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B A L P

(Bulletin of the Amerindian Languages Project)

C O N T E N T S

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SOME GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT

THE  
WAPISHANAS

BY: D. RAMPHAL<sup>1</sup>

INTRODUCTION

The Wapishana tribe in Guyana inhabits the savannah grasslands in the South Rupununi region. This area is separated from the North Rupununi by the Kanuku mountains some of whose peaks reach as high as 3,000 feet.

The Kanuku mountains run across the savannah dividing it into two almost equal parts. The area occupied by the Wapishanas is bounded on the North by the Kanuku mountains, on the South by Adolair Creek, on the East by the Essequibo river and on the West by the Takutu river which separates Guyana from Brazil.

The South Rupununi (also known as cattle or cowboy country) has an area of 2,500 square miles and is marked by rolling savannah grasslands and plains, interrupted by lofty mountains and hills and, occasionally, by patches of dense rain forest abounding with purple heart trees and with bullet wood (*mimusops bidentata*), from the sap of which balata is extracted.

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<sup>1</sup>Some of the information used in this publication was given by Leonard Johnson who worked for a short while as a Research Assistant on the Amerindian Languages Project.

The Takutu and Rupununi rivers drain the area but several creeks and rivulets can be seen winding among the hills and the mountains and meandering across the savannahs. These streams abound with a wide variety of fishes which provide an important part of the diet of the people of the savannahs. The waterways are generally flooded in the wet season but are reduced to mere trickles in the dry season.

The average rainfall in South Rupununi varies from 1400 mm to 1750 mm per annum with more than 80% falling during the short wet season between May and August. The rest of the year is dry and almost rain free. Occasionally, droughts are severe and many cattle die.

The Wapishanas live in small settlements scattered over the entire South Rupununi region. Their major settlements are Aishalton, Achiwib, Awaruwaunawa, Dadanawa, Maruranawa, Sauriwau and Shea. Other smaller villages include Katonarib, Achimiriwaii and Mariwa.

#### Main Occupations Among the Wapishanas

Farming is the main occupation of the Wapishanas and the main crop cultivated is cassava, from which their staple foods, farine and cassava-bread are made. Such farming is generally done on a small scale - just enough for family use.

Most Wapishanas, of course, hunt and fish for their meat. These two economic activities occupy a large number of Wapishanas most of the time. In addition to the latter traditional occupations, many Wapishanas are now involved in the cattle industry which since around 1880 has been an important industry in the Rupununi.

According to Loxton (1958:3) cattle ranching was started in 1860 at Dadanawa by one De Rooy. The industry grew steadily, and provided employment as vaqueros (cowboys) for the Wapishanas in the area. At present, the Rupununi Development Company, established around 1920, is a major cattle company which employs a large number of Wapishanas as cowboys and other personnel.

In the South Rupununi, some lumbering and gold mining are also done. Individual families also have poultry and pigs and some may even cultivate a kitchen garden. At present, some Wapishanas find employment in the Government services as teachers, nurses, mechanics and drivers. Some older women folk also collect cotton from the wild cotton trees and weave it into hammocks.

#### Administration in the villages

The South Rupununi area falls within the Interior Administrative District of Rupununi which is divided into several sub-districts each administered by a District Commissioner or a Regional Officer from the Ministry of Regional Development.

The village retains the tradition of being the main political unit among the Amerindians. Each village is administered by a village captain or Touchou. A Touchou is elected by members of the village for a four-year term of office. He has official powers comparable to those of a rural constable and is responsible to the government for maintaining law and order. The Touchou is also responsible for organising hunting and fishing expeditions for the whole village and is expected to play an important role whenever the village has a celebration. Generally, Amerindian Village Councils are formed to assist the Touchou in his administrative duties in the village.

#### Wapishana Villages in Guyana

Most Wapishana villages are found on banks of rivers or creeks where a steady water supply is available. Each village has a school which until recently was managed by the Roman Catholic Church but which is now Government run. These schools were in fact established by the Roman Catholic Church. The South Rupununi is generally a Catholic area (with only recent limited incursions of the Brethren denomination).

Aishalton is the administrative centre of the area and has the greatest concentration of social, educational, medical and administrative facilities. Its public facilities include a health clinic, a trade store, a police station, a consumers' co-op shop, a Roman Catholic Convent and rest house, an air strip, a nursery school and a Community High School.

Aishalton got its name from a vine called AISHAL which the Wapishanas found in abundance when they first settled there. They therefore called the place "Aishalton" which means "hill of aishal vines". Until now, aishal vines are used by the Wapishanas to poison fish in rivers or creeks.

At Aishalton, cattle rearing, balata bleeding, lumbering and mixed farming are the major occupations but several people find employment as masons, carpenters, politicians, teachers, gold miners and labourers. Fishing and hunting are always practised by Amerindians.

All agricultural produce from South Rupununi is air lifted via Aishalton to Georgetown. Aishalton has a population of nearly 500; almost all Wapishanas.

Achiwib is located on the left bank of the Meriwau Creek about 12 miles from the estuary (Meriwau is a tributary of the Takutu river). Achiwib got its name from a wild herb "Achawi" which smells like garlic and which was found in abundance there when the Wapishanas founded this village.

