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SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN AN INDIGENOUS
AMAZONIAN SOCIETY: THE EXEMPLARY CASE OF THE BRAZILIAN KAYAPO

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AMAZONIAN SOCIETY: THE EXEMPLARY CASE OF THE BRAZILIAN KAYAPO¹

ABSTRACT: The Kayapo of Central Brazil gained international renown in the 1980's for their successful resistance to the invasion and ecological destruction of their Amazonian homeland. From heroes of the environmentalist and indigenous rights movements, however, they fell into disrepute in the early 1990's as a result of some Kayapo leaders' collaboration with Brazilian miners and loggers, and the media scandal surrounding the trial of the most famous Kayapo leader, Payakan, for rape. In late 1994 and early 1995, however, the Kayapo revolted against the leaders who had arranged and profited from the mining and logging contracts and expelled all miners and loggers from their territory. They are now launching a series of environmentally sustainable projects as alternative sources of income. The social and political dynamics within both Kayapo and Brazilian society that contributed to this result are described.

The convergence of the environmentalist struggle to preserve the Amazon forest with the struggle for the physical and cultural survival of the indigenous peoples of the forest, waged by environmentalist organizations, indigenous support groups, human rights organizations, government agencies, and the indigenous peoples themselves, has decisively shaped the principles and

politics of the environmentalist and indigenous rights movements over the last two decades.

There were obvious reasons for linking the defense of the environment with that of its original human inhabitants. The forces menacing the physical and cultural survival of the indigenous peoples of the region were the same as those threatening the destruction of the forest. The political, economic and social forces involved include invasions of indigenous territories by ranchers and land speculators, who burned off vast tracts of forest; destructive forms of extractive enterprise, chiefly logging and mining; massive hydroelectric dam schemes financed by the Brazilian government and international financial institutions, and Brazil's road-building and settlement programs designed to promote the political and economic integration of the national territory and at the same time solve the social problem of surplus rural population in the Northeast and South.

Environmentalists initially concerned only with saving the forest or vanishing animal species came to recognize that native Amazonian peoples are themselves an integral part of the forest ecosystem. Their traditional forms of subsistence and environmental adaptation depend on the forest, having evolved over millenia as modes of sustainable coexistence with it. Objectively, the indigenous areas of the Amazon were those in

which the forest survived more or less unscathed, while in areas of settlement by Brazilian or other national populations it tended to disappear. The indigenous struggle to defend and maintain their traditional subsistence base, comprising their traditional lands and resources, thus appeared to converge with the environmentalist defense of the Amazonian ecosystem. The forging of alliances between environmental groups and organizations involved in the struggle for indigenous land rights and cultural survival (including the indigenous groups themselves) therefore seemed a logical and mutually beneficial step.

Cooperation and mutual support between environmentalists and advocates of indigenous rights has led to important successes. A number of indigenous Amazonian peoples have succeeded, with significant support from environmentalist, human rights and indigenous support organizations and public opinion, in gaining legal recognition of their traditional territories as reserves. Human rights and indigenous activists, for their part, supported the adoption of environmentalist policies and ecologically beneficial projects such as the creation of extractive and biosphere reserves.

The alliance of environmentalists and indigenous forest peoples, however, has been unstable and fraught with difficulty on both sides. Indigenous groups and their supporters were

outraged when a prominent international environmental conservation organization expelled indigenous people from a tract of Amazon forest it had bought for "preservation". On the other hand, some environmentalists have oscillated between unrealistic extremes in their attitudes to indigenous peoples. Amazonian Indian peoples have sometimes been romanticized as "primitive ecologists", with a spiritual feeling of kinship for everything natural and a highly sophisticated ethnoscience of "forest management" through which they have virtually created the forest through a kind of ecological gardening. At the opposite extreme, some environmentalists have recoiled from the realization that Amazonian cultures do not share Western ecological values such as a commitment to the preservation of nature for its own sake, or a reverence for individual trees and animals.

Based on recent examples of a few indigenous groups who have permitted ecologically destructive practices like mining or logging on their land in exchange for fees, some environmental activists of this persuasion have suggested that native peoples must be seen as enemies by the environmentalist movement, their immemorial record of sustained coexistence with the forest ecosystem a mere incidental by-product of the weakness of their technologies and lack of capitalist incentives for surplus accumulation, which have unfortunately now arrived. Variants of these two extreme views have increasingly dominated discussion of

the relationship between environmentalist and indigenous peoples' interests in the Amazon.

The Kayapo

The Kayapo, an indigenous people who inhabit a large area in southern Para and Mato Grosso states in Brazil, on the southern fringe of the Amazon forest, have been seized upon as prototypical examples by proponents of both of these extreme views. The Kayapo emerged as indigenous leaders of the struggle for land, rights, and environmental protection in the Amazon during the 1980's. Their bold and successful campaigns to secure governmental recognition of their lands and to block destructive development projects, like the giant proposed hydroelectric dam scheme on the Xingu river that runs through their territory, gained world recognition. Kayapo warriors captured large gold mines illegally opened on their territory and held thousands of miners hostage until the Brazilian government granted them ownership and control of the mines, including the right to close them down. Two Kayapo leaders, Rauni (Ropni) and Payakan, became international celebrities as they toured Europe and North America (the former in concerts with the rock star, Sting) in search of support for their cause. The international outpouring of support, both financial and political, was a major factor in the Brazilian government's official recognition of a series of Kayapo reserves in the late 1980's and early 1990's with a combined area roughly equivalent to Scotland. Environmentalists hailed the proclamation

of these reserves in the expectation that the formidable Kayapo would defend their areas against invasion by ranchers and settlers, the main agents of deforestation, and penetration by environmentally destructive forms of extractive enterprise, above all mining and logging, both of which had made major inroads in Kayapo territory before the government's official recognition of Kayapo control of their reserve areas.

