

# Romel's Rainforest Home

by David Dudenhoefer  
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***Urakepe.* Hello. My name is Romel. I'm a Chachi Indian. I live in the village of San Salvador, in western Ecuador. I have five brothers, two sisters, and lots of cousins.**





There are about 60 families in San Salvador, and most are bigger than mine. They live in houses spread along the Río Sucio, the main river in this area. *Río Sucio* means “Dirty River,” but half the year, the water is pretty clear. It only gets muddy during the rainy season, especially after big storms, when it rises and flows really fast. In the dry season, it’s so shallow you can walk across it in many spots.





**Our house is right in town, between the soccer field and the river. I've lived in San Salvador all my life—I'm 13—so I know this area pretty well. I've explored most of the farms around here, and a lot of the rainforest. On most of the flat land along the Río Sucio there are farms where people grow cacao and other crops, but the mountains that surround this valley are covered with rainforest. My dad and I go hunting in those forests for paca, agouti, guans and other animals. I go there alone sometimes too, just to look for wildlife.**





**We've got all kinds of animals around here—snakes, coatis, tarantulas, tamanduas—but it's hard to see them. You have to be real quiet, and walk far. Some animals are easy to see, though—lizards and butterflies are all over the place. Other animals make so much noise you can't miss them. Howler monkeys growl from the treetops, and birds like parrots, toucans and oropendolas squawk or sing, but they don't stay still.**







**I'd like to hike in the forest every day, but I have to go to school and work on our farm. I've always got chores to do. Sometimes I have to get water from the river or cut firewood before breakfast.**

**I usually eat boiled plantains or cassava for breakfast, maybe with a piece of paca meat, or a duck egg. The good thing is, I live close to school. Some kids have to walk an hour to get there, and if it's raining, they show up pretty wet.**





I like school, even though it can be hard. We Chachi speak Chapalachi, but the books are all in Spanish, because that's the official language of Ecuador. In Spanish, "good morning" is "*buenos días*," but in Chapalachi, it's "*urakepe nene*." Pretty different, aren't they? Luckily, our teachers are Chachi, so they can explain things in Chapalachi if we don't understand.





C.E.C. INTERCULTURAL BILINGÜE  
"JUAN LORENZO AÑAPA"  
SAN SALVADOR-MUISNE  
ACUERDO MINIST. 1920. 14 NOV

**When I'm not in school, I like to play soccer or volleyball with my friends. Most days, though, I have to work on our farm. Like everyone in San Salvador, my family grows cacao to earn money and other crops for food. We have a giant garden planted with bananas, plantains, limes, cassava, taro, beans, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, papaya, guava, avocado, peach palm, soursop, pineapple and chili peppers.**





**We grow most of what we eat, but the teachers from my school also have a little store in town. My teacher said that they don't earn any money from the store, but they run it to help our community. We never had a store before they opened a few years ago. They sell things like rice, salt, candles, cooking oil, batteries and best of all, candy.**





**Most of our farm is planted with cacao trees. I prefer harvesting cacao to working in the garden, because cacao grows in the shade of bigger trees, so it's cooler. There are also lots of birds, and I like to listen to them sing while I work. I look for the ripe pods, bright orange and yellow, hanging from the branches. I usually knock the high ones down with a bamboo pole, but sometimes I have to climb up for a pod that won't budge. I cut the pods open with my machete and dump the seeds into a bucket.**





**The seeds are surrounded by white fruit that's really sweet. I suck on them when I'm hungry, but I never bite, because they're really bitter. When they're fresh, the seeds are purple, but after we dry them in the sun, they turn dark brown. Sometimes my mom grinds seeds and mixes the powder with hot water and sugarcane juice. It's great, but I don't get to drink it very often because we need to sell our cacao.**





**During the rainy season, I help my father and brothers load up our dugout canoes with bags of cacao seeds and we float down the river to the road. There we catch a bus to Esmeraldas, a big port city. We sell our cacao and buy things like rubber boots, clothes, machetes and other tools. Sometimes my dad buys me chocolate, which what they make from cacao. I think chocolate is probably my favorite food.**





I like going there, but I wouldn't want to live in Esmeraldas even if I could eat chocolate every day. It is interesting—there are all kinds of people, lots of shops, and everyone has electric lights, stereos and TV sets—but it's too noisy and crowded for me. There are hardly any trees or birds in the city. There aren't many Chachi either, since most of our people live more than 100 kilometers northeast of here, around the Cayapas River.

I've never been to the Cayapas area, but my Uncle Benito has. He's the president of San Salvador, so he goes there to meet with the other leaders of the Chachi Federation. My uncle says we Chachi need to be organized, because we're a minority. There are less than 8,000 Chachi in all of Ecuador.





**My grandfather says that when he was a boy, the Chachi were about the only people in this area. Now there are lots of people from other parts of Ecuador. The problem is that they're cutting down all the forest. Along the road to Esmeraldas, the hills are practically bare. You don't see any big trees like the ones around San Salvador. We Chachi couldn't live without the rainforest. The forest gives us most of the things we need. We use it wood, leaves and vines to make our houses, canoes, baskets and hammocks. We hunt in them for the animals we eat. Even our medicines come from the forest.**





**For us, the rainforest is like a living being. We know we need to preserve it. But all around us people are destroying it. There are even a bunch of outsiders who have moved onto Chachi land and are cutting down trees. Our territory is part of the Mache-Chindul Biological Reserve, so my uncle is trying to get the environmental ministry to make those people leave. But he said getting the government to help us Indians is like trying to make a turtle run.**





**My uncle thinks private organizations might help us more than the government does. He's looking for groups that could help us improve our school, or bring tourists to San Salvador. He and my dad are working with Conservación y Desarrollo to improve our farms. They've shown us how to produce more cacao by stopping the diseases and pests that attack the trees. They're also teaching us how to dry and store the seeds better, so we can get more money for them. My uncle has always complained that we don't get a fair price for our cacao, but maybe we finally will.**





**I'm proud of my uncle. Sometimes I sit in the back of our town meeting and watch him speak. He says that when I'm older, he'll take me to Cayapas for a meeting of the Chachi Federation. I told him one day I'll be president of San Salvador, just like him.**



