



Smithsonian

National Museum of Natural History

Guide to the Felix DiGiovanni and Paul
Beer photographs of the Guahibo and other
indigenous tribes of eastern Colombia

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Collection Overview

Repository:	National Anthropological Archives
Title:	Felix DiGiovanni and Paul Beer photographs of the Guahibo and other indigenous tribes of eastern Colombia
Date:	Circa 1938
Identifier:	NAA.PhotoLot.1995-41
Creator:	Beer, Paul DiGiovanni, Felix V. Bellis, Tom (Collector)
Extent:	102 Photographic prints (Black and white, silver gelatin)
Language:	Multiple languages .
Summary:	Photographs made by Paul Beer and Felix DiGiovanni depicting indigenous people, primarily the Guahibo, as well as the natural and cultural features of the Vaupés region of Eastern Colombia.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The photographs were donated by Genevieve Bellis, widow of Tom Bellis, in 1995.

Separated Materials

Along with the photographs, Genevieve Bellis donated 28 objects from the Guahibo tribe, which are held in the National Museum of Natural History's anthropology collections. These form accession number 400216, and include wooden bows, a woven hammock, arrows, a water jug, ceremonial necklaces, a gourd rattle, a reed tube rattle, a small gourd containing curare, incised spindle whorls, and bead necklaces.

Related Materials

The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) holds the Felix V. DiGiovanni collection from Colombia, collection ID number NMAI.AC.300, donated by DiGiovanni's widow, Pauline DiGiovanni. It contains prints and negatives different from the NAA's collection, a 16mm film, and the book *The Call of the Curassow and the Land of the Guahibo Indians*. NMAI also has objects collected by DiGiovanni, including baskets, tools, necklaces, woven bags, hammocks, arrows, and pottery.

Processing Information

The pages of paperboard on which the photos are mounted were numbered prior to deposit at the National Anthropological Archives (NAA). Page numbers begin at 17, so may have been part of a larger set. The archivist assigned item numbers to the mounted photographs based on their placement on the page. (17a, 17b, etc.) The numbers in parentheses in the item description were assigned to the photographs by the donor Genevieve Bellis. Their significance is unclear.

The archivist also added captions taken from the photographs in DiGiovanni's book where it was believed that the book added clarifying information. Where applicable, the captions are in quotes below the item description.

Collection and image descriptions provided in this finding aid were compiled using the best available sources of information. Such sources may include the creator's annotations or descriptions, collection accession files, primary and secondary source material (i.e. documents, publications, and websites), and subject matter experts. While every effort is made to provide accurate information, it is understood that errors may reveal themselves following review by other subject experts, and new information is welcome.

Processed and encoded by Victoria Dale.

Preferred Citation

Photo lot 1995-41, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

Restrictions

There are no restrictions on this collection.

Conditions Governing Use

Contact the repository for terms of use.

Biographical / Historical

Felix V. DiGiovanni (ca. 1913-1990) was an American engineer, writer, photographer, and filmmaker. He was raised in the Bronx and graduated with an engineering degree from The City College of New York in 1933. As a young man, he traveled throughout Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil, and later became interested in documenting the eastern plains of Colombia, known as Los Llanos, as well as its inhabitants. In the late 1930s, he returned to Colombia to film a documentary on the indigenous people of the Vaupés region.

DiGiovanni's partner in the expedition was Paul Beer. Beer (1904-1979) was a German photographer active in Bogota, Colombia, in the late 1920s.

By 1941, DiGiovanni's documentary film about the Guahibo was completed. In 1944 he returned to Colombia to work with the U.S. Cinchona Mission, which comprised a team of scientists travelling to the Andes region to find cinchona trees, whose bark produces the alkaloid quinine, used for treating malaria.

DiGiovanni met Tom Bellis during this time. Bellis (1907-1993) was an officer with the Food and Drug Administration. From October 1942 until December 1945, he worked for the Board of Economic Warfare in Bogota, Colombia at the Instituto Nacional de Higiene Samper-Martinez. Here, he directed a laboratory which analyzed cinchona bark. In November 1945, Bellis purchased this set of photographs, along with 28 Guahibo artifacts, from DiGiovanni.

Felix DiGiovanni returned to New York in 1946 and became a mechanical engineer with a major oil company. In 1960, he completed a draft of a manuscript about his experiences with the Guahibo, titled *The Call of the Curassow and the Land of the Guahibo Indians*. He intended to publish it and also produce a Spanish translation, but he died December 31, 1990, before it could be finished. In 1994, Pauline DiGiovanni, DiGiovanni's widow, published 40 copies of the manuscript in English.

After the expedition with DiGiovanni, Paul Beer's photography focused primarily on architectural and industrial themes. He lived in Bogota until his death in 1979.

