



DENI DEMARCATION 2003

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BRIEFING

The Deni – Culture and History

“To know the spirits is to control them and to know your own spirit is to control yourself”, a Deni saying as quoted by German anthropologist Gunter Kroemer in his paper “Travel to the Deni Indigenous People”, CIMI, March 1995.

General Information

The Deni are comprised of more than 700 indigenous people living in a shallow plain between the Purus and Juruá Rivers in Brazil's Amazonas State, 7-10 days by boat from the State Capitol of Manaus. Considered Arawa people, the Deni are part of the linguistic branch Aruak. The first mention of the Deni appeared in the SPI (Indian Protection Service, currently FUNAI) report of 1942.

Tapa, one of the *patarahu* (chiefs, bosses, or leaders, depending on how you interpret the word) of Visagem Village, gives his history of the Deni people - which he calls Madija Deni:

“The Deni are divided into groups or clans, with certain political autonomy and with their own self-identity and self-identification. The ancient habitat of the Bukure Deni is the Aruá River, a tributary of the Cuniuá. The Kuniva Deni came up the river from the Low Cuniuá; many of them died of measles; today they are mixed and now their habitat is Cujubim Creek. The habitat of the Minu Deni is by Kurabi Creek, in the Xeruã; a lot of their people died of measles. The ancient habitat of the Varasa Deni of the Cuniuá is in the Xeruã. The Hava Deni also come from the Xeruã River, and mix them with the Kuniva Deni. Therefore the ancient habitat of the Madija Deni is all the extension of the Cuniuá River since the Coxodoá River is the whole within both margins. The guns and diseases of the white man caused numerous deaths, but (I also) recall the internal fights among these subgroups, being named as Kamuvári killers of the Varasa Deni and Huve Deni groups.”

The Deni define their traditional habitat as situated on the plain of the Purus and Juruá Rivers, both affluents of the Solimões (Amazon) River, between the Cuniuá River, a tributary of the Purus River, and the Xeruã River, a tributary of the Juruá River. The Deni of the Xeruã River live in four villages, all of them near the banks of the Xeruã. The Deni population of the Cuniuá River is concentrated in four villages near the banks of the Cuniuá. It is an area covered by dense forest, with trees like muiratinga, copaiba, jacarandá, pau-rosa, cedar, jatobá, louro, samaúma and virola, which have high commercial value in the logging market. Along the riverbanks, palm trees like “açai” dominate the vegetation.

The survival of the Deni communities depends on avoiding the devastation of the environment, which therefore means they are experts in good use of the totality of their habitat, favouring the recovery of the fauna and flora, and the proliferation of species. The very placing of the Deni villages shows a remarkable environmental acumen, with emphasis on drainage and the proximity of natural orchards with “pupunheiras” (palms) and banana trees.

In the surrounding ancient forest small amounts of raw material can be found, and the creeks are explored by small “timbós”. There are no continuous cleared areas: the whole area is a mix of ancient forest or secondary forest in advanced recovery, the latter creating a new environment of fauna and flora where the proliferation of vegetable species generates new food resources.



DENI DEMARCATION 2003

GREENPEACE



The Deni rely on the forest for their sustenance: hunting, fishing, extractive activities and agriculture. Due to the low agricultural potential of the forest soil, they balance their diet with wild flora and fauna that is found abundantly throughout their lands.

Agriculture is the fundamental subsistence practise of the Deni. Manioc, corn, cará (a type of root), banana, pineapples, urucum (red pigment), timbó and palm hearts like pupunha are produced in rural processes that involve preparation of the soil, burning and planting. The preparation of the common area is done collectively. After the burning, plots of land are distributed to the families, who become responsible for the planting and harvesting.

On individual and collective hunts, the Deni use rifles and bow and arrows to hunt big animals, and *sarabatanas* (blow guns) and darts to catch birds and small animals. The wild fruits are collected mainly during the rainy season (the Amazon “winter”), between December and May. Usually, tasks are accomplished individually but some co-operative efforts are made to hasten, for example, the manufacturing of fishing nets.

