

Tribe from Amazon to visit Upper Ojai

Claudia Boyd-Barrett, Special to The Star 4:26 p.m. PDT October 25, 2016



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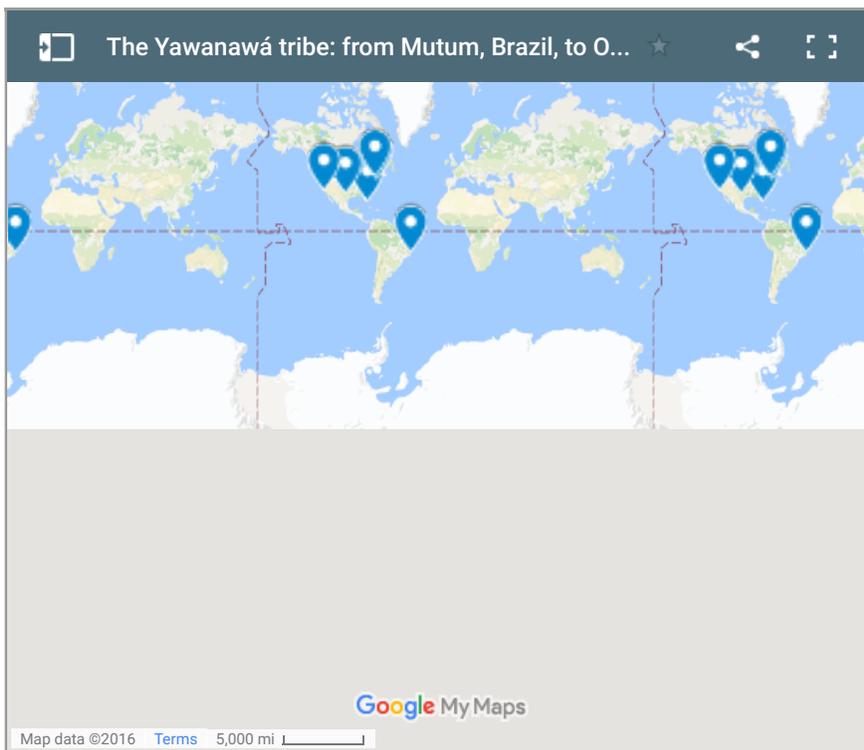
Members of an indigenous tribe from deep in the Amazon rainforest will visit Ventura County this weekend to share their culture and traditions with the American public and raise money to help build a school.

Eight members of the Yawanawá tribe from the Amazon village of Mutum in Brazil will arrive at the Ojai Foundation in Upper Ojai on Friday for an intimate dinner with up to 30 people, where they will share their traditional songs and stories. On Saturday, the tribe members will preside over a larger, all-day celebration, where guests can learn about and experience Yawanawá games, body painting, music, dancing, teachings and prayers, plus watch an evening performance by tribe members.

It's the first time for the Yawanawá to visit the United States, and the only stop they are making on the West Coast as part of a monthlong tour organized by the nonprofit Indigenous Celebration. They have already traveled to New York, Miami, Boston, Texas and Vermont. Ojai is their final stop.

"They're here on a really courageous mission to celebrate their culture in order to save it," said Anne Marie Miller, co-founder and president of Miami-based Indigenous Celebration.

Miller said Yawanawá elders are seeking to reclaim and strengthen their culture after years of interference from the outside world that has distanced younger people in the tribe from the traditional ways and left them unable to speak the Yawanawá language. The interference started about 200 years ago when rubber tappers arrived in the Amazon and forced many members of the tribe into slavery, decimating their population, she said. Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, missionaries imposed their beliefs and traditions on the tribe, Miller said.



About 1,200 tribe members remain, living in 12 villages in the Amazon forest. Although older tribe members continue to practice their traditions, no one under age 40 can speak Yawanawá fluently anymore. That makes it difficult to pass on the culture to the new generation, Miller said. Many indigenous societies around the world face a similar situation, with as many as 7,000 languages expected to be extinct by the end of this century.

Two of the tribe members are close to 100 years old and are leading the effort to revive their culture, Miller said. Money raised from the tour will go toward building and operating a school that will teach children in the tribe the Yawanawá language and traditions.

“These elders ... have an incredible amount of wisdom that was already transmitted to them by their elders,” Miller said. “For them to be unable to continue passing the torch as it has been passed for thousands of years through this tribe orally ... it’s devastating.”

Laura Whitney, president of the Ojai Foundation, said the Yawanawá visit is unique and a chance for people attending the events to learn about an indigenous culture up close.

“I think it’s a rare opportunity to have a cultural exchange with people who are still living in an intact subsistence community in the rainforest. The Yawanawá live very, very close to nature,” she said. “Their connection with the Earth is something I think we all can learn so much from because in our modern culture, we’ve really lost that connection.”

If you go

Information and tickets for "Journey to Mutum: An Indigenous Celebration" are available at ojaifoundation.org (<http://ojaifoundation.org/>) in the events section. Tickets for the fundraising dinner on Friday are \$250 per person. The Saturday workshop and evening performance costs \$125, or \$60 for students. Kids under 12 can attend for free.

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