

Anthropologist hunts for meaning of kinship

By Amanda Phipps
The Johnsonian

A sacred spring, people fixing a roof or a festival performed to secure a plentiful harvest are things you would see if you were Richard Chacon.

Chacon, associate professor of anthropology, studies the Americas' indigenous people from the ground up. He immerses himself in their culture.

It all started with an interest in hunting.

During the '90s, Chacon focused his research on the 'Amazon peoples' hunting techniques, including the blowgun hunting of the Achuar of Ecuador and the bow-and-arrow hunting of the Yanomamo of Venezuela and the Yora of Peru.

Using a map and scales, Chacon studied the way the Amazon people hunted and often went along with them.

"Sometimes we were on the hunt for six days at a time," Chacon said.

When he wasn't hunting with the native people, Chacon was engaging in their traditions rarely seen by outsiders.

"It's pretty much unheard of for an outsider to come and want to learn from them — that stops them in their tracks," Chacon said. "There is a suspicion that is understandable."

In the Amazon, the people have a strong community tie

to one another. To survive, they have to maintain that bond.

When Chacon had a leak in his roof, it was a cause for a "minga," a communal work party. The villagers united to repair his roof, in high spirits the entire time.

The community is a family, where kinship ties are a crucial part of life and often mold behavior.

Chacon was eventually seen as kin to the native peoples. He was named Tserer, or "white-faced monkey," which he earned by respecting and learning from the Amazonian people.

After becoming kin, Chacon adopted an orphan by the name of Kayashi. The boy lost both his parents and so clung to Chacon as an adopted father, a fact that he said brought him great joy.

Having a son in the village brought Chacon even further into the people's lives, and they became like family to him.

"I trust some of those people more than some of my relatives," he said.

Though they live with a strong sense of community, the Amazonian people are not without problems.

"A lot of folks have utopian or ideal paradise views of these people, but they face hygienic and health problems as well as war like everyone else," Chacon said.

They have relationship

problems and fights, but they know to maintain community ties critical for survival. Chacon said the Amazon Indians have something that America has lost: a sense of connection with one another.

"They aren't perfect, but they still maintain values we have forgotten," Chacon said.

A sense of togetherness includes certain rituals in the Amazonian culture such as the rites of passage, which is among the most private ceremonies for natives.

"I had the honor of participating in a rite of passage, the most intimate aspect of their society," he said. "They usually don't even admit this goes on to outsiders; it was my greatest honor."

After his work in the Amazon, Chacon began fieldwork in the Andes, a job that allowed him to work as a team with his wife. A sociologist herself, Chacon's wife worked alongside her husband to expand his research.

"There are areas in a woman's world I can't approach just for being a man, but my wife can," Chacon said. "The Indians sat around and gossiped about their husbands and such things with her; they loved her."

In the Andes, Chacon also witnessed a whole new world of spirituality and beliefs.

He still studies the Cota-



cachi and Otavalo, peasant farmers in the Ecuadorian Andes. He studies their belief systems, which include praying to a sun god named Inti, who needs to be ritually fed blood each year to secure a plentiful harvest.

To ensure their sun god is fed, the villagers participate in bloody ritual battles that require them to hurl stones at one another.

They believe that their actions bring about agricultural fertility and rain. The Andes people exhibit great joy in performing such rituals.

"In order to fully understand the native peoples, you have to go in there admitting you don't know everything," Chacon said.

These rituals are a source of great pride for the people of the Andes as well as their way of letting local non-Indians know that they are a force to be reckoned with.

Though Chacon studied many aspects of these peoples' lives, he got more out of it than just a



Top, Yanomamo women dance together. Above, Yanomamo women and children visit a river. Photos courtesy of Indian Cultures.

notebook full of information.

"They aren't just aspects of study," he said. "I love and care about them deeply. They do

fight and have even killed each other, but they have taught a lot about what it means to be human."