ANTHROPOLOGY

Designing for Life

An Indigenous community in the Amazon basin is showing the world how to live with, rather than off, nature

By Carolina Schneider Comandulli, with the Apiwtxa Association

Photographs by André Dib

ASHANINKA villager by a sacred Kapok tree

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LAST JULY A PREMONITION PERSUADED THE ASHANINKA INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF the western Amazon basin to undertake a great traditional expedition. When a shaman said that this could be their last chance to enjoy peace and tranquility, more than 200 Ashaninka from the Sawawo and Apiwtxa villages alongside the Amônia River in Brazil and Peru, respectively, boated upstream to pristine headwaters deep in the forest. It was the dry season, when the river waters were clear and safe for the children to splash in and the night sky starry for the spirit to soar in. There, in the manner of their ancestors, the Ashaninka spent a week camping, hunting, fishing, sharing stories, and imbibing all the joy, beauty and serenity they could.

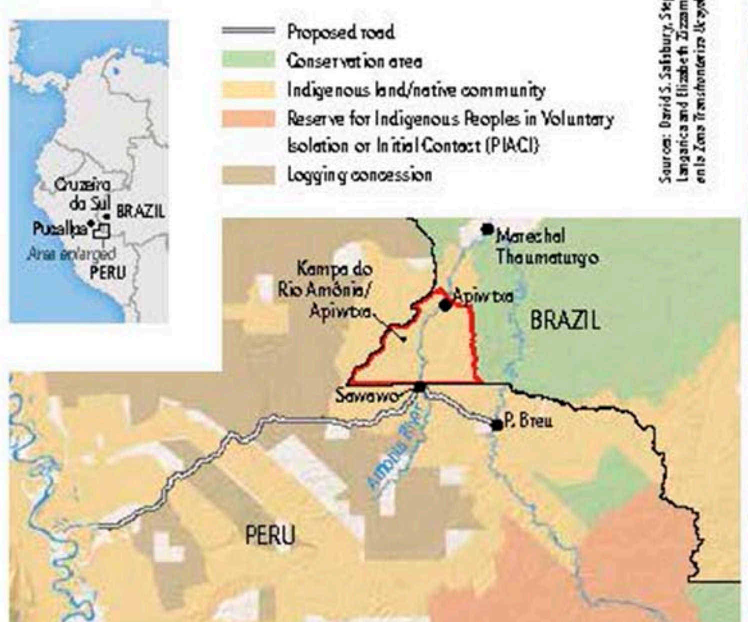
A month later the Ashaninka got the news they had been dreading—a road-building project they'd heard about months earlier was moving forward. Logging companies had moved heavy equipment from mainland Peru to a village at the Amazon forest's edge to cut an illegal road through to the Amônia. Once the road reached the river, loggers would use the waterway to penetrate the rain forest and fell mahogany, cedar and other trees. The birds and animals the workers didn't shoot for food would be scared away by the screech of chain saws. Indigenous peoples would face lethal danger both from violent encounters with the newcomers as well as from casual interactions, which would spread germs to which isolated peoples have little immunity. Drug traffickers would clear swaths of forest, establish coca plantations and recruit local youths as drug couriers and addicts. The road would bring, in a word, devastation.

This borderland between Brazil and Peru, where the lowland Amazon rain forest slopes gently toward the Andes foothills, is rich with biological and cultural diversity. It is home to the jaguar (*Panthera onca*) and the woolly monkey (*Lagothrix poeppigii*), as well as to several Indigenous groups. Its protected landscapes include two national parks, two reserves for Indigenous people in voluntary isolation and more than 26 Indigenous territories. The nearest large town, Pucallpa in Peru, is more than 200 kilometers away as the macaw flies and reachable only by forest trails from Sawawo; the tiny town of Marechal Thaumaturgo on the Amônia River in Brazil can be accessed by chartered flight from Cruzeiro do Sul, the capital of Acre province, and is a three-hour boat ride downstream of Apiwtxa.

Remote as it is, the region has been threatened for centuries by colonizers who sought its riches. In response, the Ashaninka joined Indigenous alliances to fight off the invaders, fled into ever deeper forests to escape them or, in the 19th century, were enslaved and forced to tap rubber or harvest cotton. In the 1980s, however, technological advances made it far quicker and easier for outsiders to cut through the jungle for logging, ranching, industrial agriculture, and drug production and trafficking.

