

Interview¹

Vanda Witoto²

Fierce ant from the Amazon

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We were greeted by her, Vanda Witoto, at the gate of her house in Parque das Tribos in Manaus, Amazonas. With a broad smile, a straw hat, and a fiber necklace with a red pendant of seeds and feathers, she invited us inside. We passed through a yard with several plants and remnants of construction materials. Further up, on the right, there was a wooden deck with graffiti in the background and a greenish hammock that stretched across the entire length of the area. We were invited to sit at a table with chairs and try the freshly prepared açaí amidst the palm leaves. Vanda sat in the hammock and started to tell us about that place, about the structural reforms they had managed to make, about the house next to her parents'. She spoke

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about how she mobilized the community to assist, in the best way possible, the relatives of the various ethnic groups that live in the neighborhood during the COVID-19 calamity. A calm and strong voice. Attentive to our questions, she explained about the sewing workshop we could see in the background. Derequine, in reference to the leafcutter ant. Fashion was a very important marker for us because handicrafts are the authentic form of Indigenous expression, and during the pandemic, women could no longer sell their products, which include basketry, ceramics. Art opens the path to enter places where we don't go. And so, the atelier was born, which sews ancestral fashion, with clothing, with graphics. My mother learned to sew in Amaturá, where I was born in Aldeia Colônia. *Originally, my people are from Colombia, but due to the historical violence caused by the exploitation of rubber, there was a process of escape to survive that intertwined with religion, with the imposition of the Portuguese language, which destroys culture and produces an erasure. More than fifty thousand Witotos were killed. Our elders didn't speak to us in our Witoto language. They didn't want us to be Witoto anymore, so that we wouldn't remember all the violence they suffered. On the outskirts, you don't say you're Indigenous. The way to survive was to forget everything. But in this territory, we strengthen ourselves with other relatives. When I came to Manaus, I worked as a maid to have housing and food. You can imagine everything I went through, but it was mostly because I faced a lot of prejudice. And even so, I didn't stop studying. My father always encouraged me to finish high school so I could get a better job. A teacher recommended her for a position in a pastry shop, and there, the owner encouraged her to take management courses at the same time she began studying to become a nursing technician. I started to imagine myself at university. The courses in the health field were full-time, and I couldn't afford them. So, I wanted to do pedagogy. A friend told me that at UEA⁶ I could enroll through the indigenous quota. I was accepted in the first place, but to enroll, I needed the Indigenous Birth*

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Registration (Rani), a document I did not know and that raised many questions about my origins. The document had my name – Derequine –, and it was about my people: Witoto. So, I asked my father why we didn't speak the language and why I didn't know anything about our history. And that's how I came to know more about myself and my ancestry, how my grandmother fled by canoe, and how I got here to be talking to you today. When asked about her experience at university that made her the woman she is today, she replied: at the beginning of classes I introduced myself to the class with my white name "Vanderlecia Ortega", but after a classmate presented himself with his whole body painted, greeted his classmates in his mother tongue and said he was Francisco Maricaua, I didn't feel alone anymore. I asked to reintroduce myself and said Vanda Witoto. From then on, I began to strengthen Indigenous identities that were erased and to perceive the university as a territory. I recognized myself as Indigenous at 27 years old. My journey is mine, but it belongs to many people along with me. Today I am a leader, and I know that they place a lot of hope in me. And that's why I develop work with the children here so that they all recognize themselves as Indigenous, know this, and are proud of where they come from. We don't need to be tutored; we need to know who we are and believe in the capabilities we have. We need public policies based on our way of life that guarantee the preservation of our forests and dignity for our people. We spent three hours listening to her story. We were in front of a divinity. Witoto.

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