

Asháninka@the Peruvian Amazon



2000-12-15

Keane Shore

[Photo: The Asháninka view the Internet as a means to share their traditions, while strengthening their culture and language.]

In an open grass hut on the edge of the Peruvian Andes and the Amazon jungle, an unlikely sight heralds a revolution: a computer on a rough plank table, displaying Internet web pages.

The anachronistic beige box, owned by a village of indigenous Asháninka, called Marankiari Bajo, is connected to the Internet by high-powered radio. The tiny community, located more than 500 metres above sea level and 400 kilometres from Lima (a journey that includes many changes in elevation), is remote — yet in touch with the world. Perhaps more importantly to the villagers, it's also networked with other Asháninka communities nearby. Until recently, they didn't even have telephones.

Cultural tool

The Asháninka do not see the Internet as the beachhead of a cultural invasion from the North. Rather, they have seized it as a tool to reinforce and perpetuate their own culture, to build a larger sense of community purpose among the 400-odd Asháninka villages scattered across South America, and to tell their own story to the world. In the process, they bypass outside news media and governments, which they think tend to marginalize them.

With help from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the villagers are exploring how to use the Internet to ensure that their own culture continues, and to gain economic advantages for themselves. [Mino-Eusebio Castro](#), leader of the pilot project, says his Asháninka village started with an awareness that the Internet was not originally designed for indigenous peoples. However, the villagers were hopeful that they could use the Internet to enhance their own ways of communicating.

Human essence

"This communication is not simply a window on a machine, but something much more profound," he stresses. "It's our very human essence, in which we find the commitments of the entire family, the community, and the fundamental questions of a people that has existed a thousand years — and that aspires to ensure its continued existence."

Through this project, the community members also hope to gain more control over their children's cultural education. "This communication project is very important to us, because we can use it to build and structure our own study program and create an Asháninka school, where we can share our experiences with other communities. We want this school to be compatible with the Peruvian education system," Castro explains.

Internet's potential

"With the Internet, we can contact other Asháninka brothers on the Brazilian side. With the Internet, we can show our [website](#)," he adds. "With the Internet, we can share the richness of our cultural traditions, while we strengthen our social, cultural, and linguistic capacities."

Before deciding to plug into the Internet, the Asháninka community members thoroughly assessed their own circumstances, considering how they might use the technology to promote their own sociological, linguistic, ecological, and educational ideas. Castro says they were concerned that if they didn't prepare well, they would become subservient to the technology.

Storing knowledge

"Very often, we are easy prey to technology, and become dependent on it. Therefore, I believe our challenge should be to appropriate this new technology and make it ours, for our own benefit. We want to use this technology to help us store all our ancestral knowledge inside the computer." With the barest hint of a grin, he adds: "we believe the computer has the capacity."

Marankiari Bajo's growing technological foundation also includes a small radio station with a 10-kilometre broadcast radius, which is used to provide regular programming for nearby Asháninka communities. The villagers believe that by combining community radio with the Internet and the strength of their own language, they can reinforce their culture, allowing it to survive in a global village. "After five centuries of struggle, this is the first opportunity the Asháninka have of controlling the shape of the community," says Castro.

Economic benefits

In many respects, the Asháninka continue to do the same things they've always done. Their new communication tools just make them more efficient. For instance, they find the Internet useful for choosing the best time to take their produce to market in Lima. They now know if market prices are good before they even set foot out of their villages, and their economic standing has already improved as a result.

In the course of embracing the Internet, the Asháninka are moving from an oral to a written culture. Parents hope their children will be able to learn new things that the Asháninka have not known before. But the community also still believes that elders have something to teach their youth about succeeding on Asháninka terms, even while they prepare to enter a world larger than

Marankiari Bajo. In the meantime, the Internet gives villagers the chance to set up strategic alliances, not just with other Asháninka communities nearby, but with First Nations around the world, says Castro.

Finding friends

"It's difficult for me to synthesize the experience sometimes, but on the way we've found friends, we've learned to dialogue and to agree. This has permitted us to strengthen our local capacities," he concludes. "This whole experience has shown us that we're not alone — we have friends who are in the same circumstances as we are."

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If you have any comments about this article, please contact info@idrc.ca.

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