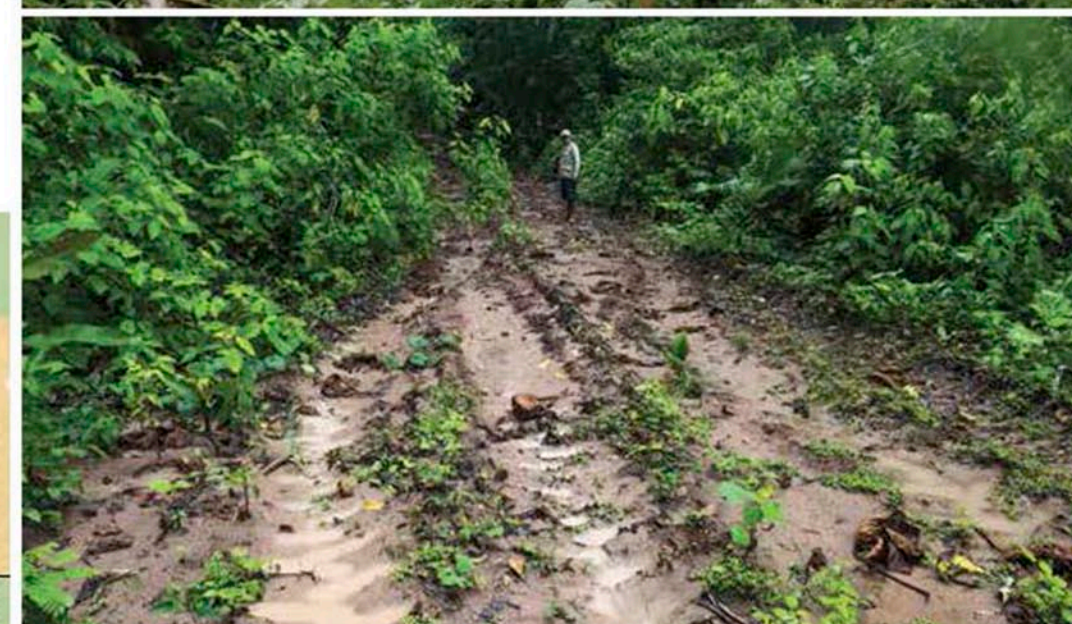
The Apiwtxa Ashaninka adapted, responding to the intensified assaults with increasingly sophisticated and multifaceted resistance tactics, which included seeking allies from both Indigenous and mainstream society. Most significantly, they devised a strategy for the community's long-term survival. The Apiwtxa designed and achieved a sustainable, enjoyable and largely self-sufficient way of life, maintained and protected by cultural empowerment, Indigenous spirituality and resistance to invasions from the outside world. "We live in the Amazon," said Apiwtxa chief Antonio Piyãko at the July gathering. "If we do not look after it, it will vanish. We have the right to keep looking after this land and prevent it from being invaded and destroyed by people who do not belong here."

The Apiwtxa, along with members of regional nongovernmen-

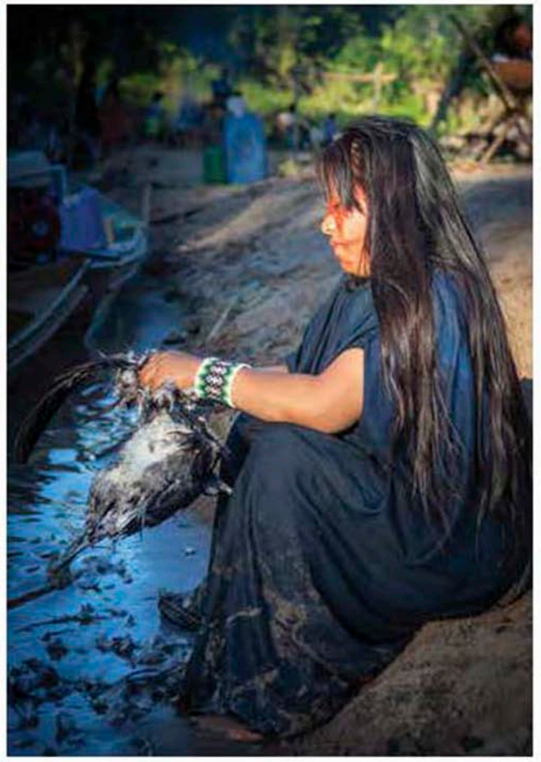


Sources: David S. Salisbury, Stephanie A. Spera, Elspeth Collard, Anna Frisbie, M. R. Place, Yunuen Reygadas Langarica and Elizabeth Zizzamia, Amazon Borderlands Spatial Analysis Team, 2021; *Atlas de las Carreteras Propuestas en la Zona Transfronteriza Ucayali Perú-Acre, Brasil* by Spatial Analysis Lab, University of Richmond (map reference)

Map by Mapping Specialists



A LOGGING ROAD from Peru (*above*) cut through the Amazon forest to reach the Am nia River in August 2021. Fearing a devastating assault on the region's biodiversity, Ashaninka Indigenous peoples and their allies halted the loggers' advance with their bodies. They subsequently established a surveillance outpost (*left*) by the illegal road to guard against further attempts by outsiders to extract the region's natural wealth.



tal organizations, had been working with the Sawawo people, first in the line of invasion, to prepare to resist the loggers. When they learned that the loggers had finally arrived, members of Sawawo's vigilance committee traveled up the Amônia in their boats. Two and a half hours later they came upon two tractors. Laden with people, food, fuel and equipment for founding a logging base, the vehicles had crossed the river into Ashaninka territory in Peru. The defenders took pictures of the destruction, interviewed the loggers and returned to their village, where they had Internet access. They reported the intrusion to Peruvian authorities through a local Indigenous organization, asking that an environment official visit to survey the damage. They also shared the evidence with the Apiwtxa and other allies and set up camp at the invasion spot, waiting for reinforcements.