The political mobilization of the Kayapo in defense of their lands and resources in the 1980's, however, was a complex political process, in which different Kayapo groups and leaders took divergent and sometimes opposing positions. These indigenous political differences continued to affect the policies of different Kayapo communities after Kayapo reserves were recognized during the past decade. Some communities refused to admit Brazilian gold prospectors and loggers. Others granted mining and logging concessions, which resulted in the stripping of forests and the pollution of rivers with mining wastes. The chief beneficiaries of these concessions were a few Portuguese-speaking leaders. The life-style of these leaders, who bought town houses in regional Brazilian cities like Redencao and Tucuma, acquired cars, trucks and airplanes, and in some cases led publicly dissolute lives, became almost as notorious as the earlier Kayapo political victories that had made them possible were famous. It began to appear that many if not all of the Kayapo, or their leaders, might succumb to the lure of wealth and

a high-consumption life-style, and become willing accomplices in the destruction of the environment they had fought so hard to protect from Brazilian expropriation.

From heroes of the environmentalist movement, the Kayapo thus became villains for large segments of public opinion. The Brazilian media seized the opportunity to expose the town-dwelling ayapo leaders as corrupt plutocrats of "Kayapo, Incorporated". The booming economy of Southern Para state flourished, based in large part on the illegal mining and logging in Kayapo areas. Meanwhile the common villagers continued to live in poverty, suffering the effects of environmental degradation: the destruction of forest hunting and gathering resources by logging activities and the pollution of rivers by gold miners, whose Placer techniques cause the flooding of large areas which rapidly become incubators for malarial mosquitoes. Even more seriously, Placer mining makes heavy use of mercury, which is discharged into the rivers and poisons both their water and fish. Several of the principal rivers and streams of Kayapo country have become dangerously polluted, their fish inedible, and many Kayapo now show dangerously high levels of mercury contamination.

Recently, however, Kayapo communities have begun turning against the leaders who permitted and benefitted from the mining and logging concessions, and have expelled miners and loggers from their territories. One community has followed this up by

launching a sustainable forestry project in collaboration with the School of Forestry of the University of Sao Paulo. This political revolution has been accomplished by a coalition of common villagers and senior ritual chiefs, the ultimate repositories of political authority in Kayapo society, who had appeared to have lost power to the younger leaders who brought in the miners and loggers. The new movement converged with the policy of those Kayapo communities that had continued to resist the penetration of Brazilian economic interests to transform the picture of Kayapo environmental politics. Unified as never before on the basis of the common policy of expelling miners and loggers from all Kayapo territory, the Kayapo have quickly turned to organizing themselves into intercommunal associations for the development of ecologically sustainable forms of revenue production. The new associations also have other aims, such as collaborative health and education projects, the support of the neighboring Panara people in their attempt to reoccupy their traditional land on the western border of Kayapo territory, and programs of cultural self-documentation. Because of the great political and symbolic importance of the Kayapo in Brazil and in the world environmentalist and indigenous rights movements, these promising developments hold great potential significance for the future of relations between these movements and for the Amazon as a whole. In the remainder of this paper I describe how these changes in Kayapo policies developed out of the internal dynamics

of Kayapo society in interaction with a variety of external influences.

Kayapo complicity in environmentally destructive extractive enterprise: gold-mining and mahogany logging

The high point of the alliance between the Kayapo and the loose confederacy of environmentalist, human rights, and indigenous advocacy organizations, supported by large sectors of first world public opinion, who had rallied to support their resistance to the invasion, theft and abuse of their lands, cultural integrity, and human rights was the great inter-tribal rally and demonstration at Altamira in 1989, organized by the Kayapo to protest the government's secret plan to build a series of hydroelectric dams on the Xingu, which runs through the heart of their territory. Some saw in the emergent alliance of hitherto divergent and uncoordinated single-issue groups comprising the Kayapo support coalition a portent of a new political conjuncture with implications far beyond the Amazon. Just as the Kayapo and their brilliant and charismatic Kayapo leader, Payakan, had played a leading role in precipitating this hopeful coalescence, however, they soon found themselves playing a leading role in its breakup.

The honeymoon between the Kayapo and the environmentalist and indigenous support organizations, journalists, and public opinion who had done so much to help (and hype) them broke up over two issues. The more serious was that of Kayapo complicity

in mining and logging on their own recently won reserves, and the misuse of the communal funds derived from the extractive concessions by some Kayapo leaders. The second turned out to be Payakan himself.

