



Messias

AMAZONIAN COMMUNITY PRESIDENT
PERMACULTURE PIONEER

It all started as a joke: “This kid talks so much he should be president; yeah, he doesn’t stop, he’s like a fish out of water,” the older folks would say. But, one joke at a time, they started to take him seriously. A few months later Messias, at the time age twelve, fifth child of Maria and Raimundo, was elected president of the community of Sant’Antonio, on the island of Urubú, district of Boa Vista do Ramos, state of Amazonas, Brazil.

The Amazon is the largest green reserve on the planet: five and a half million square kilometres – divided between Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Guyana – that house much of the world’s biodiversity and reabsorb large amounts of CO₂, reducing the greenhouse effect. The Amazon also has a great influence on the climate of the whole continent. But, in the last forty years, ever faster deforestation to plant soy and raise cattle has devastated more than 500.000 square kilometres of forests.

Messias was born on December 5, 1984 – “or was it 83? Truth is, I can’t remember” –

in a straw-roofed hut next to the river; his father worked for a local landowner. In a world where most are newly arrived settlers, Messias’s parents are Amazon natives, children of Amazon natives, landless Caboclos. Messias grew up watching his siblings go away: there was not enough money and, one by one, the older children had to leave to make a living. They worked as sailors on the river, and they always sent something back home. Messias was like an only child; his illiterate father would take him along when he worked the land, and would always tell him that he must not depend on bosses and merchants: to be free, he had to be able to produce his own food. Some nights they would go into the woods to hunt venison, giant armadillo, paca and tapir – which still abounded – and he would teach Messias everything he knew about plants and animals. Or they would go fishing with bow and arrow – “that’s right, like Indians” – with a net, with harpoons. By the time Messias started school, he knew a lot about the river, the jungle and the crops.

Urubú is a secluded and isolated zone to which there is no land access; few boats make it there. There was no electricity and the pace of people’s life was – and still is – set by sunlight. Messias was six or seven years old the first time his parents took him to a city, to see a doctor. He was shocked: he had never before seen a paved road, a car, a two-storey house, street lights, those markets full of objects, fruits and vegetables.

At that time Messias also came across that strange creature that his richest neighbours had brought from faraway: a television. Full of wonder, the locals would gather in front of the gadget to watch soccer matches. Each one put in fifty cents to pay for diesel for the generator; the ones who didn’t have any money could also watch through the window, but everyone wanted to stick his nose up against the screen.

It was amazing. Before, it was just radio, radio, and more radio. You could listen but you could not see anything.

Soccer was an important part of his life: every Saturday and Sunday, the whole community would gather around the field for a game, a little bit of music, conversation and some beer. Messias was twelve by then, and he spent the whole time talking to people: he told them that they should produce their own food to keep from depending on cities, that they could grow crops closer to their houses so as not to walk so much. In the Amazon, it is common to use a slash-and-burn system that produces a great deal of CO₂ – contributing to global warming and wearing out the soil. Under this system, each parcel can be used for two years and then must lie fallow for six or seven, so the

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peasants can’t harvest as much as they need. In fact, eighty percent of the food consumed in the “lungs of the Earth” is brought in from elsewhere.

Messias’s neighbours listened to him: in the next election, Messias defeated one of his cousins – on the island everyone is more or less related – and was elected president of the community.

The president is the person who organizes the community and its relations with the authorities. He also looks after the common property, makes sure that every member is contributing, organizes the Saint’s celebration, ensures cleanliness, keeps track of the teachers’ work, mediates between neighbours.

Many preferred to do things right from the get-go rather than withstand the shame of being scolded by a kid like me...

At first, Messias was afraid of not doing a good job or of being ignored; little by little, though, he learned and gained confidence. Times were hard: his father’s boss had fired him for no reason after forty years on the job. Raimundo sued, but meanwhile, money was tight: Messias went to work on other ranches, fished for food, and grew desperate.

When he was eighteen, his girlfriend got pregnant and they had their first child, but Messias did not want to move in with her. By that time, his father had received as severance pay the land where they had always lived, and Messias was able to attend the agro-technical school on the island. That’s where he met the people from the Instituto de Permacultura do Amazonas, based in

Manaos, who wanted to start up a project in the countryside.