Apiwtxa tribespeople showed up soon after, by boat, and nine days later supporters from three NGOs—Pro Purus, Upper Amazon Conservancy and Aconadayish—arrived on foot. That evening they saw two more tractors arriving with supplies. More than 20 people, led by a woman carrying her baby, swiftly placed themselves in front of the tractors, preventing the loggers from crossing the Amônia. The Ashaninka, who have a reputation of being fierce warriors, promptly confiscated the keys from the stunned drivers.

The official arrived the next day. He cursorily scanned the environmental damage and demanded the tractor keys, which the Ashaninka handed over. Sawawo's people nonetheless maintained a presence in the camp for months to make sure that the tractors were not used for a fresh assault on the region, and the NGO allies alerted the press to the intrusion. Eventually the logging companies left the territory. Determined but nonviolent Indigenous resistance, coupled with pressure from global media, had temporarily unnerved them.

In November 2021, however, when Apiwtxa village was hosting a gathering of local Indigenous groups to discuss the increasing threats posed by loggers and drug traffickers, the Peruvian government authorized the tractors' retrieval. One of the companies has since resumed its efforts to enter the region, using a tried-and-true tactic—divide and conquer—seeking to convince individual Indigenous leaders to sign logging contracts with them. The struggle the Ashaninka have been waging for decades continues.

CONTEMPORARY, NOT MODERN

SINCE 1992, when the Ashaninka people obtained legal title to some 870 square kilometers of partially degraded forest along the Amônia River, one of its communities has achieved an astonishing transformation. Once a people undergoing flight, fight or subjugation ever since European missionaries and colonizers arrived in their homeland three centuries ago, the 1,000-odd people of Apiwtxa village in the Kampa do Rio Amônia Indigenous Land have become an autonomous, self-assured and largely self-sufficient community. They have regenerated the forest, which had been damaged by logging and cattle ranching, restored endangered species, enhanced food security through hunting, gathering, agroforestry and shifting cultivation, and otherwise shaped a way of life they hope will ensure the continuation of their community and principles. These achievements, as well as their support for other Indigenous communities, have earned them several awards, including the United Nation's Equator Prize in 2017.

The Apiwtxa designs for living, drawn from shamanic visions and informed by interactions with the non-Indigenous world, are predicated on the protection and nurturing of all life in their territory. The Ashaninka hold that their well-being depends on the maintenance of the Amazon's incredible biodiversity. This awareness comes largely from their intimate relationships with the plants, animals, celestial bodies and other elements of their landscape, which they regard as their close relatives. These beings, especially the plant ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), which the Ashaninka call *kamarãpi*, help treat their diseases and guide their decisions through visions. "Our life is an enchantment," shaman Moisés Piyãko said to me in July 2015. "What we live in Apiwtxa is all lived beforehand in the world of *kamarãpi*."

As architects of their future rather than passive victims of circumstance, the Apiwtxa are living a concept outlined by development scholar Arturo Escobar in Designs for the Pluriverse (2018). Extending design theory into the cultural and political realm, Escobar described social design as a means by which traditional and Indigenous peoples engender innovative solutions to contemporary challenges. In his view, moments of social breakdown, when "the habitual mode of being in the world is interrupted," are important for new ways of living to emerge. Securing a territory, a safe space for the design to flourish, is essential, Escobar adds. Through the struggle to safeguard their land, the Apiwtxa have realized this ideal: the community has fought against social and ecological disintegration to take control of its own fate and that of the creatures they live with and depend on.

I first arrived in Apiwtxa village in 2015 to conduct research for a doctoral degree in anthropology. Getting there required four sets of clearances—from my university, two Brazilian agencies and the Apiwtxa themselves—a commercial flight to Cruzeiro do Sul, a chartered flight to Marechal Thaumaturgo and then a three-hour boat ride. Within days of arrival, I realized that it was no easy task to study the Ashaninka. A centuries-long history of dispossession and exploitation by non-Indigenous people has made them wary of outsiders. It was only after some months of *their* observing *me* that I was allowed to stay. My willingness to collaborate with their projects, my empathy with their principles, and my deep respect for their courage and wisdom all guided their decision. I ended up living and working with the Ashaninka for two and a half years. It was a transformative experience.

