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Framing Social-Environmental Justice by Amazonian Indigenous Peoples: The Kayapo Case

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In protest of various assaults on their lands and culture, indigenous people are mobilizing in protest against dam construction around the world (Oliver-Smith 2010). Amazon groups, in particular, have energetically begun to foreground their minority status and have constructed it in terms of active defense of cultural identity and concerted political action. One such group is the Kayapo of the village of Gorotire in the Brazilian Amazon (Turner 1991).

Although initial contact occurred in 1938, the Kayapo, in their adjustment to their new situation in regard to the Brazilians, had not conceptualized their new condition as an ethnic minority within the larger Brazilian society. Their sense of culture and identity continued to be based on certain institutions such as the extended family household, the men's house, the age set system, and naming and initiation rites of passage, that were key in the reproduction of traditional social relations.

However, in the 1980s, with the onslaught of a number of activities undertaken by the state and its citizens in their territory, the Kayapo had to adjust certain features of their worldview to see themselves as an ethnic group among many other indigenous peoples in common encounter with Brazilian society. In their confrontation with both public and private economic development initiatives, the Kayapo have come to define their very survival in terms of successful resistance to the destruction of their natural environment by the non-indigenous Brazilians.

Development aggression against their culture and environment began in the 1980s with gold mines illegally opened in their territory and the dumping of radioactive waste on their borders. These assaults were met with skillful manipulation, by the Kayapo, of Brazilian fears of savage Indians, resulting in a successful recapture of the gold mines. A sit-in at the presidential palace in full regalia halted the radioactive dumping. Perhaps the greatest triumph among many has been the leading role the Kayapo of Gorotire played in the great inter-tribal rally at Altamira to protest the project to construct five large dams in the Xingu River, eventually contributing to the delay of a World Bank loan that would have made the project financially possible. Subsequently, through an international campaign led by the Kayapo with the assistance of international allies, including media figures like the rock star, Sting, the demarcation of a large new reserve for Kayapo communities, which had formerly lacked duly constituted territory, was achieved. Basically, in their resistance to the incursions of Brazilian society, the Kayapo have made their culture a political issue. Moreover, they have found that their culture is important to others and have discovered the importance of having control over how their culture is represented. They recognize that control over the power of representation is a means of conferring value and meaning on themselves in the vision of the larger world. The great rally at Altamira to protest the Xingu River dam project was organized by the Kayapo as a demonstration of their culture and the political solidarity between all Kayapo and their allies. The Kayapo planned the great inter-tribal meeting at Altamira to protest the dam on the Xingu River to be optimally represented by film, video, and

television. In addition to the hordes of media representatives from the outside world, Kayapo videographers also filmed the proceedings of the meeting at Altamira. The purpose was not only to make an independent record of the meeting itself, but also to demonstrate, as Terry Turner says, that "the Kayapo are not dependent on the outside society for control over the representation of themselves and their actions, but possess to a full and equal extent the means of control over the image, with all that implies for the ability to define the meaning and value of acts and events in the area of inter-ethnic interaction"(1991:307).

The Kayapo encampment at the rally was designed to be a model Kayapo village with traditional houses, artifacts, and family groupings, all of which were avidly viewed by the hundreds of journalists, photographers, and videographers in attendance. The Kayapo astutely reasoned that the more national and international witnesses they had, the less likely the Brazilian state was to undertake any violent retaliations for the demonstration, in which they very forcefully demonstrated their resistance to the project and their scorn for the Brazilian authorities(Turner 1991). In 1987, Kayapo Indian leaders, accompanied by their interpreter, anthropologist Darrell Posey, visited Washington where they sought to persuade the World Bank to withhold development funds from the dams in the Xingu River region (Posey 1994).

The protest was part of a successful effort to cancel the project. However, dam projects, like vampires, are hard to kill permanently. In the 1990s, Eletronorte undertook new planning for a single dam on the Xingu, called Belo Monte, which allegedly would do less harm to the environment and impact fewer people. The Kayapo and other indigenous groups in the region, as well as their national and international allies, were not convinced. Subsequent research has shown that the dam's viability is dependent on the construction of other dams and a huge reservoir upstream to keep adequate levels of water flowing to Belo Monte for electrical generation year round. In April of 2008, a Brazilian federal judge issued a restraining order suspending feasibility studies for the dam because the contracts had not been awarded competitively (Switkes 2008a).

In May, the next month, a five day meeting of more than 800 people from 26 ethnic groups, the largest gathering of indigenous peoples of the Amazon in nearly 20 years, was held to affirm their resistance to the construction of the dam. The Kayapo played a central role, again displaying their ceremonial body paint and feather adornments, foregrounding their culture through dances and chants at the beginning of each day, as did many of the attending groups. Similar to the Altamira meeting, there were threats and physical confrontations between Kayapo individuals with Eletronorte representatives, including the minor wounding of an official on the arm by a machete wielding Kayapo individual. A declaration called the Xingu Forever Alive letter issued at the end of the meeting affirmed their opposition to all dams on the Xingu and stated, "Our culture, our spirituality, and our survival are deeply rooted in the Xingu, and we depend on it for our existence....We who have protected our Xingu River demand respect" (Switkes 2008b: 15).

Similar contentions are mobilizing indigenous people among other indigenous peoples in Brazil, as well as in many areas of the world. In India, Bangladesh, the United States, Thailand, the Philippines, and many other nations, the threat and impacts of dam construction have provided a unifying and mobilizing motive for indigenous people to defend their identity and resist the incursions of the state and international capital against their lands and their cultures.

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