

## Suya

### 1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family: Suya, (alternate name: Kisedje) from the Ge/Je language family of Brazil, South America. Speak Suya, while a few also speak Portuguese, a product of acculturation (2). “The Suya (Suia), also known as the Tsuva, are a Ge-speaking people” (3).

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): suy (2).

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): The Suya Indians studied by Anthony Seeger are located in northern Mato Grosso, Brazil. They are located in the northern portion of the Xingu reserve (1, pg: 2). “Mato Grosso, Xingú Park, headwaters of Rio Culuene. Tapayúnas in Pará, TI Capoto or Jarina reservation, Kayapó villages” (2). Latitude: -10.149; Longitude: -52.104 (4).

1.4 Brief history: “In the early 1800s, they [the Suya] entered the Xingu River area by coming down the Ronuro River. The Suya were actually two separate groups until 1970. The Eastern Suya lived on the Upper Xingu River while the Western Suya, also known as the Tapayuna (Tapanyuna, Tapanhuna) or Beico do Pau, were three hundred miles to the west, between the Arinos River and the Sangue River in Mato Grosso. The first European known to have contacted the Eastern Suya was the German anthropologist and explorer Karl Von den Steinen, who reached them in 1884. In 1915, the Eastern Suya were devastated by attacks from the Juruna and Northern Kayapo. Their population was so reduced that they could no longer sustain a traditional ceremonial life. Brazilian anthropologists reached them in 1959. A few years later they convinced the Eastern Suya to move to the protection of the Xingu Indian Reserve. In 1968 Brazilian anthropologists and journalists reached the Western Suya, but they also brought along a flu virus that reduced the tribal population from over 400 people to just 40. They too then moved to the Xingu Indian Reserve. By the mid-1980s, there were approximately 100 Eastern Suya alive and about 50 Western Suya” (3, pg: 341).

“The Suya describe their history as a series of cultural or material acquisitions from hostile beings—animals, enemy Indians, and Brazilians. During their migration from the east to the Xingu region, they met with a number of groups with whom they exchanged items and from whom they often obtained women and children. Around 1840 the Suya entered the Xingu region and encountered a group of tribes who spoke different languages but shared a similar culture, often referred to today as the “Upper Xingu Culture Area.” They adopted certain features of Xingu material culture (canoes, hammocks), foods and food preparation techniques (species of manioc and manioc preparation), as well as Upper Xingu ceremonies and body ornamentation but maintained a culture and social Organization common to other Northern Gê societies. The first known contact between Suya and non-Indians was in 1884, when Karl von den Steinen visited. The Suya were peacefully contacted again in 1959 by a Brazilian government “pacification” expedition and subsequently moved back near their earlier villages on the Xingu, where the surviving Tapayuna were moved to join them in 1970. Since then the Suya have been protected from frontier violence and the national market economy by a reservation system that intermittently provides health care and material goods and involves them in a new multiethnic social system. The Tapayuna formed their own village in 1980 and later moved downstream, away from the Suya” (5).

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: “The Suya appreciated our medical aid” (1, pg: 12). **See also 1.4 “Brief History” for information regarding the influence of contact on the Suya population by journalists and anthropologists** (3, pg: 341). “The Suya’s experience with non-Indians has been marked by traumatic population loss” (1, pg: 59).

1.6 Ecology: “The topography of the land through which the motorboat runs on the way to the Suya village is flat; the river winds slowly between mostly forested banks. It is a low, scrubby forest with a fairly heavy undergrowth of thorny plants, not to be confused with the high, clear-floored Amazonian rain forest” (1, pg: 38). “The village itself is located on a large bend in the Suya-Missu River, in the midst of subsistence recourses. There are rivers and lake rich with fish, ample forest for hunting jaguars, tapirs, wild pigs, forest deer, and other game animals as well as for making gardens” (1, pg: 38).

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: **See “Mean Village Size,” for information regarding population size** (1, pg: 9). **See also 1.4, “Brief History” for an estimated population size on the Suya** (3, pg: 341).

### 2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): “Upon my request through the chief, the men cut a garden plot for us and we planted it in September with manioc, corn, sweet potatoes, yams, peanuts, bananas, and sugarcane” (1, pg: 7). “In the steadily expanding ring of gardens around the circle of houses they plant the staple crop, manioc, which grows well even in less fertile earth” (1, pg: 38).