I had worked with various Indigenous groups since the early 2000s, as a researcher, consultant on the environmental impact of development projects, and later as an employee with FUNAI, Brazil's National Foundation for Indian Affairs. I was well aware of the devastation that the Global North's hunger for oil, minerals, timber and other resources wreaked on forest peoples. I found the Ashaninka remarkable, however, for their penetrating analysis of the assaults they faced, as well as the farsightedness with which they devised responses to them. They were not "modern," in that they did not seek a state of development modeled on a Western ideal of progress and growth that many aspire to but only few can reach. Instead they were exceptionally "contemporary," in the sense of finding their own solutions to present-day problems. As philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour commented,

THE APIWTXA WAY of living—enjoying a canoe ride on the Amônia River (*opposite page*), weaving palm leaves into the roof of a hut (*center*), or preparing a paca for a meal (*right*)—is predicated on sustainability and self-sufficiency. It involves defending the territory from assaults when necessary as well as implementing norms for protecting biodiversity.

ABUNDANCE results from living with, rather than off, nature. A child fetches corn from a multicropped field (*left*), a woman prepares a game animal (*center*) and Dora Piyako, president of the Ayopare Cooperative, displays a sling for carrying a baby (*right*). Selling handicrafts helps the community earn an income without depleting local resources.

"Knowing how to become a contemporary, that is, of one's own time, is the most difficult thing there is." And I was awed and inspired by the Apiwtxa Ashaninka's ingenuity and resilience.

"We, the Ashaninka, have been massacred by loggers; we have been massacred by rubber dealers; we have been massacred by colonizers.... We were taken as a workforce to serve patrons who told us to cut down the forest and hunt the animals for them so they could live well; we were massacred by the missions who told us that we knew nothing," Benki Piyãko, an Ashaninka leader, told me. "But then we decided to give a different response: we began to study."

The first "student," as Benki tells it, was his grandfather, Samuel Piyãko, who sought to understand the economic imperatives that drove outsiders to exploit nature and Indigenous peoples. Born in Peru, he was a shaman who worked on cotton plantations in conditions of debt peonage, a system by which Indigenous peoples were forced to work for a pittance, purchasing their necessities from their oppressors at extortionate prices, rendering them permanently indebted. Sometime in the 1930s Samuel escaped the plantations and trekked down the Andes slopes to the rain forest in Brazil. There, too, he encountered colonizers who were entering the forest via the great Amazonian rivers.

"I do not have anywhere to escape," Samuel thought, according to Benki. "I will have to adapt here. I will stay here and look with my spirit to see how I will be able to remain connected" to other people and beings. Samuel's descendants say he used his shamanic powers to envision the transformation his people have since achieved. "What is happening here is my grandfather's dream," Moisés said. "Here we are, his grandchildren, accomplishing what he thought would guarantee the continuity of the people and build the best path for us all."

Samuel came to be regarded as a *pinkatsari*, or leader, whose sheltering presence induced other Ashaninka families to move to the area. Later, when one of his sons, Antonio, wanted to marry a non-Indigenous, Portuguese-speaking woman from a family of rubber tappers and cattle ranchers, Samuel assented, declaring that she would become an ally. He was right. Her own family initially opposed the marriage, so Francisca Oliveira da Silva, who came to be known as Dona Piti, came to live with her in-laws, bringing along her knowledge of the outside world.

Starting in the 1960s, many of the Ashaninka began working for logging bosses, who used their lack of knowledge about the outside world to exploit them—paying with a box of matches, for example, for a mahogany tree. Piti explained to them the relative values of such goods to traders, helping them understand how they were being cheated in every transaction. Seeking to break the cycle of exploitation and instead trade on their own terms, the community founded a cooperative, a collectively controlled trading enterprise, in the 1980s. "We were being fooled," recalled Bebito Piyãko, one of Piti and Antonio's children. "The cooperative was a way, we thought, to break this dependency." The Ayõpare Cooperative enabled community members to trade what they produced for credit, with which they could get goods from a village shop.

At this time, industrial logging was arriving in the region, creating destruction of a kind the Ashaninka had never encountered before. In the old days, it might take days to fell a single mahogany tree with an axe; now it took minutes. Swaths of forest fell to chain saws. Tapirs and other game animals fled. Workers brought in from faraway towns invaded Ashaninka celebrations, spreading disease and harassing women. Similar assaults across the Amazon basin sparked a vigorous and prolonged social movement that resulted in Brazil adopting a progressive new constitution in 1988 that recognized the rights of Indigenous peoples to use the natural resources of their territories as they saw fit. With the new constitution in place, the Ashaninka sought FUNAI's help to secure territorial rights to the surrounding forest.

