

Kayapo Facts

1 • INTRODUCTION

The Kayapo Indians are one of the main Amerindian (native) groups that remain in the rain forest around the Amazon River in Brazil. The Kayapos resisted assimilation (absorption into the dominant culture) and were known traditionally as fierce warriors. They raided enemy tribes and sometimes fought among themselves.

Their first steady contact with Europeans did not occur until the 1950s. Since then, they have had contact with squatters (settlers with no land rights), loggers, miners, and eventually Brazilian government officials. Logging and mining, particularly for gold, have posed threats to the Kayapos' traditional way of life. Other threats have included agricultural activities and cattle-ranching in cleared-out sections of the jungle. The increasing destruction of the rain forest threatens the delicate balance between humans, plants, and animals successfully maintained for thousands of years by Amazon Indians such as the Kayapos.

2 • LOCATION

When the Portuguese conquerors first arrived in Brazil, there were about five million Amerindians. Today there are only about 200,000, of which a few thousand are Kayapos. They live along the Xingu River in the eastern part of the Amazon rain forest, in several scattered villages. Their lands consist of tropical rain forest and savannah (grassland). The Amazon basin, which includes the Amazon River and its tributaries such as the Xingu, is sometimes referred to as Amazonia. It includes parts of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

3 • LANGUAGE

The great diversity of Amerindian languages is partly due to groups of people living considerable distances from each other. Because of their relative isolation, groups developed distinct mythologies, religious customs, and languages. Even quite small groups such as the Kayapos are divided into smaller tribes with their own chiefs, although they all speak the Kayapo language. The pop star Sting (1951–) made the struggles of the Kayapo known to a wider world. One Kayapo chief, Raoni, left his Amazon homeland for a time and travelled widely with Sting. Another Kayapo who travelled with the musician was the panther-hunter N'goire.

4 • FOLKLORE

There is an interesting legend among the Kayapos who live along a lagoon. They say that if one rises at dawn and looks across the lagoon, one can see the ghost of a white man on horseback galloping along the shore. This ghostly rider is said to wear a full suit of armour, rather like a European knight, or perhaps a Portuguese conqueror.

The Kayapos believe their ancestors learned how to live communally from social insects such as bees. This is why mothers and children paint each other's bodies with patterns that look like animal or insect markings, including those of bees.

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The flamboyant Kayapo headdress with feathers radiating outward represents the universe. Its shaft is a symbol for the cotton rope by which the first Kayapo, it is said, descended from the sky. Kayapo fields and villages are built in a circle to reflect the Kayapo belief in a round universe.

5 • RELIGION

The Kayapos believe that at death a person goes to the village of the dead, where people sleep during the day and hunt at night. There, old people become younger and children become older. In that village in the afterlife, Kayapos believe they have their own traditional assembly building. Kayapo women, it is thought, are permitted only short visits to deliver food to their male relatives.

6 • MAJOR HOLIDAYS

Special days for the Kayapos revolve around the seasons. In the Amazon, these are the dry season and the rainy season. Kayapo ceremonies are also linked to their holidays. For example, an initiation rite is held when a boy reaches puberty or when he receives, as a small boy, his special ancestral name. The important dry-season celebration called Bemp (after a local fish) also includes marriage rites as well as initiation and naming ceremonies. Kayapos do not divide their time into secular and religious occasions. The religious, natural, social, and festive elements are all interconnected.

7 • RITES OF PASSAGE

When children are born, the marriage ties between a husband and wife are formalized. A man may have two or three wives. Young children receive special ancestral names. Naming ceremonies are regarded as an important means of helping the child develop social ties and an identity as a Kayapo. The naming ceremonies are held in each dry or rainy season. Other seasonal rites include special dances or ceremonies related to the crops the Kayapos grow.

8 • RELATIONSHIPS

The Kayapos have a traditionally hospitable way of greeting visitors to their homes. Food is prepared by the women, and a bed made of bamboo is laid out for a guest. On occasions body paint is worn (usually geometric designs in black or red paint). Adornments such as shell earrings or brightly coloured feathers decorate the head.

Ceremonial life is very important and continues year-round. Kayapos are often either in the midst of a ceremony or making preparations for the next one.

9 • LIVING CONDITIONS

The Kayapos live in thatched-roof huts without room divisions. The thatch for the roofs is made of palm leaves. The huts are quite roomy and large enough for an entire family. Instead of using mattresses, the bedding usually consists of hammocks. These are much cooler and more comfortable in a jungle environment.

Health protection is achieved through the use of medicinal roots and herbs. The Kayapos also have medicine men.

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For transport the Kayapos use canoes to travel long distances in the Amazon. They can also trek for days or weeks at a time.

10 • FAMILY LIFE

Teenage women of the village are prime candidates for marriage. They usually select partners who are suggested by their families. Only after the birth of a child is the marriage formalized. Traditional birth control has been discouraged in recent years in order to increase the tribe's numbers.

The Kayapos live in large family groups in villages. The women harvest the family's garden for vegetables. They also prepare body paint with the help of their children. Colour dyes are created from mixed fruits and charcoal. The men hunt and fish. Every husband will usually have between two and three wives, each with several children.

11 • CLOTHING

Traditionally men cover their lower abdomen with sheaths. The most striking ornamental addition to their attire is a light wooden lip disk about two-and-one-half inches (six centimetres) in diameter. The disk stretches their lower lip out to produce the Kayapos' extraordinary and very distinctive appearance. The usage of the lip disk is dying out among the younger men, who find it uncomfortable. In fact, younger men often wear Western-style shorts. This is due to increasing contact with Westernized Brazilians who have come to the Amazon to log, farm, or mine gold.

