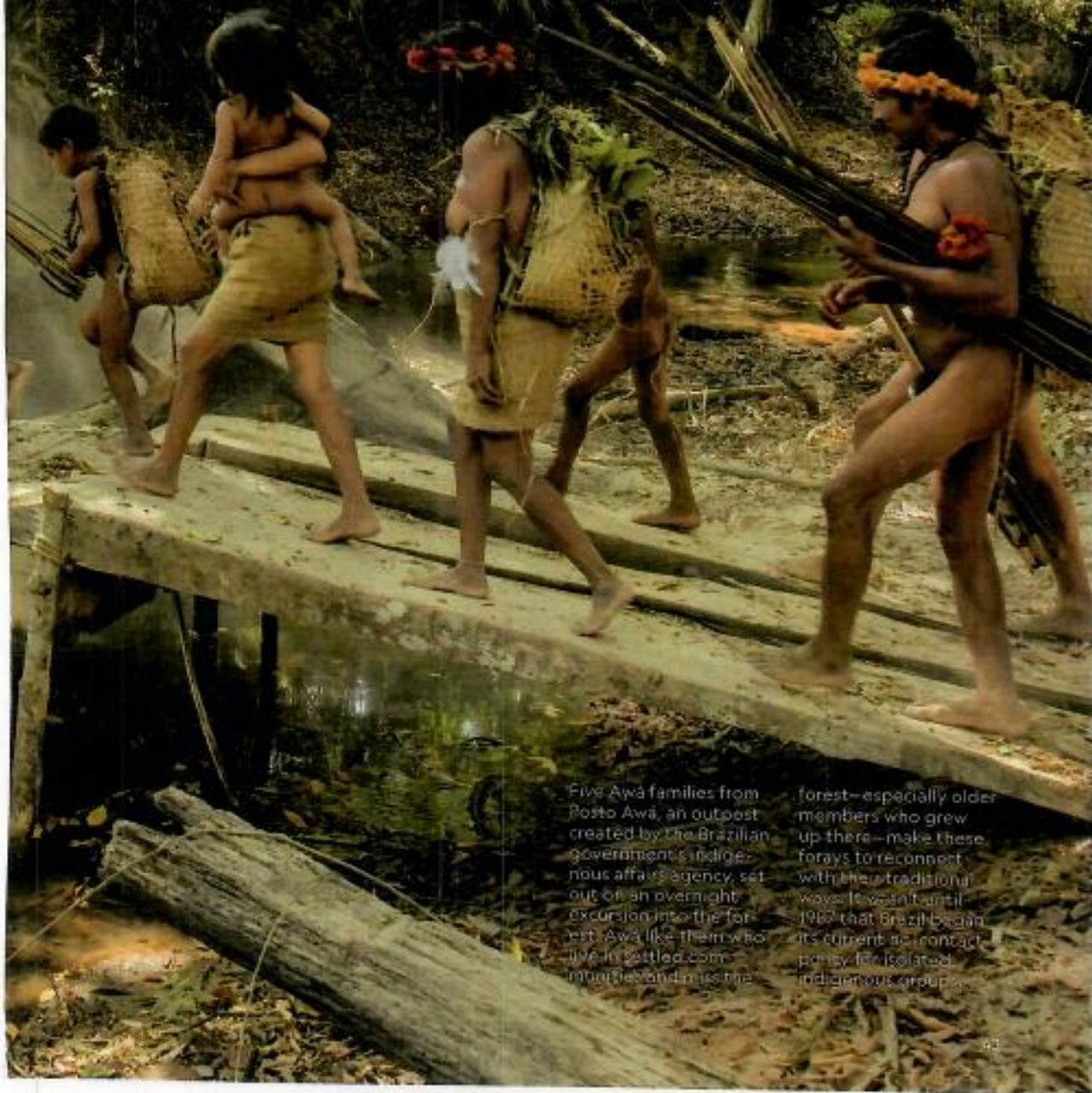


Threatened by the Outside World

IN THE AMAZON FORESTS OF BRAZIL AND PERU,
MINERS, RANCHERS, AND ILLEGAL LOGGERS ARE INVADING
THE HOMELANDS OF THE LAST ISOLATED PEOPLES.

STORIES BY SCOTT WALLACE AND CHRIS FAGAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE HAMILTON JAMES



Five Awa families from Posto Awa, an outpost created by the Brazilian government's indigenous affairs agency, set out on an overnight excursion into the forest. Awa like them who live in settled communities and use the

forest—especially older members who grew up there—make these forays to reconnect with their traditional ways. It wasn't until 1987 that Brazil began its current no-contact policy for isolated indigenous groups.

BRAZIL

The tread marks in the blood-red earth are deep—and fresh. Tainaky Tenetehar climbs off his dirt bike for a closer look.

"From this morning," he says, with the conviction of a veteran tracker attuned to any sign of human movement in these lawless borderlands.

Through binoculars, he scans the rolling hills of fire-scorched savanna that lead out to a tree-crowned ridge in the distance. Here, on one of Brazil's most hotly contested frontiers—where denuded scrubland pushes up against old-growth forest and private homesteads breach the boundaries of Indian land—the tire tracks bear a singular, ominous meaning.

"Loggers," Tainaky says. The enemy.

Tainaky, who also goes by his Portuguese name, Laércio Souza Silva Guajajara, turns to his companions, four other Guajajara tribesmen, as they dismount road-beaten motorbikes. The patrol forms a motley crew: patched jeans and camouflage and aviator shades and bandannas to shield their faces from the ubiquitous dry-season dust. Bearing an equally modest array of weapons—a single-shot hunting rifle, a homemade pistol, a few machetes dangling from cinched waistbands—they call to mind a strange, cross-genre film. Think *Mad Max* meets *The Last of the Mohicans*.

"Shall we go after them?" Tainaky asks.

Going after illegal loggers here has become the hallmark of patrols like this. They've set logging trucks ablaze, seized weapons and chain saws, and sent irate loggers packing. Patrol leaders, the 33-year-old Tainaky among them, have received multiple death threats. Some patrolmen use fake



A fire set by settled Awá clears manioc fields outside the government post of Juriti. They practice a mix of farming, fishing, hunting, and foraging, whereas isolated nomadic Awá live mainly by foraging and hunting.

