

## Primordial land in the Amazon

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Photographs of an Amazonian tribe that lives on the Brazil-Peru border in isolation from modern civilization were published this week around the world. Why do these images, which seem to be so radically detached from our world, move us so much? What is it about the sight of these naked people, whose bodies are painted in earth tones and who fire arrows at a helicopter hovering above the treetops near their straw huts, that fires our imagination?

One gnawing question that these photos raise is the tribe's willingness, or lack thereof, to be in contact with our own civilization. The tribe in question is said to be one of about 100 groups that have no such contact, and our immediate tendency is to imagine them as passive survivors of a disappearing world. The plot appears to be straightforward: In the distant past, many such groups lived in remote corners of exotic continents. Then along came modernization, and tribe after tribe was "discovered." Now the time has come for the very last ones to go down that path. We should consider ourselves lucky to share the excitement of such a belated discovery.

But could the arrows aimed at the camera be part of an alternative narrative? The Brazilian government's National Indian Foundation, which was responsible for distributing the photographs this week, indicated that the authorities have known about the tribe for some 20 years. Exploratory expeditions sent by logging and mining companies are coming to the area with increasing frequency, spurred by growing demand - and higher prices - for timber and minerals.

Encounters between these treasure hunters, many of them local Advertisement subcontractors, and the forest tribes are often violent. The explorers want to create "safe zones" where miners, loggers and road builders can work and rest in peace. Colonial history teaches us that at many such junctions, the ends have justified the means of attaining such objectives. Over the past 200 years, between 3 million and 4 million indigenous people are estimated to have been killed, expelled or exposed to deadly illnesses in the Amazon Basin.

It is unclear whether the people photographed this time had personal experience of such harsh encounters. One can safely assume, however, that their tribe's cultural heritage contains dramatic stories about what happened to ancestors and neighbors, either in recent times or in the more distant past, as a result of such encounters. Tribal histories exist, and are essential for our understanding of their response to this intrusion.

Thus their existence in the forest could be something else than an expression of passivity. It could well be an active survival strategy, a conscious choice to withdraw from a threatening reality of violence, disease, subjugation and humiliation. The arrows fired at the helicopter, which could have been seen as an instinctive, boorish response to an unfamiliar entity, should perhaps be read by us as a piercing critique of modernity.

These photographs are also relevant to our lives in at least one other way: They offer a reflection of the economic and political drama surrounding the international effort to preserve

the rain forests as part of the struggle to combat climate change. The timing of the photos' release is no coincidence. It seems to have been done in support of the efforts of several tropical countries, including Brazil, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Congo, Cameroon, Madagascar and Papua New Guinea, to create an economic alternative to the logging and mining companies that are erasing virgin forests from their maps.

These corporations, which pour tens of billions of dollars into the tropics, are causing tremendous ecological, economic and social damage on a local scale. But their activities also have grave consequences for global warming. Plants produce oxygen and sequester carbon. The large, dense rain forests play a central role in reducing the amount of carbon dioxide - the gas primarily responsible for global warming. Scientists can now calculate the contribution of every single tree to the composition of the atmosphere.

The international community has already recognized the need to save the rain forests and has accepted the principle that wealthy industrialized countries should provide poor tropical ones with the funds needed to come up with an alternative to logging. The exact sums will be determined in Copenhagen at the end of 2009, but intensive discussions are already taking place. Not surprisingly, the gap between the statements made by politicians in the industrialized world and their willingness to back their words with money remains wide.

The pictures of the "new" tribe suggest that there is only one way to preserve their basic right to life: saving their continent. Not a symbolic reservation, but a whole chunk of continent - many thousands of square kilometers of primordial, pristine forest where logging is forever barred.

If the pictures cause the liberal public around the world to lean on governments and make them save primordial forests, those who fired arrows at the helicopters will have done a huge service for a modern civilization bent on self-destruction. Perhaps as a sign of gratitude for their participation in this crucial campaign, they could be granted the ultimate prize: to be left alone, free of contact with a civilization they clearly do not want.

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