

GEOGRAPHICAL ENVIRONMENT

The greater number of the Arawaks of Northern Brazil and Southern British Guiana are found within a broad savannah some twenty or thirty thousand square miles in extent, reaching from near the Venezuelan boundary to the western banks of the Essiquibo River and from the Amazon forests to the foot of the Pakaraima Mountains; or from $58\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ to 63° W. Long. and from $1\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ to $4\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ N. Lat. It is a great undulating plain dotted here and there with grass-covered round-topped mountains. Besides these numerous single mountains there are also three short ranges which are somewhat forest-clad: the Mocajahi, south of the river of the same name and west of the Branco; the Moon, between the head of the Takutu and the Branco and the Kanuku, between the Rupununi and the Takutu. The latter forms a picturesque chain which continues in a broken series eastward to the Corentine.

The level plain is interrupted here and there by depressions which become shallow lakes in the rainy season. During the long dry season the waters evaporate and leave behind great meadows whose numerous narrow streams are lined with Eta palms which give character to the scenery. One of these depressions between the Rupununi and the Ireng was the mythical Lake Amucu on whose shore stood El Dorado, the Golden City of the Spaniards.

The rainfall amounts to sixty inches in the eastern savannah and only to forty-two in the western section. The rains extend over a very short period, hence the rivers cease to flow very soon after the beginning of the long dry season, leaving the

fish confined in deep pools in the bends of the rivers where the Indians secure them by poisoning the water. When the lowlands are covered with water the animals retreat to the mountains and fall an easy prey to the hunters. The grass on the plain, which grows to the height of three or four feet, is burned when it becomes dry to destroy the poisonous snakes and also to drive the deer into snares where they may be killed by men in hiding.

This geographical environment lends itself to the development of numerous small villages whose inhabitants live in the open and supplement their food supply by hunting and fishing, while their fields, their mainstay for food, are located in the nearby forests.

Originally all the tribes of this central group of Arawaks which now claim relationship must have lived near together and have been a part of one great nation. The Atarois have been absorbed by the Wapisianas, the recent invaders of their territory; the Tarumas, no doubt, moved down the Branco and the Negro, where the advance guard became extinct, while another group passed over to the Essiquibo. The Mapi-dians, a sub-tribe of the Atarois or a fragment of the main tribe, left the savannahs, went east and became forest dwellers. Each of these tribes will be considered separately, but the Wapisianas, the largest of the tribes, whose culture and language are best known, will be studied in detail as the representatives of the characteristic culture of the whole group.

THE WAPISIANAS¹

The Wapisianas were first seen by Dutch traders who made their way up the Essiquibo River to the savannah country south of the Pakaraima Mountains early in the eighteenth century. In 1738 Nicholas Horstman, a German surgeon in the employ of the Dutch West India Company, was sent up the Essiquibo to discover the city of El Dorado and to find a passage to the Amazon. He made these discoveries and crossed the divide to the Rio Negro, where he turned traitor and remained with the Portuguese. He met La Condamine to whom he gave a map he had made of the country traversed. This map was published ten years later by d'Anville, in the first great map of South America.² At that time the Wapisianas occupied all the Brazilian savannahs south of the Takutu and the Uraracuera rivers.

When Robert Schomburgk first explored Southern British Guiana in 1835 he found the Wapisianas occupying the territory stretching from the forests of the Essiquibo on the east to the Parima (Rio Branco) on the west and between the parallels of 2° and 3° north latitude. They had for neighbors the Macusis on the north, the Atarois on the south and the Paranauas on the west. The region east of the Essiquibo was unoccupied, as it remains even today. The Wapisianas were regarded as intruders by the Macusis, whom they had forced northward.

Today the Wapisianas, having absorbed the Atarois, have

¹ Wapityans, Wapischana, Wabijanas, Mapisianas, Mauixianas, Uabixanas, Uapixanas, Uapichanas, Vapeschanas.

² J. A. J. de Villiera, *Roy. Geog. Jour.*, May, 1911.

taken possession of all the savannah country in Guiana south of the Seriri Mountains. In Brazil there are a few families south of the Takutu and a few more north of the Uraracuera, principally along the Majuri River, where they depend almost entirely upon agriculture. Near the mouth of the river there is a village of fifteen mud-walled houses with a population of sixty individuals. Behind the low terrace upon which the village is built, stands a hill three hundred feet in height which was one great field of corn, mandioca, bananas, plantains, cotton and pumpkins, fifty acres or more in extent—much the largest clearing we found in the whole region.

The old men living east of the Rupununi River remember the stories their fathers used to tell about their migration from the West.

