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Indigenous campaigners

Trooping the tribal colours

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A hardy and versatile species that can do surprisingly well in boardrooms, palaces and even diplomatic conferences

Reuters



Almir: the earth's his oyster

WHEN the five nations that assert sovereignty (and economic rights) in the melting Arctic conferred in Greenland last month, it sounded to the untrained ear like good news for the polar region and its people: they vowed to obey international rules (ie, not fight) and to counter the risk of oil spills in newly navigable waters.

But Aqqaluk Lyngø, an artful poet-politician who is the best-known representative of Greenland's Inuit people, was unimpressed—and dismayed to get only ten minutes to address a meeting that might be critical for his island, which he longs to free from Danish dominion. “We will not be treated as pawns by outside powers who decimated our whale stocks in the 1600s, changed our religion in the 1700s, and then redrew our maps, imposed foreign borders and forcibly located many of us in the name of sovereignty,” he said afterwards. “This debate must include the Inuit, we will stand for nothing less.”

Mr Lyngø's story is typical of the long journeys that many indigenous campaigners have made: journeys which have endowed them with a remarkable ability to thrive in very different cultural and physical environments. His parents were traditional Greenlanders who despatched him to Denmark as a boy to acquire European polish; like many a colonial sent to the metropolis, the experience made him a nationalist. He passionately defends his people's right to hunt seals, but he can willingly challenge any Parisian lefty to an intellectual debate on the finer points of anti-colonial theory.

In the heart of the Brazil's endangered forest, a similar sort of versatility is being honed by indigenous campaigners who are discovering some unfamiliar terrain.

Take Almir Surui, who at 33 is already an eminent figure in the remote expanse of Brazilian forest that he represents. He can tell you as much as anyone about its rituals, its flora and fauna, its tragic recent history—but there are gaps in his knowledge, and he seizes any chance to fill them. He was excited, in April, to meet a

British ethnographer, John Hemmings, who described the time in 1969 (before Almir was born) when the tribe first met white people. So engrossing was the talk that they hardly noticed the liveried footmen moving discreetly in the background; they were guests of Prince Charles, heir to the British throne, who had invited 40 Brazilians to mull the future of the rainforest.

In common with many other indigenous activists, Almir (who uses his tribe's name as a surname when he needs one) is anything but shy or provincial. Life has made him resilient: his first memories are of the diseases, caught from white people, which reduced his tribe's numbers from 5,000 to a few hundred—and of his father, armed with a bow and arrow, facing down a lorryload of loggers and police. When, at the age of 23, he visited Washington, DC, he was confused when he was served sushi—but he did manage to persuade the World Bank to audit a loan to his home region.

If anything offers hope for the survival both of the world's remaining rainforest and its inhabitants, it may be the rich world's feeling that forest-dwellers are the most effective stewards both of carbon and biodiversity. That gives activists like Almir a moral bargaining power which they are deftly exploiting, with a keen understanding of modern communications.

Climate change is both an obvious threat to the indigenous—destroying coral, causing droughts in rain-soaked forests, boosting pest populations, and melting the Arctic—and also, in a sense, an opportunity. People really want to hear the indigenous voice, even if some messages are at odds with conventional green wisdom.

Take the Inuit, who live not only in Greenland but also in Alaska, Russia and Canada. The far north has produced feisty Canadian activists like Sheila Watt-Cloutier, who has denounced airborne pollution and climate change—and the disappearance of ice on which hunters and their prey depend—as a vast human-rights violation. “We are being poisoned from afar,” says Ms Watt-Cloutier, a sophisticated sound-biter raised in a world where telling stories was the only entertainment. And some of today's stories are unexpected: Inuit campaigners deplored last month's American decision to list the polar bear as an endangered species.

Indigenous activists (and eco-activists) can be articulate exponents of the politics of grievance. But they can be also commendably firm about urging people to help themselves in any way they can.

In debates over the dire situation of Australia's indigenous people, one of the sanest voices is that of Noel Pearson, a lawyer who urges his people to break free of the culture of welfare and addiction. As an aboriginal, he can deliver messages of “tough love” that would not be well received if they came from white lips.

Nor do all indigenous activists insist that every single thing about their culture is positive. Paula Makabory, an Australian-based campaigner for the independence of West Papua from Indonesia, has voiced dismay over her people's tribal divisions.

At a recent conference in Darwin, Australia, it was stated that indigenous people see themselves as “mercury in the barometer” of climate change. True—but not all indigenous folk would concur with A.H. Zakri, director of the United Nations University and convenor of that gathering, in complaining that moves to combat climate change have been too “market-driven”. Some of the Amazon's indigenous tribes want to participate in carbon-trading projects, if the UN and others let them.

For many indigenous leaders, securing their future is not a question of market versus non-market, but of establishing who has the right to profit from their products and lore. Take Brazil's Yawanawa people: a tribe whose numbers and culture are bouncing back after securing the stewardship of an area of forest that was recently expanded to 194,000 hectares. Their leader, Tashka Yawanawa, was living in New Mexico and already an English-speaker when, at the age of 26, he received a summons to head his people. He made a deal with Aveda, an American cosmetics firm, to supply pigments for lipstick. And in a fine piece of indigenous publicity, Joaquin Phoenix, an actor, was invited recently to Yawanawa land, where he was painted in many hues and took part in a ritual that left his stomach rather scarred.

Almir Surui is just as bold in his choice of friends. He has made a deal with Google, the internet search firm, to use the mapping facilities of its Google Earth service to track illegal logging and mark the habitats of precious plants or birds. He is equally at home with princes and cyber-tycoons: he has a hunter's way of reading the signs and behaving accordingly.

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