They were besieged by death threats from loggers and cattle ranchers. Ferrying the necessary documents between Apiwtxa and Cruzeiro do Sul, Acre's second largest city, required braving ambushes. Nevertheless, Piti, Antonio and their oldest children, Moisés and Francisco, pressed Brazilian authorities for the right to control how their locale's resources should be used. No one was killed, but by the time the land title came through many Ashaninka families had left out of fear. That Samuel died during the struggle, of old age, no doubt increased their sense of insecurity.

STRENGTH IN UNITY

RECOGNIZING THAT UNITY and cooperation were key to survival, the remaining Ashaninka families, led by Antonio, Piti and others, embarked on a process of collective planning to determine their future. What kind of life did they want to live and how would they achieve it? They surveyed their territory and their experiences, looking "inside us at the worst of all the bad moments we had faced, so that we could reflect on the changes we had to make," Benki recalled. Designing their future, devising a set of rules to maintain the cohesive social structure they envisaged and developing a management plan to ensure adequate, enduring resources would take three years of exploration and discussion.

During this period the roughly 200 people formed the Apiwtxa association to represent their interests to civil society and the Brazilian state. And at its end, they began moving the community to the northernmost extremity of their territory, a remote location they deemed strategic: less accessible to invaders and more conducive to maintaining their social integrity and governance system. Although the Ashaninka traditionally lived as nuclear families scattered across the landscape, they founded a compact village that would be easier to defend, also naming it Apiwtxa.

Roughly translated as "union," the word *apiwtxa* signifies the placing of collective interests above individual ones and is one of the community's key governance principles. The villagers consistently apply it in their struggles, seeking to achieve consensus through gatherings and discussions that can take a single shift or last for days—if that is what it takes for everyone to agree—before embarking on a course of action. These meetings help the Apiwtxa devise ways to overcome threats emanating from outside their territory and plan future projects.

The Apiwtxa constructed the new village by the Amônia River, on two former cattle pastures of around 40 hectares. They reforested the area, mostly with indigenous species, which they nurtured in nurseries. They built the huts close to the river, on raised

platforms to keep out snakes, and mostly without walls to let in the breeze. Around their homes they planted fruit, palm and timber trees as well as cotton and medicinal plants. They established banana groves and manioc fields, dug ponds to breed fish and turtles to replenish the fishing resources in the Amônia River, and set up no-go areas, which shifted periodically, to prevent overhunting. And they established a school of their own design, teaching children in the Asháninka language for the first four years and imparting both traditional skills such as weaving and mainstream knowledge such as arithmetic. Several of the young people went away to attend university and study the outside world—in particular, its economic and political systems—before returning with their skills to the Apiwtxa.

At *Apiwtxa*, the day revolves around living—bathing in the river, tending crops, fishing, cooking, repairing huts and implements, playing. By the time it draws to a close, everyone is tired. The children eat dinner just before sunset, after which they might enjoy a storytelling session before going to bed. There is no electricity. The adults eat shortly after the children, and then the spiritual leaders, mostly men, sit under starry skies to chew coca leaves in silent communion. The women gather to spin cotton, chatting only occasionally. Among the Asháninka, a great deal of communication happens without speech, through subtle shifts in expression and posture. We would go to sleep by 7 or 8 P.M., waking up early to birdsong and other forest sounds, feeling deeply rested.

The regulations that the Apiwtxa decided on in the 1990s have since developed into a complex system of governance. The community's leaders, several of whom are Samuel's close relatives, comprise shamans, warriors and hunters who deal with internal issues, alongside people with formal education or experience in building social movements, who serve as interlocutors with the outside world. With such a diversity of skills, the Apiwtxa have also become adept at raising funds from governmental and nongovernmental agencies for projects, such as reforestation.

A second key principle of Asháninka design is autonomy—independence from systems of oppression and the freedom to determine how to live in their territory. "Not be led by others" is essential, Francisco declared. Autonomy requires a large measure of self-sufficiency, to which end the Apiwtxa have enhanced their food sovereignty and implemented economic and trading practices that minimally impact the environment. The ancient *ayõpare* system of exchange, which goes beyond material exchanges to the creation and nurturing of relationships of mutual support and respect, guides all transactions within and without the community. I experienced it while living there: someone might ask me for, say, batteries, and a few days or months later I would find a bunch of fruit or some other gift on my doorstep.

One manifestation of this system is the Ayõpare Cooperative, which trades only products that do not deplete nature and only with outsiders who support Apiwtxa's objectives. "The forest is our wealth," as Moises explained. "Our project is to sustain this wealth." The cooperative's most successful products are handicrafts; they help to maintain traditions and protect the forest while providing relative economic autonomy. The cooperative also enables the Apiwtxa to communicate its principles; for example, they recently began selling native seeds for reforesting other parts of the Amazon.

