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- Cover: *A Mekranoti Indian child of central Brazil wears shell jewelry for a festival that ends one of his village's long jungle treks. Photograph by Dennis Werner. Story on page 42.*

# Trekking in the Amazon Forest

Text and photographs by Dennis Werner

*Laden with possessions and produce, Brazil's Mekranoti Indians spend much of the year traveling en masse through the jungle*

Full of thorny palms, stinging ants, scorpions, and poisonous caterpillars, the Amazon forest of the southern part of the Brazilian state of Pará seems less than inviting to most travelers. Yet the Northern Kayapó Indians who inhabit this region spend a considerable amount of time wandering about in the forest. Not only is the forest cool, since the sun rarely penetrates the thick canopy of broad leaves and hanging lianas, but materials for baskets and ropes are never more than twenty feet away, and food, mostly animal, is also available.

Local game consists mainly of small animals—macaws, armadillos, pacas (a species of large rodent), and monkeys. On very rare occasions hunters come across a herd of peccaries or a fat tapir. Although not as plentiful as the Indians would like, the local fauna has so far been adequate. For the Indians, the Amazon is neither a hell nor a paradise.

In the forests to the west of the Iriri River lies a community of about three hundred Northern Kayapó Indians, called the Mekranoti. Their village is built in a circle of square, thatched houses—one-room for the most part—surrounding a clearing of hard clay. In the middle of this plaza is the men's house, which serves as a meeting place, a factory for manufacturing weapons or ceremonial gear, a social club, and a transient hotel for bachelors or married men whose wives have just given birth.

At least two or three times a

year, at irregular intervals, the Mekranoti pack up their possessions, their pet birds and dogs, and their children, and leave their village en masse. Heavily weighed down with pots, guns, infants, and baskets of food, they spend the next three weeks to three months wandering about the tropical forest. Almost every day the entire group abandons its day-old camp and moves to a new location, often only a half-hour's walk away.

This behavior is not unusual among hunters and gatherers, societies that bring collected foods into camp every day and thus avoid storing or carrying large quantities of comestibles. The Mekranoti, however, are not hunters and gatherers but swidden agriculturists. When they depart on trek, they carry huge bundles of cultivated manioc root and manioc flour, sweet potatoes, and bananas, often making return trips to village and forest gardens to replenish dwindling supplies. While on trek, the Mekranoti gather and eat a great variety of wild fruits and tubers, but they probably have never managed to survive on wild foods alone.

Today, even though the Indians can wander in a huge tract of forest, abounding in diverse and often unclassified flora, they consume only a few wild products in any quantity—Brazil nuts available year-round, tubers found in mountainous areas in the dry summer months from June through August, and açai, a rainy season palm berry. But these products cannot provide the essential calories that only garden staples can supply. Yet despite this lack of wild vegetable foods, the Mekranoti often go on long trips lasting several months, requiring them to haul heavy loads of garden produce.

While greater contact with contemporary Brazil may eventually destroy Mekranoti trekking patterns, the practice is still quite strong. Although even the oldest Indian cannot remember a day when he did without Western goods, the village's first peaceful contact with modern civilization occurred only in 1954. Previously, the Mekranoti raided other Indian and Brazilian settlements for guns, pots, and chickens. Fighting continued for years after 1954, and as recently as 1967, the Mekranoti were still raiding their traditional enemies, the Kreen Akrore.

Since 1966, the almost continuous presence of missionaries or government personnel in the Mekranoti village seems to have dampened the group's bellicosity. Nevertheless, they are still a long way from integration into contemporary Brazilian society. Only one Indian speaks any Portuguese, none can handle money well, and most have a great deal of difficulty counting above six. The group's traditional social structure, ceremonies, and means of subsistence, including trekking, are still very much alive.

The Mekranoti have not yet clashed with Brazil's development of the Amazon Basin and continue to enjoy unhindered and exclusive access to the vast area of tropical

*Most treks are part of ceremonies that end in elaborate festivities when the Mekranoti return to their village. At right, a child is dressed for the celebration in feathers that he has inherited the right to wear.*





forest that they have been calling home for the past twenty years. They have limited their recent trekking activities to the confines of this region although there is no apparent pressure to do so.

Before 1954, their raiding activities took them much farther afield than they now need to go. In 1947, one party traveled as far east as the Araguaia River to attack the Tapi-rapé Indians, while another section wandered westward to the Tapajós River—a distance of almost 500 miles. During these lengthy trips the Indians subsisted on garden produce stolen from other Indian or Brazilian settlements.