Permaculture – or permanent agriculture – is the science of the obvious: observing nature in order to learn how to produce food without destroying it, says Carlos Miller, who, along with Ali Sharif, founded the Instituto in 1997.

It means coming up with systems of sustainable crops where all the components are interrelated and benefit each other, because everything is connected: permaculture is not about the soil, the trees, the rain, the sun, the animals, but the connections between them. We always say that no element performs just one function: they all have several, and you have to know how to combine them. The idea is to create a new equation for wealth in the Amazon in order to preserve the region: wealth that does not mean destruction,

Before the Instituto, Miller had worked in ecological NGOs that, in order to protect certain areas, emptied them out:

I was not comfortable with that: how was it possible that, in order to save a piece of

land, it was necessary to expel the people who lived on it. When I learned about permaculture, I thought it might be a solution. When man plants, he removes everything he finds and plants in the vacuum he has created. The Amazon forest does just the opposite, because it rests on land that has few nutrients, and needs to live off of itself, of its own decomposition. We copy that system, using natural fertilizers and combining plants that help each other grow without destroying the environment.

Messias was excited: he thought that this could be a solution for his people. Miller told him to keep studying to prove to him that his interest was real. When he graduated, in October of 2004, Messias went on to study at the Instituto de Manaus that – in conjunction with the district of Boa Vista – was putting together the Proyecto Casa Familiar Rural on the island of Urubú. The project was run by Genice, a young indigenous woman. In 2006, Ali and Carlos invited Messias to join in.

Now, the project revolves around a large cabin in the middle of a hectare – just one hectare – full of resources: more than one hundred varieties of productive plants: corn, cassava, sugar cane, rice, onion, banana, coffee, pineapple, avocado, chestnut, passion

fruit, guava, açai palm and many others. There is also a greenhouse to grow more plants; chicken and quail coops for eggs and fertilizer; a system to gather and filter rain water; solar energy panels; a compost-producing toilet. In a pond fish are bred, and there will soon be a pigsty whose detritus will be turned into methane gas. The project has to be self-sustaining and, above all, it has to serve as a model to further community development by showing the neighbours that they can survive without wasting so much energy and time, and so many natural resources.

It's not easy, because of their culture: burning, planting and fishing. When you tell them that they can produce without burning, without destroying nature, some tell you you're crazy or ignorant, says Messias, sitting at the entrance to the hut where he has always lived.

One of the problems, he says, is that the communities in the area are too used to public assistance. A few months ago, for instance, the project built and furnished a chicken coop in a nearby community. Shortly after finishing, the neighbours sold the chickens and asked them to buy them more.



They are very dependent. If no one is pushing them, they spend the whole day gazing up at the sky, passing the time. I try to tell them that they have to do things on their own, for themselves, but it's still me saying it. Anyway, that's our role here: showing them that it's not necessary to burn to raze the woods or to fish with nets. Some of them understand and put it into practice. Fewer people burn the woods, more people fish more carefully. They have banned fishing in certain lakes. People have started planting gardens and fruit trees, and beekeeping. We want this region of the Urubú River to be an example for other communities, so that they can see how our lives improve and how they can apply and spread these practices in their areas.

Messias is still very enthusiastic but he knows that many are opposed to the model: the ranchers, because they want more land for cattle; the merchants, because if the peasants produce their own food, they won't buy it from them. Messias looks to the government for help and tries to explain to his countrymen that if they don't preserve nature they will lose everything. He tells them that preserving nature is their duty as Amazonians, because the degeneration of the forest has consequences for everyone.

We all see now that in many African countries there are terrible droughts and hunger, so I explain that that's because past generations did not think about today's generations: they forgot that their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were going to need nature, and they kept destroying the forests, and that's why things are the way they are now. Besides, the world needs the pure air we have here to breathe, so I tell them we have to take care of it. It's not just us, the whole world needs the Amazon.

But when someone is hungry and thinks that by burning he will get food, he doesn't usually worry about whether people in China or Italy will be able to breathe.

Well, before people didn't worry about it. They used to think, if I have something, what do I care about people who don't? But now there is a different vision in our region, because people here know that a lot of the work we're doing locally depends on money from other countries. So I tell them if others help us, we have to help them. We must stop thinking about ourselves all the time and understand that when we burn land a lot of carbon goes up into the atmosphere and ruins it. That's why the climate keeps getting stranger, and if it keeps going like this where will we end up?