PREVIOUS PHOTO

At Posto Awá, villagers enjoy a morning bath. The red- and yellow-footed tortoises they're holding will probably eventually be eaten.



names to mask their identities. Three were murdered in one month's time in 2016.

They belong to a hundred-member, home-grown force of indigenous volunteers who call themselves the Forest Guardians. This group and others like it have sprouted up in recent years to meet a rising tide of illegal logging that is decimating protected woodlands in the eastern Amazonian state of Maranhão, including the 1,600-square-mile Arariboia Indigenous Land. Along with the forests, the wild game that has sustained the Guajajara's hunting culture for generations is vanishing. The lakes that give birth to their rivers and streams are drying up because of deforestation. Fish and birds are dying off.

The stakes are certainly high for the Guajajara, but they've adopted effective survival strategies since their first bloody contacts with

outsiders centuries ago. Most of them know the ways of the outside world; many have lived in it. Far more dire is the plight of another tribe, with which they share the Arariboia reserve: the Awá. Several bands of Awá nomads—the easternmost isolated, or “uncontacted,” people in the Amazon—roam the woodlands in the core of the territory, living in a state of near-constant flight from the whine of winches and chain saws and, in the dry season, the smoke of wildfires.

Confined to a shrinking forest core, the Awá are especially vulnerable. But even in the still largely untouched expanses of rain forest straddling Brazil's western border with Peru, isolated groups must live on the run to escape the depredations of illegal logging, gold prospecting, and now drug trafficking. (See “Peru,” by Chris Fagan, page 66.) All across the Amazon Basin, in fact, threats to

the security of the estimated 50 to 100 isolated and uncontacted tribes—perhaps some 5,000 people in all—are rising. These groups represent most of the world's remaining isolated tribes. The only so-called uncontacted tribes known to exist today outside the Amazon are in Paraguay's Chaco scrub forest, on the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean, and in western New Guinea, Indonesia. The numbers may seem small, but indigenous-rights advocates say there is something much larger at stake: the preservation of the last vestiges of a way of life that has all but disappeared from the planet, one that has survived apart from our industrial economy.

"When an ethnicity or a human group disappears...the loss is immense," indigenous-rights activist Sydney Possuelo says. "The face of humanity is left more homogenous, and humanity itself more impoverished."

THE INTERACTION OF THE AWÁ (also called the Guajá or Awá-Guajá) with the outside world has been defined largely by violence against them. Today perhaps a hundred of the roughly 600 Awá still carry on nomadic lives in the forest. The rest, who have come into contact with modernity in recent decades, are settled in villages in three of four protected indigenous territories, strung out in a contiguous corridor along Maranhão's western frontier. The presence of the Awá has helped spur legal protection for nearly 4,800 square miles of seasonally dry woodlands that form a critical buffer for the rain forests to the west.

Although isolated groups of Awá are present in three of the four reserves, only in Arariboia are all the Awá—some 60 to 80 of them—essentially uncontacted, keeping to themselves in the core of the reserve. They still hunt with bows and arrows, still gather wild honey and babassu nuts, and still rely almost entirely on the bounty of the primal forest and its sources of water. No settled Awá live around them who might serve as intermediaries in the event of an encounter with outsiders.

Nestled in the hills and plains ringing the reserve's heartland are dozens of towns and hamlets where some 5,300 Guajajara live. And beyond the boundaries of the reserve, in a kind of third concentric ring, are five major municipalities where timber remains the primary economic driver. With 75 percent of Maranhão's original forest cover already lost, most of the valuable timber stands left are in Arariboia, the three

other indigenous lands where Awá live (Alto Turiaçu, Caru, and Awá), and an adjacent biological reserve. Timber extraction is banned in these areas, making nearly the entire logging business in the state a de facto criminal enterprise.

But that doesn't deter poachers, who undermine enforcement efforts with lookouts and phony documents. Logging trucks, often without plates, ply back roads unpatrolled by police, delivering their payloads to secret sawmills beyond Indian lands. This network has made the Awá's existence so precarious that the tribal peoples' rights group Survival International called the Awá "Earth's most threatened tribe" in launching a global campaign on their behalf in 2012.

In Maranhão the Guajajara have made common cause with *os isolados*—"the isolated ones"—believing their own survival to be inextricably bound to that of their Awá neighbors. "The struggle to save the Awá and the forest is one and the same," says Sônia Guajajara, the former executive director of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, which seeks to give a voice to the country's more than 300 indigenous groups. She's also a candidate for national office in this year's elections.

As Tainaky's Forest Guardians huddle to decide on their next move, a helmeted figure emerges from a nearby farmhouse, kick-starts a dirt bike, and zooms past at full throttle, his face shrouded by a polarized visor.

"*Olheiro!*" the men shout. Spy!

Besides intimidation by the loggers, the Guardians also must contend with a network of infiltrators among their own people. Informants keep an eye out for the patrols and rush to relay intelligence to their paymasters, who in turn alert logging crews in the field via two-way radio.

"We've got to get out of here!" Tainaky commands, watching the bike recede in a cloud of dust. "He's going to inform on us!"

The element of surprise is crucial to the success of a mission; the Guardians must catch the loggers unawares, lest they end up driving into an ambush. Even federal agents have come under attack from well-armed loggers in the backwoods. In an instant the hunters can become the hunted.

"Who's going to fight for the isolated ones, if not us?" Tainaky told me in his kitchen the night before the patrol. He unfurled a map of the Arariboia territory and traced a finger around its edges. "The loggers are entering all around

the perimeter of the indigenous land," he said. Then he stabbed at the middle of the map. "Their intention is to reach the center—where the isolados are. They have no choice but to flee when the loggers come."

The government agency responsible for indigenous affairs is Fundação Nacional do Índio, or FUNAI. The agency's Department of Isolated and Recently Contacted Indians has placed Arari-boia at the top of a list of Amazonian flash points, where tribes are at greatest risk of imminent contact. But severe cuts to FUNAI's budget have made it all the more challenging to safeguard isolated tribes such as the Awá from the inexorable pressures of a resource-hungry global economy. Since the impeachment of then president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, pro-business politicians in congress have pushed through measures to roll back protections of indigenous lands across the Amazon. In the process, veteran FUNAI agents have been laid off and field posts shuttered, heightening the dangers for Brazil's tribal communities and isolated indigenous communities.

