

# Beacons of hope amid the destruction

MIKE SCIALOM talks to representatives of the indigenous people of the Amazon following a conference in Cambridge.

The X Oxbridge Conference which took place in Cambridge, Oxford and London recently featured two guest speakers, Vanda Witoto and Cristiane Pankararu, representing the indigenous people of the Amazon – the ‘lungs of the world’ – whose way of life is being decimated along with the rainforest, 17 per cent of which has now been destroyed.

The theme of the multi-disciplinary conference, facilitated by the University of Cambridge’s Brazilian Society, was ‘Modernity and Coloniality in Brazilian Thought’, and focused on the experience of the unfulfilled promises of modernity in the so-called world periphery.

The event took place at the start of November but, because they live in remote locations, their responses to questions posed by the *Cambridge Independent* have just been received.

Vanda Witoto is part of a determined effort to increase political representation of indigenous people in politics, even as their land, rights and even lives face unprecedented threats – threats which significantly increased during the years when Jair Bolsonaro was Brazil’s president (2019-2022). She was one of 181 indigenous candidates in last year’s Brazilian election which resulted in a win for Luna da Silva. Five indigenous candidates were elected to Brazil’s congress in the 2022 election.

Cristiane Pankararu belongs to the indigenous Pankararu people, whose home is in the Pernambuco state in north-east Brazil. A geography graduate, she holds a master’s degree and is a doctoral candidate in social

anthropology at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, where she researches national and international indigenous legal anthropology.

Questioned about their work, they revealed some of the challenges they face as they try to change both the reality of their predicament and the perceptions of outsiders towards their people, their culture and their home.

Vanda’s political journey is ongoing as incoming president Lula da Silva took office on January 1.

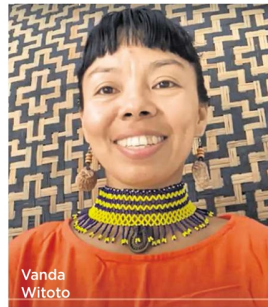
“I ran for deputada federal – similar to an MP in the UK – in the most recent elections,” Vanda says.

“Although we could not get me elected, we did build a strong political body that defends the rights of the Amazon, the environment, and indigenous nations. We are still in this political network with the party called Rede Sustentabilidade (Sustainability Network) in the State of Amazonas. In the current political conjuncture, transitioning from the current president to the next one, we are trying to get a spot in the Secretary of Indigenous Health (SESAI).

“The great challenge here is to strengthen this institution that should take care of indigenous populations’ health in Brazil. And the same goes for the National Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI). It is crucial to strengthen both institutions that were created to enact pro-indigenous policies and to ensure the *bem viver* (good living) of our nations.”

Vanda’s experience of the UK conference was very positive.

“Our participation in the debate, as indigenous women, was and continues to be necessary because the reality of



Vanda Witoto

indigenous people is not yet clearly grasped either in academic debates or in society more generally,” she says. “Indigenous participation in debates like this one gives us the possibility of undoing some of the prejudices about us that still stand in several spheres, including academic ones.

“Over the last decade, since inclusion quota policies were created so that we could access universities and education more broadly, we notice societal changes. Today, we are actively constructing the possibility to speak for ourselves, understand ourselves, question ourselves – but also question the violences to which our lands and bodies are subjected. Access to education allows us to occupy such political and institutional spaces to say that we are alive, we are resisting, we are fighting for our existence to be guaranteed. Because our fight as indigenous nations is a fight for our territories – without those territories, our life is extremely threatened.”

Has international interest in the rainforest situation helped?

“We do indeed perceive a growing international interest about us indigenous Amazonians, which is positive. Our rights are guaranteed partly in the international arena, since it is at this level that the Brazilian government makes commitments and receives recommendations and impositions that the country then must follow. This is crystal-clear for us – being present in international spaces and media is important.”

What’s the next step?

“To support indigenous Amazonians more directly, there must be investment in indigenous



Cristiane Pankararu

organisations, especially organisations led by indigenous women because they are in the frontlines fighting for territory and the safety of our people. The expansion of mining and deforestation into indigenous territories threatens our food sovereignty and our physical safety.

“2022 was one of the most violent years, with around 200 indigenous people murdered, including women, children and youths. We want to have the freedom and the means to manage and run our own lives and territories. We need resources to do that. If those who have capital invest in indigenous organisations, we will be in a better position to build schools and drinking water systems, and to secure the environmental protection of our territories.

Therefore, investment is crucial for us to secure the conditions to protect our own lives, ensure food sovereignty, education and health, because the Brazilian government is not providing that.

“On the other hand, those who have the means to could also support us by decreasing the economic and environmental impacts they have in order to decrease the economic and environmental racism that we indigenous nations experience.”

This question of the wider role Western society has to play in the battle to save the Amazon rainforest is explored by Cristiane Pankararu, who also enjoyed the Oxbridge event, saying: “I like to think it was a networking event providing an excellent debate and a celebration.”

Cristiane welcomes the interest in indigenous culture, while appreciating that it is often difficult

for Western organisations to avoid imposing solutions.

“It is still a big challenge because the approach to thinking about indigenous peoples is very colonial and colonising,” she says. “They still see us as if we were 500 years past. Breaking this narrow way of understanding the diversity of peoples in their biomes is one of the main challenges of our realities.

“We have been framed in stereotypes that do not match who we are because official history has personified us with pejorative and vulgar expressions. But with goodwill, we have managed to build partnerships that have given visibility to the struggle for land and denounced actions against indigenous peoples involving mining, gold mining, deforestation, murder, kidnapping of children, etc.”

Many people in the West understand that we need to live simpler lives, but there is resistance – the big fear being that we might regress mentally somehow. Do Western culture and the indigenous way of life have to meet halfway – and is that even possible?

“Yes, it is possible,” Cristiane replies. “It is not a question of ‘going back to the most remote or primitive past’; the issue is the idea of consumerism to which we are induced to live without questioning. At this stage of humanity, it is impossible to give up essential goods and services; objects and habits that are nowadays necessary.

“The question is to measure, to check, what is a priority and what is a preference; what is empathy and what is selfishness; what is respect and what is order; what is humility and what is poverty? It seeks to harmonise values and principles that cannot be confused with ideology. Giving in to dialogue is crucial because any imposition may result in resistance or a clash. The fear is valid but not because of the way of life that we indigenous people live; this fear must exist with uncontrolled consumption and the lack of respect for nature; this will lead to fear.

“Knowing how to use it, there will be no scarcity.”

Vanda and Cristiane are “an inspiration”, said the Brazilian Society’s events organiser Alexandre da Trindade, adding: “We have regained and renewed our hope.”



X Oxbridge Conference on Brazil at the Faculty of Education Picture: Keith Heppell