Geographical difficulties, such as low soil productivity, high temperatures and heavy and continuous rain also led to the nomadic occupation of territory, which at the end allows the re-composition of the clearings through an economical cycle of plantation, harvesting and re-planting.

Nomadic Deni in fact means that the populations of villages wildly fluctuate, with people freely coming and going. Because they are nomadic, and not village-based, the villages are merely an agregation of familiar and family groups. They have no inherent unity as communities. The chiefs are essentially the leaders of their groups and not of the village as a whole. Permanent residents can suddenly leave and temporary residents may become permanent ones.

The division of work between men and women – the men in the forest, hunting and fishing, while the women work back at the village – and the practical, day-by-day results, are important aspects of Deni society. The Deni understand that whoever works has rights over the results of this work, i.e., the concept of common property is not typically Deni.

Cultural Aspects

Deni marriage process is fairly simple: the men undertake an activity such as a hunt or a journey into the forest to look for pataua (a fruit that produces a wine similar to acai); only the women and two old men remain in the village. The old men take the groom’s hammock and move it next to the hammock of his future wife. When the men come back from the bush, the marriage is announced. Time for party and abundant food, and the new couple can sleep together.

During pregnancy, the parents are not allowed to eat eggs and can only have small fish. They should keep having sexual relations until the last moment, so the child will be born strong. The Deni woman gives birth by herself in the bush. She cuts the umbilical cord, cleans the child and brings it home. The husband buries the placenta. The real creation doesn’t take place until the shaman (zupinehe) blows the soul into the child, giving life to the infant. After the birth, the mother eats her meals alone for two months.

Weeping for the the dead is the strongest ritual of mourning among the Deni people. The dead person is buried in a new hammock, which never touches the ground of the grave. Over the body, sticks of paxiuba (a type of palm tree) are placed, and the body receives a final layer of soil. A mausoleum-like structure is built above the grave.

The most powerful men of the village are the zupinehe, the shamans. According to the Deni religion, they are the responsible for the harmony between body and soul. The shaman can communicate with the souls, and his spirit can leave



DENI DEMARCATION 2003

GREENPEACE



the body and travel. To heal, the shaman takes “stones” out of his body, considered spirits by him, and places them in the sick person. Later, he takes them out through suction. In some of the Deni villages, mainly at the Xerua River, there are no living shamans. Measles epidemics are attributed to the absence of these spiritual leaders.

Myths

Creation of the world: the Deni believe that the origin of people is a speaking lizard. The feminine spirit Mahaniru created the vegetables that stand up, like the pineapple, manioc, and bananas. The ancestor Nadiha brought the vegetables that grow horizontally like the potato. Mahaniru planted, but humans wanted to get the resulting food without working, so they fought the spirit and threatened it with death. Mahaniru then went up to the sky, taking with her all kinds of plants, leaving the starving men behind. Then men burned the area and, after the fire, a manioc plant was born. This is the origin of the agricultural tradition.

The arrival of fire: In ancient times, a man went out to hunt a jaguar, the only animal considered evil by the Deni. A bird screamed, “There is fire there”. In front of the warrior’s eyes, flames were consuming a giant tree. The man got a wood stick and took a sample of the fire back to the village. He then shared the fire with the others, which continues to burn till this day.

Celebrating

The Deni people work to have parties and fun, to invite friends from neighbouring villages and to play games. The Deni are very creative people, true experts in the art of improvisation. The shaman is in charge of organising the parties and issuing the invitations. The most important celebration is called *Ima amusinaha*, translated as “the continuation of a nice talk”. The leader distributes the ritual tasks as ideas, not orders. Some individuals should hunt wild pigs, others should harvest the plantations or fish, and the women should produce *beiju*, a typical dish made out of manioc flower.

The use of *rapé*, a mild hallucinogen made of tobacco leaves and pupui tree bark, toasted and crushed, is snorted daily by men, women and children, from early morning until bedtime.

