

1. Description

- 1.1 Name of society, language, and language family:** Desano, alternative names: Desana, wirá (wind) or wirá-porá (sons of the wind) (1), Boleka, Dessano, Kusibi, Oregu, Uina, Wina (ethnologue.com); Eastern Tukano (1)
- 1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):** des (ethnologue.com)
- 1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):** The Desana occupy about 4000 km² of rain forest, an area delimited on the North by the Río Vaupés, on the south by the Río Papurí, and on the east and west by modern settlers of Mitú and Yavarete (1).
- 1.4 Brief history:** In their observations of nature, the Desana have also grasped the fact that they must continue to do battle against the natural force of entropy which tends to tear down and degrade their environment. They are explicitly aware of the second law of thermodynamics wherein all energy transfers in an ecosystem tend to result in increasing disorder. Everything from the Desana adaptive system, from subsistence to ideology is geared toward ensuring that energy is maintained and returned to the local environment by keeping population numbers strictly confined to sustainable numbers over the long term (1).
- 1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:**
- 1.6 Ecology:** Scarcity of game animals (1). Temperatures are warm year-round with little or no variation. Rain falls year-round, although between January and March it tapers off so that the inhabitants recognize this time of the year as the “dry season. (1).”
- 1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density:** The total number of Desana malocas can be calculated that at some thirty, with an average of thirty-three persons who form the working domestic units of a given territory (1).”

2. Economy

- 2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):** Bitter manioc, plantain, banana, yams, sweet potato, pineapple, and chili peppers. Maize has very little importance (1).
- 2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:** Fish, “although the Desana emphatically insist that they are hunters, the product of the hunt forms perhaps only 25 percent of the total of their daily food supply, the rest coming equally from fishing and horticulture (1).”
- 2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns:** fish poison, bow and arrow (1).
- 2.4 Food storage:** No evidence
- 2.5 Sexual division of production:** Yes, “Upon making a new chagra, the men cut the underbrush in the forest and then fell large trees, a task that is carried out in the ‘dry season.’ At the end of March, the chagra is burned, and then the women proceed to the planting. The masculine work in horticulture occupies the first three months of the year, after which almost all of the rest of the planting activities, weeding, and harvesting falls to the women. The Desana consider hunting a male activity or, more precisely, a male attitude and fishing a female attitude.”
- 2.6 Land tenure:** Yes, “The chagras [farms] are the private property of each nuclear family... The chagras have an average size of approximately one hectare, and each family possesses some three or four plots of these garden plots (1).”
- 2.7 Ceramics:** No evidence
- 2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:** No evidence
- 2.9 Food taboos:** No evidence
- 2.10 Canoes/watercraft? Yes (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):**
- 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:**
- 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:**
- 4.9 Inheritance patterns:** strictly patrilineal (1).
- 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:**
- 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:**
- 4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):** “The Desana are divided into more than thirty exogamic patrilineal sibs (1)
- 4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?**
- 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 (i.e., semen builds up over time)?**
- 4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape:** Yes (1).
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin):** Especially close relationships exist between the Desana and the Pira-Tapuya, who are considered practically a “second Desana phratry,” almost in a sense of exogamic moiety. This intimate relationship is said to be based primarily on the fact that the sib *boréka*, which is the principal sib of the Desana, is associated with the fish, while the Pira-Tapuya (Fish People in Lengua Geral) are called *vaímahara porá* (Sons of Fish) by the Desana. The Desana consider hunting a male activity, or more precisely, a male attitude and fishing a female attitude. Thus, the fishing groups, not only the women but the phratry as a whole, are considered female elements. In other words, the Desana phratry has a masculine character, and the Pira-Tapuya

has a feminine character. The Pira-Tapuya are for the Desana *nomé-sori mahsá*/providers of women. This relationship naturally also functions in reverse: the Pira-Tapuya consider the Desana a female element and themselves masculine because they marry Desana women (1).”

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms? No one enjoys sexual freedom (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

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

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

4.24 Joking relationships?

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: Strictly patrilineal (1).

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?) Outside the community living in the local maloca (1)

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: “It is characteristic then (in light of the clear distinctions of traditional economic bases, see section 4.17) that among the Desana there is a marked tendency to marry women of phratries classified as fishing groups... while marriages between Desana and phratries classified as horticulturalists are the exception (1).