Beginning in 1990, there was a steady trickle of reports in the Brazilian and international media that Kayapo leaders were entering into contracts with logging and mining companies to operate on Kayapo lands, in return for a percentage of the proceeds, in effect acting as collaborators and profiteers in the destruction of their own forests and rivers. Some of these stories revealed that some Kayapo leaders were using the income from these contracts to maintain lavish personal life styles in Brazilian cities far from their home villages, complete with town houses, cars, airplanes, drinking binges, Brazilian mistresses and prostitutes. These accounts were often exaggerated to suggest that the Kayapo as a nation had become "rich", and that they enjoyed, and abused, a disproportionate share of the region's wealth, thus belying their claims, and those of their international supporters, that they were a threatened and deprived minority in need of aid. The almost exclusive focus of these stories on the life-styles of a few Kayapo leaders with houses in Brazilian towns, coupled with their failure to describe the lives and relative poverty of the 99% of the Kayapo population who remained in the villages, effectively magnified the biased impression they conveyed of Kayapo "wealth". Some of

these reports included Payakan among the Kayapo leaders supporting an urban life style with money from logging contracts, in direct contradiction of his international image as an indigenous guardian of the forest, an eco-warrior sans peur et sans reproche.

Payakan himself indeed, became the second major issue that shook the alliance of environmentalists, indigenous advocates, and the Kayapo. In the week of the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the leading Brazilian newsmagazine, Veja, ran an explosive cover story that Payakan, together with his wife, had raped and tortured a Brazilian girl in a drunken orgy in the Brazilian town of Redencao, where he and other Kayapo leaders with access to logging and gold mining royalties had been living in preference to their home villages.

The Brazilian media blew the case up into a national scandal, producing wildly distorted accounts of the alledged crime couched in racist epithets like "savage instinct" and "cannibalistic rituals". Both the media and politicians exploited the case as a pretext to attack the Kayapo and indigenous rights in general, calling for the elimination of Indian reserves and the removal of timber and mineral resources from indigenous control. After two years, in December 1994, Payakan was acquitted of the rape charge by a Brazilian court, which also declined to

sentence his wife on grounds that she was insufficiently acculturated to understand Brazilian law. The judge, however, noted that if the prosecution had brought a charge of aggravated sexual assault instead of rape there would have been ample evidence to convict. The decision, in any event, came too late to undo much of the damage caused by the inflammatory media attacks.

Quite apart from the case of Payakan himself, the scandal had served as a sounding board to amplify the well-substantiated reports of the complicity of Payakan and other Kayapo leaders with loggers and miners operating in the Kayapo reserves. All of this aroused widespread dismay among supporters of the Kayapo and other rain forest peoples, many of whom had naively imagined the Kayapo as primitive ecologists, living in pristine harmony with their environment in principled conformity with their ancient culture. The revelation that some Kayapo were indeed aiding and abetting the logging of their own forest and the pollution of their own rivers with mercury and mud by gold miners was for many the end of the heady conjuncture of indigenous resistance and green activism that inspired the coming together of so many environmentalist and political support NGOs at Altamira and after. The defense of the Indians' right to control, and dispose of, their own lands and resources and the defense of the tropical forest ecosystem, the reports suggested, should perhaps be seen as mutually contradictory rather than mutually supportive causes.

To understand the complex mixture of truth, misinterpretation, distortion, and outright mistatement in these reports and

the phenomena to which they refer, it is necessary to review the recent history of Kayapo resistance to invasions of their lands and attempts to appropriate their resources, starting from the time before they attained formal title to their reserves between the mid-1980's and early 1990's. Giant hydroelectric dam schemes were not the first nor the most effective form of penetration of Kayapo territory by representatives of the Brazilian and world economy. Since the 1970's there were scattered attempts by settlers and ranchers to move onto Kayapo land. These were repelled by the Kayapo with considerable violence; perhaps thirty would-be settlers, ranchers and other more transient invaders (animal skin hunters, prospectors, etc.) were killed by Kayapo between 1970 and 1990, and many others were driven off by armed attacks.

The advent of logging companies eager to tap the rich stands of mahogany and other tropical hardwoods in the forests that covered much of Kayapo territory, and soon afterward of gold miners, however, represented a more insidious form of invasion, which did not entail any intention of permanent settlement or occupation of land. The loggers first appeared in force in eastern Kayapo territory in the late 1970's and early 1980's; they offered small fees to the Kayapo communities that controlled the areas in which they wished to cut trees. Several logging concessions were accordingly granted by Kayapo communities, the

first by chief Pombo of Kikretum in about 1979, the second by Gorotire in 1981.

The loggers were quickly followed by gold miners, gold having been discovered in large quantities in many areas of Southern Para; the huge open-pit gold mines of Serra Pelada and Cumaru, located near the eastern borders of Kayapo territory, were in full production, and thousands of miners were converging on the area, many looking for new sites where they could operate independently from the capital-owners who dominated the relations of production at the larger established mines. Pombo of Kikretum village again took the lead in offering concessions to gold miners to operate on his community's land. With the combined proceeds of his logging and gold revenues, Pombo acquired an airplane, town houses and a hotel in the nearby Brazilian town of Tucuman, and had the village of Kikretum rebuilt with Brazilian-style cement-walled houses with corrugated iron or fibreglass roofs. He affected the clothes and manner of a rich regional Brazilian businessman, having himself addressed as "Colonel (the local slang for "boss") Pombo".