Pleas for help by the Guajajara have produced occasional government raids on clandestine sawmills in the surrounding towns, as well as sporadic police forays into the bush to clear out loggers. But mostly the Guardians have been abandoned to their fate, left either to watch the logging trucks haul off their patrimony or to obstruct the lumberjacks however they can.

EVERY HOUR OF EVERY DAY, freight trains brimming with iron ore thunder past the Awá settlements at Tiracambu and Posto Awá on the southeastern edge of the 670-square-mile Caru Indigenous Land. They're on a 550-mile journey from the world's largest open-pit iron ore mine to the Atlantic port of São Luís, the capital of Maranhão. Once there, the ore—162 million tons in 2017—is loaded aboard seagoing ships bound mainly for China.

The extraction of ore from the Carajás mine and its delivery to steel mills on the far side of the planet represent a triumph of technology and a capital investment worth billions of dollars. It also makes for a jarring juxtaposition—this potent symbol of global commerce passing within earshot of a people who still hunt much of their food with bow and arrow and where some of their tribe, perhaps a dozen people, still wander the jungles of the Caru reserve as isolated nomads.

The railroad's construction in the late 1970s

and early 1980s disrupted scores of indigenous communities and split the Awá's once sprawling territory in two. Settlers and land speculators flooded in. Cattle ranches, factories, and even entire cities would grow up around the Awá, who soon found themselves fenced out of the land they'd roamed for generations.

"The first sign of the *karai* was the barbed wire," said Takamãtxia, using the Awá word for white man or outsider. I was sitting amid dozens of Awá with Marco Lima, my guide and driver, in an open-air pavilion in Posto Awá, which FUNAI established in 1980 as a refuge for the tribe.

"We were frightened by gunshots," Takamãtxia continued, as a young man named Tatuxa'a translated into Portuguese. "We'd never heard that sound before." That was the day outsiders stalked his family through the woods with an unleashed dog. His grandfather was mauled to death, he said. "He couldn't run fast enough."

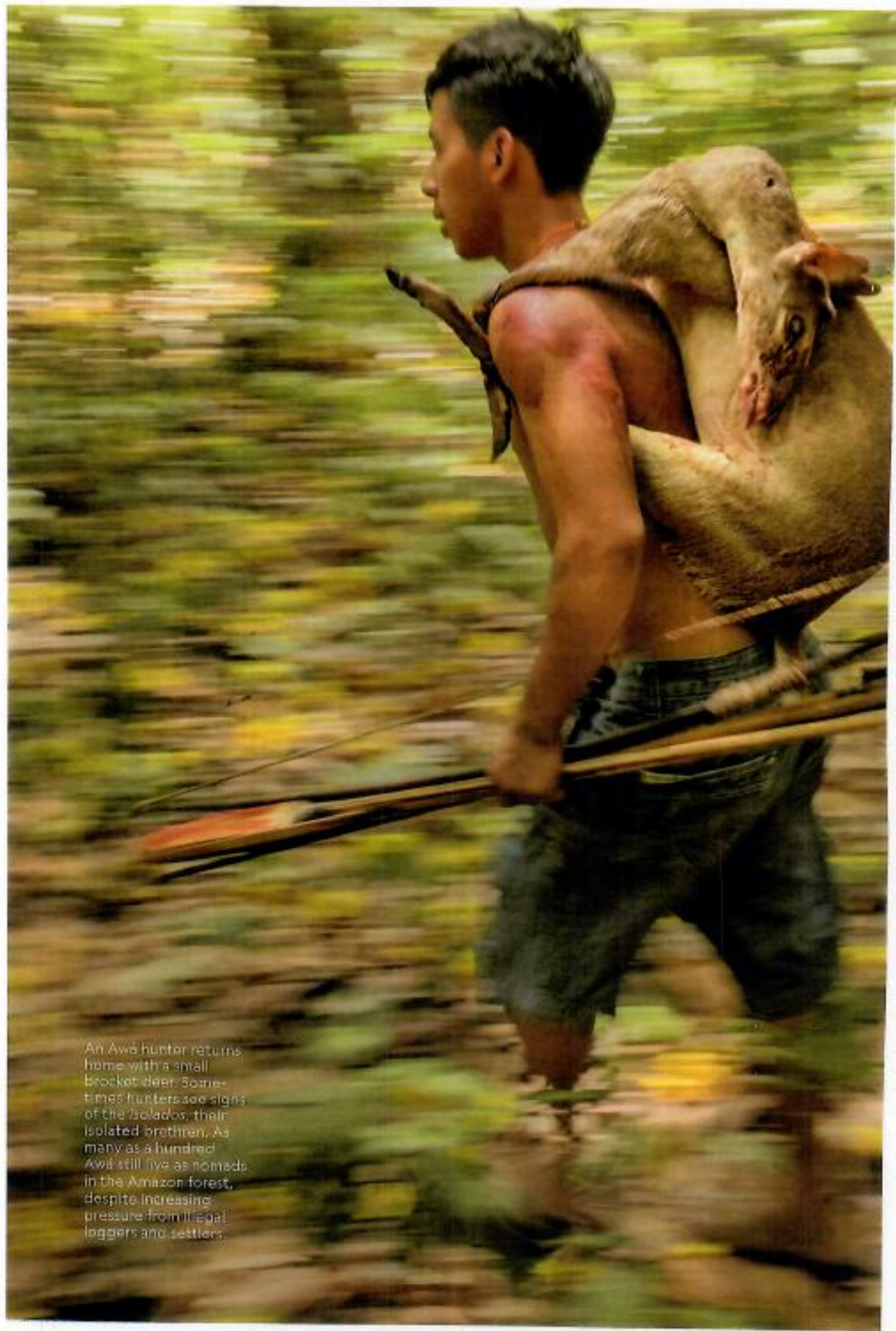
They all told remarkably similar tales: their panicked escape from intruders, their eventual rescue by FUNAI, the fatal epidemics of flu and measles that swept through in the wake of contact.

The group scattered in all directions. Some retreated to the north. Others went south, including a number of his relatives. He never saw them again.

"Could it be that my uncle is still out in the forest?" He paused. "I think so."