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: The Suya get most of their protein from fish and other game animals like tapir, armadillos and monkeys (1, pg: 41).

2.3 Weapons: Bows and arrows are used for hunting game (1). Suya men also have access to guns because of their contact with outsiders on the Xingu Reserve (1, pg: 45). “Men hunt collectively, individually, or on family excursions” (1, pg: 45).

- 2.4 Food storage: No mention of how food is stored; most likely meat and proteins are eaten as they are hunted and brought in and manioc and other garden vegetables are just pulled from the ground as they are needed; no probably not a whole lot of food storage is necessary (1).
- 2.5 Sexual division of production: Women are in charge of gathering food from the garden and processing manioc, while the men spend much of their time hunting and fishing (1). “To men fall the responsibilities of obtaining fish and game for consumption as well as most raw materials for manufacture. To women fall the tasks of processing all vegetable and most animal products for consumption by the family or the village and bearing and rearing of children” (1, pg: 41).
- 2.6 Land tenure: Seeger talks about how some families will go on trips during the dry seasons and live elsewhere than their main village, but usually, members stay in the same established village (1).
- 2.7 Ceramics: No mention of ceramics
- 2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: “We were given less and less food from the common cooking pot until I went fishing. Then we were given more, but again, the amount diminished as I occupied myself with concerns other than subsistence. After awhile, it was clear that in order to stay and survive, I would have to participate in the food-gathering to an extent that I had never imagined. I took part in nearly every collective hunt and fishing expedition during the first ten months” (1, pg: 7). “After an initial distribution within the house most garden products are brought in small quantities from individual gardens and eaten by their owners. Without a garden of our own, it was merely good fortune that we received any of this food. The Suyu were not maliciously starving us, but we did not fit into their preconceived ideas of non-Suyu foreigners, and we did not belong to their food-sharing patterns. In addition, we [Seeger and his wife] were a couple. Nuclear families are important economic units. As a single man I might have been adopted into a family and fed, but as a couple we were expected to be more independent” (1, pg: 7). “We arrived in January [after leaving the Suyu for a few months] to find our garden full of corn ready to harvest. From then on we were able to share our garden products with other families and set up food exchange networks. We always received more than we gave, but at least there was exchange. Exchanging food also strengthened my relationships with my best informants” (1, pg: 10).
- 2.9 Food taboos: “Transformation is an important concept in the Suyu life. Transformation may be either from natural to social or in the reverse direction. An example of the former is the processing of food. The Suyu must eat animals and products of forest and garden to live, but they do not eat them raw or indiscriminately. The natural product must be transformed before it can be eaten, with the exception of certain gathered fruits, insects, and honey” (1, pg: 24). **For the full list of food taboos, see the attached graphs.**
- 2.10 Canoes/watercraft: Yes, they have canoe technology because they rely heavily on fishing as one means of getting protein (1).

### 3. Anthropometry

- 3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):
- 3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

### 4. Life History, mating, marriage

- 4.1 Age at menarche (f): “Girls whose breasts begin to swell are said to be... “swelling” or “budding.” The term does not refer to menstruation, since the first flow of blood occurs when a girl has sexual relations for the first time, usually well before puberty” (1, pg: 114).
- 4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):
- 4.3 Completed family size (m and f):
- 4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):
- 4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):
- 4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:
- 4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: “Adultery may be fairly common when a married man and an unmarried woman are involved. It is less common, and not condoned, when a man has sexual relations with another man’s wife” (1, pg: 109).
- 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:
- 4.9 Inheritance patterns:
- 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: “When the older men would go to bed, anytime between 8:30 and 10:00, I would retire also. We left the plaza to the young men who pursued their amorous adventures in the night hours and slept more during the day than either the adults or the anthropologist” (1, pg: 14). If a woman gives birth to a child that is deformed, or if she has twins, usually the child/children will be buried (1, pg: 151).
- 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception?: “Sexual relationships are considered dangerous for men. Intercourse is restricted for a long time after the birth of a child, after killing an enemy, after the death of a spouse, and during ceremonies or ceremonial periods” (1, pg: 108).

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”)

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process: Yes, the Suyu believe that a fetus is made out of semen (1, pg: 112).

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

4.17 Preferential category for spouse: “Preferential matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, a group of siblings marrying another group of siblings, and brother-sister exchange (the exchange of men between two houses) are all considered good or ideal marriages” (1, pg: 129).