Cattle rearing, balata bleeding, gold mining and mixed farming provide the main source of income for the people of Achiwib. Their traditional crops include corn, cassava, ground provisions, fruits and "hill rice", but recently, peanuts and black-eye have been cultivated. The population is approximately 325 with a majority of Wapishanas. There are also some Negroes living in this village.

Karaudanawa is a Wapishana village located on the East Bank of the Rupununi River. It is approximately 16 miles from Achiwib and the mode of life resembles closely that of the people of Achiwib. It has about 300 inhabitants, most of whom are of Amerindian origin.

Awaruwaunawa is located about 25 miles from Aishalton on the right bank of the Awarewau creek, (the Awarewau creek is a tributary of the Katiwau or Sand river). The population is estimated to be about 275 and their occupations are mainly cattle rearing, mixed farming and balata bleeding.



Maruranawa is a Wapishana village about 5 miles from Awaruwaunawa. It has an estimated population of 325. The village got its name from the giant armadillo (maruru) and hence "Maruranawa" means "giant armadillo hill". This village is mainly Roman Catholic in religion and the occupation of the inhabitants include cattle rearing, balata bleeding, lumbering and mixed farming.

Shea is situated about three miles from Maruranawa and has a population of about 300. The residents of Shea are mainly Roman Catholics and their livelihood depends on cattle rearing, balata bleeding, lumbering and mixed farming. This village is noted for its beautiful scenery and captivating landscape of mountains, rocks and savannahs.

Sauriwau is located on the left bank of the Sauriwau river from which the village got its name. It has a population of about 225 almost all of whom are Catholics. Farming is the main occupation in this village except for experienced vaqueros who find employment with the Rupununi Development Company. Many people, however, in an effort to find employment, migrate to Brazil where they work as labourers.

Sand Creek is located in a valley of the Kanuku mountains through which the Katiwu or Sand River runs. This village has about 450 inhabitants who are mostly herdsmen, farmers, balata bleeders or shop-keepers. There is a landing strip for light aircraft at this village and this gives rise to some commerce. Fishes and turtles are plentiful in this region during the dry season.

Potarinaw is a mixed village with both Makushis and Wapishanas and has a population of less than 400. Most of the inhabitants seek employment at Lethem - about 30 miles from Potarinaw.

### Language

The Wapishana language belongs to the Arawakan language family. It is spoken as the first language (L<sub>1</sub>) throughout the South Rupununi. English, on the other hand, is used only as a second language (L<sub>2</sub>) but remains the language of officialdom since it is used as the medium of instruction in schools and is the language of communication with Non-Amerindians.

The Portuguese language has significantly influenced Wapishana because of the proximity of Brazil to Wapishana settlements. In a few villages on the Brazil/Guyana border, Portuguese is as widely used as English.

### Some Wapishana words and expressions and their meanings

The following list of words and phrases were obtained by elicitation from Christopher James, Oscar Marcello and Dolly Winters. The items are given both in English orthography and phonetic script.

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<sup>2</sup>For a fuller word list, readers are referred to Tracy (1972) Dictionary: English - Wapishana, Wapishana - English (Unevangelised Field Mission; August 1972)

hello	kaimen	karmen
goodbye	makuna	makuna
thank you	kaimen ūat	kaimen ūat
it doesn't matter	na isha pan	na ifa pan
we are cold	wa kadamai din	wa kadamar din
i am right	uwar sak chiiap	uwar sak tjiap
i can't tell you	na angkaichan kuadan puat	na ankartjan kuadan puat
she swept the yard	uparaidan panep pejroo	uparardan pansp pedgro
i love you	u naikda pugar	ŭ nai?da pugar
how are you	shapang pugar	ŭapan pugar
[i am] fine	kaimen	kaimen
and you	pugarman	pugarman
river	waooj	waodz
creek	waoojisap	waodz'sap
ocean	paran	paran
hill	unauwach	unauwatŭ
one	bau?dap	bau?dap
two	daiutam	darutam
ten	baukooka	baukoka?
cat	pishan	pifan
cow	tapeej	tapedz
dog	ariimirak	arimirak
pig [domesticated]	kush	kūŭ
horse	kawar	kawar
rat	kuurii	kuri
bird	kutidzra	kutidzra
chicken	kirik	kirik
dove	uuoorek	uore?
duck	bai	bar
humming bird	piimuk	pimu?

parrot	waruk	waru?
turkey	piiřuu	piřu
fish	kupai	kupar
ant	mat	mat
village captain	tuushau	tufau
councillor	fooman	foman
God	tumingkyar	tumĩkkyar
black eye [peas]	kumas	kumas
banana	sij	sidz
bitter cassava	kanuj	kanudz
cutlass	soopar	sopar
farm	jrakap	dzrakap
farmer	jrakapsan	dzrakapsan
pepper	diijak	didza?
plant [v]	paawan	pa:wan
woman	jrun	dzrun
man	dauniur	daunaur
people	piikyanau	pikyanau
Wapishana	wapichan	wapitjan
hammock	jramak	dzramak
house	kabun	kabun
eat [v]	aroopan	aropan
arrow	bairii	barri
bow	sumar	sumar
shoot	baikyan	bai?yan
gun	mukau	mukau
pet	ijrai	idzrai

R E F E R E N C E S

Amerindian Integration

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