But today, FUNAI (the Brazilian

Indian Foundation) gives them Western products in exchange for artifacts and Brazil nuts collected by the younger men on special expeditions. Since the Mekranoti no longer need to rob their neighbors, they have settled down to some extent, breaking the monotony of daily routine with what they probably consider trips around the corner.

The Mekranoti go off on trek during both the wet season and the short dry season. During the year I recently spent with these Indians there was not a drop of rain from June 17 until August 17. The small tributary that supplied the village with drinking and bathing water

dried up into a stagnant pool. When the rains do come, they are torrential, flooding large areas of the land around the village for much of the year.

Gardens must be burned and planted just before the rainy season begins about September. A few crops, notably corn, ripen early, but are quickly exhausted. The period of greatest productivity begins with the following dry season, when the Kayapó staples—manioc, bananas, and sweet potatoes—begin to dominate the gardens' three- or four-year life span.

Although the Mekranoti can choose from a greater variety of foods during the wet season, they

feel that they eat better during the dry season when their most-prized food—sweet potato—matures. Also, because the small game in the region is both easier to find and easier to approach during this season, hunters are significantly more likely at this time to return from a hunt with meat to feed their families. The easiest method of hunting—using modern flashlights to find game at night—works only during the dry season. Finally, abundant fishing catches are possible only when the streams are low and Indians can poison fish by beating timbó vines in the water. For all these reasons the Indians call the dry season *amêx kam*, literally, the

“good time,” as opposed to *na kam*, the “rainy time.”

On treks during the wet season, the Mekranoti's daily movements between campsites are shorter. The Indians have more trouble making paths and walking through flooded land and must construct lean-tos as protection from the rain. In the dry season the distances between encampments are greater, but walking is easier, and the Indians are content to spend the night without shelter, sleeping on leaves scattered on the ground.

The Kayapó also organize different kinds of treks for different purposes, distinguishing above all between ceremonial and noncere-



*Above left: On the last day of a trek, the women, who have returned to the village before the men, bathe for the final celebrations. Above: A woman plants sweet potatoes, the prized Mekranoti staple, in a village garden. Left: An aerial view of the Mekranoti village shows the men's house in the center, two circles of houses, and paths leading to gardens and the river.*



*Villagers return from a three-month trek in search of palm nuts for hair oil.*





monial expeditions. Most Kayapó festivals involve a series of events lasting several months and are sponsored by parents who want to bestow special names on their children aged five to twelve. After the sponsoring relatives and the village chief decide on a ceremony, and the requisite masks—if any—are made, relatively low-keyed activities go on for a month or two. Village members take part in masked dances, early morning and evening sings, and occasional ritual processions—the three signs that a ceremony is in progress. A festival's close, however, calls for a day-long spectacle.

To feed all participants, the Mekranoti require a large supply of tortoises, for which they must go

out on trek. And so, for about a month before the end of a Kayapó ceremony, the village empties out while everyone goes to the forest to gather and rack up as many tortoises as possible.

A typical day during a ceremonial trek starts about four in the morning when the men go to the camp men's house to begin their singing. Kayapó songs consist of heavily accented, regular rhythms, usually accompanied by rocking motions and ending with the Kayapó cadence, a sighing, semi-voiced, downward slide. The men sing in deep voices with occasional falsetto barks scattered haphazardly throughout the melodic line.

As the first patches of dawn appear through the forest canopy,

the morning sing comes to a close. Usually the men calculate the start of sings fairly accurately by observing the night sky, but when the moon is too new, singing may begin as early as one-thirty or as late as five-thirty. A sing ends with a series of yelps and exhortations addressed to men who have failed to appear that morning, such as, "Wake up! Do you want the Kreen Akrore to attack you in your sleep?" The men return to their respective families for a morning meal of cold sweet potatoes or other leftovers from the previous evening. Packing begins shortly thereafter and most people have abandoned their temporary homes by seven or seven-thirty.

Occasionally there is some con-



*Above: In camp, a woman prepares a meat pie from grated manioc and game. Right: When camping during the dry season, families sleep on leaves in the open air.*



fused argument over the site of a new camp, but construction usually begins with little delay. A camp consists of two or more long lean-tos that face each other. The men often help put up the basic frame, but construction generally falls to the women, who spend the next three or four hours gathering wild banana and palm leaves to finish the shelters.

By noon most of the structures are up and some women have already left their children with relatives while they chop wood for the large communal oven or for the small household fires that keep people warm at night. A few women gather *açaí* berries or wild bananas. Many busily make repeated trips to the previous day's encampment to

fetch the garden supplies to feed the traveling village. Still other women lounge idly on their sleeping mats or calmly paint one of their children in delicate striped-line designs, the body decoration for which the Kayapó are famous. This routine continues for the afternoon, broken occasionally by a chilling Mekranoti wail, provoked by events ranging from an old woman's remembrances of things past to a fatal machete accident. Often such a wail welcomes back a young man who, having lost his way in the forest the previous day, has just returned to camp.

