

FROM BOY TO MAN: A TUCANDEIRA RITUAL

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Team Members:

Paula Parra

Sofia Guarin



Young Satere-Mawe ready to receive the bullet ant-infested glove. Photo Courtesy by: Leo Babauta.

In the far depths of the Amazonian forests in Brazil, the Satere-Mawe tribe is doing preparations to celebrate the Tucandeira ritual. Boys from twelve years of age and forward perform this coming-of-age ceremony. The ritual consists in putting your hands inside a knitted glove lined with *Paraponera Clavata* ants. After facing the excruciating pain of being bitten not one but hundreds of these ants for ten to twenty minutes, (which, mind you, are not called bullet ants for nothing) and not shedding a single tear, the boy is considered to have left childhood and transitioned into adulthood.



Outsiders looking for different adventures sometimes also participate of the ritual. This man has just finished the ritual, and is in immense pain. Photograph courtesy of: <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/>

IS THE PAIN NECESSARY?

In the Satere-Mawe tribe, you are not considered a man unless you have gone through this ritual. Refusing this ritual brings shame and disgrace towards the individual and his family. The Tucandeira curse is also a thing for young boys to consider. The elders say that the Tucandeira is a beautiful woman that haunts you. She offers the boy a special food that is not from this world. If the boy eats it, he will become very ill at first, slowly followed by his death.

In a way, this ritual is for both a test of courage and to protect the body. It is

said that once you complete the ritual, the excruciating pain you go through makes you almost numb towards pain, and even fear itself. The main point is that once you suffer that level of pain, you will lose the fear of pain, and even transcend it.

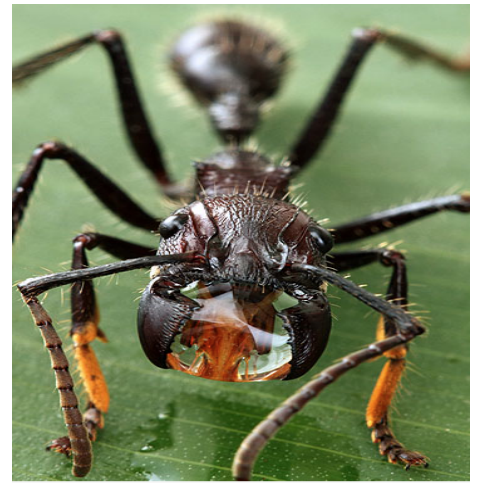
Apart from that spiritual belief, it also seems that the *Paraponera* ants' venom has medicinal benefits. Among the tribe, it is believed to be able to strengthen your defenses towards the yellow fever, malaria and other diseases spread by mosquito.

READY TO BEGIN

When a young boy becomes sexually ready he goes out into the jungle with the Medic or Shaman and the other boys of the tribe to look for the bullet ants. When a nest of bullet ants is located, smoke is wafted over it to knock out the ants. Then the ants are captured and carefully woven into knitted glove made out of leaves. The ants embedded within the leaves with their stinger facing inwards are placed in the oven-mitt shaped glove. As the ants come

of their unconscious state, they become increased aggressive and are more than ready to sting whatever comes in their path.

Before the ritual starts, the boy's hands are painted in black pigment paint. The drawing of a simple black ant covers the back of the boy, and lines along the chest, arms and face are also added. The man-to-be then slip their hands into the glove for the rite of passage to begin.



Bullet ant's appearance.

Photograph courtesy by: Alex Wild

Paraponera Clavata Ant

The Paraponera Clavata ant, “24 hour ant” or “bullet ant” is a genus ant named after its powerful sting. The bullet ant is about half-an-inch and an inch in length. The base of trees and leaves overhead are the chosen location of bullet ant's nest. Small insects and nectar are its everyday diet. They inhabit the forest from Nicaragua to Paraguay.

When the bullet ant is disturbed, their survival instinct forces them to sting, injecting their intense venom to the unfortunate harasser. The venom freezes the transmission of information by nerve cells, causing paralysis, along with unbearable pain.



