

# How a plastic cave made in Spain keeps Amazonian culture alive 5,000 miles away



Elewoká Waurá, *cacique* or chief of the Indigenous village of Ulupuwene, at the inauguration of the replica of the sacred cave, Kamukuwaká. He calls it 'an instrument that will show our strength, our struggle and our unity with other Xingu people'. Photograph: Alao Filho/Fotos Públicas

When ancient carvings were vandalised, the Wauja feared their knowledge was lost. But 3D imaging has created a replica at the heart of Brazil's first Xingu people's museum

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[Constance Malleret](#) in Ulupuwene, Brazil

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It is not yet dawn in Ulupuwene, an Indigenous village in the Brazilian Amazon, but the Wauja people have already risen to prepare for the festive day ahead. The sound of clarinet-like instruments floats across the village, on the banks of the Batovi River, as women sweep the earthen floor between the thatched *oca*, or traditional houses.

Men paint their bodies with charcoal and bright-red achiote seeds. As the sun rises over the rainforest, men, women and children all meet in the village centre to sing and dance.

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/oct/22/brazil-amazonian-indigenous-culture-kamukuwaka-wauja-sacred-cave-replica-xingu-museum>

The Wauja people are performing ritual dances all day to mark a unique occasion: the inauguration of a lifesize replica of a sacred cave called Kamukuwaká, which is being housed in the first Indigenous museum in the Xingu region.



Wauja people dance in a ritual to mark the inauguration of the Kamukuwaká replica. Photograph: Alaor Filho/Fotos Públicas

It is an act of resistance as much as of celebration. The Wauja people hope this unique resource will help to preserve their cultural heritage and keep their traditions alive for future generations – as well as draw attention to the threats their land faces from the climate crisis and local extractive industries.

“This here is an instrument that will show our strength, our struggle and our unity with other Xingu people,” the *cacique* (chief) of Ulupuwene, Elewoká Waurá, tells Wauja relatives, who have travelled from other villages to take part in the ceremony.

The original cave of Kamukuwaká is the home of myths that form the basis of Indigenous people’s culture and customs in the Upper Xingu, a tract of rainforest surrounded by soya plantations in central [Brazil](#).

But the cave lies on private farmland outside the protected Indigenous territory and was partly destroyed in September 2018, when ancient engravings on its walls, or petroglyphs, were [deliberately hacked off](#). Those responsible have still not been found.



Images of vandalised areas of the cave wall were sent to the Wauja, where anthropologists helped elders sketch the lost markings from memory to aid the restoration. Photograph: Handout

“That is where our songs, our rituals, our [body] paintings come from,” says Akari Waurá, a singer and cacique of Tepepeweke village (all Wauja people share the same surname, Waurá, a non-Indigenous misspelling of their ethnic group).

Now 49, Akari was told the myth of Kamukuwaká, the first Wauja chief, during visits to the cave as a child with his father and uncles.

It’s a living book that is being destroyed

Ewésh Yawalapiti Waurá

It was there, tracing the engravings representing female fertility, as well as fish, dragonflies and other forest creatures, that he learned about his people’s history, and the skills and knowledge required of a cacique and traditional singer.

The destruction of the petroglyphs “felt like losing our family”, says Akari, whose leopard-claw necklace and macaw-feather earrings refer to the story of Kamukuwaká. “Without these markings, how will we know [our story]? Who will teach us? We will lose our culture.”

One of 16 ethnic groups that live in the Xingu Indigenous territory, which covers an area nearly the size of Belgium, the Wauja people are accustomed to fighting to defend their way of life.



Wauja people at the Batovi River. Although much of their territory is protected, it faces similar pressures as much of Brazil's Indigenous land from agriculture, illegal logging and landgrabs. Photograph: Handout

Since this land was designated as protected territory in 1961, intensive agriculture has closed in on the forest, dams have dried out the headwaters of the Xingu River's main tributaries, and threats from illegal logging, landgrabs and predatory fishing have grown.