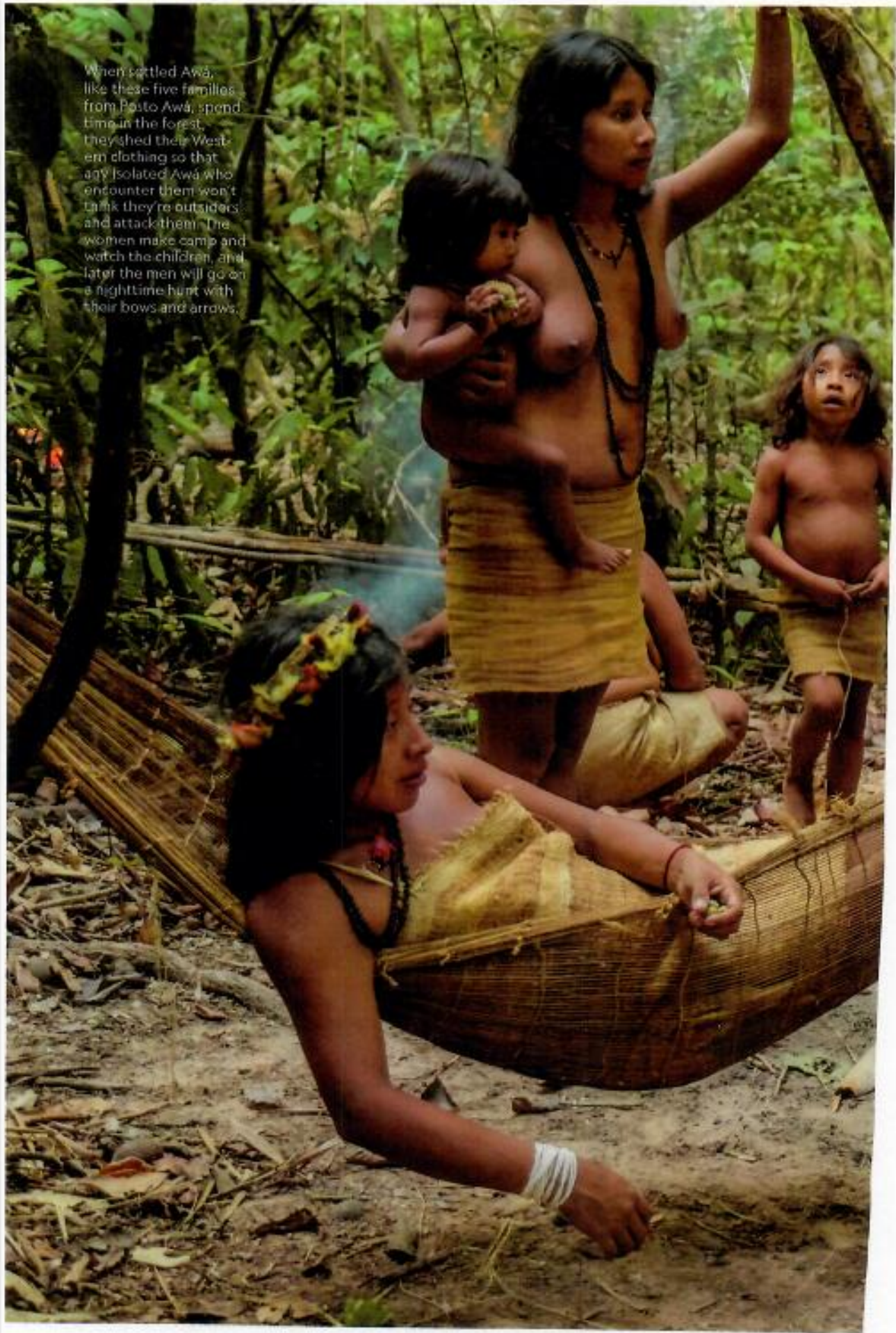
As more elders leaped to their feet, the entire pavilion erupted in chatter, and Tatuxa'a struggled to keep up. They all told remarkably similar tales: their panicked escape from intruders, their eventual rescue by FUNAI, the fatal epidemics of flu and measles that swept through the outpost in the wake of contact.

At the time FUNAI still embraced the mission of contacting tribes and settling them in outposts to make way for development. It wasn't until 1987 that FUNAI adopted its current no-contact policy, informed in part by the tragedy that befell the Awá. It was and still is a



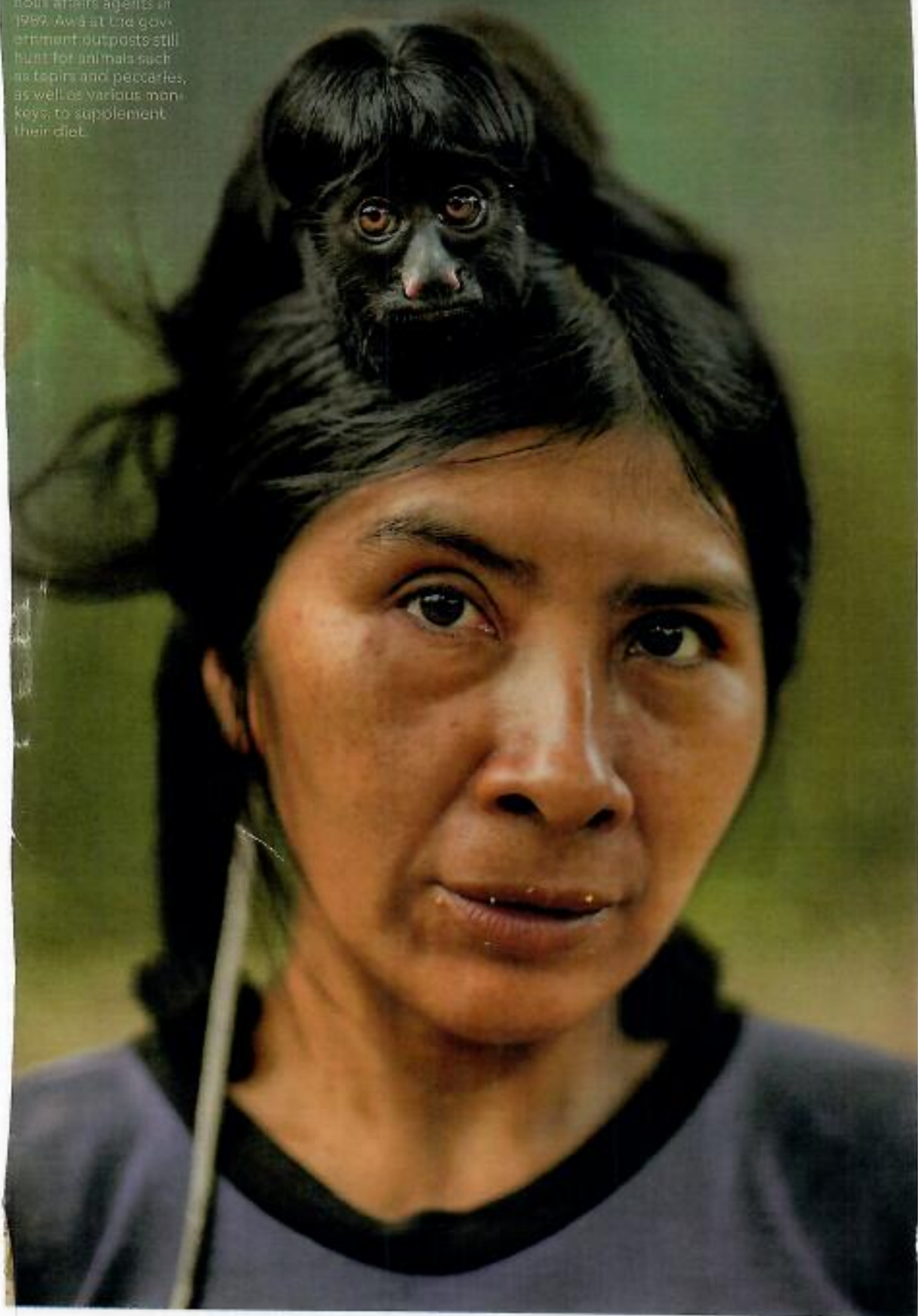
An Awa hunter returns home with a small brocket deer. Sometimes hunters see signs of the Isolados, their isolated brethren. As many as a hundred Awa still live as nomads in the Amazon forest, despite increasing pressure from illegal loggers and settlers.