While the women build the houses, most of the men take off individually for the forest and a long day of hunting. A few younger

men clear paths on which the families must travel, and some elders help transport garden produce or butcher game as the hunters return one by one. A successful hunter may return early, give his catch to the ceremonial sponsor, and relax for the rest of the day. Unlucky hunters are apt to return just before dusk.

After a bite to eat at home, the men like to congregate for an evening's gossip or singing in the men's house. While the ceremonial sponsor provides food for the male assemblage, some of the younger men rack up the tortoises brought in that day. In the men's house, stories of the day's hunting, tales of past military adventures, deals with FUNAI officials, and even





arguments about inflation of the Brazilian cruzeiro continue well into the night.

At night back in the village, respected Kayapó elders customarily saunter about the central plaza, telling stories and lecturing people to be good to each other. On trek some of the less prestigious elders try their hand at this traditional oratory. Sometimes they are laughed down, but they may gain enough respect to continue their haranguing in the main village. The men seated in the men's house often seem to ignore the elders' preaching, but occasional comments and questions reveal the audience's attentiveness. Later,

loud hoots from the men's house signal the breakup of the meeting and the end of the day.

While this pattern of ceremonial trekking is still most common, the Mekranoti recently have begun to alter their wandering strategies. More frequently, only the men go out to collect tortoises. Women are reluctant to expose their children to the dangers of the forest and to abandon the medical services that a resident FUNAI nurse offers. The men also seem somewhat reluctant to go on trek. Many of them attempt to excuse themselves by complaining of sickness and injuries, but eventually they find themselves cajoled into joining an

expedition. When only the men go out looking for tortoises they may divide themselves into their men's societies—the Mekranoti village has two such civic political fraternities—and take off in two directions. If the women and children do not accompany them, the men travel much faster and are certain to return sooner.

But regardless of who does the trekking, the last few days of a Kayapó ceremony remain the same. As the women and children go on ahead to the main village, the men stay in the forest to paint their bodies and prepare the racks of tortoises for a grand procession into the central plaza. After delivering



*Far left: At the village, men assemble live tortoises, which they have gathered on trek, to deliver to the ceremony's sponsors. Left: On trek, men carry tortoises on racks from one camp to the next. Below: A village elder helps butcher tortoises.*



this heavy cargo to the ceremonial sponsors, the men proceed to the men's house or to their own homes where the long process of body decoration begins. Having bathed, everyone in the village is first painted with black, long-lasting, genipap dye. Red urucú mixed with palm nut oil follows, giving the Indians' skin an attractive sheen.

After these initial preparations, Indians who have inherited the privilege add ornaments—eggshells or feathers glued on the body, intricate headdresses, necklaces or bracelets. Once decorated, the Mekranoti spend most of the final days of a ceremony showing off their finery in periodic processions

around the men's house. Usually, an exhausting all-night parade around the village—complete with singing, the rhythm of rattles, and stomping dances—brings the ceremony to a dramatic close.

Although most treks are ceremonial, the Mekranoti, who spend about a quarter of their time out on trek, also take to the forest for other reasons. Usually they cite some locally unavailable, but essential, item as a reason for a non-ceremonial trek, but there are other excuses, such as friendly visits to relatives in neighboring communities, which may be as far as 150 miles away. Generally, the daily routine of these treks resembles

that of the ceremonial journeys.

The most important distinction between the two types of treks has to do with community relations. Normally, when in the village, married men live with their wives' extended families. When out on non-ceremonial treks, a man will travel with this same set of relatives. On ceremonial treks, however, people sleep next to a very different group. The night before such treks, the male sponsors, of whom there is always more than one, go to the men's house and call upon their male relatives, both real and fictive (through choice or inheritance), to help them collect the tortoises needed to climax the ceremonies.

The process looks very much like a choosing up of softball teams. Husbands are accompanied by their wives and children. Since everyone has a different set of fictive kinsmen, every ceremonial trek puts families together differently—a novel way for tribesmen to become better acquainted with their fellows.

While I was in the village, about half the population took off on a three-month trek in search of palm nuts for hair oil, while the other half spent a few weeks traveling to a larger river to fish. Another trek fetched a kind of resin that the women needed to paint designs on children's shaved heads. All of

these expeditions lasted at least several weeks, but there were also shorter trips away from the village. Individual families often took off for a few days to get meat. Several times, the men left the village to collect masking materials or to chase herds of peccaries. These shorter trips were not like treks because they did not involve carrying garden produce. But the longer excursions were every bit as difficult as the ceremonial treks.