While Pombo, a fluent Portuguese speaker unlike most of the Kikretum villagers, lived in high style in Tucuman, wheeling and dealing with the Brazilian gold-buyers and lumber companies and maintaining a Brazilian mistress in his hotel, and the loggers and miners laid waste the forests and streams near Kikretum, the

villagers had to content themselves with their new houses and periodic "presents" of merchandise purchased with some of the mining and lumber revenues. Pombo's example was soon to be emulated by several other Kayapo leaders.

In 1981, two large gold mines were illegally established near Gorotire village on land designated (but not yet legally defined) as Kayapo. The Brazilian Indian Agency, FUNAI, protested ineffectively and then, failing to have the miners expelled, negotiated, again ineffectively, with the miners to pay a percentage of their earnings to the Kayapo. The miner's representatives agreed, but succeeded in shifting the decimal point from the initially proposed figure of ten per cent. to .001 per cent! The Kayapo chiefs who were called upon to sign the document had no understanding of the meaning of the numbers. Five thousand miners were soon at work in the mines, which were wholly supplied by air.

Payakan, who had assumed the job of agent in charge of the Indian Service (FUNAI) post at Gorotire in 1982, resolved to get a better deal for the Kayapo from both the loggers and the miners. He negotiated a more favorable contract with the logging company to which the community had granted a concession, and attempted to retain it in a community account to be used for projects of collective benefit. In this he was opposed by two other young, educated Gorotire leaders, who ultimately succeeded

in frustrating Payakan's plan, and retaining the prevailing arrangement whereby the money from the timber and gold concessions was held in accounts directly accessible to the chiefs of the community and to themselves as the responsible caretakers of the accounts.

Payakan was in effect run out of Gorotire over this issue, but kicked upstairs to a position of wider responsibility for the affairs of all the Kayapo villages in the regional headquarters of FUNAI in Belem. From this vantage point he coordinated the confrontation of the Gorotire with the gold miners when the contract with them came up for renewal in 1985. When the mining company that controlled the operation balked at the modest rate demanded by the FUNAI negotiators, 200 warriors from Gorotire and Kikretum seized the airstrip at the Maria Bonita mine by which both the illegal mines were supplied, and announced that they would shoot up any planes that attempted either to take off (several planes were caught on the strip) or land, until the Brazilian government granted their demands. These were to cede full ownership and control of the mines to the Kayapo, explicitly recognize the right of the Kayapo to close down the mines, compel the miners to pay a fair rate to the Kayapo as long as production continued, and to promise to legally recognize the whole area occupied by the five Kayapo villages east of the Xingu as a giant Kayapo reserve as soon as it could be officially surveyed. For ten days the government blustered and threatened, even sending a

detachment of troops with a band to parade up and down the Gorotire airstrip in a ludicrous and unsuccessful attempt to intimidate the Kayapo. The plight of the 3,000-odd increasingly hungry miners at the two mines, however, ultimately forced the government's hand and it conceded all the Kayapo demands, in exchange for an undertaking by the Kayapo to allow the mines to stay in production for two more years.

The capture of the mines was orchestrated by the two young Gorotire leaders who had forced Payakan out of Gorotire, acting in concert with tactical directives formulated by Payakan at FUNAI headquarters. The episode thus exemplified the strategic importance of young educated Kayapo leaders (fluent in Portuguese, literate, and with enough arithmetic to understand bank accounts, percentage rates and bookkeeping) in the developing pattern of Kayapo relations with the new forms of Brazilian penetration of the Kayapo area, above all the extraction of gold and mahogany. These young leaders, usually the sons or sister's sons of presiding chiefs who had been sent out to Brazilian schools and were expected to succeed to the chiefly office themselves, had at this stage (the mid-1980's) a virtual monopoly on the expertise in Brazilian ways necessary to deal with Brazilian businessmen, bankers and local politicians over concessions for extractive activities on Kayapo land. Their importance as middlemen grew with the increasing volume of such activities, which gave them a direct interest in promoting them.

By the late 1980's it appeared that the young leaders of Gorotire, and their counterparts in half-a-dozen other Kayapo villages, had definitively upstaged their aging fathers and maternal uncles, the formally constituted ritual chiefs (benhadjuoro) of their communities, and come to exercise the real political as well as economic power, with the older chiefs, who still held titular authority, functioning in a primarily ceremonial capacity as figureheads. Emulating the example of "Coronel" Pombo, these young leaders established themselves in town houses in the boom town of Redencao, near the eastern frontier of the new Kayapo reserve, where they began to spend increasing amounts of time away from their villages. They acquired cars, trucks, airplanes, Brazilian servants and retainers, in sum establishments rivalling that of Pombo in Tucuman, with life-styles to match. When questioned (by me, for one) about the propriety of their life-styles, they coolly insisted that taking care of business with the Brazilians, as representatives of their communities' interests, required them to maintain appropriate establishments in a Brazilian town.

