

# Wao!

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A WEEK WITH A WAORANI FAMILY IN THE AMAZON RAINFOREST

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## 1. Introduction

There are dozens of indigenous tribes that inhabit the Amazonian rainforest. One of these is the Waorani, a people famous for their fierceness that still thrives in Ecuador's Yasuni National Park. While many Waorani are leaving their jungle homes in search of work and opportunities in the towns and cities of the *colonos* ("colonists"), at least one family's deeply-rooted sense of place and their faith in the God who created their treasured rain forest home makes them determined to maintain their native Waorani lifestyle. Cahuilla and Mima Omaka are proud to be living off the land in the same environmentally-friendly, sustainable way their ancestors have lived for thousands of years. Making daily decisions to either accept or reject the modern technologies and lifestyles brought ever closer by globalization, they walk a fine line between the past and the future.

On a Friday afternoon in March 2015 my family met a woman named Yolanda who lived in Yasuni until the age of ten. Four days later we found ourselves floating down the Shiripuno River with Yolanda, her brother Conan and several other native Waorani on our way to the home of her brother and sister-in-law, Cahuiya and Mima.



Cahuiya Omaka was born in Yasuni. At the age of 14 he was relocated to the Cururai River by missionaries to get an education. This is where he met Mima. Twenty years later Cahuiya moved back to the Shiripuno River with his wife and children to live in the way of his ancestors—but with a

Christian mindset.

In a time when many Waorani are turning to the ways of the “colonos” (colonists), Cahuiya’s strong Christian faith is helping him to maintain his traditional ways, avoiding the addictions to alcohol and drugs, materialism and consumerism that have conquered many of his neighbors. Cahuiya has a deep respect for God’s creation and is an advocate for protecting and



conserving his native rainforest. He is blessed to live in one of the most biologically-diverse regions on earth and is driven to do his part to keep it that way.



This report about Waorani life is based on my observations of the Omaka family (which includes Cahuiya's uncle who lives two hours down-river) and on stories told to my family by Cahuiya and his relatives. Interestingly, this is one of the families that National Geographic photographed for their 2013 issue featuring

"The Wildest Place On Earth" (<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/01/125-yasuni-national-park/wallace-text> – the fourth photo from the end in the Photo Gallery shows Cahuiya, smiling, in his uncle and aunt's home – we sat around the fire in the same hammocks during our visit).

## 2. Family

The Waorani traditionally don't live in villages. Families live a few hours apart from each other and are almost totally self-sufficient. A traditional family would consist of a father, his one or more wives, and all his children. In earlier times it was common for a man to have various wives, depending on how good of a hunter he was and how many people he could provide for. Now men usually only have one wife.



The family would have a house, one or more *fincas* where they grow their food, access to a river or spring for water and lots of forest all around for hunting and gathering fruits and useful plants. Every few years they would move to a new location. While still living in the old house they would go find a new spot, plant a finca there, and when it is almost ready to harvest would build a house in the new location and move there, abandoning the old house. Nowadays some families do live in villages and the family structure isn't as strict as before. For example, the Omaka family has a father, a mother and their two grown daughters: both single mothers with young children. They still do live alone though, about two hours away from their closest neighbors. They have moved three times since moving to the Shiripuno River region.

The Omaka family is still pretty traditional in that it is the father's job to hunt for meat for the family, build the houses and make the poison and other tools he uses for hunting. The mother's job is to cook, grow food in the finca, wash the clothes and dishes, prepare the chicha and care for the babies. Once children are old enough to start working the boys become the Father's responsibility to be taught the skills needed for manhood. The girls stay with their mother, learning from her the work of a woman. Both the Mother and Father whip their children with stinging nettles on their arms and legs to teach them obedience and give them strength. The Father gives his bravery to his sons by rubbing them with his sweat after returning from a successful hunt.

Cahuiya says that traditionally if a boy is being raised by his single mother, when the child gets to a certain age he has to go to his father and make him provide meat for him. It is the father's responsibility to feed his children and it is too much work for the mother to have to raise the boy all on her own. The children of Cahuiya's two daughters that live at his house are still only toddlers, but when they get older, I wonder if Cahuiya will send them out to beg their fathers for food in the old way or if he will continue to provide for them himself.

### 3. Houses

The Omaka family's house is made in the traditional way with a frame of wooden poles, a palm leaf roof and vines to hold it together. It is shaped like an A-frame, with the roof reaching all the way to the ground. The roof is steep so that the rain slides down it quickly. Inside the single room it is dark



and smoky. The smoke from the cooking fire on the dirt floor is what preserves the roof by keeping out the insects that would otherwise eat the leaves. Woven hammocks hang around the fire which are used as beds and chairs. It takes four people about a week and a half to build a house.

