New Mashuin elected for the Shawi

Autonomous Territorial Government

On the 4th and 5th of November more than 500 Shawi leaders gathered in the community of Nueva Vida, on the banks of the Paranapura River, to elect the new Mashuin, or President, of the Shawi Autonomous Territorial Government. Reninmer Huiñapi Cardenas, from the community of Inchiyac, was elected by popular vote and became the second Shawi Mashuin, for the period 2023-2027. "We are going to defend our territory and consolidate the great dream to have our integral territory recognised," said the new leader.

By Michael Watts – 1st December 2022

The ancestral territory of the Shawi covers 1,004,000 hectares, stretching from the foothills of the Peruvian Andes along the Paranapura, Sillay and Cahuapanas rivers. Although the territory contains intact Amazonian forest ecosystems, the region faces multiple threats: oil and mining concessions, large infrastructure projects, agribusiness interests, and conservation projects that could give control of some of their lands to the state.

To defend their forests and their future, the Shawi are actively confronting these threats by strengthening the governance of their territories. Inspired by the Wampis, they announced the foundation of the Shawi Autonomous Territorial Government (GTANSH) in 2017 and elected Wilson Tello Cahuaza as their first Mashuin for the 2017-2022 term.
The de facto autonomies of the Peruvian Indigenous Peoples

The Autonomous Territorial Government (GTA) model is an innovative model developed by Indigenous Peoples in the Peruvian Amazon to protect their territories and act as an advocacy platform for the recognition of their territorial rights. As mentioned, the Wampis were the pioneers in declaring their GTA in 2015. Since then, eleven other indigenous nations in the Peruvian Amazon, including the Shawi, have constituted their GTAs according to their traditions and customary systems of government.

These Autonomous Territorial Governments are not legally registered organizations, instead basing themselves in customary law, the Peruvian Constitution, and international treaties ratified by the government. They express a growing demand for rights from Peru’s Amazonian indigenous communities, while also responding to the lack of basic services from a national government that historically has abandoned regions far from Lima. The Autonomous Territorial Governments are proving to be an inspirational force for other Indigenous Peoples in the region and the world, because of the benefits of local governance, self-determination and greater protection of biodiversity in their territories.

During the last five years under the leadership of Wilson Tello the GTANSH has managed to establish itself as the most important representative Shawi organization and has brought together their different federations under a single banner. By uniting they halted the creation of the Cerro Escalera Regional Conservation Area within their ancestral territory and have established collective strategies to stem the invasion of their lands by settlers.

The Autonomous Territorial Government of the Shawi Nation has also decreed the prohibition of mining and oil projects, while at the same time protecting the areas of exceptional biodiversity that make up its territory. Despite these important steps, the pressure on Shawi communities, mainly from loggers and agribusiness, continues to grow.
Election of a new Mashuin

In this context, the continuation of a strong autonomous government system is considered essential for the future of the Shawi and their territory. The election of the new Mashuin was organized for November 4 and 5. By the night of the 3rd, Shawi leaders began to arrive on foot, by canoe and in small planes to the community of Nueva Vida, nestled in a valley formed by the Paranapura River. The next morning men, women and children gathered in the communal hall to begin this historic event with a sense of excitement and expectation in the air.

The GTANSH statutes follow a model of alternation meaning the position of Mashuin must swap between the Paranapura and Cahuapanas river basins every five years. As Wilson Tello is from Paranapura, this time only candidates from Cahuapanas could apply, accompanied by their Ka'taninsu (Vice President) from Paranapura.

Those who were permitted to vote included the wa'an (traditional leader) and vice-wa'an of each community, as well as the leaders of the Shawi federations. After a day and a half of debate, two candidates remained: Reninber Huiñapi Cárdenas and Jesús Pinedo Escobeda. At 6:00 pm on November 5, Reninber Huiñapi Cárdenas was confirmed as the winner, with 136 votes to 68. Clauber Tangoa Huayunga from the community of Panan accompanies him as Ka'taninsu.

Dreaming the future of the Shawi Nation

Reninber Huiñapi Cárdenas, a qualified nurse, described his hopes and goals for the next five years: "What we want is to institutionalize our Autonomous Territorial Government and for the State to consider us as a nation, with all the rights that are protected by Article 169 of the International Labor Organization and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We want the State to provide us with basic health and education services, and to respect our right to prior consultation."
The new Mashuin added that the Autonomous Territorial Government will defend Shawi territory and aim to attain recognition for their integral territory. “We want to continue in the footsteps of the previous Mashuin, building on what has already been constructed, including strengthening our school of leaders. I will govern for all the Shawi, from across our great territory”, concluded Huiñapi Cárdenas.

The new leadership of the GTANSH will begin its term of government on January 1, 2023. The Shawi are one of twelve indigenous nations of the Amazon that have declared their autonomy and plan to go to the Peruvian Congress together to demand their recognition. The government should give the GTAs the recognition they deserve and, above all, understand that far from being a problem, they should be seen as key allies to help stem the increasing deforestation of the Amazon rainforest.

Michael Watts is a filmmaker and community facilitator. He lives in Colombia and works with LifeMosaic, an NGO that supports Indigenous Peoples in the defence of their rights, territories and cultures.