When settled Awá, like these five families from Posto Awá, spend time in the forest, they shed their Western clothing so that any isolated Awá who encounter them won't think they're outsiders and attack them. The women make camp and watch the children, and later the men will go on a nighttime hunt with their bows and arrows.

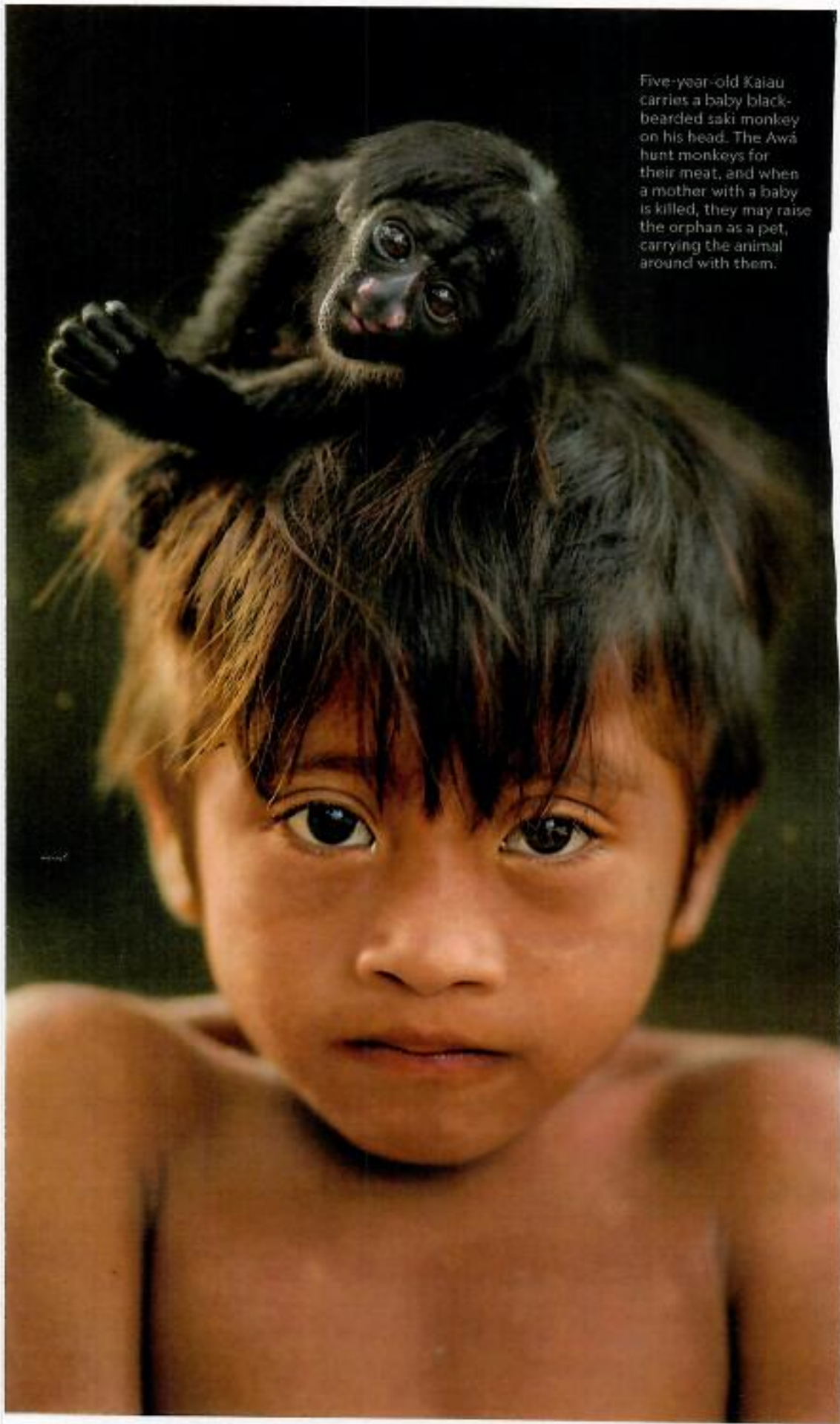




Ayrua, 39, with her pet black-boarded saki, was contacted by indigenous affairs agents in 1999. As at the government outposts still hunt for animals such as tapirs and peccaries, as well as various monkeys, to supplement their diet.