Some Waorani have started using corrugated tin for their roofs but many still prefer the old way. The metal roofs are very loud when it rains and when sun shines on the roof the house heats up like an oven. Rain slides off the traditional roofs without a sound and the thick layer of leaves keeps the inside cool and shady. But traditional houses are also more work. They disintegrate much more quickly than metal and have to be replaced. The roofs are always being repaired—a few leaves at a time to fill in the holes. And now that some people are starting to use stoves for cooking instead of fires, their roofs don't get the smoke they need to preserve them and fall apart even quicker.

#### 4. Food

The Waorani diet has three staples: *yuca*, bananas and *chonta duros*. Yuca is the root of a small bush-like plant. It is white and starchy. It grows quickly and once you cut off the root from the plant you can stick the plant back into the ground and more yuca will grow. Bananas also grow very quickly: in one year the tree is full-grown and ready to be harvested. It is then cut down, the head of bananas is removed and by the next year a new tree is growing out of its roots. There are too many varieties of bananas to count; some are for boiling, some for roasting, some for eating raw, some for making *chicha* and some are for eating green. Chonta duros grow on palm trees. They are hard nut-like fruits that can be red, orange or



yellow. They grow in big clumps high up in the palm trees during chonta season. To eat them they



have to be boiled and peeled. The stringy flesh inside is bright orange. Because Mima wasn't able to work in the finca for two years because of an injured knee, the Omaka family has been running low on these three foods. But now that her knee is

healed, she and her daughter have planted a new finca and they will soon have enough again. Meanwhile their closest neighbors, Cahuiya's brother and his family, have more chonta than they can eat and share a few bunches with them.





All three of these staples the Waorani make into chicha. To do this they boil them, then mash them up and add water. The chicha of Yuca and Chonta can both be drunken fresh or fermented. Banana chicha is sweet and is called *chucula*. To make the fermented yucca chicha the women first chew the yucca which makes it



ferment. The enzymes from the woman's mouth and the resulting fermentation kill the bacteria in the chicha, making it clean. The Waorani can go for days living on only chicha.

When the father brings home meat they eat all they can and then hang the rest in a woven bag above the fire to save for later. The smoke from the fire preserves the meat and keeps out bugs. Later on they scrape off the blackened skin and eat the meat on the inside.



The family doesn't have set meal times--like breakfast, lunch and dinner--but eats whenever they get hungry, and when there's food. They never take food or water with them when they travel, but eat whatever fruits they find along the way and stop at their neighbor's homes to rest and drink chicha. If they don't find any food along the way then they just don't eat until they get to their destination.



The Waorani never drink plain water. They always make it into chicha or, like the Omaka family, boil it, add *hierba luisa* (lemon grass) leaves and drink it as tea. If they get thirsty when they are out walking in the jungle they cut open a particular vine and drink the clean, clear water that comes out.



## 5. Hunting and Fishing

The jungle provides all the meat that the family needs. Monkeys, *puerco sajín*, *capybara*, many kinds of rodents and *gallina de monte* live in the forests. An abundance of different kinds of fish, including piranha, fill the rivers and ponds.



To hunt Cahuiya

goes out into the forest with a blow gun, poisoned darts, a gourd of cotton to help the darts fly, and a spear. The blow gun is for hunting animals like monkeys and birds that are in the trees, and the spear for killing animals that live on the ground.

As he walks along Cahuiya calls out the songs of many different animals. To call some animals he whistles, for others he makes a hoarse yelling noise; sometimes he rolls up a leaf to blow

through to imitate the call of a certain bird. He knows the names of all the animals and what calls to make to make them come. If an animal is close by it will call back to him. They will call back and forth in a sort of conversation until the animal is close enough for Cahuiya to attack. If he doesn't have a knife with him when he kills an animal, he uses the sharp stem of a certain plant to cut out the intestines so that the animal will be lighter to carry home.





When Cahuiya wants to go fishing he first has to go out into the forest to search for worms, which he wraps up in a leaf. Then he cuts a sturdy pole and ties a string and hook to it. When he's ready he goes out in his boat to find a place to fish. If the shore of the river or pond is too overgrown to fish, he cuts down a few small trees to make a sort of dock. To carry the fish his wife weaves a temporary basket out of two palm leaves. Back at home the fish are cooked by his wife. She either prepares them in a *maito* (wrapped in a leaf and cooked on the fire) or boils them whole.



