

## The Yagua People: Indigenous Tribe of Peru

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### Abstract

The overarching theme of the project is the indigenous Yagua people of Peru, who live along the Amazon River. Despite the fact that the project focuses on their lives as a whole, taking their culture and way of life into account, the study focuses on a more significant challenge that the Yagua people face. Their health problems, as well as topics affecting the arrival of modern medicine and the muchacha phenomenon, are investigated thoroughly. Deforestation, drug trafficking and illegal mining are also discussed as prominent current issues. We chose to investigate the Yagua people as we had some exposure to the variety of the Peruvian culture through the virtual meetings with students from the ESAN University (Lima) during the Global Understanding course and prepared a research project for the XVII International Competition of research, practice-oriented and creative projects in English among university students organized by the Ural State Pedagogical University. The conducted small-size case-study research is based on the qualitative research method. We analyzed primary and secondary sources. The primary sources arise from a qualitative research we conducted through the survey research technique. We used the structured interview as a tool and we interviewed students from University of ESAN with whom we attended the Global Understanding Course together and their course instructor. We also interviewed the photographer Goran Jovic who had visited the tribe and has raised the awareness of their culture through his photographs. The secondary sources arise from an extensive internet search for data and available information online. The findings showed that majority of the surveyed Peruvian fellow-students were unaware of the Yagua people's existence, let alone their health challenges. Thus, we believe intercultural and cross-cultural contacts, partnerships, and collaborations can contribute in the raising awareness of various problems and can help us learn about various challenges people face around the world.

*Keywords: indigenous Yagua people, intercultural, challenges*

### Introduction

Indigenous tribes are of significant importance in many facets of our life that we are unaware of. Such issues might include climate change and global warming control, agriculture, natural resource management, biodiversity, and many more. With these communities purposefully sequestered, it's no wonder that many people are unaware of their existence, let alone their difficulties. The Yagua people of Peru live in such a tribe beside the Amazon. We have undertaken to investigate the peoples since we made contacts in Peru through the Global Understanding course. The goal of this study article is to promote awareness of the Yagua people's issues, which include the so-called "muchacha" phenomenon, their health system, and illicit mining, deforestation, and drug activities.

## **Factual Information**

The Yagua are an indigenous tribe of roughly 6000 people that live in Columbia and northeast Peru. They presently reside along the rivers Amazon, Napo, Putumayo, and Yavari. They date as far back as 1768. The Yagua tribe has been notified as a minority community, even characterized as “national minorities”, according to Toledo (1999). Furthermore, after reviewing several internet sources, we discovered that, while the Yagua language, which includes a range of Quechua vocabulary, is still spoken, it has been designated as an endangered language due to the fact that there are only around 6000 native speakers. Pena(2009, p. 20) quotes Thomas Payne’s findings by saying “As of the early 1980’s, Thomas Payne estimated that 75 % of women and 25 % of men were monolingual in Yagua. Spanish proficiency varies; we have observed a few instances of probable multilingualism stemming from the desire of Yagua-speaking parents to have their children speak only Spanish.” They are well-known for their culture of recognizing hardworking and competent workers. Having said that, it is crucial to remember that throughout history they have been legendary hunters, diligent farmers and they have become well-known for their exquisite. Basket weaving, pottery, and the manufacture of blowguns are examples of other crafts. The expertise required to accomplish such trades is passed down from generation to generation. Their parenting practices are not dissimilar to most social norms. They adhere to conventional gender conventions. Boys are required to provide for their families by hunting small animals, whilst girls are expected to keep the home in order. Yagua boys are taught to hunt small animals with a blowpipe, and they are very skilled at it.