Five-year-old Kaiju carries a baby black-bearded saki monkey on his head. The Awa hunt monkeys for their meat, and when a mother with a baby is killed, they may raise the orphan as a pet, carrying the animal around with them.



A Ka'apor capuchin
crowns Ximirapá,
47, who left the
settlement at Posto
Awá in the 1990s
for another at
Tiracambu, drawn
by the prospect
of better hunting
and less crowded
living conditions.



An Awá woman cleans and butchers an armadillo in the village of Posto Awá. Today most Awá live in settled communities near government outposts where they have greater access to manufactured goods such as metal tools, guns, medicine, and even smartphones.

NEXT PHOTO

Members of the Guajajara tribe serve as volunteer Forest Guardians. The homegrown force is dedicated to protecting the Arariboia Indigenous Land from incessant invasions by illegal loggers—and to safeguarding several isolated Awá families who still roam the reserve.



landmark policy recognizing the rights of tribal people to pursue their traditional ways of life, free from persecution by outsiders. (Contact teams are very occasionally dispatched if an isolated indigenous group is in imminent peril.)

That evening, Tatuxa'a led me from the pavilion toward the edge of the village. Under a low-hanging silver sliver of moon, a sacred ceremony to commune with the Awá's ancestors was about to begin. The pungent scent of wood smoke hung in the air. Dogs yapped. From the distance came the clatter of the Carajás train.

In the shadows of a porch, women pasted tufts of harpy eagle and king vulture feathers to the heads, limbs, and chests of a half dozen otherwise naked men, all of them village elders. The patterns of the white feathers seemed to throb in the darkness, giving the men a spectral,

otherworldly appearance.

"They wear the feathers so the *karawara* will recognize them as real people—as Awá," Tatuxa'a explained, referring to the ancestors who watch over the forest and protect the earth-bound Awá. "Otherwise they might mistake them for white men and kill them."

Amid eerie, ululating chants, the men danced around an enclosed hut as if in a trance. One by one, they entered and exited the hut, stamping their feet as if to launch themselves into the spirit world overhead. Still dancing and singing, they returned to their women and children, cupping their mouths to blow blessings on their loved ones from the spirits they'd just encountered on their journey to the heavens.

"The ceremony takes us back to the time when we all lived in the forest," Tatuxa'a said. "It helps



us keep our culture alive and protect our land.”

It wasn't clear whether he, a literate, bilingual young man, believed in the spirit world. But as I watched this spectacle beneath the star-studded sky—amid the reverberating, high-pitched walls, the naked men dipping and bending as if possessed by unseen powers—I couldn't escape the sense that an ancient and irreplaceable way of life hung in the balance.

As I traveled through Awá territories, I perceived widespread fear that the government institutions created to protect Brazil's tribes also were in danger of disintegrating—a fear that the Awá could be cast adrift in a largely hostile world.

An hour down the road in the village of Tiracambu, all of its 85 people turned out to welcome us, singing and dancing as they came. A young man named Xiperendjia asked me to sit. “The

government doesn't like Indians,” he said. “We're afraid they're going to give away our land.”

People gathered in a circle three-deep to listen. “The loggers have burned our forests,” Xiperendjia continued. “All the animals—tortoises, monkeys, peccaries—are dying off. Our fruits have all burned. We need help.”

I said I had come to hear their concerns and share them with readers far and wide. Marco Lima grabbed my pen and held it aloft. “You see this pen?” he shouted for all to hear. “This is Scott's weapon. With this he will tell the world about the Awá!”

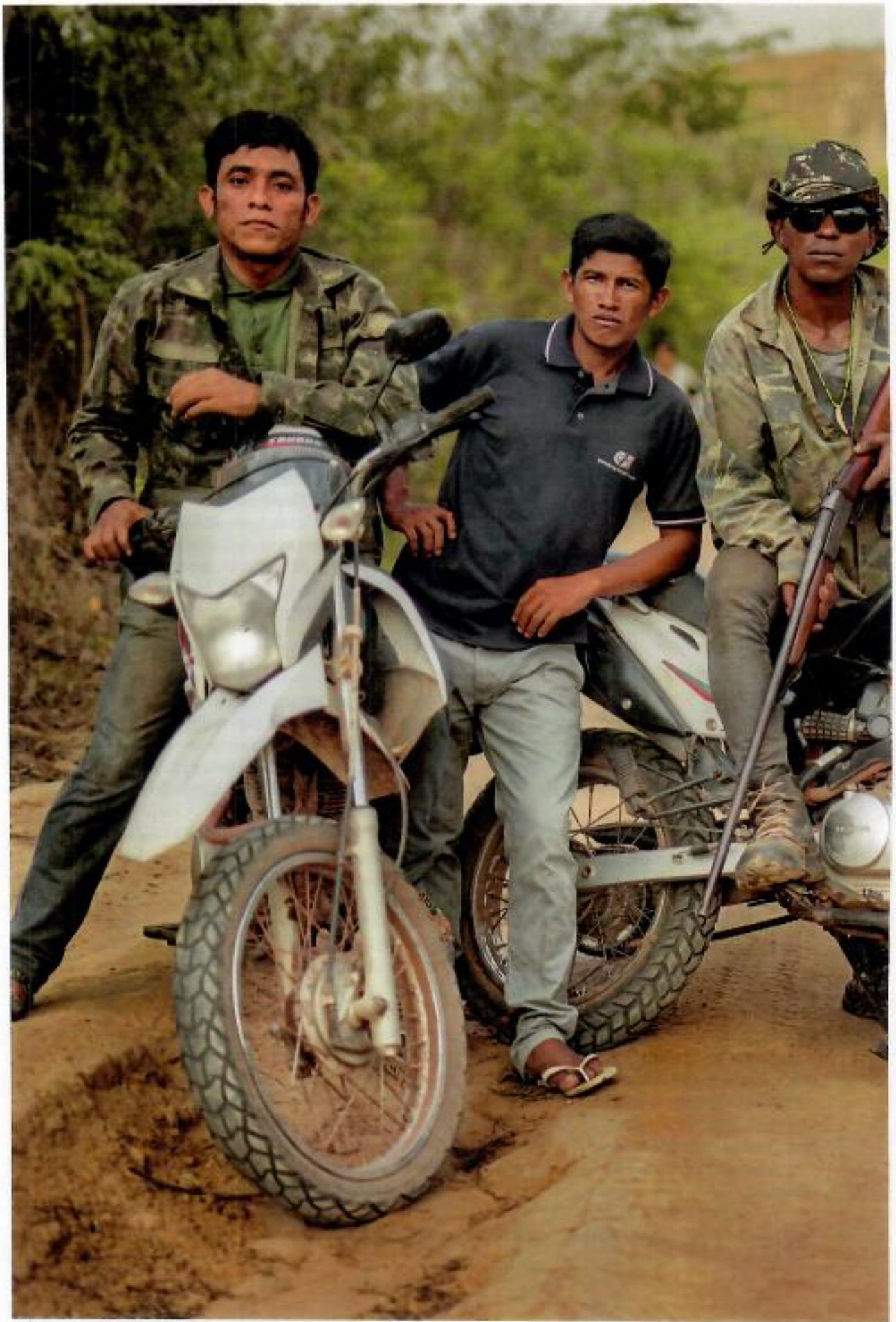
“Do you want to see the Awá's weapons?” Xiperendjia replied. He barked a command to the crowd. People vanished into their huts. Moments later they returned—men and women alike—brandishing long bows and clutches of arrows with fire-hardened bamboo points. “See?” Xiperendjia said. “These are *our* weapons.”