Since the Mekranoti so willingly expend great energy carrying around garden produce, trekking must provide benefits greater than a few bottles of hair oil. Recently, some anthropologists have argued

that trekking, where it occurs, is a response to meager sources of protein. Although the Amazon River and some of its major tributaries are renowned for their generous stocks of fish and the richness of the surrounding wildlife, this great natural wealth is not found in the remote areas of the Amazon Basin away from the fertile flood plains of the major rivers.

Where the Mekranoti live, fish and game are relatively scarce, and garden products—sweet potato, banana, manioc—are notoriously low in vegetable proteins. While they are a good source of some proteins, Brazil nuts alone, or in combination with starchy produce,





*Left: For a couple of months before a trek, an occasional ritual signals that a ceremony is in progress. Below left: During the festivities at the end of a trek, villagers form a procession. One mother carries a child with a heavy feather headdress. Below: During the very last moments of a festival men hide under leaves, preparing to grab masks that they will hoist on poles to mark the ceremony's end.*



cannot supply the Mekranoti with the proteins that only animal sources can provide. The Kayapó must roam over great distances to capture game to satisfy their basic dietary requirements. Trekking is necessary, regardless of the work required.

While in the village, Indians eat meat about six out of ten days, but on trek this average climbs to about nine out of ten. This difference is due largely to the greater amount of time hunters on trek spend searching for game. When living at home, men hunt about nine hours a week, but out in the forest this average soars to twenty-eight hours a week. Hunters bring back game on about half the days they go out.

This figure remains the same on trek and at home, even though competition over a day's hunting territory is much greater while on trek. And so considerably more meat is captured and consumed while traveling out in the forest. Thus far, this procurement strategy has protected the Mekranoti from protein deficiencies, but their nutritional future may depend on continuing freedom to wander over large tracts of land.

Although protein plays an important role in the origin of Mekranoti trekking, it cannot explain why these Indians did not try to reach game in easier ways. They could have simply spread out, planting gardens and building houses



throughout the jungle. Then each family could live off the resources of its own local territory. But the Kayapó prefer to live in large villages where trekking is the only way to reach scattered wildlife.

Perhaps the desire to stick together comes from the tradition of Kayapó warfare. The Mekranoti explain the raids they carried on before 1967 as a means of revenge, looting, or kidnapping. (One old Brazilian man, a middle-aged Tapiapé woman, and three young Kreen Akrore who were kidnapped as youngsters still live in the Mekranoti village.) Although the Mekranoti have calmed down in the last

ten years, they are periodically subject to fears that some day the Kreen Akrore will return to avenge the 1967 raid.

In the past, when such fears were stronger, the village often moved to a more distant, safer location. This terror of enemy retaliation accounts for the Kayapó desire to congregate in large villages rather than dispersed residences. Fear may also have been responsible for the Mekranoti's former reluctance to send only men out on treks, leaving the women defenseless. As cooperation replaces violence between Kayapó and other peoples, trekking habits may give way to

other adaptations to the tropical environment.

Although protein scarcity and warfare may account for Kayapó trekking, they do not explain why the Mekranoti remain together when they trek, while their relatives in the savanna regions of central Brazil break up into smaller groups at these times. Mekranoti men on trek must compete for hunting territories, while savanna groups send hunters off in different directions. The Mekranoti have failed to adopt this easier method because they are unable to use the small local streams, which are choked with water plants and dead trees; thus, they are obliged to travel overland. Anyone who has waded for hours through knee- to waist-high waters can appreciate the work required to hack a path through lowland tropical forest. Since the Mekranoti spend almost two hours a day transporting bundles alone, a good path is of utmost importance. By traveling together, the Mekranoti can save time cutting trails. Although the Mekranoti have to keep hunters in the same area, this disadvantage is easily offset by the work saved on path making.

Three factors—protein scarcity, warfare, and difficulty of transportation—have dictated the Mekranoti style of trekking. Today, game is still dispersed and the making of paths is as difficult as ever, but warfare has disappeared. Now, before organizing an excursion, the Indians take into consideration such new factors as government-sponsored medical services and the sale of Brazil nuts to FUNAI. Nevertheless, as long as treks provide basic needs, the Mekranoti will keep traveling. □

*The Mekranoti chief, above left, dresses for a festival in genipap dye and inherited ornaments. During the last days of a ceremony, young women, painted and adorned with eggshell ornaments, gather at the house of the ceremonial sponsor.*