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

4.15 Out-group vs. in-group cause of violent death: Although gatherings, reciprocal social and economic interactions are harmonious, conflict still occurs between individuals, sibs, or even phratry groupings. The most common causes of such conflict are rape, the failure of a group to reciprocate in the exchange of women in marriage, and witchcraft. The concept of avenging one of these wrongs to the death is a strong part of the emotional and political life of the Desana (1).

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: Rape, the failure of a group to reciprocate in the exchange of women in marriage, and witchcraft (1).

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): Marriages between the Desana and surround Tukano phratries (1). “The Desana believe that many plants grown by them were introduced only in recent times. The sweet potato is said to have been brought by the Uanano who received it from a mythical personage, who was the first Uanano woman. Also, the occasional cultivation of the arum is attributed to the Uanano, and the papaya as well as the custard apple and even the chili is said to be plants of recent introduction brought in by the rubber collections from Brazil. Even the manioc grater is said to have originated with the Uanano, and in past times the Desana did not grate the roots but allowed them to soften in water for some two or three days before shredding and squeezing by hand.” “The main distinction that they themselves make refers to the traditional economic base; that is to say, they distinguish clearly between hunting, fishing, and horticulture groups. These three categories form a scale of values, with the horticulturalists being assigned the lowest status and the hunters the highest. To be sure, all of the groups devote themselves to horticulture that they complement with hunting and fishing, but we are concerned here with a traditional attitude, an emphasis that is formulated almost as a “destiny.” The classification, from the point of view of the Desana, is as follows: The Desana are hunters; the Pira-Tapuya, Uanano, Tukano, and Siriano are fishermen; the Tuyuka, Mirití-Tapuya, Karapana, and all Arawakan groups are horticulturalists (1).” See section 4.17 about Pira-Tapuya relations.

4.18 Cannibalism?

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: 33 people (1)

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): Sedentary (1)

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): Socially ranked sibs (1)

5.4 Post marital residence: Strictly virilocal and exogamic to other phratries, mainly the Pira-Tapuya, Yurutí-Tapuya, and other phratries of the Eastern Tukano. All of these exogamic phratries are close neighbors who occupy malocas in the same region and, like the Desana, are organized in ranked sibs. Marriage with Arawakan-speaking tribes seems to be very rare, although it is possible that the Arawakan Tariana are presently taken to be so “Tukanoized” that their alien origin is hardly recognized anymore (1).

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): Defined territories for each maloca (1).

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): “Although the Desana clearly recognize the scarcity of game animals, the hunt is for them the preferred, and fundamentally male, activity around which all other aspects of their culture revolve (1).

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization: “Each sib occupies one or more malocas, large communal houses, where some four to eight nuclear families live together. The malocas are constructed along the banks of the rivers and creeks, preferably near rapids, and they are generally spaced in such a way that there is a considerable amount of distance between one maloca and its neighbor. They are low constructions, rectangular in plan, at times with the rear part somewhat rounded, and covered with a roof of palm leaves. The main door, located in the front of the house, is oriented toward the landing place on the nearby river while another, secondary door is located

at the opposite end of the construction. Some distance away from the maloca, connected with it by narrow footpaths, are the fields or charges (*po'é*). The chagras are the private property of each nuclear family. Traditionally, each sib occupies a maloca, with few exceptions (the *boréka*, for example, who are more numerous than the others and eventually occupy several houses). There are, on the other hand, some sibs that are so small that they live together with others. At present, however, a maloca house is made up of members of many different sibs. The total number of Desana malocas can be calculated that at some thirty, with an average of thirty-three persons who form the working domestic units of a given territory (1).” The front half of the maloca is considered to be the male part of the structure, the rear half is the female part, while the right half of the entire structure is the adult part and the left pertains to the young people (1). See section 9 for more about the maloca and cosmology.

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses): No evidence

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: “The Desana are divided into more than thirty exogamic patrilineal sibs, each one descending from a mythical ancestor but all recognizing the primacy of the sib *boréka*, a fish of the genus *Leporinus* .