The Wauja people's tireless campaigning for their rights brought the expansion of [the protected area](#) in the late 1990s to include the [Batovi territory](#), where Ulupuwene is located. However, the cave and surrounding sacred site, where the Wauja people are the custodians, remain outside those limits, making access difficult and dangerous.

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Although the Kamukuwaká cave has never been dated, it was listed by the government as a national heritage site in 2016. But that did little for its preservation. Even before the petroglyphs were vandalised, it was put at risk by the silting up of the nearby river (the cave on the riverbank), [plans for a highway extension](#) nearby and disrespectful use by non-Indigenous fishermen, who would drink and leave their rubbish in the cave.

The project was set in motion after the damage to the cave was discovered in 2018. After consulting with archaeologists, anthropologists and the Wauja people, a near-perfect copy of the vandalised part of the cave was built in Spain by [Factum Foundation](#), a non-profit organisation specialising in cultural heritage preservation.

"I didn't believe they would manage to make the replica," says Akari, who was the first Wauja to see the finished product in Spain in 2019. "Wow, I liked it. I told my community about it ... And we all decided to bring it back to the Xingu."



Sections of the cave replica, which is made out of resin-coated polystyrene and polyurethane, at Factum's workshop in Madrid. Photograph: Oak Taylor Smith/Factum Foundation

The eight by four-metre replica, weighing one tonne, arrived in Ulupuwene this month after a 5,000-mile (8,000km) journey over sea and land. It was transported in six pieces, which the local community helped put together. It is now housed in a specially constructed adobe-brick building, called the Cultural and Monitoring Centre.

The whole endeavour results from a partnership between Factum Foundation and [People's Palace Projects](#), a London-based arts and research centre based at Queen Mary University of London, which collaborated with the Indigenous community, who were involved at every stage.

I believe we are in the presence of our ancestor [Kamukuwaká], who fought throughout his life. We are here giving continuity to that fight

Tukupe Waurá

Pere Yalaki Waurá is one of the Wauja elders who helped to ensure the copy was as accurate as possible by sketching the lost markings from memory on images of the digitally restored cave.

"The replica of Kamukuwaká has modernised our knowledge," the 67-year-old says in the Arawak language, recalling how her predecessors sought to pass on this history but could not prevent some of the traditional knowledge from being lost as elders died.

Her son Tukupe Waurá, who translates for her, adds: "Not just the Wauja but all Xingu people, the new generations, can now come to see [the replica] without risking their life [as the real cave is far outside their territory]. And this guarantees our culture, our spirituality, our sensitivity."

The project's power to keep that history and spirituality alive is evident in the Arawak word for replica – *potalapitsi* – which can also mean photograph or engraving.



Akari Waurá, a singer and *cacique* of Tepepeweke village, using the replica of the sacred cave of Kamukuwaká to teach children about Xingu culture. Photograph: Alaor Filho/Fotos Públicas

“*Potalapitsi* of things are no less real than the original,” says Chris Ball, an anthropologist at the University of Notre Dame in the US state of Indiana, who has worked with the Wauja people for two decades.

“To make a replica is to honour the original, empower the original and bring the original into the present here and now. It really differs from the modern capitalist idea of mechanical reproduction as somehow lessening.”

As they approach the new cultural centre on the inauguration day, the Wauja people continue to perform their ritual dance. The ceremony determines which boys will become leaders. It was traditionally held at the original cave but has not occurred in about a decade.

“Hopefully, it can now happen next year,” says Tukupe, as Wauja people crowd around him to see the newly unveiled replica. “I believe we are in the presence of our ancestor [Kamukuwaká], who fought throughout his life. We are here giving continuity to that fight.”

“It’s a living book that is being destroyed,” says Ewësh Yawalapiti Waurá, director of the Xingu Indigenous Land Association (Atix), which represents local communities.

A modern solution was found to help preserve the Wauja ancestral culture: constructing a resin-coated polystyrene and polyurethane facsimile designed using cutting-edge 3D-imaging technology.