History

The Rubber Cycle, which extended from the end of the 19th century until 1940, was the main cause of rapid occidental occupation of the Purus and Juruá River areas, and of the consequential and tragic murders, both directly or through introduction of disease, of most of the Indigenous People of the Amazon. The extractivism economy of the rubber industry used the Indigenous Peoples as guides on field trips and as hunters, fishermen, latex producers and as protection against other hostile Indian groups.

Once the rivers had been navigated, nothing could stop the advance of western people and western influence. Large ships sailed up miles and miles of rivers bringing men in search of land and survival. It was the arrival of the Rubber Soldiers. The first urban settlements such as Labrea and Canutama, on the Purus River, and Tefé, on the Juruá, started popping up in the middle of the Amazon jungle.

During the rubber boom, it is estimated that the Indigenous population of the Purus River region was about 40,000 individuals. Unavoidable *correries* – violent confrontations between Indigenous Peoples and settlers – occurred, mainly at the mouths of the *igarapés*, which are small streams of water, where the indigenous resistance focussed and the extractivism frontier met.



DENI DEMARCATION 2003

GREENPEACE



The Deni people, considered peaceful and rural producers, lived inland of the left bank of the Purus River, from the mouth of the Ituxi River up to the Pauini River. Because they constructed their huts in the middle of the forest, their contact with the encroachment of settlers was partially blocked. Even though some were recruited as workers at the seringais (rubber tapping areas), their families remained isolated in the forest. Epidemics and slaughters reached the Deni, but their ethnical and cultural values were preserved.

However, the Deni traditional subsistence economy was strongly affected. The *aviamento* system, based on unfair exchange of rubber for industrialised goods such as rifles and salt, started the vicious cycle of debts and dependency that is still alive today between ribeirinhos and patrons involved with logging in that region. (The ribeirinhos are people that live by the riverbanks in the Amazon; usually existing by rubber tapping, fishing and fruit collection, and although they can be considered traditional populations they are not Indigenous People.)

Economy

With the dramatic decline of demand for Amazon rubber at the end of the Second World War, the Deni started to exchange manioc flower, copaíba oil, meat and fish, for products such as salt and fuel, and some men sought work in the logging industry to survive. In 1992, a measles epidemic killed 67 Deni who had joined logging operations.

Historically, the objective of the colonization fronts had been to transform indigenous people into producers for the regional economy. Therefore, every element that might favour the strengthening of mechanisms to guarantee the survival of indigenous groups as autonomous societies with intact cultural identities have been systematically viewed as obstacles.

Today the non-indigenous presence at the Cuniuá River is practically none – only 20 non-Indian families remain; the only remaining commercial activities being small scale and predatory: extraction of "copaíba" oil, log cutting, and fish drying. The most active Patrons in recent years have been Raimundo Acreano, Zena and Tião, who develop a highly exploitative system of trade with the Deni and the ribeirinhos, following on the model of the rubber cycle entrepreneurs of the last century.

Besides destroying the natural resources, encroachment by the logging industry also opened the doors for further epidemic diseases such as influenza and measles, and generates serious conflicts between loggers and Indigenous Peoples over land use, trading and labour. The Deni, who live primarily outside of the cash culture, do not know how to fairly value their products and labour within the context of our society, and are constantly exploited as a result of this.

According to social scientist Renata Feno Alves, nowadays "the Deni Indigenous People are interested to learn about the outside world. Some of them want to learn how to read and write. They complain about the lack of teachers". She believes that "they can indeed benefit from their relationship with the whites on things such as how to get organized and fight for their rights".

Therefore, Ms. Alves says that the contact with the whites no longer represents as big a risk, especially because habits such as the shamanism, traditional medicine and the language are secure. "With time, they did loose some of their ancient culture. For instance, they don't use ceramics for cooking anymore. They know that it's easier to use pans and aluminium bows. It does not mean that the women forgot about the art of ceramics though. All in all, the essence of the Deni lifestyle has been preserved", she said.



DENI DEMARCATION 2003

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The demarcation of their land is an important step to guarantee the traditional life style of the Deni people, allowing them to control their own future and to maintain their culture, the natural wealth, and the environmental integrity of their territory.