## **Methodology**

We started the research by analyzing secondary sources from an extensive internet search for data and available information online. We focused mostly on other research papers and online books. This helped us come to knowledge of the most prevalent issues at the time concerning the Yagua tribe. After acquiring factual information, we moved onto the next part of the research; conducting a small-size case-study research that is based on the qualitative research method. Interviews were used as a primary source for acquiring data. We used the structured interview as a tool and we interviewed students from University of ESAN with whom we attended the Global Understanding Course together and their course instructor. We also interviewed the photographer Goran Jovic who had visited the tribe and has raised the awareness of their culture through his photographs and videos. The questions were formed around the information that was previously acquired. The interviews with the Peruvians were done by email, while the interview with photographer Jovic was done through social media; via Instagram. We wanted to first confirm the general facts about their way of life, beliefs and traditions, and next assess the interviewees’ understanding of the current issues that the Yagua people are facing.

## **Health Issues**

The Yagua people, like any other indigenous community, confront significant challenges in their healthcare system. The most notable problem is the insufficient introduction of modern medicine. Their system is comprised of a shaman, apparently

performing the role of a doctor, yet the two are polar opposites. Shamans are more concerned with the spiritual and intangible causes of sickness, and their job in the community is to explain to the patient what factors have caused their illness. In contrast to our professionals, who utilize biology and symptoms to establish a diagnosis, shamans are not able to do it in this way since they lack essential expertise and practice. Because it is the only way they know, the Yagua people turn to natural medicines for healing. There have been numerous attempts to apply modern medication but they have failed for a variety of reasons. For a start, it may not have been introduced appropriately. One should not try to utilize the medication as a substitute for their present ways; rather, it should be used as a supplemental treatment when traditional therapies are insufficient. "White medicine need not be seen as a substitute for shamanism, but as a therapeutic complement which can work concurrently with traditional pharmacopoeia" (Chaumeil, 1984, p. 52). Second, even if the medicine is broadly acknowledged by the public, price is not publicly available. It is too costly, especially given the Yagua people's economic position. More so, individuals are not given enough information to enable them to operate with modern pharmaceutical drugs. Lastly, in addition to their unique medical procedures, other issues like as hygiene and malnutrition have a role. They have been robbed of cultivable areas as a result of invaders seizing enormous swaths of land and abusing the Yagua people, but this is only one of numerous concerns. As a result, solutions to help improve Yagua's health tend to be largely preventative in character, such as immunization programs under pre-vaccine care, the establishment of indigenous health advocates, and a reevaluation of herbal medicine.