A Kayapo chief wears ceremonial feathers as part of his headdress. A headdress made out of bright golden-yellow feathers looks like the rays of the sun. Particular family links are indicated by the use of matching parrot feathers. The feathers signify initiation into adulthood. Other ornaments include beads, cotton bands, or shells, which women also wear.

Girls and boys wear coloured cloth bands of various bright colours. These are tied and sometimes knotted below the waist or crisscrossed across the chest. They also wear ornaments such as beaded necklaces, wrist-bands, and armbands. Young Kayapos are usually barefoot. Some Kayapo chiefs occasionally wear Western-style thonged rubber sandals.

Body paint is an important addition for men, women, and children alike. It is not a casual form of make-up. The specific markings and occasions for wearing it are linked to particular rituals and activities.

12 • FOOD

Fish is a main source of protein in the Kayapos' diet. Wild fruits and Brazil nuts are eaten. Vegetables are harvested, and animals such as monkey and turtle are hunted. Some animals are eaten rarely except during festivals. Kayapos are skilled hunters. They use blowguns and darts dipped in a type of poison called curare, which instantly paralyzes an animal.

Due to greater contact with the world outside their own culture, Kayapos are changing their diet. They can now purchase rice, beans, cookies, sugar, and milk from village stores that have cropped up in the Amazon to supply loggers, miners, and farmers.

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13 • EDUCATION

Most Kayapos continue to teach their young people the skills necessary to survive in the rain forest. These include hunting, fishing, trekking, and making and using canoes. Growing vegetables, beading, body paint preparations, and cooking are skills Kayapo girls are expected to know. Some missionaries in the Xingu River area have attempted to offer a more Western-style education, including reading and writing. However, many Kayapos have been extremely wary of accepting this type of schooling. They are concerned that their children will be lost to them and will forget traditional skills.

Recently, in a protected area of the Xingu Reservation, a school was set up to teach children from various tribes. They learn reading, writing, and arithmetic and receive information about the ways of people outside their own culture.

14 • CULTURAL HERITAGE

Completing a full cycle of festivals is essential to Kayapo culture. Singing, chanting, and dancing are important to Kayapo life. Men and women also sing as they go out on a hunt or work the land. They use a type of rattle or maraca and sticks to beat rhythms.

15 • EMPLOYMENT

Many Kayapos were pressured into taking part in gold mining in the Amazon River in the 1980s and 1990s. Gold mining is hard and often dangerous work. In addition, the mercury used in mining seriously pollutes the rivers.

Kayapo chiefs are helping direct their people in a variety of activities including harvesting nuts, fruits, and vegetables, as well as the construction of modern housing for recently arrived settlers. This means that the Kayapos no longer restrict themselves to traditional hunting and fishing. Because they earn money for their work they can purchase goods they did not have before.

16 • SPORTS

Traditionally the Kayapos did not develop sporting skills separately from skills that were useful for work. Hunting, fishing, and trekking, for example, have now become sporting activities in white society. In Kayapo society they are survival skills; their recreational value is secondary. Some Kayapos obtain great pleasure from teaching these skills to younger members of the tribe. Acquiring prowess in any or all of them is a source of pride.

Kayapo children enjoy swimming along the shores of the Xingu River. Until the 1990s, this river was completely unpolluted. Villagers who have had more contact with people outside their own culture have learned to play soccer.

17 • RECREATION

Storytelling is a significant aspect of Kayapo life. It is a way of transmitting Kayapo legends and history as well as a way of preserving the identity of a people. It is also a form of entertainment. Mostly, however, it forms part of the rituals that give structure and meaning to the life of the

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Kayapos. Storytelling is interwoven with dance rituals and ceremonies. These follow a definite cycle, linked to nature and to the changing seasons.

18 • CRAFTS AND HOBBIES

Kayapos make beautiful beaded necklaces, some a brilliant blue or yellow. They also make bracelets and earrings using shells or stones, and headdresses made from the brightly coloured feathers of various Amazon birds. The Kayapos are skilled in preparing and applying intricate designs as body paint. They weave sturdy and flexible hammocks. They also make their own canoes as well as fishing and hunting implements such as spears, clubs, blow guns, arrows, and darts.

19 • SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Many activities in the Amazon threaten a way of life the Kayapos want to preserve. Poverty, a population explosion, and an unequal system of land ownership have driven many people into the Amazon region in search of land. Deforestation of the Amazon is occurring at a rapid rate. This destruction is accelerated by the activities of cattle ranchers who grow beef for export to fast food chains in the United States. Land that is over-grazed by cattle quickly becomes completely barren.

Commercial loggers have also contributed to the destruction of the Amazon jungle by providing tropical hardwood for construction in Japan, Western Europe, and the United States. The destruction of so many trees contributes to carbon dioxide pollution in the atmosphere and, therefore, to global warming.

Mining is yet another threat to the way of life of the Kayapos and other Amazon peoples. Smelting furnaces need charcoal, and much of it is taken from irreplaceable virgin forest. A harmful by-product of the Amazon gold rush has been the introduction of new diseases to which the Kayapos have no natural immunity. Also, mercury poisoning affects Amerindian communities downstream from mining activities. Mercury released into the atmosphere is another form of pollution.

Some Amerindian groups, including the Kayapos, have been attacked and murdered in the search for land. Others have had their land forcibly taken away. In addition, many have had to work for very low wages in miserable conditions in some of the frontier towns.

The Kayapos are working hard to find ways of confronting the problems posed by the arrival of people who do not appreciate the delicate ecological balance of the Amazon region.

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