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5.12 Trade: Regional social harmony, exchange, and the control of political aggression are maintained between various groups at both the inter-sib and inter-phratry levels by frequent gatherings, which especially at the latter level, permit reinforcement of the linkages that exists between Tukanoans in the reciprocal exchange of women, religious ideology, and economic exchange (1).

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies? “Sibs are scaled according to their rank; those higher of rank traditionally occupy the lower courses of the river, while the lower ranking sibs live towards the headwaters. It is difficult to ascertain the relationship between this distribution and the economic potential of the adjacent regions, but it seems that the forest resources are somewhat more abundant at the headwaters, while more fish and better soil for gardening are found on the lower courses... the sibs of the higher rank are more exposed to acculturation than those who live withdrawn on the upper courses of the rivers and form the conservative element; the latter are more apt to retain the characteristics of a hunting society. There are no chiefs or headmen, but the inhabitants of each maloca sit and obey an elder who represent authority for those who live under same roof (1).”

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR):

6 Time allocation to RCR:

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): “Most religious rituals are the duties of the *payé* (*ye'é*), who serves as an intermediary between society and the supernatural forces. The *payé* directs the ceremonies of the life cycle, that is, “baptism,” initiations, and burial rites. Besides, he is also a curer. But his central function has an essentially economic character as he is the intermediary between the hunter and the supernatural “masters” of the animals. The *payé* must influence these masters or “owners” so that they will cede some of their animals, and he must also instruct and prepare the hunter so that he will observe the many prescriptions that are necessary. As sort of a game keeper, the *payé* is intimately concerned with the sexuality and fertility of game animals, a sphere in which “intervenes” in many ways to assure the multiplication of the species. In his contacts with supernatural beings, the *payé* uses certain hallucinogenic drugs, such as the powder of *vihó* (*Piptadenia*), which he sniffs through his nose, or the drink *gahí* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), called *yajé* in Lengua Geral. The characteristic paraphernalia of the *payé* consist of his gourd rattle and a long lance-shaped rattle as well as an ornament formed by a polished cylinder of white or yellowish quartz that he wears suspended from his neck. Illness, imagined primary in the form of small black splinters or thorns that an enemy has introduced magically into the body of the victim, is cured by the *payé* who sucks it from the body until all the sickness is extracted and then blows tobacco smoke over his patient and throws water on him. Besides the *payé* there are several individuals designated as *kumú* whose functions seem to be rather those of a priest. The *kumú* is considered to be a direct representative of the solar divinity and, as such, has a very high status in society. Generally, he intervenes only in certain phases of the rituals of the life cycle, but his main function is that of conserving traditions which he explains in long “counsels (1).”

6.2 Stimulants: Tobacco, “hallucinogens such as the powder of *vihó* (*Piptadenia*), which he sniffs through his nose, or the drink *gahí* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), called *yajé* in Lengua Geral (1).”

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

6.4 Other rituals: “Besides collective ceremonies carried out on the occasion of the rites of the life cycle, the Desana and their neighbors gather in periodic reunions called *bayári*. After days or weeks of anticipation, it is made known that some maloca or other is preparing a reunion, and the canoes comes from all parts with the visitors who bring various fruit, fish, and smoked meat. This food is given to the organizing sib phratry. In these reunions the Creation Myth and the myths referring to the origin of the phratry are recited; there is dancing to the sounds of various musical instruments, and the men wear large feather crowns. Hallucinogenic drugs are sometimes consumed on these occasions. These gatherings, with their marked emphasis on sib cohesion, are of great importance and probably constitute the strongest and most structured collective expression of the culture (1).” The “feast of the Yurupari” is an important ceremony which usually takes place during a time of the year when there is an abundance of food from smaller fish and certain jungle fruits. It is held when the number of pubescent girls in the maloca is sufficient enough for the local group to enter into a reciprocal arrangement with a sib from another phratry. The Desana use large, hollow, wooden musical instruments, or flutes and although girls are punished if they see the flutes, the flutes are employed in a context that does not appear to involve any sort of general male chauvinism (1).