Scope and Contents

The collection consists of 85 photographic prints mounted on paperboard, with annotations made by Genevieve Bellis, wife of Tom Bellis. Also included are 18 enlargements mounted on black paper with annotations (not Bellis') in Spanish, and a number written on the back. With one exception (Item 29), the enlargements are of the photographs mounted on paperboard.

The photographs depict the indigenous people of eastern Colombia, primarily the Guahibo tribe, as well as the natural and cultural features of the Vichada region. Other tribes represented in the photographs include the Piapoco, Guanano, Banibo, Casanare, Guayabero, and Tucano tribes. The location depicted in the images is in the Vichada region, unless otherwise indicated.

The photographs show the customs and daily activities of the tribes, including bathing, washing clothes, cooking, fishing, hunting, making arrows and dugout canoes, house-building, creating water pitchers from clay, weaving cloth from the bark of trees, and preparing for ceremonies.

Bibliography

DiGiovanni, Felix V. *The Call of the Curassow and the Land of the Guahibo Indians*. Limited Special Edition. Jamaica, New York: Paula Di Educational Enterprises, Inc., 1994.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Baniwa Indians
- Ethnology
- Guahibo
- Guanano Indians
- Guayabero Indians
- Piapoco (Piapoko)
- Tucano Indians

Cultures:

- Guahibo
- Piapoco (Piapoko)

Places:

- Colombia
- Orinoco River
- Vaupés (Colombia)

Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1

17a: Two Guahibo men fishing with bows and arrows from canoe
Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 3.

17b: Guahibo man and boy standing in river, fishing with bow and arrow
Notes: "Father and son on the lookout for a bigger fish." (p. 151.)

17c: Guahibo man in river holding ray fish caught using barbasco method
Notes: Note: Barbasco fishing involves taking poison plants, pounding the vines to loosen the poison, and then washing them into lagoons. Smaller fish in the lagoons die from the poison, but larger fish are stunned and rise to the surface, making it easier for them to be either scooped with nets or caught with bows and arrows. The poison does not affect their edibility for humans. (p. 151.)

17d: Piapoco man standing with bow and arrow in front of lagoon at Lake Saracure

17e: Piapoco man hunting with bow and arrow near Codá River

17f: Piapoco boy and man in canoe on Uva River watching man on shore holding large cachama (Tambaqui) fish
Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 4.

17g: Piapoco man with bow and arrow at Lake Saracure
Notes: Bellis' annotation: "Piapoco Indian hunting turtle."
"Young man fishing with a bone-tipped arrowhead."(p. 40-41.)

18a: Guayabero man standing with bow and arrow near Guaviare River
Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 4.

18b: Guahibo man tying feathers to arrow
Notes: "The arrow shaft is finished with black, cormorant feathers." (p. 134.)

18c: Young Guahibo men aiming bows and arrows
Notes: "Teenagers target practicing with bows and arrows." (p. 143.)

18d: Guahibo man holding ray fish and bow and arrow
Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 6.

18e: Guahibo medicine man wearing ceremonial attire standing before stacked sugar cane
Notes: "Lee-enseeyo performing the ceremony to ensure that the cane juice will ferment well."

Supplemental note: "He wore a long, flowing loincloth beautifully painted with geometrical designs. The jaguar claw

headdress, which came down to the small of his back, was trimmed with an abundance of parrot and macaw feathers. The animal-teeth necklace he was wearing had one very large jaguar fang besides the usual alligator teeth, wild boar tusks and giant ant-eater claws. A large jaguar-skin medicine bag hanging at his side and the magic rattle in his right hand completed his ceremonial garb." (p. 134.)

See also enlargement, Folder 6

18f: Person wearing ceremonial mask and bark cloth tunic

18g: Guahibo medicine man squatting at fire and preparing drug "niopo"
Notes: "Medicine man Manibela making the drug 'niopo'." (p. 98.)

See also enlargement, Folder 3.

19a: Guahibo man wearing animal fang necklace and headdress and holding rattle

19b: Group of Guahibo men wearing animal fang necklaces and dancing.
Some hold deer horns

Notes: "The deer dance. The deerhorns are a hooting instrument which the Indians use in many of their dances." (p. 117.)

19c: Man examining petroglyph on rocks near Atures rapids of Orinoco River

20a: Guahibo man, woman, and baby in canoe on Vichada River

20b: Guahibo men in bongo (covered canoe) navigating rapids on Vaupés River

20c: Men in canoe on Inirida River

20d: Guahibo men and boys unloading baggage from a bongo to carry over rocks on Vaupés River

20e: Guahibo men pushing bongo through Vacurabá rapids on Vaupés River

20f: Guahibo men navigating bongo through Inirida River

20g: Guahibo men carrying bongo through rapids on Vaupés River

Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 4.