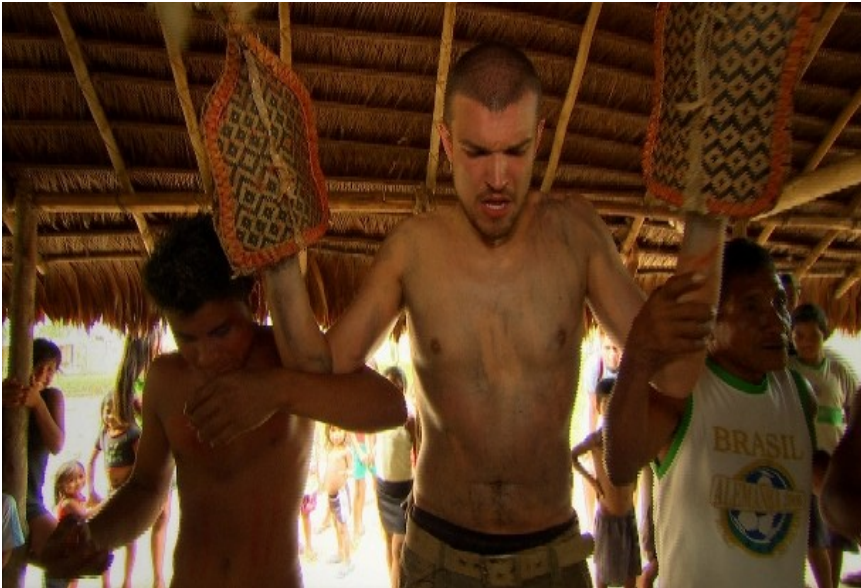
Glove infested by bullet ants used in the ritual. Photograph courtesy of:

<http://ferrebeekeeper.files.wordpress.com/>

VENOM PARTY

The ceremony starts when the boy places his hands inside the gloves. One at a time, each boy locks arms with some of the elder men, and starts singing and dancing. Red feathers, rhythmical singing, and the sound of pounding feet fill the small cabin-like house.

The men move to rhythm of the drums, and go on for ten to twenty minutes. While all of this takes place, the boy has to struggle with the pain and having to lift his arms at head level. The songs they sing are to encourage and give strength to the boy. The ants sting every part of the boy's hand. Even with all the pain the boy must be feeling, he must remain calm and not show signs of pain and fear. If the boy cries he must do the ritual again and again until that doesn't happen.



Photograph, from *Beast Hunter* episode: *Wearing a Glove of Venomous Ants*, by channel.nationalgeographic.com



Steve Backshall, on one of his shots during "Deadly 60" TV show.

Photograph courtesy of: <http://en.wikipedia.org/>



Boy from the Satere-Mawe tribe starting the Bullet Ant Ritual.

Photograph courtesy of:

<http://acritica.uol.com.br/amazonia/tucandeira-tradicao->

HELL ON EARTH

Whatever the pain it was to be bitten by the ants, is nothing compared to when the gloves are pulled off. Once the gloves are out, the real torture begins. The venom spreads along the blood current. The Tucandeira ants' venom lasts about 24 hours (hence the name "24 hour ants"), along with the pain and hallucinations. One Satere man from the tribe describes the process, as "it's the same as having your hands in fire". The boy that completed the ritual usually is in a state of delusion and visions. What used to be his hands now

swollen and paralyzed looking-stumps. If the horrible pain wasn't enough, there is a high risk of mortality because of the quantity of venom the person receives.

Unfortunately, one attempt is not enough to turn a Satere-Mawe boy into a man. The soon-to-be-man has to through the ritual as many times as it takes for him not to shed a single tear during the process. Accomplishing this can take up to 20 times, over the course of months and even years.



Tucandeira ritual taking place. Photos courtesy of: The Tribe: Gallery - Bullet Ant Rite of Pa

Either by bungee jumping or some other kind of crazy test of strength, it seems, as men want nothing more than to prove that they deserve the tittle. Their little to none physical changes in appearance may have led them to try and demonstrate that they have left childhood and transitioned into adulthood.

The Tucandeira Ritual won't be the only or the last, there will always be some cultural belief that men are strong but they need to prove their value. Some things never change.

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