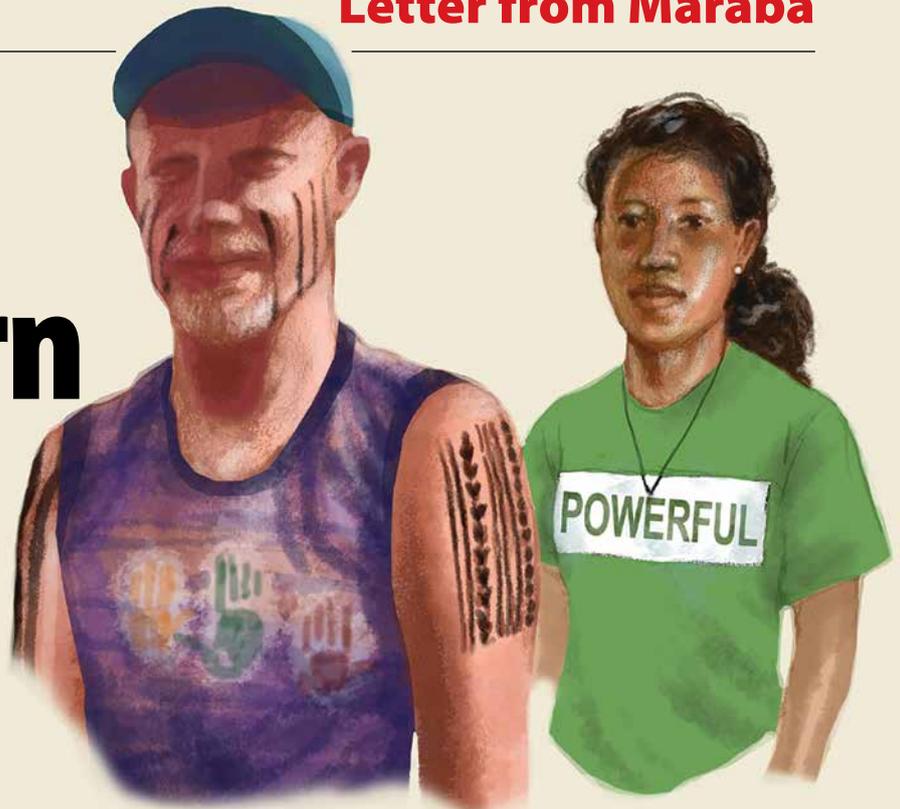


Our time will return

The lines painted on his skin lead to the heartlands of identity, discovers DAN BARON COHEN.



I cycle towards our little cottage

in Cabelo Seco community, glad to be home. The 10 hours of driving 20 kilometres of collapsed highway through huge craters of rainwater on the Trans-Amazonian Express back to Marabá City have left me aching and exhausted. But the visit to the Kayapó territory has also provided vivid images of indigenous Amazonia, not just vulnerable, but wise and resilient.

As I dismount my blue bike, Samila emerges from the community's House of Rivers cultural centre, drumsticks in hand. A throng of teenage girls follows her into the narrow street, afro-contemporary dance still animating their bodies. 'Which indigenous people did you visit, Dan?' Samila asks. 'Yours,' I smile. 'Amazing dancers! Do you know how old they are?' Samila shrugs. 'I know the women only speak Já, the oldest language in this region.'

Twelve girls gather round me to study the paintings on my arms and face. Day of the Indian is not celebrated here in Cabelo Seco. Too much unresolved history. But the girls know that they are looking at clues to their identity, beneath African roots they now proudly claim. Their black pupils accompany their forefingers as they decipher the symbols on my arms. 'A fish, darting through the water,' speculates Kaline. 'Or *mandioca* root,' says Bianca. 'Or the path down to the river!' says Aline. They play with the hair on my arms. 'Dan wears his own coat,' giggles Raíssa, 'even in this heat!' And they disperse, laughing.

Samila sits beside me. She has heard her teenage mother (whom she does not know) was Kayapó and met her

father, a descendant of the *quilombo* of African resistance, on Tucunaré Island during the *mandioca* festival. At just 16 she is already an accomplished percussionist and displays a quiet leadership that is transforming how Cabelo Seco sees its indigenous past. Dona Ana-Luisa approaches. She caresses the painting on my cheek, similar to markings fading on her forearms. 'My white indigenous brother! Wait till my grandchildren see you!' She laughs, a generous, full-throated celebration of her Kayapó identity, reaffirmed as an indigenous health-worker, and sits beside us.

'Ana, are you speaking at the meeting in the university tonight?' I ask. All social movements in Brazil have formed a 'Popular Front' to resist the civilian dictatorship, which plans to repeal indigenous territories reclaimed since 1988. Ana leans closer, whispering: 'You must have seen the rashes on their skin. Babies without limbs. And the Kayapó live far from the iron mines. We have to take this Government to the UN Court of Human Rights.' She stands. 'I'll see you there.'

Drawn by the sunset, Samila and I walk to the railings beside the River Tocantins and look out towards Tucunaré Island. 'The river remembers everything,' Samila reflects, her gaze fixed on its flowing centre. The sky is ablaze, dramatically painting her features with bold strokes of blood red and burnt orange. Unlike the dancers, she is not lithe. Her shoulders and

hips display the strength of the slaves whose tightly coiled dry hair gave Cabelo Seco its name. But Samila's hair is jet-black, straight and silky, like her indigenous mother. She taps an African rhythm on the railings, lightly, with her drumsticks.

'The river dropped ten metres, yesterday,' Samila notes, studying the current. 'How does it change from drought to flood to drought in days?' Rustling leaves warn of an impending tempest. Suddenly, we're overpowered by the stench of decaying waste from the open sewers. Samila intones a phrase from the community poem printed on the t-shirt stretched across her broad back: *Learn from me, my kin, the toxic cost of saying 'yes', when thinking 'no'*.

A whiplash of lightning rips the twilight sky in two and thunder explodes right above us. Heavy droplets. Samila sniffs the air. 'It won't rain.' She turns toward me. 'No-one here will protest. Openly.' A silence. 'When we learnt Portuguese in school, no-one explained where the language in our mouth comes from. No-one told us we live in the Amazon. Today, we're proud of our African roots. Tomorrow, we'll speak our indigenous tongue. We may not graduate primary school. But we know how to read the river. And we know our time will return.' ■

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