
Brazil: The Ashaninka Resistance Movement meets the future

Deep in the interior of Brazilian Amazon, a logger crosses the border from Peru and invades Ashaninka tribal land, felling another ancient mahogany and dragging it toward the river to be floated down to a truck and headed for international markets.

“This week is one of the most crucial in Ashaninka history,” observed curator Celso Carelli Mendes, speaking from his 15 years of experience living and working in the Amazon with various tribes. “This week may decide the future of the way that indigenous people work with the Brazilian nation-state, the future of the forest itself.”

We were eating a midnight snack at a café in the center of the capital city of Brasilia, after driving tribal leader Benki Piyanko to his hotel following a paparazzi-filled evening at Ciné Brasilia. The evening was the official opening of Semana Ashaninka-Apiwtxa, five days of meetings, cultural events, round-table discussions and films revolving around the Ashaninka tribe. The Semana brought together some of the Brazilian government’s top decision-makers, including Minister of the Environment Marina Silva and the presidents of FUNAI and IBAMA, the two major government agencies dealing with indigenous people.

The opening event was a glamorous public spectacle, including performances by the Ashaninka and other Brazilian musicians, official speeches, TV coverage, a photography exhibit and the debut of a documentary film. Ultimately, however, most seemed to agree that despite the flash and sparkle of the night, it was ultimately superficial, a show. On the way back in the car, Benki and Celso spoke about the division between pretty words and real action, the eternal split between theory and practice.

“People were coming up to me tonight and telling me that I was demonstrating the future of Brazil, a future in which indigenous people work in alliance with the government to preserve the Amazon,” Benki said. “But I think that the future is already here, the way is clear—we just need people who are going to act, who are going to do what needs to be done for the forest, who are going to work. That’s what is lacking.”

When I arrived that evening at Ciné Brasilia, the twelve members of the Ashaninka tribe who had traveled thousands of miles from the outer reaches of the Amazon for Semana Ashaninka-Apiwtxa were assembled in front of the flashbulbs, microphones and TV cameras. They were dressed in their traditional hand-woven robes and feather-topped crowns, faces painted with intricate red and black patterns, draped in countless strings of colored seeds.

The Brazilian Ashaninka live on a reservation of 85,700 ha (1 hectare = 2.5 acres), in the state of Acre, near the border with Peru. Apiwtxa refers to a specific community that might be called the capital of the Brazilian Ashaninka nation, where the leaders of the tribe live. The remote location of the tribe has played a part in its sporadic contact with devastating forces of colonization, and the land to this day is only accessible by air or by a journey of several days by canoe from the nearest road.

Compared to their ancestral territory, this reserve represents a rather small piece of land, which the

Ashaninka people have managed to hold on to after hundreds of years of struggle and resistance. The reserve was recognized as their nation's territory in 1992, 250 years after the first major uprising of the Ashaninka expelled the Spanish soldiers and Franciscan missionaries who had arrived with the wave of colonization. After warding off invasion for over a century, many of them were enslaved in the brutal regime of coffee and rubber plantations. It is estimated that a staggering 80 percent of the tribe was decimated from disease and extreme exploitation during the rubber boom of 1839- 1913. In the face of this incomprehensible loss, the Ashaninka have battled to maintain their cultural identity, protect their forest home, and preserve their language and livelihood.

According to the event program, the Semana Ashaninka had two objectives: to explore the "advances and victories of the tribe in relation to natural resources and sustainable production" and to, "seek solutions to difficulties and problems in the Brazil-Peru border region." After the opening event, the Ashaninka took part in a series of meetings with government officials and public "round-table" discussions. The major issue discussed was the illegal entry of loggers across the remote border, who are felling mahogany and other valuable trees in Ashaninka territory at a growing rate.

The Ashaninka gained some amount of media attention in the past decade, owing in part to the charisma, strength and initiative of their young pajé, Benki. Thirty years old and the son of the "chief," or cacique, Benki's intense shamanic training included a year of spiritual practices in isolation in the jungle as an adolescent. Benki was among the leaders of a project to bring the Internet to the Ashaninka, using small village kiosks to facilitate communications between remote areas and create a website to publicize news about the tribe.

"Some people ask, 'why are Indians messing with the Internet?'" Benki remarked. "But I think it is really important that we have this net of communication, to let the world know what is going on with us."

The Ashaninka presented their initiatives towards sustainable development through documentary films that demonstrate some of their work. One aspect is a program of reforestation, replanting land destroyed since the invasion of brancos, or white men. Benki reported that the tribe has replanted 25 percent of the deforested land, and that the small fruit plantations have been bearing products that the tribe has sold to benefit schools. They have also implemented projects to raise fish and turtles for food, with excellent results. Much of the work was done by children as a form of experiential learning, and training for the future.

"I asked myself, what did my grandparents and great-grandparents do to protect the forest?" Benki said. "Our people want to work with Brazil to create an alternative development, to show the world an example of sustainability.... Eight years after we started this project, we were able to feed people, and hope to continue forever."

"The Ashaninka story is different in that they are showing us the way," commented Romulo Mello, Director of Hunting and Fishing Resources at native affairs organization IBAMA. "They don't just talk, they "do", and they are inviting us to participate with them, to share lessons from indigenous culture."

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