Kayapo Courage

The Amazon tribe has beaten back ranchers and gold miners and famously stopped a dam. Now its leaders must fight again or risk losing a way of life.

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Kendjam looks timeless, but it was established only in 1998, when Chief Pukatire and his followers split off from the village of Pukanu, farther up the Iriri River, after a dispute about logging. “Fissioning,” as anthropologists call it, is often the way Kayapo resolve disagreements or relieve the strain on resources in a particular area. The village’s population is now 187, and for all its classic appearance there are additions that would have boggled the minds of Pukatire’s ancestors: a generator in a government-built nurses’ station; a solar panel array enclosed in a barbed wire fence; satellite dishes mounted on truncated palm trees. A few families have TVs in their thatch houses and enjoy watching videos of their own ceremonies, along with Brazilian soap operas. Pukatire showed us to a two-room schoolhouse built a few years ago by the Brazilian government—a pistachio-colored concrete structure with a tile roof and shutters and the luxe marvel of a flush toilet fed by well water…

In 1900, 11 years after the founding of the Brazilian Republic, the Kayapo population was about 4,000. As miners, loggers, rubber tappers, and ranchers poured into the Brazilian frontier, missionary organizations and government agencies launched efforts to “pacify” aboriginal tribes, wooing them with trade goods such as cloth, metal pots, machetes, and axes. Contact often had the unintended effect of introducing measles and other diseases to people who had no natural immunity. By the late 1970s, following the construction of the Trans-Amazon Highway, the population had dwindled to about 1,300…In the 1980s and ’90s the Kayapo rallied, led by a legendary generation of chiefs who harnessed their warrior culture to achieve their political goals. Leaders like Ropni and Mekaron-Ti organized protests with military precision, began to apply pressure, and, as I learned from Zimmerman, who has been working with the Kayapo for more than 20 years, would even kill people caught trespassing on their land. Kayapo war parties evicted illegal ranchers and gold miners, sometimes offering them the choice of leaving Indian land in two hours or being killed on the spot. Warriors took control of strategic river crossings and patrolled borders; they seized hostages; they sent captured trespassers back to town without their clothes.

In their struggle for autonomy and control over their land, the chiefs of that era learned Portuguese and were able to enlist the help of conservation organizations and celebrities such as the rock star Sting, who traveled with Chief Ropni (also known as Raoni). In 1988 the Kayapo helped get indigenous rights written into the new Brazilian Constitution, and eventually they secured legal recognition of their territory. In 1989 they protested the construction of the Kararaô Dam project on the Xingu River, which would have flooded parts of their land. The original plan calling for six dams in the basin was dropped after large demonstrations in which conservation groups joined the

Kayapo for what is known today as the Altamira Gathering.

…From shotguns and motorized aluminum boats to Facebook pages, they have shown a canny ability to adopt technologies and practices of the cash-based society at their borders without compromising the essence of their culture. With the help of noted anthropologist and Kayapo expert Terence Turner of Cornell University, they have embraced video cameras to record their ceremonies and dances and to log interactions with government officials.

"The Brazilian government is trying to pass laws saying indigenous people don't need to be consulted for their rivers to be used for electricity or mining or even if the boundaries of their lands need to be redrawn," said Adriano "Pingo" Jerozolimski, the director of a nonprofit Kayapo organization that represents about 22 Kayapo villages. Last June in the village of Kokraimoro, 400 Kayapo chiefs avowed their opposition to a raft of decrees, ordinances, and proposed laws and constitutional amendments that would gut their ability to control their land and prevent them, and any other indigenous group, from adding to their territory…

…Pukatire sounded a lament I heard over and over: "I am worried about our young people who are imitating whites, cutting their hair and wearing stupid little earrings like you see in town. None of the young people know how to make poison for arrows. In Brasília the Kayapo are always told they are going to lose their culture and they might as well get it over with. The elders have to speak up and say to our young people, 'You can't use the white man's stuff. Let the white people have their culture, we have ours.' If we start copying white people too much, they won't be afraid of us, and they will come and take everything we have. But as long as we maintain our traditions, we will be different, and as long as we are different, they will be a little afraid of us."