Messias makes a living from his crops, his 470 beehives and his salary at the project. He still plays soccer every weekend and hates cities:

I can't stand the noise, the stress. I am calm here and I breathe good air. If I want to eat, I go fishing. I don't have to lock my door, I'm not afraid of being robbed. I only go to the city to learn things that I can bring back here, to my people.

In the meantime, he has had another son with the same woman, "his friend." Most women in the region give birth to many

children, because no one ever talked to them about family planning:

It's a vicious cycle. To feed so many children with this slash-and-burn system, there is more deforestation, more destruction of nature. So the land stops producing food and, when these kids grow up, they will have nothing to eat. Family planning is very important to preserving nature.

Messias has recently been asked to run for councilman on the ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores ticket, and he doesn't know what to do. His politics are social, not partisan, he says, and he wants to keep it that way because party politics are full of dirty money, secret deals, pressure and corruption... But if he really wants to change things he might have to join a party, he says, and, for the first time in many years, he doesn't know what to do next.

FORESTS

THREATENED HOME TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Between 2000 and 2005, the global annual loss of forest area was over 7 million hectares, or 0.18% of global forest area.¹ Globally, deforestation affects over one billion people, of which a majority live in developing countries.²

Rainforests in particular produce oxygen and store carbon, which mitigates the impact of carbon emissions on climate change.³ Unfortunately, rainforests are also under threat from deforestation. In Amazonia, deforestation is projected to reduce precipitation, as about half of the precipitation is generated by the rainforest itself, through evapotranspiration from trees. The loss of precipitation risks being as high as 20%, leading to future dry periods, higher surface temperatures and change in forest structure.⁴

Deforestation is a contributing factor to climate change, and climate change in turn risk accelerating deforestation. While there are many efforts in place to halt the immediate loss of forests as a result of deforestation, the long-term effects of climate change on forest areas are becoming increasingly harder to avoid. As the global temperature warms up, forested ecosystems risk being displaced, as warmer temperatures will move climatic zones suitable for temperate and boreal plants. Evidence suggests that plant migration previously has taken place at a pace of 20-200 kilometres per century. Currently, the northward migration of climatic zones suitable for temperate and boreal plants risk being as much as 200-1,200 kilometres by the year 2100, meaning that plants risk lagging behind.⁵

Such changes have occurred all throughout the history of the Earth, but with global warming the speed dramatically increases, not allowing the soil and ecosystems to adapt the way they have historically.⁶ In the eastern regions of Amazonia, increased temperature will most likely by the middle of the 21st century induce a decrease in soil water, which in turn will lead to tropical forest being gradually transformed into savannah.⁷ For developing countries, mitigating the effects of climate change on deforested areas is greatly challenging, due to poverty and institutional constraints. In many countries, public, private and non-governmental actors find themselves lacking adequate resources to tackle the challenges, risking a continuing spiral of negative effects that will be even harder to counteract. Mechanisms that could provide financial incentives for alternatives to the clearing of forests are rarely in place.

Further to ecological shifts, deforestation and climate change also directly impact Indigenous Peoples, who inhabit rainforests all over the world. Indigenous Peoples face challenges not only in terms of effects such as extreme weather threatening crops and traditional lands, but also of political influence, as their forests gradually become more politicized through efforts to curb deforestation and climate change.

While the rights of Indigenous Peoples are increasingly recognized, most notably through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

Peoples, adopted in 2007, Indigenous Peoples are often ignored or systematically marginalized in decision-making related to their homeland forests.⁸ Exclusion of Indigenous Peoples stem from both government institutions and programmes, as well as from the private sector, and risks leading to loss of traditional knowledge about forests.

Children and young people are particularly affected by deforestation, in short and long term. Deforestation and other unsustainable uses of forests increase the number of poor people, and the number of people who will face poverty in the future. This directly affects young people's choices; one example is threats to school enrolment.⁹ As effects of climate change increase in strength, young Indigenous People living in rainforests will have to manage the response to tomorrow's challenges. In order to do be able to do this, they must be capacitated to be fully involved in work already being carried out. Hence, efforts to curb climate change and its effect on rainforests must include strategies to increase education enrolment and improve the livelihoods of young people.