

The Ashéninka

Perfect by God's measure

Stories by Chris Turner
Photos by Bob Sidders

IBB photographer Jimmy Tallentire
left and Chris Aronson prepare fuel
for a trip upriver. Tallentire's access
to the Ashéninka means encountering their
culture. Nearly all their villages are ac-
cessible only by boat or small airplane.



loud popping of the loon mowers—the engine vibrations the tranquility of the Ecuadorian jungle as the flat-bottom boat slowly pushes upstream. Brown faces of all ages pop from behind trees along the bank to see the curious-looking visitors.

Few white faces are seen in these

parts. The boat's GPS checks the handheld global positioning system and confirms the obvious: It's the middle of nowhere.

The closer city of any size is many hours back down the river and up another. The sun transforms from bright yellow to warm orange as it sinks beyond the hori-



■ Above left and above: **Man Asháninka, the Jamunasa Shashu tribe,** lives in the dense jungle and live in isolated family groups along the winding rivers of the Peruvian rain forest. Although contact with the outside world is increasing, **their lifestyle has changed little in hundreds of years.**



zon. Disciples will find intentional Mission Board missionaries Chris and Pam Ammons before they reach the tiny community of Belén.

Geographically, the Ammonses have reached the far edge of the Asháninka (Ashén-ang-kah), the people group among whom they work. It is along one of sever-

al winding rivers within the thousands of square miles where the Asháninka live.

By human reasoning, Belén is not a likely location to initiate a church-planting movement. But by God's measure, it's perfect.

"Evidence that God was at work among these people before we got here is every-

where," Chris says. "It is evident in the responsiveness of people, the doors He has opened for us among the people, and the leaders He's raising up who will spread the gospel throughout the Asháninka."

"We could see as many as 30 percent of these people along this river making a de-

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"Alejandro stopped at every community . . . He couldn't stand the thought of one person being left out and not having the chance to hear the gospel."



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 often to follow Christ within the next two years."

Alejandro Santos is one of the leaders. More than a decade ago he was a drunk staggering from bar to bar in Puerto Benavides, a port city on the Pacific River. Hearing a sermon and thinking it came from a bar, he wandered into a church service looking for another drink.

God used the message of Pastor Brigade Ramirez López to change Alejandro. His message: Christ. Now both pastor and protégé work among Alejandro's people.

Less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the Ashéninka are literate in their own language. Alejandro is an exception. He can read some Spanish. While it is a struggle,

he uses it to study the Bible.

His ability to teach his own people with the gospel increased after the Ammonites and another IMB missionary, Jeremy Tallentire, taught Alejandro the chronological, Bible-storying method—the verbal sharing of Bible stories for oral learners. He now shares the stories in his heart language, practicing them endlessly with his family. And he loves it.

"One time we were going what is normally a few hours up the river to another community," Jeremy recalls. "It took us two days.

"Alejandro stopped at every community on the way and went looking in the jungle for people to hear the stories. He couldn't stand the thought of one person

being left out and not having the chance to hear the gospel."

There are approximately 25,000 Ashéninka, making them one of the largest people groups in Peru. Because of their remoteness, they have had little or no exposure to the gospel, which is precisely why the Ammonites chose to share God's Word with them.

The Ammonites found no effort to plant churches among the Ashéninka. But they did find Bibles in their language.

The Bibles led them to David and Judy Payne, Wycliffe Bible translators, who have lived and worked among the Ashéninka for nearly 21 years.



■ Above: Missionary Paul Ammon leads Ashéninka children in a song that declares God as creator of the universe. The Ashéninka have little understanding of God. Now, few are in fear of failing to appease the spirits worshiped in their traditional religion.

The Paynes and the Ammonites were answers to each other's prayers. The Ammonites needed Bibles; the Paynes needed someone with a desire to share the gospel with the Ashéninka. It was a God-ordained match.

"David has been such a key for us because he knows everybody in the Ashéninka community," Chris says.

■ Top: Pastor Brigade Ramirez López has traveled among the Ashéninka along the Pacific River for years. The integrity of his ministry has opened many opportunities among the Ashéninka for the Ammonites and their team.

■ Above: Chris Ammon (left) and Jeremy Tallentire discuss "staying" with Alejandro Santos. Alejandro is a great teacher and key leader. He practices telling Bible stories for hours with his family before sharing them in Ashéninka communities.

"In fact, two of our prayer requests before coming to the field were that we'd be able to meet the Ashéninka chief and be able to speak at the annual Ashéninka tribal coronation. We shared this with David when we first met him."

Eating lunch with them was an Ashéninka man whom David introduced.

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