After four decades of plans dating back to Brazil's military dictatorship, four decades of studies, protests, revised plans, court rulings, court reversals, blockades, international appeals, a film by *Avatar* director James Cameron, and lawsuits, construction finally began in 2011 on the $14 billion Belo Monte. The complex of canals, reservoirs, dikes, and two dams is located some 300 miles north of Kendjam on the Xingu, where the river makes a giant U-turn called the Volta Grande. The project, which will have a maximum generating capacity of 11,233 megawatts and is slated to come on line in 2015, has divided the country. Its supporters defend it as a way of delivering needed electricity, while environmentalists have condemned it as a social, environmental, and financial disaster.

In 2005 the Brazilian Congress voted to revive the dam on the grounds that its energy was essential to the security of the rapidly growing nation. The Kayapo and other tribes affected by the plans reassembled in Altamira in 2008. A project engineer from Eletrobras, the state-owned power company, was mobbed and suffered a "deep, bloody gash on his shoulder," according to news accounts at the time. Claiming that the project's environmental impact statements were defective and that the region's

indigenous people were not adequately consulted, Brazil's federal Public Prosecutor's Office filed a series of lawsuits to stop the complex, essentially pitting one branch of the government against another. The cases went to the country's Supreme Court, but judgments have been deferred, and construction of Belo Monte has been allowed to proceed.

Even a complex consisting of just two dams will have an enormous impact on the Xingu Basin, thanks to roads and the influx of an estimated 100,000 workers and migrants. The dams will flood an area the size of Chicago. Official estimates project that 20,000 people will be displaced; independent estimates suggest the number may be twice as high. The dams will generate methane from inundated vegetation in quantities that rival the greenhouse gas emissions of coal-fired power plants. The diversion of some 80 percent of the water along a 62-mile stretch of the Xingu will dry up areas that depend on seasonal floodwaters and are home to endangered species.

...One of (Ropni's) purposes in coming to Kendjam was to find out why the chiefs of the eastern part of the territory had been accepting money from Eletrobras. Boxes of brand-new 25-horsepower boat motors were stacked on the porch of the Protected Forest Association headquarters. Ropni's village and other villages in the south had steadfastly refused money from Eletrobras, money that activists said was an attempt to dampen indigenous opposition to Belo Monte. The consortium building the dam was investing in wells, clinics, and roads in the area and was paying a dozen villages nearby an allowance of 30,000 reais a month (roughly $15,000) for food and supplies, which Schwartzman describes as "hush money."

The first Kayapo encounters with the grimy Brazilian banknotes led to the coining of their evocative word for money: *pe-o caprin,* or "sad leaves." More and more sad leaves were a part of Kayapo life, especially in villages close to towns on the Brazilian frontier. In the Kayapo village of Turedjam, near Tucumã, pollution from clear-cutting and cattle ranching had wrecked the fishing grounds, and it was not uncommon to see Kayapo shopping in supermarkets for soap and frozen chicken.

... On the day the chiefs left, there were letters they needed to sign—FUNAI paperwork authorizing various matters they had discussed. Mekaron-Ti, who was fluent in the Western world as well as the forest world, signed his name quickly like someone who had written a thousand letters. But Ropni held the pen awkwardly. It was striking to see him struggle with the letters of his name, knowing what esoteric expertise was otherwise in his hands, how deftly he could fasten a palm nut belt, or insert a lip plate, or whittle a stingray tail into an arrowhead, or underscore the oratory that had helped secure a future for his people. In the Xingu Valley there had hardly ever been a more able pair of hands. But in the realm that required penmanship, the great chief was like a child.

Six months later, 26 eastern Kayapo leaders met in Tucumã and signed a letter rejecting further money from the dambuilding consortium: "We, the Mebengôkre

Kayapo people, have decided that we do not want a single penny of your dirty money. We do not accept Belo Monte or any other dam on the Xingu. Our river does not have a price, our fish that we eat does not have a price, and the happiness of our grandchildren does not have a price. We will never stop fighting... The Xingu is our home and you are not welcome here."

...It is one of the richest ironies of the Amazon that the supposedly civilized outsiders who spent five centuries evangelizing, exploiting, and exterminating aboriginal people are now turning to those first inhabitants to save ecosystems recognized as critical to the health of the planet—to defend essential tracts of undeveloped land from the developed world's insatiable appetites.

In a more leisurely posture, a festively dressed father waits for his baby's name-giving ceremony to begin.