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The trees are my grandparents: the Ecuador tribe trying to save its culture

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Taish, the Shaman in Wayusentsa, Ecuador. Photograph: Dan Lior

Deforestation and climate change threaten the Achuar people's existence - but a genealogy site is trying to protect its future

The [Amazon rainforest](#) has been home to the Achuar people for thousands of years. Skilled hunters and fishermen, they have a spiritual connection with nature and consider themselves the forest's greatest protectors.

Life is governed by their ancestors, with family history passed down orally from generation to generation. Yet traditions are being undermined as the young are tempted away by modernity, while their fragile ecosystem faces man-made destruction.

But now, the same technological developments so often deemed a threat to traditional ways of life, have offered the Achuar people, and other remote tribal people, the opportunity to preserve their legacy and fight back against the eradication of their histories.

A team from the global genealogy website MyHeritage has been spending time with groups like the Achuar in an attempt to preserve their family heritage.



Livia and her youngest daughter on their way to fish, Wayusentsa. Photograph: Dan Lior

Entsakua Yunkar, shaman of the Achuar Sharamentsa community in [Ecuador](#), said the project was helping to assuage his fears that “history can disappear” very quickly.

“I feel like the father of this community,” Yunkar said. “If I don’t exist here, this community can’t have power and be successful. I feel that I give positive energy to the communities and families here.

“The big trees are my grandparents. They speak to me. I feel very sad when I think about what will happen in a long time. The world is changing. Our goal is to protect this area and our culture so it will be alive for many years.”

The very existence of tribal communities around the world is threatened by a whole host of factors.

Imported diseases, such as influenza, measles and chickenpox, can prove deadly when tribespeople have not had the chance to develop any immunity, according to Survival International, the global charity for tribal people’s rights.

[Deforestation](#) and climate change are also huge threats, while technology and modernity risk destroying communities by luring younger members away to urban regions.

The genealogy project is the brainchild of Golan Levi, a qualified architect who earlier in his career spent years creating giant sculptures with tribes around the world.

“I heard fascinating stories [during his time as an architect],” he said. “They had a history of oral tradition, but they didn’t have a means to preserve their heritage.

“The oral tradition keeps the essence of their communities but they’re losing the pieces. They might know the meaning behind a ceremony but they wouldn’t be able to tell you the name of their great great grandparents.



A portrait of an Achuar family. Photograph: Dan Lior

“When I started working at MyHeritage I realised it was the perfect fit to document those stories.”

The group’s first project was with the Himba people of Namibia in 2015, with subsequent delegations visiting the Nenets in Siberia, the Emberá, Ngäbe, Naso and Guna in Panama, and several tribes in Papua New Guinea.

“Everything varies from tribe to tribe ... but family and how they collaborate with each other is key,” said Levi.

He explains the groups have initially been met with scepticism, but their willingness to muck in breaks down barriers with the tribespeople, who eventually agree to be photographed, filmed and interviewed. “It takes time to build trust,” he adds. “We live as they live in order to understand how they view the world and this is something they greatly appreciate.”

Franklin Wasump, an Achuar who hails from the Wayusentsa community, echoed Entsakua Yunkar’s concerns about his culture disappearing.

“In many years the Achuar culture may disappear, as happened with other nationalities, because there are many young people that don’t want to preserve the culture,” he said. “I am sad because although today it is still preserved, in the future it might not.

“It is the responsibility of the father to teach, to talk to the young children in order not to lose the culture.”

Yampia Santi, an Achuar leader from the Wayusentsa community, said he hoped the project would raise awareness. “The Achuar tribe will be around for many more generations, which is why we ask you tell your friends about the rainforest and the Achuar people who live there.”

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/16/the-trees-are-my-grandparents-the-ecuador-tribe-trying-to-save-its-culture>