20h: Guahibo men on bongo near shore, on the Meta River near Cabuyaro

20i: Man on hillside looking down at Guahibo men rowing in bongo on Muco River

21b: Two men aboard bongo on shore of Muco River

21c: Moriche palm trees in the Vichada River

21d: View of landscape near Orinoco River with man in foreground

21e: Bongo on Muco River from high vantage point

21f: Lake Arimena, near Meta River

22a: Orinoco River

22b: Town of Yavaraté on Vaupés River

22c: Moriche palm trees in the Vichada River

22d: Boquerán rapids, on the Orinoco River

22e: Vaupés River with town of Yavaraté in background

22f: Ayari River with Guananos ancestral long house, or "maloca" in background

22g: Guananos men on rocks overlooking Vaupés River

22h: Tucano man standing on rocks overlooking Vacurabá rapids on Vaupés River

22i: Yacaré rapids on Vaupés River

23a: Inirida River

23b: Houses in Umari Village on the Vaupés River
Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 5.

23c: Hanging vines and tropical vegetation near Inirida River

23d: Guanana women carrying jugs of water on their heads near Ayari River
Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 3.

23e: Guahibo men using "chahky-chahky," or mill, to grind sugar cane
Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 6.

23f: Guahiba woman painting her daughter's face

23g: Guahibo men hollowing out tree trunk to make canoe
Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 6.

23h: Guahiba girl carrying water jug on her head. Jug is shaped like female figure

24a: Guahibo man sitting in hammock

24b: Guahibo man mixing river water with manioc in gourd

24c: Guahiba women working in yuca field

Notes: "Cocopi's wife and mother-in-law digging up cassava roots to make bread." (p. 104.)

24d: Guahibo man weaving a hammock, or "chinchorro," with children in background

Notes: "It is the man's job to do the weaving. Maulesi weaves the hammock." (p. 106.)

See also enlargement, Folder 3.

24e: Guahiba woman twisting tree fibers into cords for hammocks ("chinchorros"), with children nearby

Notes: "It is the woman's job to twist the fibers into cord." (p. 106.)

24f: Guahibo man and woman gathering moriché palm tree leaves for hammocks ("chinchorros")

Notes: "Maulesi and his wife gather palm leaves to make a hammock." (p. 106.)

25a: Piapoco boys cutting tree bark for clothing

25b: Guahibo girls boiling cumare fibers for hammocks ("chinchorros"), with boys in background

Notes: "After the fiber is stripped from the palm leaves, it is boiled to soften the fiber." (p. 106.)

25c: young Guahiba woman bathing in river

25d: Piapoca women painting pottery in Cadá River area

25e: Guahibo men and boys building a house

Notes: "Not one nail was used in the whole construction. All the materials needed came from the nearby forest." (p. xvi.)

25f: Guayabera women preparing manioc, with boys in background, in Guaviare River region

Notes: See also enlargement, Folder 4.

25g: Group of Guahibo children and adolescent girls and boys

Notes: "...patiently waiting for the fiesta to begin." (p. 164.)

25h: Young Guahiba woman bathing in creek

26a: Guahiba woman nursing child in Tuparro River region

Notes: "Mother and child. Guahibo children often breast feed until they are four or five." (p. 156.)

26b: Guanana woman in Ayari River region

26c: Young Guahiba woman carrying water jug on her head

26d: Guahibo man wearing necklace made of animal fangs

26e: Guahiba woman with face painted

Notes: "Manibela's wife paints her face with a grill design." (p. 106.)

26f: Guahiba girl with face painted

Notes: "Manibela's daughter with elaborate face design." (p. 106.)

26g: Banibo woman and child in Usana River region

26h: Guanana woman in Ayari River region

27a: Guayabera woman in Guaviare River region

27b: Guahibo man in Tuparro River region with painted face

27c: Boniba woman in Isana River region

27d: Two Boniba girls in Isana River region with painted bodies

27e: Boniba woman with painted face in Isana River region

27f: Guahibo man with face painted

27g: Smiling Guahibo man with face painted

Notes: Processing note: The bottom right corner of photograph shows imprint of Beer's name.

27h: Guahibo boy with face painted

28a: Group of Guanana women standing beside Vaupés River

28b: Group of Guahibo male and female tribe members gathered for festival

Notes: "The guests crowd around the yalaki trough waiting to fill up their gourds." (Yalaki is the term for both a fermented beverage as well as the fiestas where the drink is served.) (p. 110, 165.)

28c: Group of Boniba women in Isana River region

29: Two Piapoco boys carrying dead puma tied to a pole