

Case 10: Real-Life *Avatar*

In the blockbuster movie *Avatar*, corporate mercenaries from Earth battle against a coalition of indigenous aliens in an effort to generate profits by destroying their planet. *Avatar* director James Cameron has called his latest philanthropic project "kind of 'Avatar' for real."¹ Of course, Cameron is not referring to interplanetary war. Instead, Cameron is talking about local resistance to the Belo Monte dam project in the Amazon rainforest. Cameron's involvement in local resistance to the Dam project has drawn international attention and helped to publicize the dislocation of several indigenous groups.

The Belo Monte dam is part of a proposed hydroelectric project on the Xingu River in the Brazilian state of Pará. Pará is Brazil's leading source of mineral resources such as bauxite, the raw material from which aluminum is produced. It is estimated that the Belo Monte dam will produce 11,223 megawatts of energy, making it the third largest hydroelectric facility in the world. The lion's share of the energy produced at Belo Monte is expected to be used in smelting facilities at Carajás, Jurutí, and Alumar. Excess energy will supply local communities and be transmitted to Sao Paulo and southeast Brazil.²

The dam's advocates point out that infrastructure improvements are vital to the development of Brazil's national economy. Further, they argue that hydroelectric energy generation is far more environmentally friendly than energy based on fossil fuels. Others are concerned that the Belo Monte dam will flood some 400 square kilometers of the Amazon and that the construction of reservoirs controlling the flow of water to the dam may lead to substantially reduced water levels on large portions of the Xingu River.

The indigenous people of several tribes practice traditional lifestyles, consisting of subsistence farming, fishing, and hunting along the Xingu River. The flooding and rerouting of the Xingu is expected to displace between 20,000 and 40,000 such people. The Brazilian government has plans to relocate the people of the Xingu, but this relocation has been rejected by many indigenous people. Some 18 tribes representing 9 ethnic groups collectively oppose the development of the Belo Monte dam and the relocation that this development entails.

James Cameron sums up the dilemma posed by the Belo Monte dam as a "quintessential example of the type of thing we are showing in 'Avatar'—the collision of a technological civilization's vision for progress at the expense of the natural world and the cultures of the indigenous people that live there."³ Modern Brazilians value the generation of electricity and the technological resources that this electricity makes possible. However, Brazilians participating in traditional cultures have little interest in the technological advances that electricity makes possible and appear to be harmed by the damming of rivers in an effort to produce power. One wonders whether the tensions between modern and traditional cultures are reconcilable.

¹ Alan Duke, "James Cameron joins real-life 'Avatar' battle," *CNN*, Apr. 20, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/04/20/james.cameron.rain.forest/index.html>.

² "Brazil: Belo Monte Dam," *Amazon Watch*, http://www.amazonwatch.org/amazon/BR/bmd/index.php?page_number=99 (last accessed Aug. 1, 2010).

³ Alexei Barrionuevo, "Tribes of Amazon Find an Ally Out of 'Avatar,'" *The New York Times*, Apr. 10, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/11/world/americas/11brazil.html>.

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