Susan Carey

THE KAYAPO: FIERCE DEFENDERS OF THE FOREST

The Kayapo are a group of Indians native to the rainforests of the Xingu River range in the Brazilian Amazon. They are unique in that through demonstrations of their own strength and determination, the Kayapo have been able to not only protect their own territory, but to halt varied governmental plans for the national development of Amazonian land as well. The battle over the proposed hydroelectric dam at Altamira is a clear example of this case. The dam, which was intended to be the first in a series built along the Xingu River, was to be located 400 miles below Altamira in the state of Para. Located on Kayapo territory, the dam would have resulted in the degradation of thirteen tribal villages, ultimately flooding an area of 7,000 square miles (Hecht and Cockburn 1990:200). However, through the skillful use of their own international prominence and notoriety, the Kayapo have subsequently been able to halt such projects planned out by the Brazilian government. This paper will examine the factors which distinguish the Kayapo as a tribe; thus earning the Kayapo international attention, and the power to successfully confront government officials in the contestation over land.

The Kayapo view contestation over land as war. This sentiment results to a large degree from their culture, which is based on a warrior system and is ingrained in children from a very early age (Turner 1991). As a result, for centuries the Kayapo have been regarded as the fiercest Indians in Brazil (Sting and Dutilleux 1989:75), both by
other tribes, and by the white Brazilians who view the Kayapo as violent and uncivilized (Schmink and Wood 1992:270). Having long taken pride in their fighting ability (Lea 1984:675), the Kayapo thus assume a superior position over other Indian tribes (Turner 1991). Kayapo men in particular display a certain arrogance; assuming that as Kayapo alone they have the ability to triumph. The men regard themselves as "true" Indians, unique in their ability and their knowledge to fight against the white Brazilians (Ibid). In contrast, the Kayapo refer to other Indians as "common" Indians; these Indians are believed to be inferior, and lacking the warlike qualities which the Kayapo so confidently possess (Ibid).

Though in the past it was not uncommon for Kayapo villages to battle amongst themselves, conflicts over land rights and other natural resources caused former enemies to unite (Conklin and Graham 1995:701). In essence, these issues formed a basis of cooperation among natives who previously had little common ground (Ibid:701). As stated by one Kayapo chief (Ropni), all "foolish quarrels" had to be set aside in order to unite against the Brazilians, those primarily responsible for the newly emerging conflicts (Turner 1991). In a historic and unprecedented ten day meeting, sixteen Kayapo chiefs came together in 1981 to discuss a unified strategy in order to defend themselves (Schmink and Wood 1992:263). Some of these chiefs had not seen each other in nearly 40 years (Ibid:263). This initial meeting would later become only the first of many, brought about by the urgent need for the Kayapo to protect their territory.

Kayapo efforts to halt the proposed hydroelectric dam at Altamira exemplify the high degree of unification which occurred among tribal members as a result of outside pressures. In a culmination of four months of preparation, in February 1989
approximately 600 Indians made a 400 mile trek out of the forest to the town of Altamira (Turner 1991). 500 of the Indians in attendance were Kayapo; the remaining 100 Indians were comprised of invited representatives from 40 other tribal nations (Fisher 1994:222). The six day demonstration was entitled the "First Encounter of Native Peoples" with the main focus of halting hydroelectric plans (Turner 1991).

No less important, however, was the unification of tribal members which occurred at the onset of the demonstration. In an important ceremonial dance, the Kayapo joined together in solidarity, pledging to sink their differences and to unite against the common enemy (Ibid): "We Kayapo are all brothers now," said one tribal member. "We must no longer fight among ourselves, but direct our battles against the whites who try to take our lands" (Lea 1984:686).

