



HELENA

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A RIKBATSA WOMAN

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The first rays of sun brighten up the waters of Juruena river, at the Rikbaktsa territory in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. A smell of baked fish inebriates the small wooden house decorated with feathers and traditional crafts. Helena, a Rikbaktsa elder, prepares breakfast with the fish that was caught in the night before.



Helena calls her friends to finish a headdress that represents her clan. Rikbaktsa people are known by the beauty of its traditional crafts such as headdresses, necklaces, earrings made with seeds and bones according to its cultural meaning. "You gotta be very skilled, it's true.", says Helena, while her friend Rosa shows a finished headdress. "But all the headdresses must be equal. Otherwise, they can be beautiful but not culturally important."





"I do everything I can to make sure everything is ok: that the men are already in the jungle looking for animals... we use the animals for everything, is not only to eat! Unlike the white people, we know that if we take something from the forest, we need to make sure that nothing will be wasted. A life was lost after all", says Helena.



"While they are
in the jungle,
I'm here.
Washing the
dishes,
preparing the
food, gathering
all the
materials they
need to
produce our
tools".

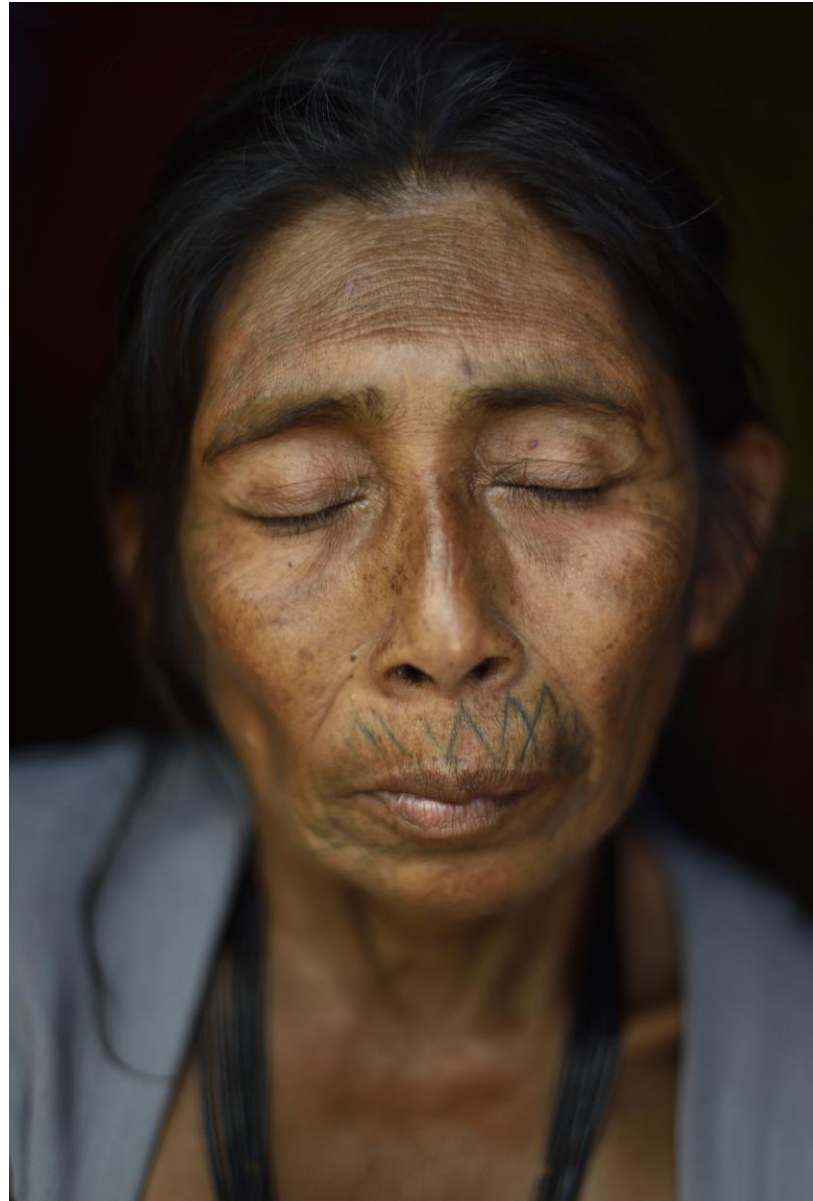


I tell the children that they need to understand our culture, that they need to know how to make our crafts. This is what matters. It's not only because it's beautiful, but there is a reason behind it."





“There are non-indigenous who see indigenous peoples with their body painting and ask if that is a tattoo.”, says Olga, an elder Rikbaktsa woman. “Most of the cases is not, it’s urucum and jenipap. Urucum is the red tint, jenipap is the black one.”



"But do you see these drawings on my face? These are tattoos."

One of the ethnicity's most unique traditions that has almost been vanished is the practice of 'tattooing' girls faces.

Helena tells me how she had her face marked when she was young. "I don't know how many years I had. I don't even know how many years I have now! My dad said I used to be a naughty girl and decided to mark me so I could be quieter. He picked up some bones of a little squirrel that lives in the jungle, prepared an ink with some herbs and jenipap and started drawing. All I remember is that it was really painful. I had to stay locked inside the house for many days. I was forbidden to eat meat and to drink anything hot. I think his plan worked because I became a good girl after that!" Parents used to mark her daughters faces as a punishment but also as a rite of passage. Nowadays only four 'tattooed' women are alive as no one wants to mark her daughters faces anymore.



"How old am I? I have no idea."

Helena laughs when someone asks her age. "I think I have more than forty. But time doesn't matter. What matters is what we are doing with our time." she says. "I tell the children that they need to

understand our culture, that they need to know how to make our crafts. This is what matters. It's not only because it's beautiful, but there is a reason behind it." "It's sad that there aren't many women with the tattoos anymore.", says Helena

I mean, sad until a certain point, I don't want the girls to suffer the same way we did in the past."

