

Ashaninka

Profile

Ashaninka, who are members of the Arawak linguistic group, inhabit the Peruvian Amazonian rainforests. The total number of indigenous Peruvians living in the Amazon basin is estimated at 350,000. The approximately 50,000 Ashaninka constitute the largest ethnic group in the region (see www.native-languages.org/ashaninka.htm).

Historical context

Ashaninka communities have had a long and difficult relationship with missionaries and other external agents. In the early twentieth century they were colonized by rubber tappers; in the 1970s and 1980s their lands were usurped for the production of sugar and palm oil, for cattle ranching and forestry, by gold prospectors and a new wave of colonists. In addition almost 700,000 hectares of forest have been destroyed to provide extra coca-growing areas and for the construction of airstrips for its illegal transportation. From the 1970s, emergent Ashaninka leaders formed their own local ethnic federations to deal with such problems.

Violence intensified in the late twentieth century due to the combined pressures of drug traffickers, terrorists and colonists. In 1989 Sendero Luminoso invaded Ashaninka territory, seeking control of the lucrative drug trade; following massacres in six Ashaninka villages in August 1993, a delegation of Ashaninka travelled to Lima to ask for economic aid and arms. By attempting to organize their own defence groups, Ashaninka leaders became further involved in the conflict. Those who tried to defend their communities during a further attack by Sendero in September 1993 were arrested on charges of terrorism.

Government efforts to retake the area and Ashaninka self-defence strategies resulted in the expulsion of most Sendero Luminoso activists from the area, but they also resulted in large displacements of Ashaninka people. In addition, many official documents and censuses of Ashaninka lands and communities were destroyed or lost during the conflict; this has led to serious problems as regards land tenure in the region.

Current issues

As a consequence of the Peruvian government's neoliberal policies, there has been a significant rise in oil activities in the Amazon rainforest. Other contentious issues include the Camisea Natural Gas Project and the increased number of concessions, granted by the state, for wood extraction in areas belonging to indigenous communities. This situation, combined with the lack of indigenous land titles, has led to many conflicts between Ashaninka communities, colonists, international corporations and state authorities, as well as irreversible ecological damage. However, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become involved in the Ashaninkas' protest campaign, seeking to draw on the recent convergence of indigenous activism and global environmentalism. They have secured several important

advances, such as the establishment of a large new protected area, the Otishi National Park. This has been officially designated between the Ene, Tambo and Urubamba rivers, along with two indigenous communal reserves. (Other Amazonian indigenous communities such as the Achuar have managed to secure agreements with companies - in this case Petroplus - against further oil development.)

In 1988 Asociación Inter-étnica para el Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana (AIDSESP) initiated the Intercultural Bilingual Education Teacher Training Programme (FORMBIAP). This encourages alternative methods of teaching, recognizing indigenous peoples' rights and promoting Peru's ethnic diversity. Such programmes are still under way today; they do not reject theoretical knowledge but focus instead on local, cultural and ancestral knowledge. Ashaninka community elders are included in the bilingual education teams, alongside teachers and expert technicians.