The extraordinary level of organization demonstrated by the Kayapo in the rally at Altamira has increasingly become a defining characteristic of the tribe. This organization, essential to their survival, can be attributed to both long standing cultural traditions, and similar confrontations in recent history in which opponents of the Kayapo have necessitated the tribe’s will to organize and to take action. Both factors have contributed a great deal to the experience which made their organization at Altamira a success, and will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

The first factor which has contributed to the Kayapo’s unique organizational strength stems from the Kayapo’s traditional "military chain of command" (Turner 1991). This chain of command is primarily based on "age sets," in which each group (male or female) will work together in order to accomplish a required task of benefit to the entire village (Ibid). Age groups are utilized in numerous aspects of Kayapo culture, whether it
be hunting, fighting, dancing, or the like. These groups not only exhibit the Kayapo’s
great organizational strength, but have also played a key role in its honing. Through the
experienced use of age-set related tasks, the Kayapo have refined their organizational
power, thus allowing the tribe to apply their unique abilities towards other aspects of life-
- such as in confrontations with the white majority, as at Altamira (Ibid).

The second factor influencing the Kayapo’s unique organizational strength can
be attributed to the experience gained in past confrontations with outsiders who
encroached upon their land. Continued invasions by those seeking to exploit the
resources of Kayapo territory (such as miners, ranchers, loggers, and rubber tappers),
forced the Kayapo to adopt new forms of resistance in order to regain control of their
land (Ibid). Importantly, these invasions gave the Kayapo direct experience in dealing
with outside disputes, and the tribe could therefore apply this experience towards the
government officials at Altamira (Ibid).

Perhaps there is no better example of this than in the case of the Maria Bonita
gold mine on the Gorotire Indian Reserve. Furious by the mining activities of
garimpeiros (gold miners) who illegally snuck into their territory, in April 1985 the
Kayapo seized control of the Maria Bonita gold mine (Turner 1988). Decorated in battle
paints and feathers, and armed with war clubs, rifles, bows and arrows, 200 Kayapo
warriors occupied the only means of access into the mine, an illegal airstrip which was
the root behind the influx of incoming garimpeiros (Ibid).

Today, the Kayapo have firm control of the mine, generating an income of two
million dollars annually in gold revenues from their imposed five percent miner’s tax
(Ibid). But what is most significant is the way in which the Kayapo have utilized these
revenues. In the same year that the Kayapo gained control of the Maria Bonita mine, the tribe purchased an aircraft and hired a Brazilian pilot; these were used to transport the Kayapo between villages, into nearby towns, and perhaps most importantly, to patrol their borders (Ibid; Schmink and Wood 1992:272). In this sense, not only did the use of such revenues enhance communication among the Kayapo, but it also made them aware of illegal encroachments upon their land, and the subsequent environmental degradation which followed. Thus, their "ingenious" use of gold revenues helped the Kayapo to defend and to protect their own culture, and at the same time made the Kayapo the first tribe in Amazonia to acquire an air force (Turner 1988).

The invasion of garimpeiros into Kayapo territory led to another important element which has now become characteristic of Kayapo confrontations and negotiations with Brazilians, and that is the acquisition of video camera. The first video camera was obtained by the Kayapo in 1985, when it was confiscated from gold prospectors who had illegally occupied the Kayapo's tribal land (Smith 1989:29). With funding from the five percent commission they receive from the Maria Bonita gold mine, the Kayapo have further purchased a second video camera (Ibid:29). Since 1985, not only have the Kayapo become the most experienced Amazonian tribe to use the video camera, but according to anthropologist Terence Turner, the Kayapo offer the "most striking and varied examples of indigenous video" (Turner 1992:5).

The Kayapo do not regard video documentation merely as a passive recording or a reflection of already existing facts, but rather as a means to establish the facts on record (Ibid:11). Documentation therefore has a performative function (Ibid:11), which
the Kayapo are well aware of and use to their own advantage. This advantage is rooted in the Kayapo's deep distrust for the non-Indian word (Smith 1989:29).

From the moment they acquired video cameras, the Kayapo have made a point of making video recordings of their major political confrontations with national society (Turner 1992:11). Frustrated by the broken promises of government officials, the Kayapo thus transform a transient event into a fixed image, one which can be stored permanently and in a form which can circulate in the public domain (Ibid:11). The importance of the performative role of video in Kayapo society is expressed in the words of one Kayapo chief: "The Brazilians speak falsely. They break their promises. Now we have learned to use their technology. We can record what the Brazilians say for the Indians and Brazilians to hear, so the Brazilians will be forced to act according to their words" (Turner 1988). The proceedings at Altamira were therefore recorded by the Kayapo; this provided them a form of evidence in the event that any government official should attempt to go back on his word, as originally stated in negotiations at the Altamira rally (Ibid).