Meanwhile, the two-year period the Brazilian government had insisted the Kayapo must keep the captured gold mines open, expired with no attempt to close the mines, as Kayapo leaders had vowed to do at the time of the agreement. Instead, the Gorotire and some other Kayapo communities opened new gold mines, under the direct control of the young leaders in Redencao, and gave

concessions for many small groups of miners to operate within the reserve. Several of the communities also gave concessions for the logging of mahogany in their areas, which they renewed year after year, and which brought in even more money than the gold.

It thus indeed appeared, from the most visible facts and media reports, that "the Kayapo" had succumbed to the appeal of easy money, and abandoned whatever ecological principles they might ever have had. Not only were logging activities damaging their forests (more through the construction of logging roads than the actual cutting of mahogany trees), but the proliferation of gold mining was polluting their rivers both with mud and, far more seriously, with mercury. Suspicious miscarriages and other birth defects began to appear at the most seriously affected community, Gorotire, where tests showed many individuals with shockingly high levels of mercury poisoning. FUNAI agents, NGO representatives, anthropologists, public health workers, and some of their own senior chiefs repeatedly explained to the people of Gorotire and the other villages involved in the gold concessions the nature of the danger and warned against the cumulative effects of continued gold mining using the mercury-based Placer technique, all to no apparent avail.

The pressure for the gold and timber concessions did not, however, arise uniformly from the Kayapo people as a whole. Some leaders, such as Ropni, and the communities with which they were

associated, such as the Mentuktire villages of Kapot and Cachoeira, had never allowed logging or mining in their areas. Some villages, like A'ukre, secretly allowed logging but refused to permit gold mining. Within those communities which allowed both types of extraction, opinion remained sharply divided. Support for the mining and logging came unevenly from different groups of the population, principally younger men eager to advance themselves by emulating Brazilian life-styles as a shortcut to the prestige otherwise attainable only through the slow process of rising to senior status in the traditional system of age-grades. Such men, attracted by Western commodities and life-styles, demanded that their leaders do whatever possible to make them available, and only gold and mahogany could provide income on a scale capable of satisfying their demands.

Another factor favoring the letting of concessions was the cancellation by the Brazilian government of all forms of aid to indigenous communities, including medical care and education, from the beginning of the Collor regime in 1990. Kayapo leaders argued that they therefore had no choice but to deal with the miners and loggers to satisfy their communities' basic needs for medicine and other essential services, also including education. This argument, however, was at least partly hypocritical. The medical needs of Kayapo communities could be met with far less money than was brought in by the gold and timber contracts, and it is unfortunately true that these needs actually often went unmet as

the money from the contracts was spent on more personal and less essential items.

The major force behind the logging and mining concessions in the villages that allowed them, however, was clearly the community leaders themselves, in particular the younger leaders who maintained homes in Brazilian towns and lived in them, away from their villages, for much of the time.

Many ordinary people in the villages, especially mature adults and older people, resented the way the young leaders appeared to be using their role as inter-cultural mediators to constitute themselves as a new class, able to control and divert to themselves most of the benefits and power accruing from the new economic dealings with the Brazilians, while leaving relatively little for their fellow villagers. The young leaders, however, seemed effectively beyond the control of the people of their home villages. The great majority of the latter could not match the young leaders' expertise in dealing with Brazilians, but nevertheless recognized that such dealings had become essential to their communities, regulating the access of Brazilian outsiders to their territory, representing Kayapo political interests to local and national Brazilian authorities, and channelling Brazilian goods and wealth to their communities (even if they saw relatively little of the latter).

While their level of personal spending and lavish style appeared to go beyond any reasonable requirements of communal business, it should not be overlooked that these young leaders, in their guise as successful and wealthy Brazilian men about town, came to fulfill an important and unprecedented symbolic function in the evolving pattern of inter-ethnic relations comprising the social environment of the Kayapo communities of Southern Para. Probably for the first time in the history of Amazonian native peoples, individual members of indigenous communities were establishing themselves on an equal footing with the Brazilian regional elite. Not only were they the equals of Brazilians in wealth and possessions, but they gained acceptance as politically and socially responsible members of the community, in at least two cases running successfully for the local office of vereador (town councillor). This social and political achievement has been important both to Kayapo and to local Brazilians in redefining the possibilities of inter-ethnic coexistence by bringing about the participation of Kayapo on equal terms at the highest levels of local society and politics. The success of the young leaders in this respect, of course, further intensified the desire of still younger Kayapo to emulate their dazzling example, which in turn intensified the pressure for timber and gold concessions.

This symbolic and ideological role of the young leaders was overlooked by most of the Brazilian media reports referred to

above. These reports also missed the complex relation of the young leaders to the political and economic processes unfolding in their home communities. Even as they continued to perform vital functions as inter-ethnic and inter-cultural mediators, they, and their policy of continuing the mining and logging concessions, became the objects of steadily mounting resistance by a wholly unprecedented conjuncture of social and political forces in the villages. This opposition finally exploded in the Autumn of the past year (1994).