Many FUNAI officials agree with the Awá: The government seems to be deliberately starving the agency of funds. “FUNAI doesn't have the resources to do its job,” said one supervisor who asked not to be named. “It's like a patient in intensive care.”

THE CUTBACKS TO FUNAI'S BUDGET have left the lonely hilltop post guarding the main entrance to the 450-square-mile Awá Indigenous Land staffed with a skeleton crew of only three unarmed civilians. This territory is home to roughly a hundred Awá, including a few small bands of uncontacted nomads.

Marco and I followed a washed-out road leading down from the guard post. Here and there the rusting hulks of bulldozers littered the roadside, left behind in 2014 when army troops expelled loggers and settlers who had invaded the reserve en masse. At the bottom of a long hill, we entered the intended target of those powerful machines, a silent world of deep shadows and dazzling shafts of light split by a canopy of towering trees and thick lianas. Macaws shrieked in the distance, their calls punctuated by the shrill cry of a screaming piha bird.

We pulled up before a whitewashed house shaded by a stout jackfruit tree. We'd arrived at the FUNAI base of Juriti. A tall man with curly grayish hair and an arched brow sauntered over and shook my hand. His name was Patriollino Garreto Viana, a FUNAI veteran of 35 years and administrator of the Juriti post since 1995.



When I mentioned the abandoned bulldozers, Viana nodded gravely. "They removed 3,000 invaders from the territory," he said, recalling the 2014 expulsions. "Whites had arrived very close to here—it was very dangerous." The evictions stirred bitter resentment in nearby frontier towns such as São João do Caru. For months afterward, Viana couldn't show his face there. "I was *um homem marcado*," he said. A marked man.

He showed us into the five-room building that served as his quarters and as an improvised clinic for a pair of government health workers. A stream of Awá patients—young women in flower-print dresses breastfeeding infants, men in loose-fitting T-shirts and flip-flops—wandered in and out through an open door in the back.

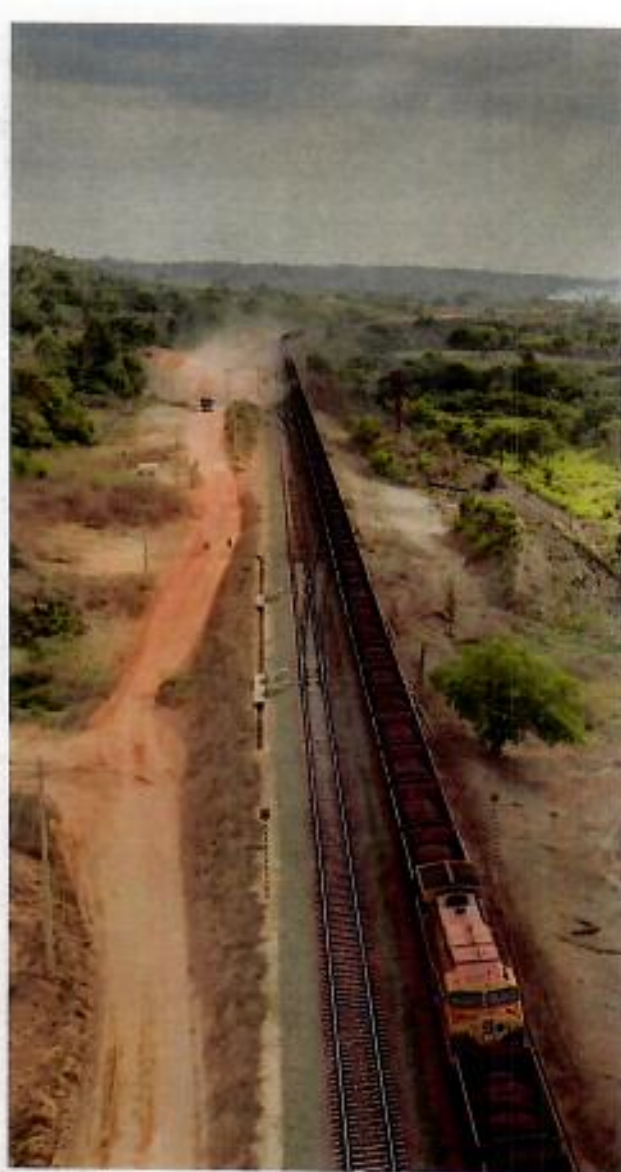
Despite the incursions by outsiders, Viana said, Juriti remained in many ways the most sheltered of the four settled Awá communities. The elder generation among its 89 residents—men and women now in their 50s and 60s—were brought here from a succession of FUNAI contact expeditions in the 1980s and 1990s. They've spent most of their lives in the bush, and the men especially still feel most at home there. "They barely stay at the post for a few days before they're off again," Viana said.

The men return from their forays with deer, peccaries, and tapirís. On the veranda, before a small crowd, an elder named Takya performed an astonishing imitation of the deep, throaty growls of a howler monkey. The Awá use such calls to lure animals while on the hunt—part of a vast storehouse of knowledge that has ensured the tribe's survival for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

PERHAPS NOWHERE is that legacy more threatened than in the Arariboia reserve. Not even with support of environmental police have the valiant efforts of Tainaky Tenetchar and the Forest Guardians been able to halt the logging scourge.