Reducing physical threats from the outside world enhances autonomy as well. To this end, the Apiwtxa have tried to create a physical and cultural "buffer zone" around their territory by helping neighbouring Indigenous communities to also bolster their traditions and protect biodiversity. Prolonged subjugation by mainstream society has led several Asháninka groups, especially those in Peru, to adopt outsiders' unsustainable modes of living or succumb to market pressures to sell timber or other forest resources, Benki and Moisés observed. Changing this state of affairs requires restoring ancestral ways of interacting with nature, the shamans believe. Apiwtxa leaders hold that this ancestral knowledge is a vital resource for all of humankind. "It is not enough to only work on our land," Benki said, "because our land is only a small piece of this big world that is being destroyed."

The Asháninka reject the idea that humankind is separate from nature and that the latter is subject to the former. According to their creation myth, the original creatures were all human, but Pawa, their Creator, turned many of them into animals, rocks, plants, celestial bodies, and others. Despite being different in form, these beings retained their humanity and are all related to the Asháninka. Many other Indigenous traditions similarly hold that plants, trees, animals, birds, mountains and rivers, among others, can speak, feel and think and are tied to other beings in reciprocal relationships.

AT A GATHERING by the headwaters of the Amônia River in July 2021, members of the Apiwtxa and Sawawo communities discussed the need to protect the Amazon forest from outsiders who covet its riches.