Popular Kayapo Resistance to Extractivism and the Expulsion of Miners and Loggers from Kayapo Territory, September-December 1994

The Brazilian Federal Constitution, instituted in 1988, prohibits extractive activities, such as the cutting of timber, by non-Indians on indigenous reserves, and requires approval of any mining activity on indigenous land by a full vote of the national Congress (there have been no such votes for any mining activity in the Kayapo area). The Federal Prosecutor of Brazil (the equivalent of the U.S. Attorney General) therefore announced that he would order the expulsion of all loggers and miners from Kayapo land, annulling all contracts between them and Kayapo communities. Such an initiative, to be enforced by Federal Police, was announced in early 1994, but remained stillborn in the face of Kayapo threats to resist with armed force any attempt by police to enforce the Prosecutor's order inside their territory. Some Kayapo argued that their right to their own land

and resources should mean that they had the right to do with them what they pleased, including cutting down and selling off their forests if they so chose. Kayapo intransigence--some said, Kayapo greed--seemed to have brought both environmentalist values and the Brazilian Constitution to a standstill.

This gloomy prospect, however, was suddenly illuminated by a remarkable event. Beginning in September, the people of Gorotire, in a collective confrontation with their younger leaders and the gold-mining interests they represented, demanded that the mining of gold should cease forthwith, and all miners be expelled from Gorotire territory. Their spokesmen were the senior traditional chiefs, whose ritual authority was now given political force by the backing of a united community. The senior chiefs ordered the younger leaders, their own sons and nephews, to repudiate the contracts they had negotiated and expel the miners. The young leaders, who might have resisted either the authority of the senior chiefs if unsupported by an aroused populace, or the demands of a mob of villagers unsanctioned by chiefly authority, bowed to the combination of authority and power they jointly constituted, and promptly carried out the senior chiefs' orders. 2,000 angry and bewildered miners (all that were then at the mines) were trucked out of the reserve to Redencao, where they camped on the central boulevard of the town and commenced intimidating the citizens, threatening to burn down the offices of FUNAI and calling on the mayor to help them get back into the

reserve if he valued the peace of his city. What had produced this extraordinary turn of events?

Gorotire, it will be recalled, is both the largest Kayapo village, with a population of slightly over 1,000, and the one that has been most heavily involved in gold mining and logging concessions. It is therefore also the Kayapo community with the longest and most intense experience of the environmental costs of logging and mining: devastated forest areas, diminished hunting and fishing, fouled water, and mounting levels of mercury poisoning. For ten years, the people of the village had put up with these problems as the price of their entry into the Brazilian commodity economy. The symptoms of mercury poisoning were slow to appear, large areas of forest remained intact, hunting was still good in some places and there were still fish to be caught and good water to found in small streams and springs even if the main river and its fish were no longer usable. The environmental effects, however, were cumulative and increasingly affected the daily lives of the average villager in ways that could no longer be ignored.

The young leaders in their town houses in Redencao, of course, were insulated to a great extent from these effects. To this invidious difference was added the increasingly obvious fact that most of the economic benefits of the timber and mining concessions were going directly to support the life style of

these leaders in the towns, and to a lesser extent of the senior chiefs in the village, but few were trickling down to the ordinary villager. Even the medical and educational services to pay for which the concessions were ostensibly given in the first place were often neglected, with medicines and school supplies sporadically out of stock and teachers' salaries sometimes unpaid. The villagers had gradually become aware that this situation was not merely a temporary or contingent state of affairs but the functional consequence of the system of logging and mining concessions mediated by the young leaders, and was likely to continue as long as the contracts remained in force and under the latter's control. The villagers saw themselves increasingly as losers, as a result of their exclusion from any control over the contractual arrangements, while the young leaders, by virtue of their control over the same arrangements, monopolized the rewards. They had, in effect, become class-conscious; it was a short step to class politics.

That step was finally taken with the influential urging of a new element in village society: educated members of the younger generation, who had learned the same basic language, literacy and numerical skills that were hitherto the monopoly of the first generation of young leaders. Enough young people have now acquired these skills, either at the sporadically functioning village school or in some cases at Brazilian schools in the town, to neutralize the monopoly of the reigning clique of "young

leaders". As ordinary villagers themselves, these sophisticated younger people tend to identify with the disfranchised common villagers, but unlike them are able to understand and criticize the young leaders' arrangements with the Brazilians and their disposal of the theoretically communal revenues those arrangements provide. They are the "organic intellectuals" of the new class politics of the Kayapo, a politics that in the crisis of early December at Gorotire found its synthetic expression in the coalition of a revolt of the commons and a reassertion of traditional chiefly authority. Such a coalition, and the eruption of militant "class" politics it produced, is a new development in Kayapo politics, but significantly found a parallel in roughly contemporaneous events in another Kayapo community that had also been heavily involved in logging contracts: the Tchikrin Kayapo community of Catete. There, the villagers, with the support of the older chiefs, called for an abrogation of the logging contracts negotiated by one of the younger chiefs, and physically restrained him from leaving the village to return to the Brazilian town of Tucuman, where he was to meet with the logging company to renew the contract. Instead, the community has entered into a project for sustainable planting and harvesting of mahogany with the Sao Paulo indigenous support organization, ISA (Instituto Socio-Ambiental).