### **The "Muchacha" Phenomenon**

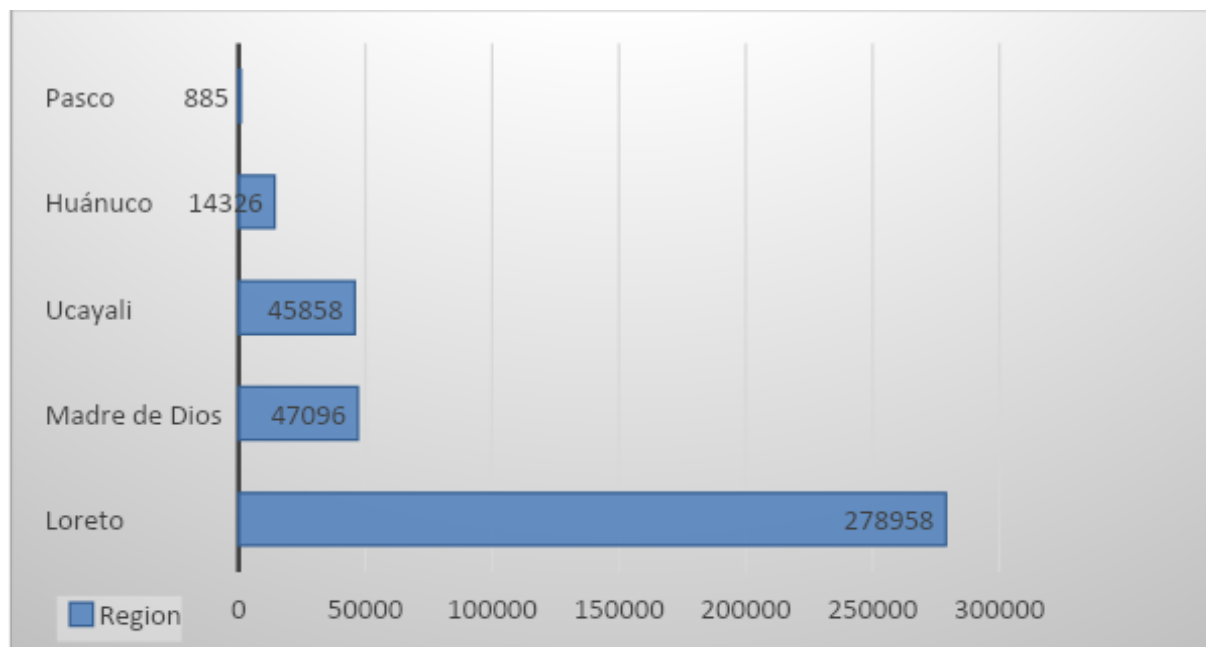
Peruvians have a saying that goes way back in time, and it states that the Yagua people are the cheapest labor in the Loreto area. The patronage system, which is the interplay of economic transactions based on the use of male labor (as seen with lumber, rubber, skins, and daily or seasonal work), has been prominent and constant throughout the years, until recently. In the last 10 years, the focus of attention has shifted from males to women, and that is where the concept of the muchacha or muchacha phenomenon is derived from. Until 1975, men left and women stayed; now, the converse is true. First and foremost, the market for "muchachas" or servants, is in trouble; examine the rising number of ads proclaiming "se necesita muchacha" (servant or aid sought) that one sees in the windows of Limenian or provincial residences. If it is true that the vast majority of females employed as maids are of indigenous descent, they will mostly migrate from the Sierra to the coastal area where there is the highest demand. However, many highland females are now refusing to work as domestics since they are itinerants selling food or clothes. Furthermore, and this is without a doubt the driving element, demand is significantly expanding as the Peruvian middle class emerges, which is extremely thirsty for the advantages of the well-to-do. Jean-PierreChaumeli (1984) has discovered that the people of Caballo-Cocha have been vocal that everybody wants a muchacha now. Aside from the devalued chores that are assigned to them (cooking, washing, and child care), the vast majority of Yagua muchachas are not compensated or educated. They are most typically kept in solitude in the patron's house. They may be seen at Caballo-cocha, sitting mutely by the window, hiding from passengers and reappearing once they have passed. In the presence of their new "adopted family," they learn to reject their roots and fully break connections with their community. With the existence of racial

consciousness in the minds of the Yagua women, new times are on the way. Until recently, women have been the most deprived of knowledge and abilities in society, and they are now regarded as keepers of the elders, customs, and the preservation of their language.

### Illegal Mining

Illegal mining has proven to be a major environmental crime for the indigenous peoples that live in the area of activity. The Yagua are one of these tribes. The ramifications of this heinous illegal conduct may be seen in areas such as Madre de Dios. Extensive online research led us to the discovery that not so long ago, reporters from Mongabay Latam visited San José de Karene, a town in Madre de Dios with an official name where the impacts of illegal mining could be witnessed. “According to the research, illegal mining has stolen 6,282 hectares (15,523 acres) of forest from the community” Praeli (2021, para. 31). The Mongabay Latam research demonstrated that, despite all attempts by communities to remedy the issue, unlawful mining has damaged 129 villages throughout the five areas analyzed. These communities face a paucity of remote sensing satellites as well as well-defined territorial boundaries. The seized territory can then be invaded and legitimized by outsiders. Catoteni and San José de Karene have also experienced this. Praeli (2021, para. 37) reports back and quotes Francis Quiqie, who is a member of the governing board of San José de Karene by stating “Today, customs are no longer practiced. Even parents themselves do not handle this knowledge, and this is being lost due to mining. If we lose our customs, then it would not even make sense to call ourselves an Indigenous community.”

