The Wrestlers of Xingu

Photos and Text by Ezra Shaw

Two wrestlers compete against each other in traditional huka-huka wrestling in the Kamayurá village of Xingu National Park, in the Amazon rainforest of Brazil.

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Weré, 30, is the best wrestler in the village of Kamayura, deep in the Amazon rainforest in Xingu National Park. He lives a simple life; in the morning, he teaches at the school in the village and in the afternoon he tends to his fields of manioc and participates in the tribe’s unique tradition: Huka-huka wrestling. Matches start with the athletes facing each other; they then begin rotating clockwise while imitating the grunting of the jaguar, after which they then kneel onto the ground and shake hands with their opponent. At that point they reach out and cling onto each other and begin wrestling. To win the match, you can either lift both feet of the opponent off the ground, flip him onto his back or circle around him so you are holding on to his back. Each match is very quick, usually lasting less than a minute.

Weré grew up in Kamayura, but, at the age of 14, he moved to the city of Brasilia because his parents wanted to show their children the way of the white man. His parents enjoyed their new life, but the children did not. Both Weré and his sister moved back to Kamayurá when he was 18. Weré now has three children by two different wives. At one point he was married to both wives, but it became too complicated and he separated from one of the wives. He wants to stay in the village and show his kids the traditions of the Kamayurá people.

In 1961, the Brazilian government created Xingu National Park in the middle of the Amazon rainforest to protect the environment and the indigenous population of the area. Within the park, there are approximately 4000 Indians from 15 tribes living along the Xingu River. The tribes in Xingu National Park live very simple lives; many wear no clothes, instead choosing to wear traditional beaded belts and necklaces and paint patterns on their body. They live in straw houses with extended family members and eat largely what they can get from the land.

Like the indigenous people that live in other areas of the Amazon, the tribes within the national park are threatened by a number of issues. The greater Xingu River area is being rapidly deforested for commercial timber and to create more farm acreage to meet the demand for corn and soy products — a demand recently spurred by the growing movement for biofuels.

Earlier this year I travelled to Xingu National Park to spend a week with the Kamayura tribe, who live near the Upper Xingu River in the middle of the national park. To reach their village is an adventure in itself. Along with my guide, I took a two hour flight from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia. From there it was 16 hours on a bus, four hours in a back of a pick-up truck, and then we finished the journey with a ten hour boat ride up the Xingu River.

The Kamayura village is located near a large lake about 15 kilometres away from the Xingu River. The village is made up of nearly 20 homes situated in a large circle and houses approximately 300 people. Extended families...
share the homes, and the number of people living in each house range from 10-30 people; all of whom sleep in hammocks. The dwellings are spacious, often measuring 25 meters long and 15 wide. The homes are generally made of straw rather than palm leaves. It is becoming increasingly harder to find the materials needed to build the houses because of forest fires in the area. After they gather all the necessary materials, it takes about five months to build a house.

The Kamayura tribe has a basic diet consisting of fish and manioc, a root vegetable. However, about five years ago the amount of fish in the lake became so low that the tribe decided to stop fishing in the lake for three years to restore the fish population. During that period, they had to buy or trade for fish from neighboring villages. Manioc looks similar to a large potato and is most commonly consumed in the form of tapioca cakes that they call beiju. It is harvested from the fields, grated and then refined. Because raw manioc contains cyanide, it must be soaked for hours and then boiled to remove the toxins.

The men and the boys of the Kamayura tribe wrestle almost every day of the week. Wrestlers start to gather in the center of the village in the middle of the afternoon and wrestle for about an hour before they go back to doing their chores before dinner. The wrestlers take turns matching up against opponents that are about the same size and skill level that they are. The wrestlers are able to test their skills with neighboring villages during the annual Kuarup ceremony, a traditional indigenous ceremony honouring their deceased ancestors. There are many different rituals that take place during the two day ceremony with the most important one being the huka-huka wrestling matches on the final day.

Huka-huka wrestling and the Kuarup ceremony are unique to Xingu National Park, one of the most remote and beautiful places in the world. However, if the deforestation continues, the Kamayura tribe and other tribes within Xingu and other parts of the Amazon will not be able to continue living in the rainforest. If forced to move out of the jungle, traditions like the huka-huka wrestling will be lost. Members of the Kamayura tribe do not want to leave their home. Tacuma, one of the chief’s 14 sons said, “Here you breathe, and you breathe fresh air. In Rio, it is like breathing raw sewage. There are tons of supermarkets and bars and restaurants in Rio. Here, our supermarket is our lake and our forest. I have been to Rio, and I wouldn’t want to live there.”
Ecutia, one of the best fisherman in the Kamayurá village, fishes with a traditional bow and arrow in a dugout canoe.
TOP RIGHT: Weré prepares for a day of wrestling inside his home. He uses homemade kneepads to protect his knees from the hard ground while he is wrestling.

MIDDLE RIGHT: A portrait of Weré in between two of his bouts.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A close up of a razor made of piranha teeth that the wrestlers use to scrape their body before a big wrestling match. After they scrape their body, they rub an herb from the jungle onto the body to stimulate blood flow.

BELOW: One of the chief’s sons paints patterns on his leg before heading out to wrestle for the day. The red paint is made from the Urucum plant.
LEFT: One wrestler lifts another off the ground to win the match. To win in huka-huka wrestling, a competitor can either lift both feet of his opponent off the ground, flip him onto his back or circle around him so he is holding on to his back. Each match is very quick, usually lasting less than a minute.

RIGHT: Weré and Tacumã cling together during a closely contested match. The men are considered two of the best wrestlers in the village.

LEFT: Tacumã sifts sand through his fingers after a match.

RIGHT: Boys of all ages participate in the afternoon huka-huka wrestling matches. They usually start at a very young age and wrestle most of their lives.
Weré rests after a bout. Wrestlers wear traditional belts and bells on their waist during their matches.
LEFT: Weré is both the champion wrestler in the village and also a teacher at the school. He had moved away from Kamayurá for four years with his parents before returning to the village. The school was built in 2005 with government funding; kids start going at the age of six and go five days a week.

BELOW: Kids gather around a book behind one of their homes.
Kotok (right), the chief of the village, baths in the lake with two of his three wives, and three of his 30 children. All the people in the village bath at least three or four times a day - starting before the sun rises, and continuing throughout the day.
LEFT: Villagers play traditional flutes to pay homage to a man (the grandfather of one of the flute players) who had recently passed away. The villagers go from home to home throughout the day playing the flutes. They play almost daily for a month leading up to the Kuarup festival.

RIGHT: An aerial view of the Kamayurá village. The village is situated about 10 miles away from the Xingu river.

LEFT: A solar panel powers a satellite disc behind a traditional home. Most of the homes have their own satellite so they can watch television at night when the generator is working.

RIGHT: Women play soccer in the village almost every day before they head to their respective homes to get dinner ready for their families.

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A mother prepares beiju, a food made out of manioc, for her children. Manioc is harvested from the fields, grated and then refined. Because raw manioc contains cyanide, it must be soaked for hours and then boiled to remove the toxins.

Kids play in the lake late in the afternoon.
Weré, the tribe's huka-huka wrestling champion, walks to the center of the village to meet his opponents for the day.