If these events are unique in Kayapo history, their causes are not, and herein lies their significance. The main factors in

the Kayapo situation are becoming increasingly common throughout the Amazon, as extractive enterprises attempt to utilize the offices of intercultural mediators like the young Gorotire leaders to obtain the consent or collaboration of indigenous communities for mining, logging, oil-drilling or genetic prospecting in their territories. The Gorotire crisis, which marked the collective repudiation and reversal by an important indigenous community of what had become the leading example of the collusion of indigenous Amazonian peoples in environmentally destructive extractive activity, is therefore a portentous event with potentially general implications (it would not be the first time that Kayapo political actions set an example for other Amazonian peoples).

The political and environmental implications of the Gorotire action were swiftly realized by the Kayapo themselves in the dramatic events that immediately followed the expulsion of the gold miners. As the miners camped in the middle of Redencao, threatening disruption and disorder if they were not swiftly returned to their mines on Kayapo land, the Prefect (mayor) of the city, who himself owned an illegal gold-mining concession in Kayapo land, helped the main gold-buying company of the city to buy up the debts of the young Gorotire leaders. These debts, in the name of the community of Gorotire but in fact almost entirely the personal debts of the four leaders in question, came to the staggering sum of over \$220,000.00. The Prefect and the company

confronted the young leaders who had carried out the expulsion and order and offered a deal. It would pay off the debt if the community would permit the miners to return for six more months. If the community did not agree, the company threatened to foreclose on the debt, which the community would not be able to pay off without the revenues from the mining concessions. The village as a whole was thus held hostage to the profligate life styles of its representatives, the young leaders, who now became the emissaries of the gold miners and buyers to reverse the decision of the chiefs and people of their community. The community accepted the deal. It seemed the miners and their backers had won.

At this juncture, however, the Prefect was defeated for reelection, removing the major local political support for the miners' efforts to resume their operations in the Kayapo reserve, and the Federal Prosecutor announced that he would resume his campaign to enforce the expulsion of both miners and loggers from all of Kayapo territory, beginning on December 15. With the example of the Gorotire revolt against the miners before them, those Kayapo communities and leaders who had previously opposed the initiative now proved more receptive (others had been for it all along). With air transportation provided by the Indian Agency (FUNAI), leaders from all the Kayapo villages met on December 10 in Redencao with representatives of the Federal Prosecutor, the Federal Police, and the Federal government's Institute for the

Protection of the Environment of the Amazon (IBAMA); ironically, the meeting was held at the town house of one of the young Gorotire leaders, whose telephone had been cut off to forestall his running up any more bills. The result of the meeting was a unanimous decision by the Kayapo chiefs to expel all miners and loggers and terminate all mining and logging concessions on Kayapo land. This decision was rapidly implemented by Federal Police in cooperation with Kayapo from local communities in January-February of this year (1995). As some of the big saw mills of Redencao declared bankruptcy, the judge of a Federal Court ruled that all of the illegally cut mahogany seized during the expulsion of the loggers would be sold at auction, and the proceeds (which should amount to several million dollars) turned over to the Kayapo. The judge specified that only duly constituted Kayapo development associations and their projects would qualify to receive this money; it would not simply be handed out directly to community leaders, thus risking the creation of a new generation of "Coronel Pombos", but would be administered by FUNAI, the National Indian Foundation (under the inspection of qualified non-governmental organizations), to bona fide Kayapo development projects organized by duly constituted Kayapo associations. The Kayapo quickly moved to organize themselves in new inter-communal associations to initiate and manage environmentally benign income-generating projects, such as the sustainable production of wild forest products, the marketing of processed garden crops such as tapioca starch and dried

bananas, and ecotourism. The five Kayapo communities to the west of the Xingu, Mentuktire, Roykore, Pukanu, Kubenkakre and Bau, organized themselves in this way as the Assocacao Iprere in early March 1995. The five villages of the Area Indigena Kayapo, to the east of the Xingu, were in the process of constituting themselves as a similar association in early April, as this was written. The final, ironic result of the Kayapo collaboration with illegal, environmentally destructive Brazilian business was thus the stimulation of new political associations that may become a force for environmentally sustainable, self-directed Kayapo revenue producing enterprises.

Conclusions: the Indigenous Political Struggle for Popular Empowerment and Environmental Conservation

The termination of environmentally destructive extractivist activities in the large area constituted by the Kayapo reserves is an important victory in the struggle to preserve the Amazonian ecosystem and its native peoples. The complex historical and political process leading to this signal event holds several lessons of general relevance to analysts, activists and policy makers concerned with environmental conservation in areas inhabited by indigenous populations.

To begin with, it is important that the Kayapo have been able to evolve through a series of different policies and positions over the past two decades, in response to changing

political, economic, and ecological circumstances. The different policies they have followed have been integrally connected to changes in their society and its relations with the Brazilian economy. These changes include collective resistance to territorial invasion, successful organization against the ecological damage and political disempowerment represented by the Altamira dam project, the granting of mining and logging concessions as a means of gaining income and a niche in local Brazilian society, the rise to power and wealth of the young leaders who served as the mediators of these and other inter-ethnic contacts and contracts, and the recent repudiation of the mining and logging concessions for a combination of reasons including the class polarization, environmental deterioration and public health crisis they had caused.