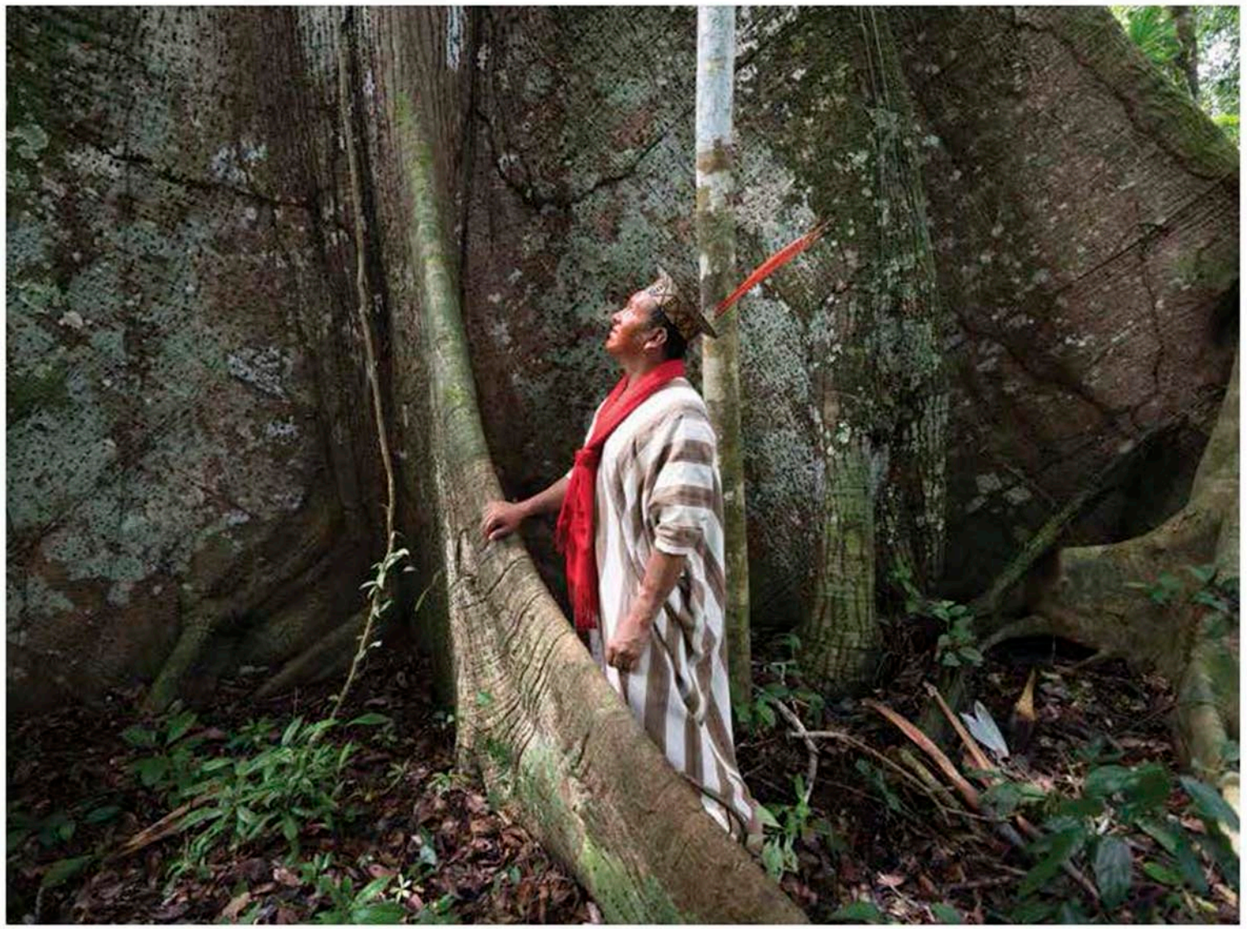
A SENTIENT WORLD

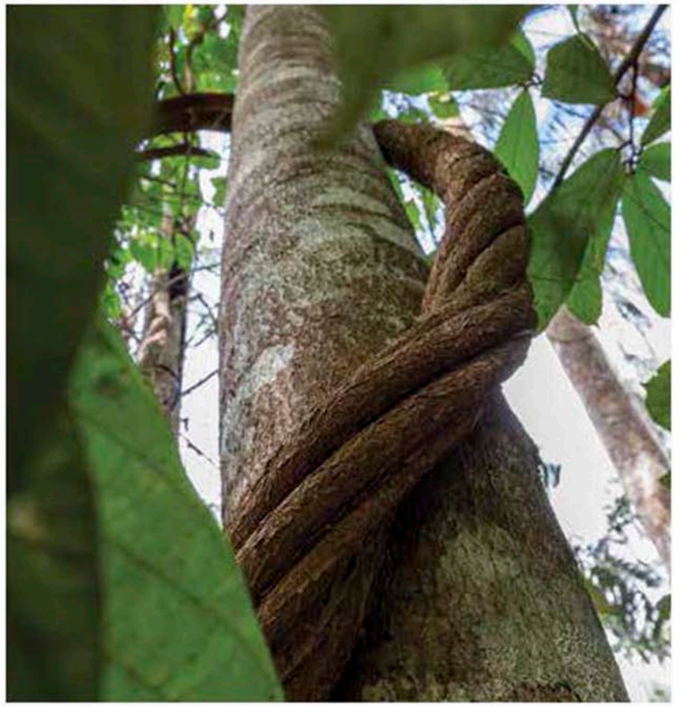
IT WAS AYAHUASCA that taught them about the intimate connections among beings, the Asháninka say. In their mythology, the ayahuasca vine sprouted from the place where a wise ancestral woman, Nanata, was buried; it possesses her wisdom. A Japo**[CK]** bird (*Cacicus cela*) then explained to the Asháninka how to unite the ayahuasca vine with a particular leaf (*Psychotria viridis*) to brew the sacred drink, *kamarõpi*. "They drank it and took it to their people, bringing light and conscience to them," Benki said.

Kamarõpi rituals always take place at night, preferably under a clear, starry sky. There is no fire, no talking; the occasion is solemn. When the psychoactive brew starts to take effect, the shaman guiding the ceremony chants, usually to the birds and the spirits in the sky. Soon the others start to sing, too, their voices overlapping to create a rapturous polyphony. At this point, visions ensue. The shaman is attuned to every participant and monitors what they are feeling, intervening when necessary.

When I took part in the ritual, I felt my body dissolving into the surroundings, my self merging with the environment in a way that defies words, giving me a deep sense of the connectedness between other beings and me. In my experience, the *kamarõpi* ceremony establishes powerful bonds among everyone present and between the forest creatures and them, enabling communication to happen in silence even after the ritual is over.

As Moises sees it, *kamarõpi* helps people develop their conscience by leading them toward self-knowledge and gradually to a deep knowledge of other people and other kinds of beings. Once developed, this wisdom will help guide their actions and relationships. Shamanic rituals have parallels with psychotherapy, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss noted; shamans, like therapists, help people gain insight into themselves and their relationships with others. But psychotherapists are only recently beginning to comprehend the power of psychoactive substances in assisting





THE ASHANINKA BELIEVE that all creatures, as well as features of the landscape such as the Amônia River (*opposite page*), are sentient and connected to one another by reciprocal relationships. Visions induced by the ayahuasca vine (*left*) reinforce the empathy that the Indigenous people feel for other beings. Francisco Piyàko (*above*) communes with a majestic kapok (*Ceiba pentandra*) tree.

AMÔNIA RIVER meanders through the Kampa do Rio Amônia Indigenous Land in the western Amazon basin.

trauma patients, among others, to come to terms with their suffering and thereby to heal. The *kamarãpi* ritual goes further, creating deep empathy not only for oneself and other human beings but also for other creatures, as well as for rivers and other features of the landscape. All come to be seen as connected, an awareness that has profound implications for how people treat nature.

Apiwtxa's shamans even attribute their capacity to design their society to *kamarãpi* visions. Moisés, Benki and other shamans actively seek guidance from ayahuasca, with whose help they attain, sustain and explore an altered state of consciousness that enables them to envision the future and find solutions to challenges. Dreams are known to be conducive to problem-solving; they enable disparate concepts to link up in ways not normally available to the rational mind. Shamans in Ashaninka and other Indigenous cultures deliberately attain such states of consciousness as a means of seeking foresight and wisdom.

