The Cashinahua of Southeastern Peru

By KENNETH KENSINGER

The Cashinahua, classified linguistically as Panoan, live along the Curana River of southeastern Peru and along upper reaches of the Embrí, Merú, Tarapaca, Jardín, and Breví Rivers of the state of Amazonas and the Territory of Acre in Brazil.

The Cashinahua depend about equally on hunting and horticulture (sweet manioc, maize, plantains, bananas, pepper, watermelon, chili peppers, squash, etc.) for subsistence. Fishing and gathering serve to provide variety in the diet, and to supplement the food supply especially when the old gardens have become exhausted and the new gardens have not yet come into full production, or when the men have been unsuccessful at hunting.

The basic economic and property-holding unit is the nuclear or polygynous family; the basic social and political unit is the village, which until recently, consisted of one or two long thatched-roofed houses, each inhabited by two or more matrilocal extended families. Each village is autonomous. Intercourse cooperation and interaction among neighboring villages is generally social and ceremonial in character. Although widely dispersed, the Cashinahua consider themselves to be a single group bound together by a common language—hunyë kün (the Real Words—hunyë kün, 'men'), by a common ethnic identity—hunyë kün (the Real Men—hunyë 'men'), by the ceremonially important patrilineal moieties, and by extension of the kinship terminology to include all members of the tribe.

The Cashinahua of the Curana River seem to have migrated from the Embirí River of Brazil shortly after the turn of the century because of a disagreement over what the tribe's relationship should be toward the Brazilian rubber workers who were moving into the area. The more conservative, isolationist group moved up the Embirí and crossed over to the headwaters of the Curana where they maintained their isolation until 1945 or 1946, when a group of them descended the Curana in search of metal axes and machetes. The contact was peaceful and the Cashinahua began to work lumber and wild rubber but soon became disillusioned by the harsh and unfair treatment of the traders.

In 1951 an ethnographer from the Museo Sjö Paulo, Brazil, visited several of their villages (he reported 450-500 persons living in eight villages), taking photographs and collecting artifacts for which he paid them lavishly with trade goods. Shortly after his departure an epidemic swept the villages and decimated the population. Many died; others fled to Brazil. Thus, on my arrival in the tribe in July of 1955, the ninety-one remaining Cashinahua were somewhat less than enthusiastic about the idea of my living in the village. However, their desire for trade goods outweighed their fears and I was invited to stay. Their fears melted slowly, due largely to the generous payment in trade goods they received for building my house, my successful medical treatment of the headman, my willingness to participate in their activities, and my humbling, but to them hilarious, attempts at speaking their language.

As a linguistic field worker with the Instituto Linguístico de Verano del Perú, my job was to learn and analyze the Cashinahua language, and then to develop an orthography and prepare literacy materials in it. (The Institute works in conjunction with the Peruvian Ministry of Education, which has as one of its goals the incorporation of all its ethnic groups into the life of the republic through a program of literacy and bilingual education.)

Learning an unwritten language is difficult.
Maneyu, after the river changed its course. The old village was located where the river flows in this picture. The large house in the middle of the picture is the house built by the Cashinahua for the author.

Two of the houses in the village of Maneyu were washed away by the Curunja River when it changed course in 1955. The small buildings are cookhouses.

(Left) Dancing kushanawa, part of the fertility rites. The chants for this dance call the spirits of the vegetables to the new gardens. (Right) A Cashinahua woman dressed for the women's enactment of kushanawa, a parody of the fertility rites normally performed by the men. The outfit is made of immature palm fronds.

(Left) Cashinahua man with his infant daughter. Both are painted with designs of the jaguar. Designs are associated with membership in one of the patrilineal moieties. (Right) Brother of the headman modeling chilbida, the outfit worn during the headman's dance. One of these outfits has recently been acquired by the University Museum.
At Balta [name of village] things have been going well. None of us has died. That is the way it has been.

Now we have colds, we feel like dying. *Menun* [expression of great desire], send us lots of medicine. We feel badly. Bob [my linguistic colleague] is in Yariná [headquarters for the Institute near Pucallpa]. John [the ornithologist] is in Yariná. Who is going to be able to give us medicine? *Menun*, hurry and come, friend.

Friend, I now have a son, so now I have five children.

Our people from Embina, real men, are about to make a long garden here at Balta. They will live here.

That’s all, friend. Mario.

I want send you a letter (to say) Hurry back, friend. I miss you.

In three moons we are going to eat nxitup [eat nxitup is the name of the initiation rites].

Beside, in the next moon, we will make kucha [to make kucha is the fertility rite]. All of our people like you. They want you to see it [the rites]. Before doing anything else, see this. We are going to make the *tete pei* [outfit for the headman’s dance], and kucha, and nxitup, and *buchu* [head—special meat for the headman’s dance], and lots of meat. Hurry and come.

What do you say?

Now you have an airstrip. We have a 260 meter airstrip. *Menun*, hurry and come. Come to see us. I miss you very much.

Another thing, I want to ask you for something. Send me a radio—one of those little cheap ones from your father’s place (country). I would like to buy one, friend. That’s all.

I only know how to write a little bit. *Menun*, hurry and teach me, friend.

Friend, another word. Dinin is also living with us now. I now have a house [he, previously lived with his father] . . . by the bank of the river. Titu has a wife now. Kunin has a wife now.

I’m going to take this letter to John, friend. Look, is it good? Look at what I have done, friend.

That’s really all. Hurry and come back. I miss you very much.

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**SUGGESTED READING**

**HARALD SCHULTZ, HOMBA. Macmillan. New York. 1962.**

**MATTHEW HOXEY AND CORNELL CAPA, FAREWELL TO EDEN. Harper and Row, New York. 1965.**