The successful assertion of communal control over the leaders who had parlayed their skills as inter-cultural mediators into political and economic dominance in the community was the prerequisite of beginning to reverse the ecological and social damage caused by the mining and logging contracts the negotiation and supervision of which they had made their chief function. It is significant that the Kayapo of Gorotire only succeeded in curbing their power and reversing their policies through an alliance between traditional ritual chiefs and a new movement of "class" protest by a mass of ordinary villagers. This suggests that both traditional institutional structures of political and

ritual authority and new kinds of political responses to the new economic and quality-of-life issues created by capitalist forms of environmental exploitation may have constructive parts to play as indigenous communities struggle to come to terms with the problems and consequences of extractive industry and other forms of capitalist enterprise.

It also underlines the importance for NGOs, government agencies, and other entities engaged in supporting indigenous groups and/or protecting their ambient ecosystems to avoid as far as possible giving individual members of indigenous communities unique functions and powers as mediators. It is vital to diffuse mediatory functions as much as possible, and to encourage communal participation in decisions affecting collective interests in which such individuals may be involved in their mediatory capacity. As private capital and governmental development projects increasingly penetrate the Amazon and similar areas, it becomes increasingly urgent to find ways to protect the interests of native communities and their environments alike from the effects of deals done on their behalf by individuals acting as mediators but with no effective constraints or even, sometimes, concern for collective interests as such. It is essential to recognize that indigenous political systems may not contain effective mechanisms for exercising such control, and every effort should be made to encourage their development.

A second generation of young Kayapo educated in the skills necessary for interethnic relations was instrumental in challenging the monopoly of the young Gorotire leaders in this respect and helping their fellow villagers to understand the connection between the deteriorating health and environmental situation and the mining and logging contracts which were the basis of the young leaders' policy, leadership and life style. Broadly based communal education in the skills of inter-cultural communication is clearly central to the successful accommodation of indigenous Amazonian communities to the changing demands of protecting their environment while dealing with the economic demands and pressures of capitalism.

Just as at Altamira, Kayapo cultural attitudes towards the environment were important in the movement to expel the miners and loggers. Again, it was not a concern for nature in the abstract or the value of natural beings as such, but the sense that the continuity of the ecosystem as a whole is essential to the reproduction of Kayapo society. When a point is reached where the ecosystem is seriously threatened, as by the destruction and pollution of rivers and their fish by mining, or when so much of the forest is damaged by logging that hunting and gathering become increasingly unproductive, the indigenous people will resist if they can, even if the policies responsible for the destruction have been sanctioned by their own leaders and have

produced a modicum of wealth in Brazilian goods and devices such as cars, motorboats and airplanes.

The Kayapo example makes clear that the notion of indigenous peoples as "primitive ecologists" with environmentalist values analogous to, if more "spiritual" than our own, and the opposite conception of them as destructive exploiters, culturally indifferent to environmental values and ready to seize any opportunity for short-term profit from any form of destructive assault on the ecosystem, are false alternatives, and do not exhaust the real spectrum of indigenous environmental relations. The context of human-environmental relations in the Amazon, as in many parts of the world, is one of rapid change between a regime of subsistence and a capitalist economy dominated by extractive forms of production for profit. In this historic context of fundamental change, "culture" does not stand still, an inert body of "traditonal" concepts and attitudes, like a cook book of some bygone era no longer able to deal with today's ingredients but incapable of change. Nor are "culture" and "politics" mutually exclusive ways of relating to environmental problems, such that indigenous peoples operate only with "culture" and we with "politics". As the example of the Kayapo shows, indigenous communities, like ourselves, are fully capable, given the opportunity, of transforming their relationship to their environments through processes of internal political struggle,

combined with active relations of resistance and accommodation to the ambient society and economic system.

That indigenous communities like the Kayapo may arrive, as a result of these processes, at environmentally sound policies and practices for reasons other than environmentalist principles in our sense should give us no cause for complaint. On the contrary, the Kayapo experience may point a useful moral for us. The success of green politics in our own society may in the end depend more on our increasing consciousness of the ways environmental exploitation is inseparable from the degradation of people in class society, and the ways our uses of nature are integral to our production of ourselves and our social world, than any abstract understanding of the principles of ecology.

1. This paper is based on field work carried out on numerous visits to the Kayapo between 1989 and 1995. These trips included extensive cooperation and the sharing of information with Brazilian indigenous support organizations, chiefly the Centro de Trabalho Indigenista, the Centro Ecumenico de Documentacao e Informacao, and the Nucleo de Direitas Indigenas, the latter two having joined in 1994 as the Instituto Socio-Ambiental. The most recent field trip was in March 1995, when I attended the organizational meeting of the Associacao Iprere in the Kayapo village of Cachoeira (now renamed Mentuktire) on the Xingu, gathered data at AVA (the Association for Life and Environment), FUNAI (the National Indian Foundation) and CVII (the Center for the Indigenous Visual Image), all of Brasilia, and the CTI (Center for Indigenous Work, of Sao Paulo), and took part in an internal seminar on current conditions and policy options among the Kayapo at the Instituto Socio-Ambiental in Sao Paulo. My field trips have been sponsored by The Center for Latin American Studies of the University of Chicago, The Lichtstern Fund of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago, The Spencer Foundation, and Granada Television International.