With wildfires—some of them set by loggers as a diversionary tactic—running rampant in late 2017, FUNAI's Department of Isolated and Recently Contacted Indians hurriedly erected a field post on the reserve's eastern flatlands. Isolated Awá nomads had been spotted dangerously close to a major road, and it was feared that forced contact—a last resort—might be required to save them.

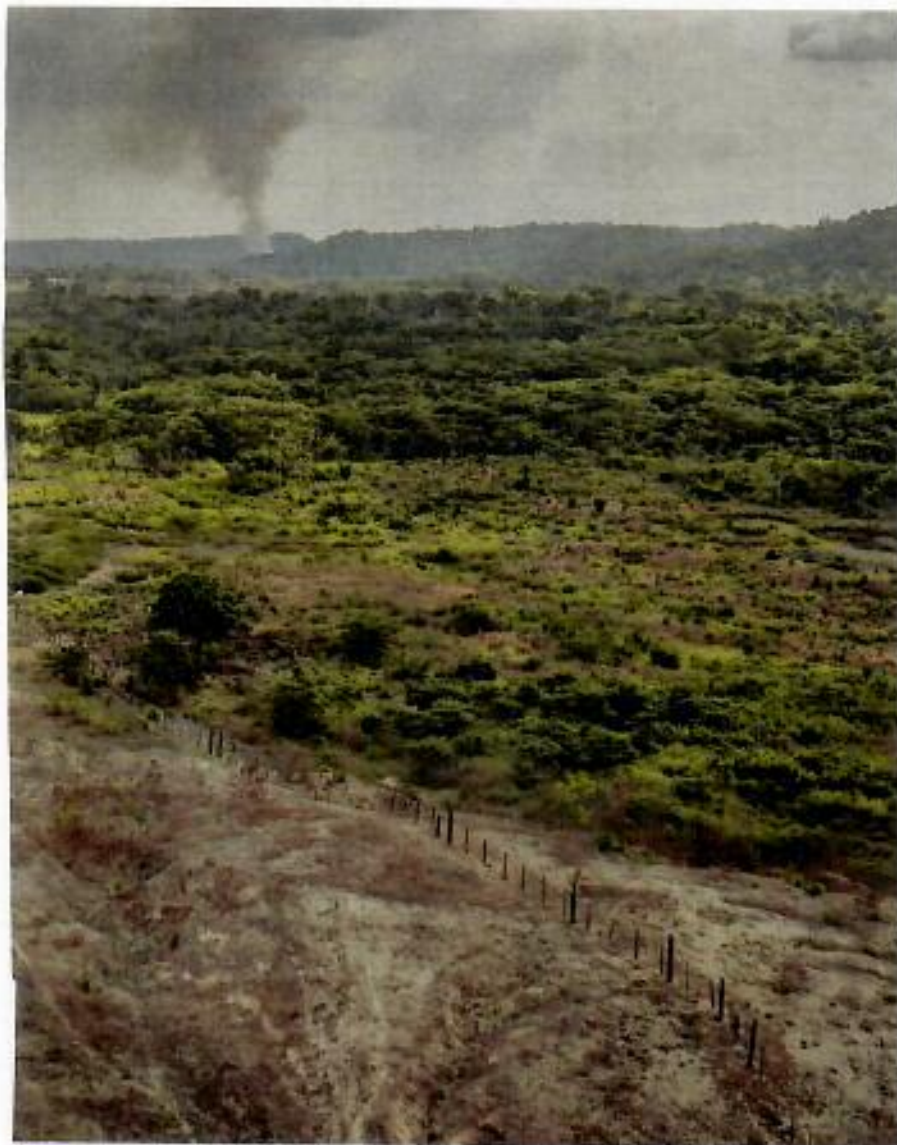
"The idea of no contact continues," said Bruno de Lima e Silva, the department's Maranhão



coordinator, seeking to dispel rumors that the post signaled a shift in FUNAI policy. He said it was simply part of a contingency plan.

The Awá show no signs that they're ready to give up living in the wild, Lima said. At least for now, they appear to be healthy, and they're having children, a strong indicator of a sense of security. "If they wanted contact, they would reach out."

On my last day in Brazil, photographer Charlie Hamilton James and I chartered a bush plane out of Imperatriz to do an overflight of the Arariboia reserve with Bruno Lima. Soon we were passing over undulating ridgelines that receded into the distance in a bluish gray haze. Scorched trees stood alone in smoldering fields. Up ahead loomed the wooded hills at the center of the reserve. The aircraft banked sharply, and



Mile-long trains brimming with iron ore clatter past the indigenous communities of Posto Awá and Tiracambu en route from the world's largest open-pit iron ore mine to the Atlantic port of São Luís, where the ore is loaded onto ships, many bound for China. When the railroad was built in the 1970s and '80s, it cut through traditional Awá lands.

we looked down on the jungle canopy—a fantastically mottled quilt of rich greens and muted browns punctuated by brilliant yellow bursts of flowering ipê trees. Somewhere down there were the *isolados*. Perhaps they stopped at the sound of the droning aircraft and were peering up at us through the trees.

"Look!" Lima said, pointing down into the forest. "A logging road!" At first I didn't see it, but then there it was, a brown strip snaking along a hillside, disappearing beneath a cluster of trees, then reappearing a short way on. "The loggers are perfecting the crime of timber theft," Lima said over the roar of the aircraft. "They make roads under the canopy that are hard to see." He looked out the window, then continued: "Municipalities all around the indigenous lands depend on timber. All the local power elites are involved,

directly or indirectly, in the criminal activity." (Local politicians take issue with that assessment, arguing that enforcement efforts have already brought the illegal logging business to its knees.)

Reaching the northeastern limits of the reserve on our overflight, we caught sight of a white-cabbed truck bouncing along the serpentine trail. Its flatbed was loaded with timber, like some predatory insect hauling prey back to its nest. And as it moved east toward the sawmills beyond the reserve, I could see nothing that stood in its way. □

Scott Wallace teaches journalism at the University of Connecticut and is author of *The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribes*. **Charlie Hamilton James** has spent 20 years documenting life in the Amazon. This is his eighth *National Geographic* story.