About fifty years ago a mulatto named Rogers, who died but recently, came from Demarara and settled between the Rupununi and the Cuduwini rivers, where he found the whole territory occupied by the Atarois. He witnessed the coming of the Wapisianas, who intermingled freely and intermarried with the Atarois until that tribe has become completely absorbed.

The Wapisianas speak of a number of tribes who in former times lived in separate groups but have more recently been absorbed into their own tribe by intermarriage. Among them were the Karapeiu, the bud people; Iliou; Tarewinpidian, the bat people; Sapparas, cassava cut and dried for drink; Powisien; Inkerikub, a very bad people, short and powerful; and the Paravilhanas, who lived near the Mountains of the Moon. The last member of the Paravilhana tribe, an old man, died in 1914. They were called Cilikunas by the Wapisianas and were probably a subtribe or very closely related to them.

A branch of this tribe living on the lower Branco were the first to come into contact with the Portuguese.

The Wapisianas are the most reliable and the most industrious of all the Guiana tribes. The wholesome influence of Mr. Melville, who has lived among them and has been their guardian for twenty-five years, is largely responsible for their development. He has taught them the value of continuous labor and the use of money, and has protected them from the unscrupulous exploiter. No traders or missionaries have yet established themselves among them. Hence their natural honesty, their simple purity and their primitive religious ideas have not been destroyed.

MATERIAL CULTURE.

HOUSES.

Their villages are composed of a few houses grouped together without regularity in the open savannah near the forests. The houses may be occupied by a single family or by two, three or four related families. They may be rectangular, round or oblong, but in any case they must have at least two doors at opposite sides or ends, one for men and one for women. There is often a small third door through which refuse is carried. Neither the grouping of the houses, the direction of the walls of a single house, nor the position of the doors seem to have any relation to the points of the compass. These things are determined by convenience only.

The houses are built with tight walls for protection against the cold nights of the dry season when the winds blow from the mountains across the flat plains. The walls are either of thatched palm leaves or of adobe held in position by wattled

poles. The accompanying ground plan (Fig. 1) and detailed description of a house at Calton will suffice to show the general type of construction.

The house is in the form of an ellipse; 30 feet wide, 46 feet long and 22 feet high. The two main posts, set deep into the earth, are 6 inches in diameter and 22 feet in height. They are forked at the top to receive the ridge-pole which is allowed to project two or three feet beyond its supports. The other eight posts are the same size and 8 feet high. They are placed 2 feet inside the wall and used to support the plates. The sixty-eight rafters are stayed midway between the plate

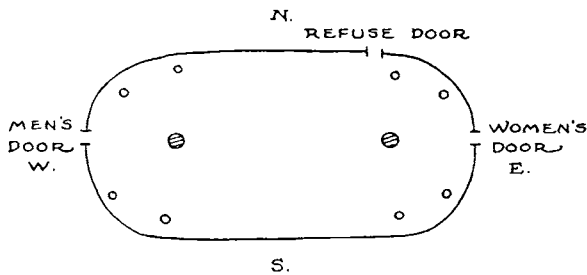


FIG. 1.—GROUND PLAN OF WAPISIANA HOUSE.

and the ridge-pole by lashings to a horizontal pole. The roof is made more secure by having two long poles on each side placed diagonally from plate to ridge and lashed to the rafters. On either side of the gable a larger rafter is lashed to the ridge-pole. About four feet below the ridge a heavy pole, lashed horizontally to these two rafters, supports the upper ends of all the gable rafters. By this method a small triangular space is left for the escape of the smoke and for ventilation. The roof at the end of the ridge projects sufficiently to protect the smoke hole from storms. The lower ends of the rafters come down inside of the house a foot from the wall. The

laths are lashed on top of the rafters a foot apart. A foot above the bottom lath on the under side another lath is fastened. From between these two laths, rafters extend three feet over the side walls. This method of construction breaks the slope of the roof and protects the walls.

The walls are 5 feet high and 8 inches thick. Poles are set in pairs 5 inches apart and small poles an inch in diameter lashed on the outside and on the inside of these, thus leaving a space 8 inches wide for the adobe. The adobe is mixed with the feet in a hole in the ground near the house. When well mixed, it is worked with the hands into small lumps and tamped down between the poles. On the inside the wall is made quite smooth, but often the outside is left so rough that the poles are not covered. The wall is plastered up tight against the roof. The spaces left for doors are filled with a movable door of leaves. During the rainy season the doors are kept closed at night as a protection against mosquitoes. The roof is made of leaves of the aeta palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*) and put on much like any other thatch roof.