## 6. Clothing

Because of the warm rainy climate, in the past the Waorani traditionally wore very little clothing. Men would wear a string tied around their waist to hold their penis out of the way while they run through the forest. Women wore nothing. Nowadays they usually wear western-style clothes although young children



and older people still find it more convenient to go naked. Cahuiya's two 2-year-old grandsons are always naked around the house, adding just a shirt when they go out in the boat. As the floor of their house is dirt, the boys can urinate and defecate wherever they want. Their grandmother just scoops it up with a shovel to clean up. Cahuiya almost never wore a shirt, except for when we went to town, and in the evenings he would hang out in just his

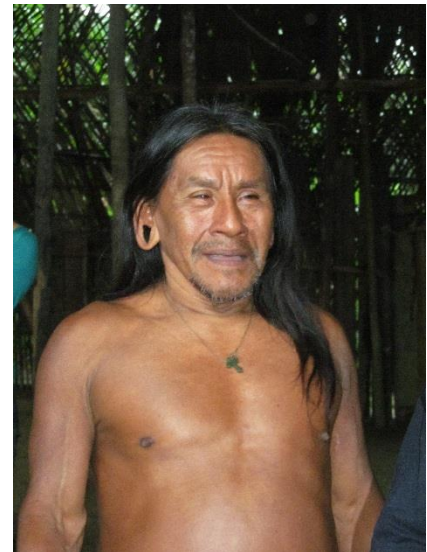


underwear. Some women like Cahuiya's sister-in-law are still accustomed to going topless. They know that when they go to town they have to put on more clothes though, and they have city clothes set aside for this purpose.

Traditionally the Waorani were always barefoot. Although they still go without shoes around the house, they now wear rubber boots most of the time. Waorani women and men alike have long

hair. Women put a leaf-based extract in their hair to make it strong and able to grow very long. Their hair commonly reaches down to their waists.

Men's hair is usually shorter, reaching to about their shoulders, and many have started cutting theirs in the western style. Men traditionally wore big wooden plugs in their ears. This stretched out their ear lobes so far that their ears hung partway down to their shoulders when they took the plugs out. Most people don't wear plugs anymore, but some older Waorani, like Cahuiya's brother, still have stretched-out ear lobes.



## **7. Health**

For the Waorani death is a constant threat. Illnesses that are seldom life-threatening in the United States like the common cold and diarrhea are much more serious in the jungle, routinely causing death. For example, Cahuiya's father got sick with diarrhea and a few days later, before an airplane could come to take him to the hospital, he died. We saw another example on the canoe ride to Cahuiya's house when we picked up a woman whose daughter

had just died of a cold the week before. The young boy she held in her arms had a terrible cough and she worried that he might die as well.

The Omaka family relies on a number of different sources for healing sickness and injuries. Some are more traditional, like using medicinal plants from the jungle and seeking advice from a shaman. Others, like going to the doctor and getting help from periodic medical campaigns, are newer.

Soon after Cahuiya's daughter, Ines, gave birth to her son he got sick and started throwing up. The first thing she did was take him to the hospital. But when the doctor told her there was nothing wrong with her son she went to the shaman for help. Ines had been living in the city with her baby and the first thing the shaman told her was to go back to her parent's home out in the jungle and feed the baby the natural Waorani food. He also told her that because her son's father wasn't Waorani the other Waorani were mad at her and had cast a spell on her baby. He said that her son should never go down to the river in the evening because that is when the other shamans send their spells up and down the river. He also said that she shouldn't take the baby to places where there are lots of other people because there might be shamans there who will curse him. So she followed the shaman's advice and sure enough her baby got better.

Ines' story shows that their family is straddling the old way and the new way: although they do go to the hospital first when they need medical help (which costs only a few dollars), they still rely strongly on the shaman even though his services are much more expensive (\$100 for Ines' consultation). Another source of help is medical campaigns where doctors—usually from the United States—come in for a few days to examine patients and provide free medicine. Although this is likely the best option because it is free and the doctors are much better than



the doctors at the state hospital, they only come through about once a year. So for less severe cases they still use natural remedies.



The forest is full of medicinal plants that are free to anyone, if you know how to use them. When Cahuiya's brother Conan got a stomach ache he made himself a tea out of bark. And when Cahuiya got bit by a snake he cured himself with the leaves of a special plant. Another useful secret is that when you get tired walking in the forest you can purposely touch a wasp, making it sting you to help wake you up.

## 8. Paid Work

As the times change the Omaka family has started using products from the outside world like western clothing and gas for the motor on the boat given them by the government. For the first time they find themselves needing money. Cahuiya has found a few different options for providing the income his family needs. One way is to work digging trenches. He did this a few years ago and remembers that the work was hard and the days long. This earned him 80 dollars a month. Another option is to work for the "Compania", one of the many oil companies drilling right outside of the protected zone. This work pays much better—300 to 400 dollars a month. A third option is working with tourists. Cahuiya once rented his house out to a family for 40 dollars per night. But an opportunity like this doesn't come often.



