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Kayapó

Profile

Kayapó live in the Xingu and Altamira area of the rain-forest, in Mato Grosso and southern Pará. There are nine communities that are known as Xikrin, Txhukahamai, Mebêngokrê. Their language is part of the Ge linguistic family and is known as Macro-Jê, Jê or Kayapó. The Kayapó are unique because they have traditionally settled in small groups of no more than 80 in fertile areas of the Amazon River basin. This location makes it easy for the Kayapó to travel outside of their communities, but also makes them more accessible to outsiders. The Kayapó men traditionally use disks in their lower lips, ear plugs and genital sheaths, and members of the community use body paint at all times. Circular patterns are of symbolic importance, and the community is structured in a wheel-and-spoke format, with lodging for the men in the middle. The Kayapó were first contacted in the 1950s. They participate in many aspects of the lumber and mining industries. They are heavily studied for their traditions, environmental activism and cash-based natural resource management plans.

Historical context

In 1989 Kayapó organized a successful protest against the construction of a dam that would have flooded a vast area of Amazon territory. Kayapó visited the headquarters of the World Bank and secured mass media coverage of their plight. The resulting international protest led the World Bank to withdraw its funding, forcing the Brazilian government to abandon the project. This protest built on successful previous organizing efforts in Altamira and in Brasília during the Constitutional Assembly.

In October 1992 the Kayapó Menkragnotí were finally granted nearly 5 million hectares in the Xingu and Altamira area of the rain-forest.

Current issues

The Kayapó have two very different perspectives on outsiders - the Gorotire village has retained mining rights, while Kapot has remained distant from commercial interests. Members of the community have hired whites to mine the land, and Kayapó have sold their products to major international corporations such as the Body Shop. Two Kayapó chiefs, Ropni (or Raoni) and Bepkoroti (Paulinho Payakã), have become international celebrities. The international pop star Sting works closely with Raoni on environmental issues and co-authored a book based on his experiences. Despite the amount of contact the Kayapó have with outsiders, there is still internal tension that has enabled them to retain a level of scepticism about outsiders. This balance may help explain some of the economic and political success of the community.

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