Dreaming is essential but not enough, Benki adds. It is also essential to plan—to think consciously and rationally—and act in the present. When a shaman reports a significant vision, the community discusses it and develops a plan of action. In 2007, when Benki dreamed about a center for disseminating forest peoples' philosophy—a place that would be rooted in ancestral knowledge while reaching out to the world with a message of caring for all beings—the Apiwtxa acted on it, founding the Yorenka Atame (Knowledge of the Forest) Center.

They constructed the building on a cattle pasture across the river from Marechal Thaumaturgo, a small town three hours downstream of Apiwtxa. Its creators intended Yorenka Atame as a demonstration to the townspeople of an alternative way of living and turned the pasture into a forest full of fruit-bearing trees. Earlier, while serving as environment secretary for the town, Benki had sought to lure its youth away from drug trafficking by training them in agroforestry and inviting them to *kamarãpi* ceremonies. Using ayahuasca can be dangerous: its impact depends crucially on the skill and ethics of the person supervising the session. But Benki hoped the ritual would help the young people feel connected to nature—and it did. They helped him plant around Yorenka Atame and went on to establish a settlement called Sunshine, where they grow their own food using agroforestry and agroecology.

Yorenka Atame is a place for exchanging knowledge about the forest and discussing what true development might mean. It has hosted many gatherings of Indigenous peoples and scholars from around the world. "We do not have enemies; we have partners and allies and the ones with whom we disagree," Francisco said—the Apiwtxa wish to engage everyone in dialogue. Exchanges at Yorenka Atame and in the field have helped local rubber tappers to reforest their region and stimulated the cultural revitalization of many Indigenous groups, such as the Puyanawa peoples, who had been enslaved and almost exterminated by rubber barons.

Such activities have given the Apiwtxa community a huge presence and influence in the region despite its small size. Isaak Piyãko, another of Antonio and Piti's sons, became the first Indigenous mayor of Marechal Thaumaturgo in 2016. That he is among the leaders of the Apiwtxa, a community whose achievements are widely respected, probably helped his election.

In 2017 Benki and others established a related project, Yorenka Tasori (Knowledge of the Creator), with its own center. It facilitates the diffusion of Indigenous spiritual and medicinal knowledge among forest peoples and beyond. Yorenka Tasori also includes an effort to protect Ashaninka sacred sites, which are often places of great natural beauty—but are threatened by roads, dams and extractive industries. As much a political as a spiritual endeavor, Yorenka Tasori seeks to revitalize traditional links among the Ashaninka as a way of restoring their historically powerful cohesiveness. In such manner—by protecting their ancestral knowledge, especially the awareness of interconnectedness with all other beings, and passing these gifts on to younger generations—the Apiwtxa hope to ensure the Ashaninka's continuity as a people.

I accompanied Benki and other Apiwtxa representatives on visits to Ashaninka sacred sites in Peru and was struck by how people were drawn to them. They had an aura of serenity and power that attracted many others, so that our group grew inexorably as we traveled. The Apiwtxa leaders inspired hope wherever they went, to the extent that the chief of one Indigenous community said, "It must have been Pawa who sent you here to open our eyes."

The Apiwtxa hope to open our eyes as well—to reach out to us with their message of unity and interrelatedness of all beings. They believe that a spiritual awareness of the underlying unity of creatures shows a way out of our epoch, marked as it is by ecological and societal crises—a time that is increasingly referred to as the Anthropocene. This geologic era derives from the relentless expansion of humankind's destructive activities on Earth, impacting the atmosphere, oceans and wildlife to the point that they threaten our own survival. The *anthropos* least responsible for the Anthropocene—people inhabiting the land in traditional ways—are suffering its worst consequences, however, in damage to their environments, livelihoods and lives.

The Apiwtxa propose in place of permanent economic growth and extractive industry a social and economic system in which collaboration ranks above competition and where every being has a place and is important to the whole. By looking after human and other-than-human beings and cultivating diversity through protecting, restoring and enriching life, they are pointing to a pathway out of the Anthropocene.

"This message comes from Earth, as a request for humanity to understand that we are transient beings here and one cannot just look at one's own welfare," said Benki in an appeal to the world in 2017. "We have to look toward future generations and what we will leave for them. We have to think of our children and of Earth. We cannot leave the land impoverished and poisoned, as is happening now. Today we can already see great disasters beginning to happen, people emigrating out of their countries in search of water to drink and food to eat. We see a war going on for wealth now, and soon we will see a war for water and for food.

"Shall we wait, or shall we change history? Join us!"

FROM OUR ARCHIVES

A Tapestry of Alternatives. Ashish Kothari; June 2021.

scientificamerican.com/magazine/sa