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms: Unmarried women tend to have more sexual freedom than married Suyu women (1).

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

4.22 Evidence for couvades: Yes, Suyu men go through couvade when their wives are pregnant and must do nothing strenuous; sometimes they even simulate childbirth themselves (1, pg: 150).

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

4.24 Joking relationships: **See “5.7 Joking Relationships” for some information on sexual joking** (1).

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

4.26 Incest avoidance rules: “The Suyu distinguish sisters and mothers from wives and lovers” (1, pg: 110). “The men agreed that it is especially enjoyable, and not too reprehensible, to have sexual relations with one’s “distant” or classificatory sisters. But if a man has sexual relations with all his sisters, he will have none left for ceremonies. This was raised as an issue before a ceremony. Once a man has sexual relations with a member of his ‘*whai-wi-ieni*’ [his sisters, mothers, or sister’s children], she is no longer eligible to perform the tasks associated with her former status” (1, pg: 111).

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony: “Women are said to be best from the time that they begin to swell at their breasts until they have two children and are considered “already old.” This does not mean that their sexual life stops. On the contrary, it merely means that they are stably married and have left the age grade of desirable young women” (1, pg: 109).

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name: Suyu women’s names do not necessarily carry moiety and plaza group membership (1, pg: 107). “Every Suyu possesses a set of between one and forty names” (1, pg: 136). Some of the Suyu names are given through social passage rituals, while others are family names that have been passed down, and then other times family members will have special in-group names for one another that only they are familiar with (1, pg: 137). “A boy receives his name from his mother’s classificatory brother, a name that determines the moiety to which he will belong, body painting he will use, with whom he will sing, etc” (6, pg: 68).

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

4.30 Are marriages arranged?: Occasionally and rarely, a child marriage will be arranged (1, pg: 164).

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

**Warfare/homicide:** The Suyu were probably more war-like before moving to the Xingu reserve, but once they moved to the Xingu reserve, they were expected by the reserve administration to be peaceful and remain within the boundaries of the reserve. During Seeger’s stay with the Suyu, he talks about how, “various groups of Suyu men were on an expedition to pacify the Kren Akoroe tribe” (1, pg: 55).

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

#### 4.18 Cannibalism?

### 5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

#### 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: (See chart below)

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION
		<i>For the Eastern Suyu:</i>		
0-4	8	8	16	17.75
5-9	12	11	23	25.50
10-19	10	8	18	20.00
20-29	7	9	16	17.75
30-39	2	7	9	10.00
40-49	2	1	3	3.30
50+	-	5	5	5.70
Total	41	49	90	100.00
		<i>For the Western Suyu:</i>		
0-4	4	3	7	16.50
5-9	4	9	13	30.00
10-19	5	4	9	21.00
20-29	2	7	9	21.00
30-39	1	1	2	4.60
40-49	1	-	1	2.30
50+	2	-	2	4.60
Total	19	24	43	100.00

Graph from: Seeger (1, pg: 9).

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): “To complicate my first visit, many [Suyu] families too extended dry-season trips to hunt and fish some distance from the village” (1, pg: 9).

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): Several men in the village who are considered the best orators made up the head of the village and form the political system for the Suyu. The main orator who communicates with respective tribes and distributes gifts is called ‘*the Capita*’ the other important role among the Suyu is the ‘*Merokinkande*’ who is the man that decides when a specific ceremony should be performed; he is also consulted on ceremonial etiquette and song (1, pg: 195-196).

5.4 Post marital residence: Uxorilocal; men leave their parent’s huts and go to live with their wives’ family once they are married (1). “The Suyu observe the uxorilocal rule of residence: boys leave their homes to live in the men’s house at a certain time in their lives; when they marry, they go to live with their wife’s family, distancing themselves spatially and socially from their mothers and sisters” (6, pg: 69).