Figure 1: Illegal mining in hectares

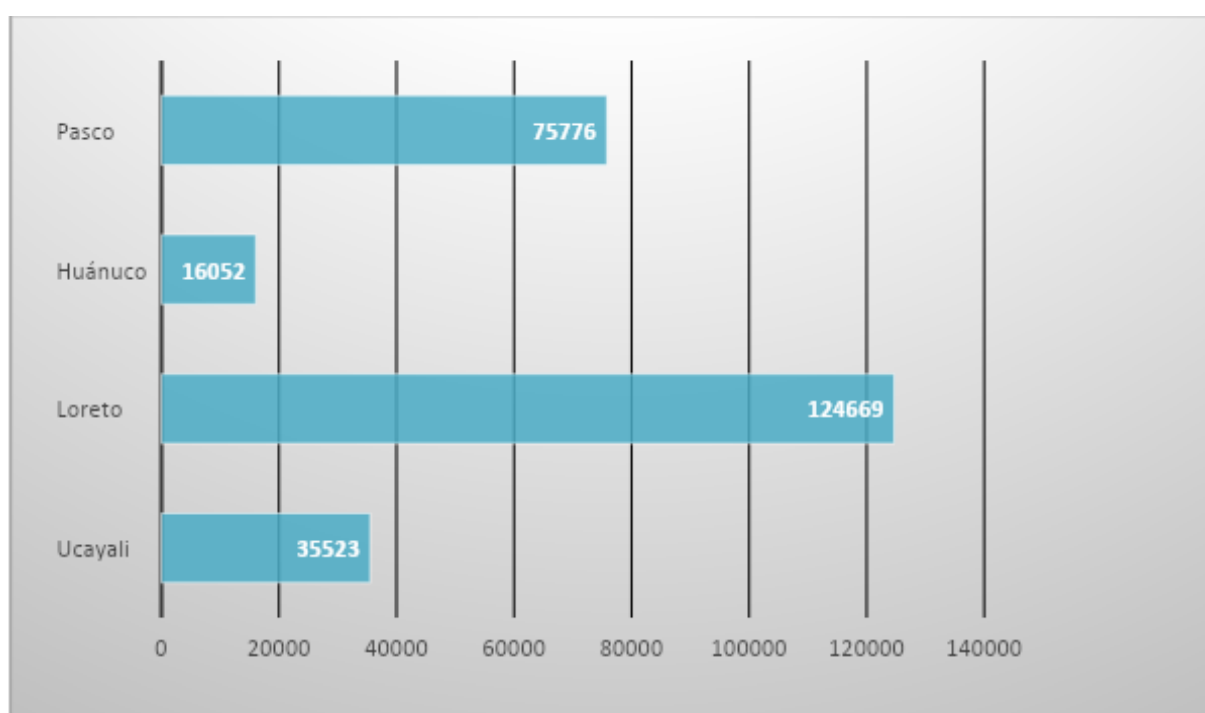


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### Drug Trafficking and Deforestation: the Link

Drug trafficking has become a problem in the recent two and a half years. The death of Arbildo Meléndez in April 2020, just after the start of the COVID-19 epidemic, signaled the start of the violence that would explode in the coming months. Meléndez was the head of the Unipacuyacu Indigenous community in Huánuco, which was made up of members of the Kakataibo ethnic group. So far this year, four Kakataibo chiefs and three Ashaninka leaders have been assassinated. In terms of the existence of criminal activities, particularly drug trafficking, Kakataibo lands in both the Ucayali and Huánuco regions have become the most critical places. There have been multiple reports from multiple journalists that have entered the area and witnessed wreckage in the region and deployed a drone to photograph what is thought to be a secret airfield. The residents of the town have claimed to be terrified.