6.5 Myths (Creation): “The myth of the Creation of the Universe, of man, and of the first sibs of the Desana, is recited on practically all occasions when a group of people drink *chichi* and to dance (1).” The creation myth begins with the Sun and the Moon. They were twin brothers whom both lived alone until the sun had a daughter. He lived with her as his wife, but soon the Moon became jealous and tries to make love to the Sun's daughter. When the Sun heard about it, he told the Moon he was having a dance, and when the Moon

went to the house of the Sun, and as punishment, the Sun took the Moon's the large feather crown he wore that was like the crown of the Sun. He gave the Moon a small feathered crown, and they now never live in the same house (1). In Desana cosmology life on earth is produced through the medium of different color energies emanating from the sun. Each color has distinct associations: yellow is associated with male fertility, and red, with female fertility; blue is associated with values of transition and communication; and green, with freshness and growth. The Desana visualize the cosmos in terms of layered colors: at the bottom lies the green Paradise, then comes the red earth, then the blue sky, and, on top, the yellow light of the sun (1).

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): The Desana make extensive use of color symbolism, both in their material culture and in their association of colors with actions and concepts. The yellow and blue feathers of crowns, for example, represent male power and divine communication, while the act of procreation is represented by red dots on a yellow background (1). The Desana use large hollow wooden musical instruments, or flutes, in an important ceremony called the "feast of the Yurupari. (1)." See section 6.4.

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

6.8 Missionary effect:

6.9 RCR revival:

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint: The Desana paint their faces with a variety of designs according to the occasion. Young men, for example, sometimes decorate their faces with fragrant yellow dots using sap from a tree. When Desana men are about to go fishing they use red pigment mixed with various aromatic saps to paint their faces with fish-like motifs. In the first case the most immediate purpose of the decoration is to attract women, in the second case, to attract fish (1).

7.2 Piercings:

7.3 Haircut:

7.4 Scarification:

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

7.8 Missionary effect

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

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):

1. The most important part of the interior, in the cosmological sense, are three smaller horizontal cross beams, called "jaguars," all of which are surmounted by poles and a long beam called a *gumú* that runs the length of the structure from the front door (male) to the backdoor (female). This beam is horizontal, but nevertheless is viewed as an axis mundi that *vertically* connects the three separate planes of the cosmos. The male half of the maloca is viewed as having the color yellow and the female half as having the color red, but each is considered to be bathed in the reflective light of the other. Furthermore, the yellow male half also corresponds to the color characterizing the top level of the cosmos, where the Sun-Father lives, while the red female half relates to the color of the earth, which is viewed as being red. Finally, at the center of the interior, in the most sacred spot of the entire maloca, a small wooded stool is placed in which sits the *payé*, or shaman, acting as the intermediary between sib and the supernatural forces who created and continue to regulate the central plane of the cosmos, namely "this world," or earth (1).

2. At the time Reichel-Dolmatoff studied the Desana during the 1960's, it was clear that even the "slightly" growing population had clear ways of keeping their population in check; namely, through the use of oral contraceptives and by exerting control over the frequency of sexual relations. Desana women prepared concoctions from herbs which enabled them to space out the births of their children over several years longer than would have been the case had they not used them. This method must not have been totally efficacious, however, given the strictness with which the Desana observed sexual abstinence. Reichel-Dolmatoff notes that a strong puritanical streak characterized Desana society, and sex was thus considered to be the greatest of all dangers that humans faced in this life. The main ritual mechanism controlling sex was the requirement that all hunters- which, of course, included all males except the youngest boys and oldest men- must observe general sexual abstinence, especially before and during the hunt. This is based on the idea that the humans and animals in a local ecosystem shared in the same, highly limited potential for procreation in light of its carrying capacity. If the human population increased at all beyond its equilibrium state, then it was believed that both the game animals and the supernatural figure in control of their numbers (Master of Animals) would become highly jealous. Such an increase would involve a misuse of part of the limited, shared sexual energy budget available to both populations in the local ecosystem, a portion of which the animals could claim quiet rightly for themselves in order to maintain their own population levels. If some Desana were either too highly sexed or fecund to keep their number of children they had to a strict minimum, having six or seven children who survived to a marriageable age, the rest of the maloca looked down upon them with great scorn, considering them to be little better

than a “family of dogs.” This suggests again, that the strong social controls generally were observed in order to keep their numbers in synchrony with the protein carrying capacity of the environment.

Numbered references

1. Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo. Amazonian Cosmos: The Sexual and Religious Symbolism of the Tukano Indians. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971.