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

5.6 Social interaction divisions: “I was instructed not to work with women or young men because they knew nothing” (1, pg: 11). **See also 4.10 “Parent/Offspring Interactions”** (1, pg: 14). “The most extreme distinction between nature and society is between the group of animals classed as strong smelling and the group of initiated men living in the men’s house located in the village plaza (who have no strong odor). The former is the most natural of the natural and the latter is the most social of the social. Other contrasts are made as well: (1) Adult initiated men are opposed to women, children, enemy Indians, and animals. (2) Adult initiated men, women, and children are opposed to enemy Indians and animals. (3) Adult initiated men, women, children and enemy Indians are opposed to animals. In each case the first element is considered social in contrast with the second element. In different contexts the contrast between nature and society rests on different groupings” (1, pg: 22). One or two communal cooking pots are shared by everyone in the village for cooking food (1 pg: 41). “With rare exceptions, they [women] have no formal roles in the political arena” (1, pg: 107).

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: “Bemused by my ability to write things down and still fail to remember them, they [the Suyu men] kept quizzing me. They also used the technique of saying an obscene phrase very rapidly for me to repeat and then bursting out laughing when I said it” (1, pg: 11). “The Suyu like to laugh” (1, pg: 12). The Suyu have really gross, sexual humor (1, pg: 115). Joking relationships are very particular; you aren’t supposed to make jokes about your wife’s family, but you can make jokes to/about your own affinal family members (1, pg: 117).

5.8 Village and house organization: “He [Niokombedi one of the Suyu chiefs] invited us to stay in his large house in which lived some thirty-five people in one open room. At first we slept in the corner of the house, which resembled a large tobacco barn. Later we were

invited to sleep closer to the middle of the house” (1, pg: 6). They Suyu village is made up of seven houses that form a circular shape around the village with one central plaza (1 pg: 38).

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens’ houses): “At dusk, the men would congregate in the center of the village plaza and talk, or sing, or ask us [Seeger and his wife] to sing. When we sang, they would come into the center as well” (1, pg: 14). “the group of initiated men living in the men’s house located in the village plaza” (1, pg: 22). Suyu men usually enter the men’s house at around the age of sixteen or seventeen (1, pg: 114).

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere: “Our hammocks were slung, a rack was made for our luggage, and we settled down to live” (1, pg: 6). Seeger mentions hammocks several times throughout his book (1).

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: Men and women who are older and have several grandchildren go through a rite of passage where they become clowns. Men are no longer politically active and have special roles as clowns; at this age and women become sexually inactive (1, pg: 115).

5.12 Trade: “The Suyu were especially sensitive to our supply of trade goods because only witches (*wayanga*) hoard things for themselves. It is a tribute to the cultural relativity of the Suyu and to their patience that they never accused us of being witches. The Suyu did not beg or consistently ask for things. They said that if they were always asking for too many things or taking things, I would not come back with more presents” (1, pg: 8). The Suyu must have access to trade on the Xingu Reserve because Seeger mentions the fact that they own guns (1). “The administration of the [Xingu] reservation supplies the Suyu with trade goods on an irregular basis” (1, pg: 55).

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

## 6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6 Time allocation to RCR: “[The Suyu] respected my interest in those parts of their own society that they found interesting—ritual, song, stories, kinship, and ideology. I was an excuse for the performance of rituals: to teach me so that I would know and record them” (1, pg: 12). “Our house was quite active at night, but I slept soundly and missed much of the surreptitious coming and going. The Suyu would often wake us when some public even was occurring, such as a child birth, an eclipse, or a meteor shower, which was another advantage of living in a house with them” (1, pg: 14).

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): “They would tell me things in the dark as fathers tell their children. They took an interest in making sure that I understood. I was almost always referred to the person who knew the most about any given subject, be it a myth, song, house name, genealogy, or history” (1, pg: 11). Curing chants are really important to the Suyu, as is herbal remedies (1, pg: 212).

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): “A child is not considered a fully social being at birth. The Suyu describe the life cycle as a process of transformation that begins at birth, when the newborn child is picked up by some relative, through naming, walking, initiation, parenthood, and old age. Those close initial ties to the natal family and the naturalness of the child are attenuated by giving names, by ties of ritual relationships, and eventually by marriage. The human body is also transformed” (1, pg: 24).

6.4 Other rituals: Seeger mentions a, “short garden-burning ceremony” (1, pg: 9). “The Suyu began their name-giving ceremony, the mouse ceremony, just a few days after our return [in January]” (1, pg: 10). “One man commented to another that he would have good luck hunting because he had dreamed a good dream (which introduced me to dream symbols.) On a different occasion one man asked another, “Did you turn into a bird and fly up to the sky with your grandmother?” (which introduced me to fever visions)” (1, pg: 15). “The Suyu use metaphors in curing chants and in dream interpretation, in humor and in ceremony” (1, pg: 26).

