

# PROFILE of The Week

By Dr. DHANPAUL NARINE

## Gibson and Anita Caesar: Keepers of the Rainforests

The rainforests are a powerhouse of diversity. They contain more than half of the animal and plant species on the planet. Many of the medicines that we use today are from plants in the rainforests. Food sources are to be found in the forests as well and we are reminded in the popular media that the rainforests are the 'lungs of the world.' This means that they store about 20 per cent of the world's oxygen. But they also absorb a great portion of the man-made carbon dioxide emissions.

Rainforests are vibrant with plant and animal life but what make them special are the peoples that inhabit this fascinating world. It is estimated that there are about 50 million people that live in the rainforests of the world. This is not a huge number when one considers that thousands of natives have been decimated due to the constant encroachment of outsiders.

Guyana is one of eight South American countries that is part of the Amazon rainforest and it has a number of Amerindian groups and subgroups. They comprise the Waraus, Wapishanas, Arawaks, Caribs, Patamona, Makusi, Wai Wai, and Akawaios. The Arecunas and Karamakoto are also part of the subgroup.

In the seventies, the Upper Mazaruni area in Guyana became the subject of increasing interest in the country and the Caribbean region. There was talk of harnessing a waterfall in the hinterland that would provide electricity to Guyana. The fall that was identified was Kumerau and it was located in the Upper Mazaruni.

An Upper Mazaruni Development Authority (UMDA) was created to oversee various as-

pects of the project. There was a human resource component to the project that involved researching the lifestyles of the Amerindians. The idea was to work among them and to get them to agree to move their settlements hundreds of miles away from the catchment area. Resettlement then was a



Dr. Dhanpaul Narine (center) with Anita and Gibson Caesar and their family. Dr. Narine was a Research Officer in the Upper Mazaruni and journeyed to the milk river with the Amerindians.

primary concern of the Human Resource Department of UMDA.

In 1976, I was appointed as a Research Officer with UMDA. I was part of a group that was responsible for collecting and analyzing primary source data on the Amerindians in the Upper Mazaruni. The project was headed by a Social Anthropologist, Dr. Alain Fournier. We did preliminary work at Bartica,

Kartabo Point and the Riversview Goshen area. A period was also spent at Mahdia.

This was to prepare us for the Upper Mazaruni. We did a tour that included Jawalla, Kako, Imbamadia, Kurupung and Kamarang and then were ready for Waramadong. This village is situated about 25 miles up the Kamarang River. Waramadong is a picturesque village; the residents were able to carve out a settlement in the heart of the jungle with a certain amount of flatlands used for farming.

The main farming technique was swidden or slash and burn agriculture. Two influential persons greeted us on our first day at Waramadong. They were Gibson and Anita Caesar. Gibson was the captain of the village while Anita was the midwife.

She kept herself up to date with the latest medical information on midwifery by corresponding with Georgetown Hospital and with the medical outpost at Kamarang. Anita kept excellent records on births and illnesses in the community as well as outlying areas. She walked long

accompany her to the edge of the village to help in the delivery of a child. I held the bottle lamp as we navigated our way on a bushy track to the hut of the prospective mother. I froze in panic at a large object that blocked our path. Anita calmly took my arm and we jumped over it. The object was a



Anita and Gibson Caesar understand the whispers of the forest. He was a Captain and she was a nurse at Waramadong.

giant anaconda. The baby that she delivered was named Moses!

Anita's brother was Roy Kenswil. He was known as the local historian. Kenswil worked closely with Dr. Audrey Butt-Colson who was at the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford. He helped Dr. Colson to collect primary source data when she was doing her research in the Upper Mazaruni in the fifties. The majority of the Akawaios were Seventh Day Adventists. Dr. Colson studied Hallelujah, a syncretic religion in the area and Kenswil was on her team.

Gibson Caesar was the agriculturist and captain of the village. He was born in Venezuela and studied Adventism on the coast before returning to the hinterland. Captain Caesar took time to explain to us the Amerindian concept of space and time. When an Amerindian said that the farm was 'over there' it could mean two days walk in a thick jungle.

The farm would consist of a few manioc and plantain trees and

yams in a clearing that was made from the slashing and burning of trees. There was also division of labor among the sexes; the men farmed while the women fetched the produce from the farms.

The UMDA project employed a number of locals to be part of the team. The huntsman was Carvaio who had kinship ties in Brazil and Ricky Caesar was the Bowman and translator. Ricky's sister was Desrey Caesar who later became a Minister of Education in Guyana. Desrey also worked on the Amerindian Languages Project at the University of Guyana and went on to earn her doctorate from Fisk University.

As it turned out the hydropower project was not realized. The World Bank did not provide the loan but those two years, 1976 to 1978, provided us with valuable insights into Amerindian lifestyles. Gibson and Anita Caesar are still around to dispense their wisdom with us. Their son Ricky is doing well in Venezuela while another son Terry is married to Raquel Thomas-Caesar. She holds a doctorate from Imperial College in London. Raquel is Director of Resource Management and Training at the Iwokrama International Center in Guyana and is a keen conservationist.

Gibson and Anita Caesar have a rich legacy. They are guardians of the forests and show the world that Amerindians are in tune with the Great Spirit that inhabits the rivers and trees. It was my great honor to be reunited with Gibson and Anita Caesar after forty years.

distances to keep track on the progress of pregnancies and would educate women about good health practices. She also used local herbs that had medicinal properties to cure ailments.

Anita was a one-woman clinic! One rainy morning she appeared with a bottle-lamp. It was around 2 o'clock and the conditions were blustery. Anita wanted to know whether I would