The Kayapo have further employed their use of the video camera in recognition of yet another advantage: not only is the video a means of recording events, but it is also an event to be recorded (Turner 1992:7). This utilization has contributed to the Kayapo's international prominence and notoriety, and can be demonstrated in the case of the Altamira rally. At Altamira, Kayapo cameras not only recorded the event, but were themselves one of the events most recorded by photojournalists of both national and international press (Ibid:7). Turner attributes this to the Kayapo's "ostentanious" use of video cameras, in which Kayapo camera persons are deliberately included in
events not merely to record what takes place, but to ensure that they too become an attraction recorded by the press (Ibid:7).

The Kayapo have gained an appreciation for the mass media which has provided the tribe with an immense amount of visibility, thus forwarding efforts in contestations over land. Much of Kayapo success can be attributed to "media savvy Kayapo leaders. . . who became masters of the art of translating indigenous cultural values into terms outsiders could comprehend" (Conklin and Graham 1995:700). Significantly, these values drew heavily upon the language and concepts of environmentalism (Ibid:700). Thus, the Kayapo emerged at the forefront of a trend to "think locally, act globally," linking their struggles against ecologically destructive development projects proposed by the Brazilian government to international issues and organizations (Ibid:695). In so doing, the Kayapo were able to mobilize a broad base of transnational and pan-Indian support (Ibid:700). Using the environmental movement as a vehicle, the Kayapo were thus able to become international "stars" in much the same way, as noted by Conklin and Graham, that "receptive audiences are essential to the making of Hollywood stars"(Ibid:701). Playing upon Western stereotypes of the "ecologically noble savage" (Ibid:696), the Kayapo became skillful manipulators of symbols which related to the Amerindian as guardians of the forest and upholders of ecology (Fisher 1994:222). It was this image of the "noble savage" which the international media so frequently recognized and promoted, broadcasting throughout the world (Ibid:222).

The Kayapo's successful use of media can be attested by the rally at Altamira, in which there were almost as many reporters in attendance as the Indians themselves (Turner 1991). Even British rock star Sting made an appearance at the rally, on behalf
of the Kayapo and his own campaign against the destruction of the rainforest (Ibid).

The rock star was accompanied by photographers from Vogue, People Magazine, and VH1, which worked to further ensure the rally’s success as an international media event (Ibid).

The way in which the Kayapo capitalized upon their own cultural elements becomes apparent at the Altamira rally: media images of traditionally adorned Kayapo proliferated, and Kayapo leaders even urged other tribes in attendance to remove their Western attire and decorate their bodies in accordance to tradition (Fisher 1994:222). Furthermore, for those Kayapo who could not convey their messages to the international press through Portuguese, new methods of communication were devised (Turner 1991). In actuality, the methods were inspired by the Kayapo’s long standing and rich sense of theater and mimesis, but were adapted for new their political purposes (Conklin and Graham 1995:700). Rather than verbally addressing the white-majority, some non-Portuguese speaking natives chose to convey their messages through the theatrics of warlike gestures and oratory (Ibid). Perhaps the most memorable example of this came from the defiant Kayapo woman who, as a symbolic gesture of resistance, wielded a machete in the face of the proposed dam’s head engineer (Ibid). Significantly, this was done before hundreds of onlookers, many of whom were representatives of the international press (Ibid).

Thus, in a synthesis between the old and the new, the Kayapo have enabled themselves to successfully defend their culture and their land. They have done this by drawing upon age-old cultural traditions, but also upon the modern techniques so often associated with Westerners. In the words of one famous Kayapo chief (Payakan), who
helped to lead his tribe to international fame and notoriety: “the Kayapo used to defend themselves with war clubs and spears. . . Today, we defend ourselves with words, our heads, and the press” (Fisher 1994:271).
Bibliography


