Meet Tashka and Laura Yawanawá

In 1998, Tashka Yawanawá, from the Brazilian Amazon, left Brazil to study English in California, U.S.A. There, he met Laura Soriano, a Mixteca-Zapoteco activist from Oaxaca, Mexico, who, like him, is a dynamic bridge-walker between two worlds. Laura speaks four languages and has a degree in International Relations. Vance Martin shares an insightful discussion with Tashka and his wife Laura, who have worked for the rights of indigenous peoples from all over Latin America for many years.

Tashka and Laura, you are two of the most dedicated, experienced, and hardworking people in the world for culture, nature, and people. Your message and work support not only your own community, the Yawanawá people, but also indigenous peoples, communities, and all life around the world. Please tell us how your work began and how it has grown.

In 1999, we founded the Nawa Institute, an organisation to serve indigenous communities. We began to travel the world never sure of where the financial support would come from, but knowing we needed to connect with indigenous peoples to speak and listen together, assess common needs, and offer solutions to their problems.

In 2002, Tashka became Chief of the Yawanawá and assumed responsibility for 600 people – all that was left of his people and culture – and 165,000 hectares (400,000 acres) of Amazon rainforest in Brazil. All that was left of their traditional homeland. In just a few years, we managed to double the extent of Yawanawá territory, begin the reintegration of the Yawanawá culture, and establish economically and socially empowering relationships with the outside world. The Yawanawá population is now over 1200 people.

This is so inspiring. How did you do it?

We are grateful that we could help lead the remote Yawanawá people in the Brazilian Amazon back from near obliteration through a long and essential process of sustaining the Yawanawá culture, their message, and to protect Mother Earth.

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We are one global family. We need to stop seeing ourselves as separate beings. We are so pleased that you can visit India for the first time, for WILD11, at Jaipur in March 2020. What message will you bring to this Congress?

In the 21st century, all peoples of the world have to unite to fight for the same cause, the survival of the human species. An essential aspect of this is to share our planet with the nature that supports us all. We need to respect nature and allow her the space and freedom to be herself, and only in that process can she support us and all life. This, embodied in the Nature Needs Half movement, can be an important call for reciprocity between humans and nature – and it can also be called respectful common sense!

We live in a global village, where we are interconnected with each other, so it is necessary and entirely possible to collectively take action now. Today, we do not have much time to repair our planet. It is a great responsibility that each of us have to step up and act. For us indigenous peoples of the Amazon, we have been the guardians of this magnificent rainforest that is a common good of humanity, and therefore must be preserved for all of us who live on this planet.

Tashka Yawanawá is Chief of the Yawanawá people in Acre, Brazil. The son of the former leader of the Yawanawá, Tashka grew up witnessing the virtual enslavement of his people by the rubber industry and experiencing the near annihilation of the tribe’s culture by missionaries. Since the 1980s, Tashka has actively fought for the rights of indigenous peoples. Realising that he needed further education to improve the situation of the Yawanawá, he pursued higher education in the U.S. and abroad. He was directly involved in the creation of the Indigenous Lawyers Association and co-founded the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Youth Alliance, through which he shares the experiences and knowledge of the Yawanawá with youth around the world, and works with projects that guarantee the preservation of different indigenous cultures. In 2001, Tashka returned to Brazil, and chose to use the knowledge gained from his experiences abroad to help his people transform their future. He became the youngest Chief in the history of the Yawanawá at age 25. In a short amount of time, Tashka and Laura have managed to double the extent of Yawanawá territory, reinvigorate Yawanawá culture, and establish economically and socially empowering relationships with the outside world. Tashka and Laura have two daughters – Kenemani and Luna Rosa – and divide their time living and working in the Yawanawá community and Rio Branco, Brazil.

Laura Yawanawá is a Zapotec Mixtec Indian from Oaxaca, Mexico. She holds a degree in international relations, focused on indigenous peoples and political affairs. Laura speaks three languages fluently (English, Spanish and Portuguese). Previously, she served as the Executive Director of the South and Meso-American Indian Rights Center in Oakland, California. She has worked for the rights of indigenous peoples from all over Latin America for many years. Together with her husband Tashka, she travelled with a backpack all over Latin America, visiting remote indigenous communities to empower them with information to fight for their rights and self-determination. She co-founded organisations to support indigenous peoples, such as the Nawa Institute and NIVA (Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Alliance). She also worked for the Climate Change Institute of the State of Acre, organising workshops in indigenous communities about climate change and environmental services. She comes from a matriarchal culture in the northern hemisphere. Seventeen years ago, she married Tashka Yawanawá. Since then, they have worked together for the good of the Yawanawá people. She now serves as President-Director of the Yawanawá Sociocultural Association/ASCY. She has been instrumental in helping transform a community from a deeply male-oriented culture to one that is more open and inclusive of women.

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in a violent manner. The illegal invasion is reported to the relevant organisations including Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), which translates to National Indian Foundation, the police, and the governor’s office.

The story of your relationship with Aveda, the major natural cosmetic company, is inspiring and historic. Am I right that you negotiated one of the first commercial/cultural relationships to avoid bio-piracy and create a strong, mutually beneficial relationship between the Yawanawá and Aveda?

Yes, a 27-year-long relationship has been built between Yawanawá and Aveda. This has been a learning experience for both. The partnership works well because Aveda as a company respects the Yawanawá self-determination and has been sensitive and flexible with our cultural ways. We have developed a direct communication with them.

Many people are afraid today... of climate change, extinction, and the loss of nature. What do we need to do to create a wilder world that is better for all people, all life, and to rid the world of fear and hopelessness?

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