and aggressiveness of the Jivaro make them feared and hated by neighboring tribes. Still, Jivaro mainly practice inter-tribal wars. Jivaro women were treated with harshness and scorn by their husbands; the sons, when grown a little, were taken to live with their fathers. Each man had several wives, of whom some were just slaves, won after defeating an enemy group, as all the men of the defeated village were killed and the women were distributed amongst the winners. The women farmed the land, planting corn, manioc (used to make a type of beer, chicha), chilly peppers, squash, bean and other crops. They also gathered wild fruits and small animals (frogs, lizards, worms and ant larvae). Women also took care of the house, cooked, cared for the children, and made clothes for all the family, from the simple tunics they wore to the men's outfit. Jivaro women wore few adornments. Men hunted using bows and arrows and spears, made of wood and bamboo, with tips hardened into fire. The arrows had sharp hooks which, when splintering into the prey, tore its flesh. As the tips were soaked in curare, the victims had no escape. The Jivaro hunted from peccaries to toucans, curassows (turkey like birds) and iguanas. Birds were hunted using long bamboo blowpipes and poisoned darts, up to 30 cm (1 ft) long. The dart could hit birds found 40-50 m (130-160 ft) away. Toucans were appreciated for their feathers, used for making crowns and collars. The large toucan beaks were used as rattles or adornments, hung in collars. Toucans, parrots, macaws and smaller monkeys are kept as pets. Anaconda was believed to host one of the most important Jivaro spirits, Tsunki. Tsunki made the boat to float on the water. Jaguars were considered a symbol of power and vigor, and killing one allowed the hunter to be endowed with its vital force. The claws and teeth were used to make protective amulets and the jaguar fat was used for making magic ointments. Fishing was practiced using harpoons, hooks, baskets, bow and arrows. The most rapid way of fishing was to use the juice of a venomous vine,

barbasco, in shallow calm waters. The juice consumes the oxygen from the water, and the asphyxiated fish are easily collected. The teeth of the piranha are used for making the tips of the blowpipe darts. When a Jivaro warrior killed an enemy, the head of the latter was cut off and brought to the jivaria, where the other members receive him with pride and joy. A series of rites ensured the warrior was not empowered with the soul of the dead enemy, believed to inhabit his head. The main rite is txantxa, the reduction of the cut head for a better conservation and exhibition. The skin and meat were separated from the skull, considered useless. The skin was boiled in a special pot, with the juice of various vines and grasses that made the skin to shrink. Once cooked, the head was left to dry, then it was filled with hot stones, which further shrank it. Subsequently, hot sand is placed inside and the features are modeled so that they resemble as much as possible the dead enemy. The lips were sewed with cords and on the closed eyelids pegs were applied. When finished, the head had the size of an orange. On the top of the head small cords were sewed, so that the head could be hung as a trophy at the belt of the winner or on the roof of his hut.