6.5 Myths: **See 6.13 “Religion” for information regarding myths** (1, pg: 25).

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): “There are no work songs, love songs, or lullabies among the Suyu: all their music is confined to rituals” (6, pg: 68). “The songs the Suyu sing stem from three different sources. Their ceremonial repertoire includes very old songs whose origins are described in myths; songs they have learned and appropriated from outsiders; and songs transmitted to the community by “men without spirits” (6, pg: 69-70).

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

6.8 Missionary effect: “The administration of the Xingu reservation espouses a policy of noninterference in tribal affairs” (1, pg: 55).

6.9 RCR revival:

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: Men are not supposed to have sex after the death of a spouse because it is considered dangerous (1, pg: 108). “Corpses are usually buried with all of their belongings, their gardens may be destroyed, and the close relatives go into mourning” (1, pg: 172).

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

6.13 Briefly describe religion: “Suya songs are learned from animals. Music, a central feature of the ritual life of the Suya, is newly obtained from nature every time a ceremony is performed. Similarly, curing chants attempt to instill a particular animal attribute into a person in order to simulate rapid growth, give strength, or cure certain illnesses. The close relationship of human beings and the natural world, described in myths, continues in these symbolic forms. Under certain circumstances nature is reincorporated into the very core of society” (1, pg: 25).

**7. Adornment:** “The permanent body ornaments of the Suya are ear disks, lip disks, and body scarring” (1, pg: 81). “As they [the Suya] age, the design of their ornaments changes and they assume different roles. The degrees of socialization in the life process are marked by the socialization of certain parts of the body through operation and ornamentation” (1, pg: 82).

7.1 Body paint: Yes (6).

7.2 Piercings: “The ear, the organ that is the locus of morality, is socialized by the insertion of a large disk in both men and women” (1, pg: 24). “Both men and women wear ear disks, made of rolled palm leaf or wood, which may reach a diameter of eight centimeters” (1, pg: 81).

7.3 Haircut: When the close relative of someone dies, that person will shave their head as a sign of mourning (1, pg: 175).

7.4 Scarification: “the Suya practice two other mutilations of the body. One is the scarring of bodies of adult men who kill enemies. Numerous parallel, horizontal scars are made on the chest, legs, arms, back, and shoulders, and a few vertical scars are made on the buttocks and the lower back. Killing an enemy and passing through a scarring ceremony confers membership in a special status group with its own ritual rights and duties” (1, pgs 82-83).

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): “The Suya men were evident among the crowd, standing silently apart with their arms crossed, set apart from the other with their red lip disks” (1, pg: 6). “Men also wear large lip disks that alter the shape of their lower lips. Eyebrows and eyelashes are plucked. The body itself is socialized, and bodies that have not been so treated are considered animal-like” (1, pg: 24).

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: During ceremonies, men will usually insert new lip disks and both men and women will paint their ear disks with fresh white clay (1, pg: 82).

7.7 Sex differences in adornment: Only men wear the famous lip disks that the Suya are known for, and men are never to appear in public without their lip disk in place; they even sleep with them in (1, pgs 81-82). “The Suya men say that a good vagina is made, not born. To this end they pull and stretch the lips of the vaginas of women to make them especially large. They maintain that in the “good old days” women’s vaginas hung down several inches” (1, pg: 83).

7.8 Missionary effect: None

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: None mentioned

**8. Kinship systems:** “Kinship is based on an ideology of a physical identity shared by children, parents, and siblings. The socialization of the person is marked by alteration of the human body itself” (1, pg: 27). “Adult men are more concerned with relationships outside of their natal and residential household; women are more concerned with relationships within their own house and related houses; children are not integrated into the adult world and are mostly familiar with the members of their own house and with their parents’ siblings” (1, pg: 127).

8.1 Sibling classification system:

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

## **9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):**

On page 7 of his book, Seeger speaks about fishing with a young man who “suffered from convulsions and needed a companion to keep him from falling out of the canoe,” which sounds like epilepsy; I thought that this was interesting when thinking about homicide within groups for some physical handicaps (1, pg: 7).

The Suyá bathe in the river around 4:30-5:00AM every morning during nonceremonial periods (1, pg: 13).

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