Figure 2: Illegal coca crops in hectares in Loreto, Ucayali, Huánuco and Pasco

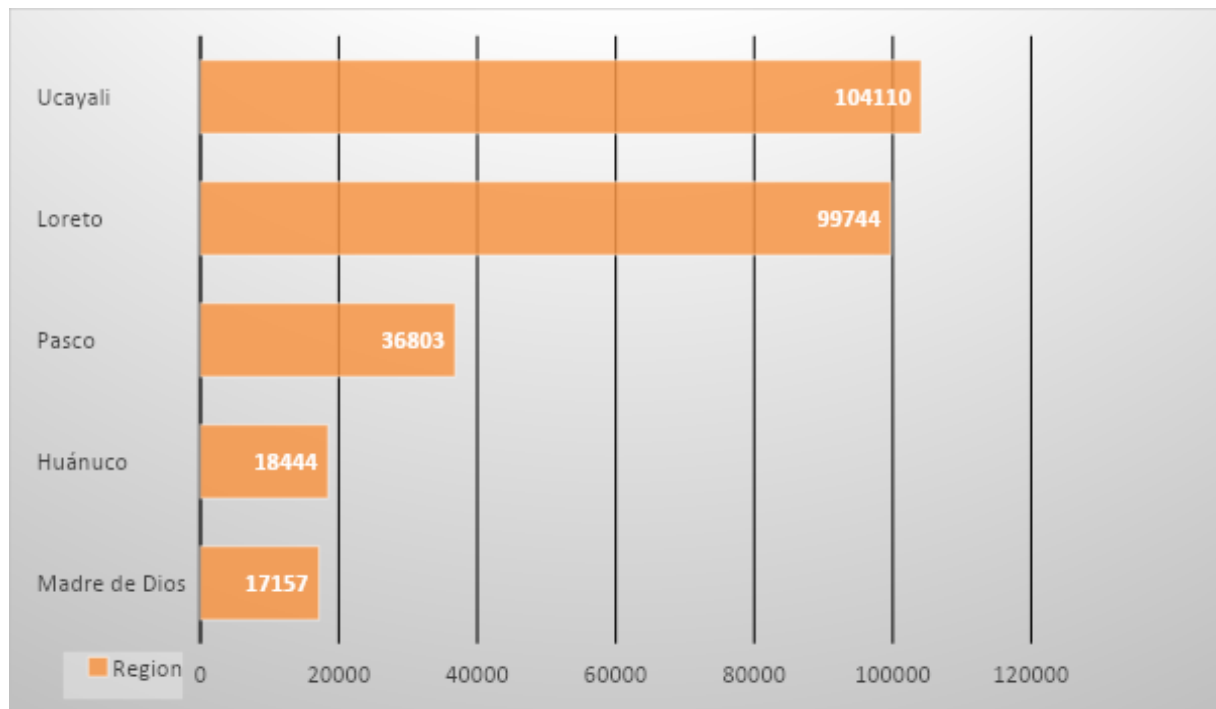


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Across Ucayali, indigenous tribes confront a similar situation. According to the reports by Pareli (2021), as a result of drug trafficking, at least 16 indigenous villages are threatened with deforestation. Statistics from 2020 may paint an even bleaker image, since Peru lost more forest land last year than it had in the preceding 20 years. "It's disgraceful," said IBC's Ráez (2021, para. 23) of Peru's rising deforestation, outpacing the 2019 rate by 50,000 hectares. Berlin Diques, president of the Ucayali branch of the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDSEP) also spoke up last year by saying "During the pandemic, illegality has increased a lot, because while we were obedient and did not go anywhere, the criminals continued to advance". The Ministry of Environment indicated in a letter response to Mongabay Latam's inquiries that "the regions where the biggest spike in deforestation has been detected during 2020 have been Ucayali, Loreto, and Madre de Dios, compared to

2019." The motivators have been numerous. The government also reported that Indigenous people may have been disproportionately affected by forestry difficulties in 2020. They have been more vulnerable and prone to a range of diverse and unscrupulous agents who have exploited the situation as a result of the absence of control measures as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Per a government reporter's assessment of deforestation in Peru's five regions, about 276,000 hectares worth of forest land have been destroyed inside Indigenous areas in the previous ten years. Indigenous regions surrounded by deforestation have appeared, and many of its inhabitants have banded together to safeguard their territory. However, their rebellions have become exceedingly hazardous.

