How the Amazon's Indigenous People Are Holding Back the "Arc of Destruction"

By Daniel Howden

The uruku red lines painted on her cheeks change shape as she draws a sharp breath. Arms outstretched, she blows into the palms of her hands and lifts an invisible weight into the night sky. Katia Luisa Yawanawa is standing on an open ship's deck, thousands of miles upstream on the Amazon, where the great river divides into the black water of the Rio Negro and white water of the Solimoes.

Katia is offering a prayer called a Shuanka. It involves singing to the Yawanawans' ancestors for guidance and protection. Although only 26, Katia is among the most important members of her tribe. She is a wise woman, a xinaya, and the Yawanawan tribe's first female shaman.

The young healer is also a living symbol of the resurgence of Brazil's indigenous population, and their delicate balancing act between adapting to the modern world while holding on to a traditional worldview.

Across the so-called "arc of destruction, " the logging, ranching and farming operations that are deforesting the Amazon basin, it is indigenous groups fighting for their own lives who offer the best resistance.

For the Yawanawans this has meant casting aside traditional objections to allow a woman to become a shaman. Taska Yawanawa, their young chief, explains how attitudes were changed: "We said no. The spirit is the spirit, it has no sex, so a woman can be initiated into the spirit."

Even then, Katia faced a year-long ordeal before she could take her leading role, much of it in isolation deep in the forest.

Speaking to an international audience at an environmental gathering in Amazonia State, staged by the the non-governmental organisation Religion, Science and the Environment, Katia describes her rebirth.

"When you are initiated you drink ayawaska (a powerful natural hallucinogen) and take the oath of fidelity. You are committed to doing good. There is a strict diet, no sex, no water, and no food for months. It's like a baptism, being reborn again."

In recent decades the Yawanawans, like other tribes, came close to disappearing. Now they number 620 living in the remote Amazonian region of Acre, and that number is expected to pass 1,000 within two years. They have established rights of perpetual residence across hundreds of hectares of the rainforest, and fought off the threats of loggers, ranchers and corrupt local officials to protect their land.

Hylton Philipson, the trustee of Rainforest Concern, a London- based charity, believes the story of Katia and the resurgence of Brazil's original inhabitants is the best cause for optimism over the future of the Amazon.

"If you look at a map of where the indigenous populations are they are the thin red line standing in the way of the destruction of the Amazon," Mr Philipson said. "There is a clear relationship between the indigenous people and the survival of the forest. They are the most cost-effective means of protecting it."

The indigenous don't have title to land but under law have perpetual right of occupation. "They are unpaid and unrecognised forest rangers," said Mr Philipson.

Brazil is a vast country. The Amazon biome covers nearly half of Brazil. But to most Brazilians, who live in the industrialised south, the Amazon is as remote and exotic an idea as it is to most Europeans.

The indigenous have legitimate claim to 20 per cent of Amazonian land. They are only 0.3 per cent of Brazil's population but have rights, acknowledged by the government, to 12.4 per cent of its land. The Brazilian government has neither the will nor the resources to extend the rule of law into the remote territories and it is "glad to have the indigenous out there doing it for them", Mr Philipson says.

When Pedro Alvares Cabral, the Portuguese commander of the discovery fleet, arrived in Brazil in April 1500, he was shocked to discover a coastline teeming with life. The arrivals thought they had reached the Indies and called the locals Indians. He wrote of the "paradise" of natural riches and the beauty of the country and its inhabitants.

The honeymoon soon soured as the Conquistadores ravaged the land and its people and only a handful of tribes would survive the onslaught of agricultural slavery and Western disease. When the Europeans first reached the Amazon, there were seven million indigenous people from as many as 2,000 distinct tribes, or nations. By 1950 that number had plummeted to just 100,000.

The Yawanawans, whose homelands are in the dense jungle of Acre in south-eastern Brazil, had their first contact with the outside world 100 years ago. Taska Yawanawa, the 29-year-old chief of the tribe, narrates the disastrous impact that followed: "Our first contact was with missionaries. They wanted to change everything about us. We struggled to survive, to hold onto anything from our original education and culture. We had traditional methods to deal with the Yawanawan diseases but we had no method to deal with the occidental diseases."

They were decimated by malaria and stripped of all rights during the rubber boom. To make matters worse, they were then infiltrated by the Christian fundamentalist missionaries, who arrived from Florida, calling themselves the New Tribes mission in the 1960s.

Taska said: "They didn't see Yawanawan culture in a good light. They started calling the Yawanawan leadership communists. We had no idea what communism was. But they told us all communists will go to hell. We decided to go to hell but to stay in our own lands with our own way of life."

The Brazilian stereotype of the Indian is that of a lazy good for nothing. But the "exact opposite is true," according to Mr Philipson. "They are the entire underpinning of the forest. It's their culture that is rich and ours that is bankrupt."

Source: The Independent UK via Truthout
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