

Toxic promises

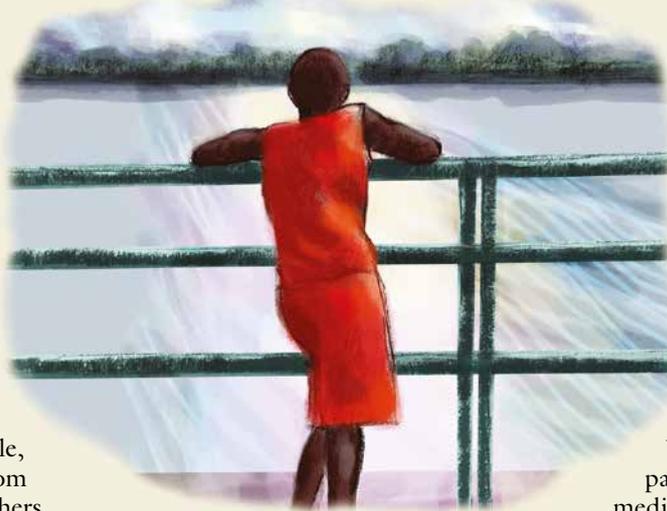
Why does 'accelerated development' spell disaster in the Brazilian Amazon? DAN BARON COHEN begins his column from the Afro-indigenous community of Cabalo Seco.

I descend the steps of

Cabelo Seco's House of Rivers cultural centre, leaving the AfroRoots pulse of its youth community drummers behind me, and cross the cracked street. I step over scattered beer cans and uncollected waste from the night before, on to the chipped kerb of the waterfront and lean across the rusted railings. Tucunaré Island is barely visible, 200 metres away. Acrid fog from weeks of burning forests smothers this southeastern region of Pará State, choking Marabá City and crowding its hospitals with asthmatic children and babies. It hasn't rained in five months.

Zequinha, village songwriter and fisher, joins me. 'This ash is as much from the fires in California and Australia, carried by the wind, as it is from here,' he reflects. He shakes his head at the parched riverbed. 'Our rivers in the sky have dried up. Now we suffer the effects on the other side of the world.' The meeting of two rivers, the mighty Tocantins and the sinewy Itacaiúnas, has sharpened into a stony arrowhead that points to the River Araguaia and its arid plain on the near horizon. 'We'll soon be able to walk across the Tocantins!'

Forests of *castanheira* and *sumaiúma* trees that once sheltered Zequinha's grandparents in their resistance *quilombo** on that plain were felled for 'electricity for all'. Like all Amazonian riverside communities, Cabelo Seco's Afro-indigenous fisherfolk and 'washerwomen' were not consulted before the federal government's Accelerated Development Project bulldozed their allotments that stretched down to the river to build the waterfront. No politician consulted scientists from the Federal University's



alternative energy project in the capital, Belém, to allow the city to assess scientifically the impacts of the planned Marabá Hydroelectric Dam. But everyone knows what will happen if the dam is built to power the mining of the world's largest iron reserves, beneath their homes. They read the toxic effects of the Tucuruí Dam 40 kilometres away in rashes on their skin, their children going blind, the swarms of dengue mosquitos, their empty fishing nets. They know that when the Tocantins becomes a river-highway in an industrial grid of other river-highways and dams, river-sources will dry up and the result will be ecocide.

Zequinha laughs. We know the fisherfolk will not speak out. Centuries of genocide, slavery and the memory of hooded activists suspended upside down over Tucunaré Island by the former military dictatorship, silence them.

We watch an old woman in a dull-grey dress standing on the arrowhead, staring at where the sunset should be. A van passes, its loudspeakers reminding Cabelo Seco that 'the historic meeting' at 8pm in Praça São Felix is about to start. The Minister of Development will hand a cheque for 66 million Reais (\$20 million) to the Mayor of Marabá. The woman steps barefoot between staring suffocated fish, rusting technology and plastic bottles, examining each object with

her stick. I walk towards the meeting, the drums still pulsing within me.

The waterfront is filled with adolescent girls and boys accompanying well-dressed men, and hooded youths buying and selling crack. This trafficking first appeared with the soft-coup in August 2016, the orchestrated impeachment of Dilma Rousseff of the

Workers' Party by the corrupt parliament, judiciary and private media. It is recorded in the anti-austerity graffiti sprayed on to broken cement benches and boarded-up bars. I weave my way between the dozens of parked black official cars and ranchers' Land Rovers that face freshly painted green railings. I pause between the two worlds. Iron scaffolding supports a huge stage with banks of seats upon it, garlanded by political banners. Politicians and entrepreneurs from nearby towns sit on it, listening to the Minister. He is young and charismatic. Following the conviction of Lula, the Workers' Party former president, he is well placed as a presidential candidate in the 2018 elections.

The Minister thanks god for the opportunity to serve Marabá. He praises President Temer's vision, crowning an anti-corruption strategy and financial crisis with this 'New Phase of Revitalization'. Then he invites the Mayor, Marabá's media mogul and owner of its new shopping mall to receive the 'largest public investment in the history of Brazil'. They pose before assembled journalists.

Dollar bills change hands in the thriving night economy behind me. The drums of Cabelo Seco can be heard between the camera flashes.

And I realize. There is no audience. ■

Dan Baron Cohen is an eco-cultural activist who lives in Marabá and has been working in the Amazon since 1999.

*A settlement founded by people of African origin, often escaped slaves.