Figure 3: Forest Loss 2012-2020 in hectares



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### Collected Data from the Interviewees

As previously said, we conducted interviews with four Peruvian students, their ESAN University professor, and photographer Goran Jovic. It is crucial to highlight that three of the students and the professor were uninformed of the existence of such an indigenous group in the first place, therefore they were not much assistance, but rather aided in the goal to raise awareness of their presence and difficulties. One of the students who had visited the tribe confirmed whatever accurate information we had learned on the Internet, but she had nothing new to offer to what we already knew. She, on the other hand, mentioned the Yagua's deforestation problem. "Everything they do on a daily basis, everything that they use every day such as tools for hunting, or making baskets, or even their clothing, all comes from different types of trees. When I visited they showed us different techniques that they use and it was beautiful", she

commented. She also added: “the trees are their most precious source to be able to continue living and that is why this situation is so devastating to me”. Photographer Goran Jovic was asked the same questions as he had previously visited and lived with the tribe. He refused to comment on matters such as their health care system or the "muchacha" situation, but he was unaware of illicit mining and drug operations. Regarding their hygiene, he stated that the media's portrayal of them is erroneous; they are more exposed to their outside environment, therefore it is unavoidable for them to get dirty or muddy, but this does not imply that they have poor hygiene. He discussed with us more about their customs and way of life, since his mission is to raise awareness of such tribes' ancient practices and the necessity of understanding and accepting them. When asked how he felt being among such people, particularly the Yagua, he responded:” for me, it is a return to the simplicity of life, something that we in the modern world have somewhat lost along the way”.

## Conclusion

Raising public awareness for the difficulties the Yagua tribe faces that include the "muchacha" occurrence, their medical system, and illegal mining, forestry, and organized crime is the purpose of this research piece. Their health-care system struggles with the entrance and implication of modern medicine as a replacement for their traditional methods. With this in mind, as well as their rejection of the medicine, or simply poor conditions for it to be excepted, solutions to help improve Yagua's health do seem to be mainly precautionary in nature, like vaccination programmers under pre-vaccine care, the institution of indigenous caregivers, and a reassessment of traditional remedies. The "muchacha" phenomenon, or rather the development in the demand for such maids, poses a significant danger to the women of Indigenous descent. Nonetheless, with the presence of racial awareness in the Yagua women's thoughts, new times are on the horizon. Women were historically the most deprived of information and talents in society, and they are today recognized as the protectors of the elderly, traditions, and the retention of their language. Furthermore, new problems have risen in the past two years, especially since the epidemic of the corona virus. Illegal logging and drug trafficking have proven to be severe environmental disasters for the indigenous peoples that reside nearby. Both are related to the growing issue of deforestation. Indigenous territories encircled by deforestation have emerged, and many of its residents have come together to protect their land as a result of the consequences. Their uprisings, unfortunately, have grown quite dangerous. According to our empirical findings, the plurality of the polled Peruvian fellow-students was uninformed of the Yagua people and their challenges. As a result, we agree that intercultural and cross-cultural connections, partnerships, and collaborations may assist raise awareness of various issues and help us learn about the numerous challenges individuals experience throughout the world. It is critical to help them, just as they help us in ways we cannot comprehend.

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## Author Notes

**Teadora Stefanovska** is a first-year student at the University of American College's School of Foreign Languages in Skopje, North Macedonia. Teadora is also a permanent resident of Skopje. She and her partner chose to research indigenous tribes as part of an international competition on the same subject. They came in second place thanks to their research project. Her interest in the differences between cultures began at a young age, prompting her to constantly research the living standards and traditions of people like the Yagua. She believes that such projects can raise awareness and, as a result, help those who are less fortunate than others.

**Iskra Andreeska** is a first year student at University American College Skopje, at the faculty of foreign languages. She was born and raised in Ohrid, however, she is now located in Skopje for college. Iskra believes indigenous groups play an important role in today's world due to the fact that they constantly make efforts to protect our land and



biodiversity. By caring and raising awareness about indigenous groups and their problems, we also contribute to protecting their rights as well as our environment.