

Culture, sustainability and resilience in a woman's song

In the beginning, the women played the *jacuí* (sacred flute) and sang for the whole village; the men's role was to listen with reverence. One day, the men rebelled; they didn't want women at the centre of the village any longer. They took the sacred flutes and created the *Casa da Música* (House of Music), built in the *uikúka* (central square). Ever since, women have been forbidden from playing the *jacuí*, or even from entering the *Casa da Música*, which has become an environment restricted to men. But if the men prevented them from playing, they could not stop them from singing, for they could not steal the voices from their throats. And thus the women sing.

I was told this story by the *putaki wikipiti* (owner of the village, chief) Aritana, the leader of the Yawalapíti. Son of Kenato, Aritana is a leader, not only of his people, but also of the many peoples who inhabit the Xingu National Park, an immense area of 2.6 million hectares of biological and cultural diversity. Five thousand Indians live in the Park from 14 different tribes: Kalapalo, Wauja, Meniako, Kuikuro, Kamaiurá ... various races, linguistic branches, cultures. To be a leader in the midst of such diversity, one needs to know the other, be tolerant, learn to listen, speak many languages; Aritana is polyglot; he speaks eight languages and uses them at the council of peoples of the Alto Xingu.

The Yawalapíti have inhabited the region since time immemorial, and their territory lies between the Tuatuari and Kuluene rivers. The first recorded contact between these tribes

and white men was in 1887, with the expedition led by the German, Karl von den Steinen. The Yawalapíti are direct descendants of Kukumuti or Mavutsinim, who planted the trunks of the Kuarup: the tree of rebirth. Being born again from difficulties, even from death itself, was one of the teachings that Mavutsinim left as his legacy; a teaching that was of great value when the presence of the white man became more frequent. Pestilence, viruses and bacteria overran the place and, with them influenza, measles, diarrhoea and infections. Cattle, pasture, soya, meat production and with this process came hunger, dirt, and fenced-off land. Attacks of all kinds, with lethal weapons or with sugar: death, decay, desperation...

In 1948, there were only 28 Yawalapíti. It was a people under the threat of extinction. The solution found by the Villas-Bôas brothers - internationally renowned Brazilian defenders of indigenous rights - and by Kenato was to bring them together into a single village and form unions with other Xingu peoples. People who before used to fight among themselves would now have to join together to grow again, as in the Kuarup rites. In 2005, there were 230 Yawalapíti, but very few, only five, were fluent in the language and the history of their people.

The peoples of the Xingu may not know the western laws of physics and the concept of resilience, but they know the teachings of Mavutsinim and the power of the Kuarup. Even when subjected to all kinds of strain and adversity, obliged to withdraw, cower, bow down and retreat, their capacity for recovery made them return to their original form and strength. The Yawalapíti are resilient. They are resilient because they perform the Kuarup.

The great challenge for the Yawalapíti to grow is to recover their language. Although the interethnic unions were essential for the rebirth of the Yawalapíti people, the cultural transmission line has been broken. *"You know how it was before, when you arrived in a village. Everyone was painted, everyone very beautiful. It wasn't like today. Before, in the late afternoon, the centre of the village was full of people. Old people, youngsters, boys, all gathered together, talking about what they had done, what they were going to do, telling a story, talking about the day... today, no, only the elderly go to the centre. It seems that that joy has ended."* (Ichimã Kamayurá).

But the roots of the Yawalapíti are strong, they know their stories and they keep them alive in their day-to-day dances and songs.

The Yawalapíti are clever. Among them there is one who has been nicknamed MacGyver by visitors. The scientist of the village, he operates the radio, fixes the car engine,

invents things. Their culture is also maintained by invention and by contact with what comes from outside. It recreates itself. Thus they proposed creating a *Ponto de Cultura*.

The concept of the *Ponto de Cultura programme* is embedded in what their tribe already practised: sharing work and developing cultural activities that respect the autonomy and leading role of communities. As a *Ponto de Cultura* neither creates nor invents itself, but is empowered by what already exists, the idea was easily assimilated by them. "*The Pontos de Cultura is like the trunk of the Kuarup*", Aritana said.

The Yawalapíti *Ponto de Cultura* activities proposed by Ipeax (Xingu Ethno-Environmental Research Institute) in the indigenous lands of the Xingu include a language school, publication of a Yawalapíti alphabet book, dictionary and grammar, the recording of traditional songs, indigenous performances, Xinguan fashion and body art, crafts, traditional architecture and Yawalapíti on the web. Aritana is president of the Ipeax and its board is comprised mainly by indigenous people from the Xingu. The Indians of Brazil have a memory, and they know what happens when they transfer the destiny of their people to others. Even if in the beginning, the filling in of spreadsheets and the necessary programme bureaucracy seemed difficult for an Indian who lives in Xingu, it is always better that they speak for themselves: without mediation. Outside help, when honest and disinterested, is welcome, but theirs is always the last word. What they need to do, they do for themselves, and thus they gain their autonomy.

In the Kuarup in which I participated (2007), it wasn't just the elderly that sang the festival repertoire. The repertoire of the Yawalapíti is vast and is becoming lost, and singing a song is not just a case of memorising the words; it is necessary to know the stories, the rites and the emotions. All this is contained within a culture. For ten days, a recording and research team followed the dance and musical repertoire of the village. It was a great moment, young people, adults and children exerting themselves so that the language would be fully recorded. But, despite their best efforts, not all the young people were masters of the music.

Suddenly, singing could be heard from inside one of the houses. To everyone's surprise, the voice was coming from the smallest house, the poorest and most forgotten, the least well maintained. The singing came from the depths of the darkness of the straw house. The old woman Wantsu lived there: one of the five Yawalapíti still fluent in their language. Wantsu sang songs that not even the oldest men remembered. She took them from the depths of her soul, as if from the time when - as well as singing - the women played the *jacuí*.

*“Yamurikumalu
Ayawa, ayawa rinari
Iyawa riyari Yamurikumari nawikamina
Atsanhia putapa nupikani nukamani
Kamatawira”*

*“The women warriors
Yamurikumã deserve to be respected
You do not know how I am feeling
And that I will die”*

As in the Kuarup, the Yawalapíti are reborn. And they come back to life through the singing of a woman. As with the Yawalapíti, Brazilian culture, despite pressure, resists. It is resilient; it finds points of support and leverage. And as it moves, it recreates itself.

*This is a text extract from **The Point of Culture: Brazil turned upside down** by Célio Turino, edited by Paul Heritage and Rosie Hunter with Poppy Spowage, published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 2014, 2nd edition 2018. Published on our website by PPP to thank donors to our emergency Covid-19 appeal for the Yawalapiti Village. Please donate here: justgiving.com/campaign/Yawalapiti-COVID19*

Original edition copyright 2009 Célio Turino, published by Editora e Livraria Anita Ltda, www.anitagaribaldi.com.br

English language edition: main text copyright 2013 Célio Turino; introduction and afterword copyright 2013 People's Palace Projects. Translated by Novas Languages, Paul Heritage and Rosie Hunter.

Rights for the 2014 and 2018 editions are reserved by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, as safeguarded by the Creative Commons Licence used herein. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

The right of Célio Turino, Paul Heritage, Rosie Hunter, and Poppy Spowage to be identified as author, contributors and editors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The views expressed in this book extract are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation or People's Palace Projects.

ISBN: 978-1-903080-18-4