For Cahuiya and his Waorani neighbors the issue of how to get the money they now need is a struggle. Each option has its pros and cons and each family is trying to figure out which is best for them. Some have decided that working for the Compania is the best way. The work isn't too hard, and the pay is good. But for Cahuiya, who as a Christian cares dearly about God's creation and protecting his native land, it doesn't seem right to work for the very company that is destroying the jungle. Digging trenches is such demanding work, and pays so little for all the time spent, that it doesn't seem worth it. Both working for the Compania and digging trenches are full time jobs and leave almost no time for hunting, building and other things back at home. Since the people who do these jobs don't have time to do things the traditional way, they start buying more things from the outside. Instead of hunting meat they buy chicken and beef at the store. Instead of growing yucca and bananas they buy rice and noodles. In turn this makes them need more money, which makes them have to work more.

The third option—tourism—is different from the other two. To work with tourists you don't have to leave your home, you don't have to do hard manual labor. In some ways it seems like the easiest option. Tourists are willing to pay a lot for an authentic experience. But to provide the memorable experience that the tourists want there are a lot of things they have to know. They have to know to always use clean water because tourists' stomachs get sick easily. They have to know in what ways the tourists want to be adventurous, and what things they can't tolerate. They have to be able to tell them the names of the plants and animals they see, and be able to cook delicious food for them. They have to be willing to tell them their stories, to teach them about their native lifestyle.

Tourism is a new concept for the Waorani. It is an opportunity for them to generate some income but still preserve their native way of life. They don't know much about it, but many like the idea and are eager to try it out. Some people, like Cahuiya's brother and cousin,



have built lodges to receive tourists. Business is fairly slow—Cahuiya's cousin receives about one group of tourists per month. And they are still trying to figure out how much money to charge. Because the only way to get out to where they live is by

motorized canoe, and all the food for the tourists (except for things like yucca, chonta, bananas and other local foods) has to be brought in on the river, caring for tourists is actually quite expensive.

For Cahuiya the decision isn't easy. For now he relies on a few different sources. He doesn't have a regular job and still spends most of his time living the Waorani way. But when the need for money arises he usually goes and works for the Compania for a couple of months. Although he resents having to work for them, it is an easy way to make some good money. He enjoys working with tourists, but the work is sporadic and can't be counted on to provide for all their needs. Another source of help is his two sons who hand down their used clothes to him and come to help with projects like building a new house. For the Omaka family this is still an unresolved issue. And for the time being, while they are still fairly self-sufficient, the matter isn't too pressing.

## **9. Untouched Neighbors**

Although the Omaka family and many other Waorani have had contact with the “outside world” for about fifty years, there are some who are still resisting civilization and live exactly the way their ancestors did—seeking vengeance through killing and practicing the traditional Waorani spiritualism. These people are called the “intangibles”. Although no one knows exactly where these uncontacted peoples live, the Omaka family and others living on the Shiripuno River have had occasional interactions with them. Cahuiya himself has never seen an intangible but his wife and daughters have been visited by them at their house on a couple of occasions while he was away.

The most recent visit happened only a few months ago. Ines and her mother were at their home when a group of native men wearing no clothing came into the clearing holding spears. The women grabbed the children and ran. The uncontacted Waorani speak the same language as the Omaka family and Mima pleaded with them not to kill them. “Take all the food you want,” she said, “But don’t kill us.” The men turned around and left.

Cahuiya’s uncle, who lives two hours downstream, has also had contact with the intangibles. When it rains for a long time their fires sometimes go out. The intangibles know that Cahuiya’s uncle always has a fire and after long periods of rain they come to his house in search of it. So after big rain storms the uncle goes to the edge of the clearing and sets out burning coals and food for the intangibles. He never sees them coming to take it but the uncle says that when he goes back after a few days the gifts are gone. By doing this he trusts that the intangibles will not harm him.

There has also been some conflict between the intangibles and the oil companies that are trying to drill in their land. A few workers were recently killed, a reminder of how protective the Waorani are of their territory. The violence actually helped to make the government set



stricter laws protecting the territory of the Waorani--a tribe ferociously determined to hold out against modernization.

## **10. Concluding Thoughts**

The Waorani have lived for hundreds of generations in violence-induced isolation from neighboring tribes and outsiders alike. But whether they are ready to welcome the change or not, they are finding themselves face-to-face with the most powerful opponent they have ever confronted: modernization. Though there are many Waorani, like Cahuiya and Mima, who are still holding strong to their native heritage, many younger Waorani are finding the lifestyle of the *colonos* to be more interesting and exciting. Like Cahuiya's daughters, they are drawn to the cities, enjoying all the opportunities for partying, shopping, dancing and fun. Many of them don't appreciate the traditional life of their parents. But this is the generation which, ready or not, carries the future of the Waorani in their hands.