There is often a small round house nearby which is used for making farina and cassava bread. This has no inside framework or side walls, but is built of sloping poles and covered with leaves tight to the ground to keep out the dogs and other pets. The house is 12 feet high and 10 feet in diameter. The natives have chickens now and build similar houses for them.

The rectangular houses usually have higher walls, which may be made with adobe or palm leaves. They are often made of the long leaves of the cokerite palm (*Maximilian regia*) tied horizontally to the upright posts. The upper leaflets are bent down over the mid rib. The roof is often made in the same

way. Beginning at the bottom of the rafters, two or three leaves are tied to the rafters together, then another course tied six or eight inches above, overlapping the first. Another method is to plait the leaflets together. A house of this type often has a wall across the middle dividing it into a closed sleeping room and an open working or lounging room without side walls. For the walls and sometimes for the roof as well, the long leaves of the cokerite palm are used.

Temporary shelters on the river side for use when fishing or away in the forests at hunting stations are made in the form of an equilateral triangle. For one corner a tree is selected in a convenient place. For the other corners, poles are set about ten feet apart—the proper distance for the length of their hammocks. Then three poles are lashed in a horizontal position six feet from the ground. The roof is made of the long broad leaves of the troolie palm (*Manicaria saccifera*) with the stalks all centering at the tree corner. As the leaves are put on they cross on one side and the other of the tree, thus making that corner sufficiently high to run the water off on the three sides of the shelter. The cross pole at the foot extends beyond its supports and broadens the roof for the protection of the hammocks hung along the sides. This small shelter, which can be built in a few minutes, gives a space to hang three hammocks or even six or nine if desired. The fire is built in the middle and serves to cook the meal, to keep the hunters warm at night and to dry wet clothing which may be hung from the roof. It would be difficult to devise a more comfortable or a more serviceable shelter. The one necessity is the palm with a very long frond.

The larger communal houses have no inside partitions separating the family apartments. Each family has its own

private section between hammock posts and each woman has her own fireplace, but there is a common working place either in the middle of the large house or in a building outside made for the purpose. The end of the large house near the men's door is regarded as the men's section. Here the men hang their hammocks during the day, receive their male friends, and eat their common meal. The opposite end is reserved for the women. Men and women of the household may use either door, there is no absolute rule, but strange men or women are always taken in through their respective doors and are expected to use these doors only.

In some villages there is a wall-less house used as a men's lounging and working place and for the entertainment of of visiting men.

DOMESTIC UTENSILS.

There are no windows in the house and the doors are low and narrow. The interior is gloomy and dark, but after a time the eye begins to distinguish objects. The floor is of mud, worn smooth by the constant tread of bare feet. The soil had been removed before the house was built. The smoke from numerous fires has blackened the framework and higher parts of the roof. These fires are kindled in the regular cooking places or under the hammocks to keep the naked sleepers warm at night. Each family has its own cooking place, about which are grouped cooking pots, storage-water pots, gourds for carrying water, food bowls and firewood. The very large jars used for storing drink are some distance away in a more secure location and are covered with leaves. Platforms are made on the crossbeams for storage purposes. High up near the ridge-pole are hung the most valuable things

or those seldom in use. Corn is stored by tying the husks together in small bunches and hanging them over the cross-beams. Bananas are seldom hung up in bunches to ripen, as is common among the whites, but are cut off the stem in hands and strung on a cord between the rafters. Bows and arrows are kept on one of the platforms or on supports stuck over a rafter into the roof. The blowgun must be looked after with great care or it will warp or twist out of line. It is never stood up on end, but is suspended either from one end or from two loops in cords properly spaced. Shoulder bags and work baskets are hung on hooks made of forked sticks and fastened to the rafters. All kinds of small articles are tucked into the thatch. The first things to attract the attention upon entering a house are the hammocks swinging between every pair of posts in the house. When the men are not at work in the daytime they are usually found resting in their hammocks, because it is cooler inside and, what is more important, the pestering flies do not enter these dark interiors.

When the house has a wall-less room or there is an outside men's house, the hammocks are usually hung there through the day. When the nights are not too cold or the mosquitoes too numerous some of the men sleep here as well. They often prefer to sit on stools to work. These are made either of wood or a turtle shell. A short section of a small log is flattened on top and cut away below to form a leg at each one of the four corners, or a section of a tree with three branches is selected and cut to make a three-legged stool. The most common form, however, is the one made from the carapace of the large land turtle. A hole six inches across is cut in the back forming a base on which the stool stands.