FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF PROGRESS: DEATH TO THE INDIANS IN BRAZIL

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Indians in Latin America have been more or less continuously affected by drastically declining populations after first contact with Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[1] Brazilian Indians prove to be no exception to this rule.[2]

Pedro Alvares Cabral discovered Brazil in the year 1500 and claimed the land for Portugal. Pero Vaz de Caminha, the ship's chronicler, sent back glowing reports of the riches and promises of the new land. Page after page Caminha described the local inhabitants who impressed him with their beauty, manners and generosity.[3] Caminha's letters encouraged Voltaire to formulate his theory of the Noble Savage which was to have such a profound effect on Brazilian literature and Brazilian/Old World relationships. Well, that phase in the relations between the Portuguese and the first Brazilians was soon over and the Europeans got down to business; to Christianize and to exploit the riches of the new land.[4] The Europeans proceeded with great vigor to exploit the new land and the new people in a way common to the mentality of sixteenth century Europe. The Indians were enslaved, Brazil wood was discovered and the search for precious minerals was on.

Unfortunately for the Indians, a great many died due to the harshness of slavery, the introduction of European diseases, armed conflict, and wide-scale massacres.[5]

Many of the remaining Indians were able to survive, at least for the time being, because of the inaccessibility of the Amazon backlands. This area (see map) was the size of Europe and was bordered to the south by a half million square miles of thicket and swampland. Except for the rivers, some of which were impossible to navigate, the area was completely isolated. One expert on the Brazilian Indians, Edwin Brooks, who accompanied the Aborigines Protection Society to Brazil in 1972, suggests that many Indians retreated into the remote Amazon rain forests under pressure from the original Portuguese invasion of the sixteenth century.[6]

Therefore, up until the late nineteenth century when rubber was exploited in Brazil and quite recently when the Brazilian government decided to start a massive road-building venture through the Amazon regions, the Indian resident of these backlands lived relatively undisturbed. Now, nearly five hundred years after the first Portuguese invasion of Brazil, Amazon Indians, located chiefly but not exclusively in the Mato Grosso, are suffering tremendous declines for virtually the same reasons as did sixteenth century Indians: disease, armed conflict and greed for land and minerals. These factors, together with other more subtle ones such as

government corruption and policy, combine to bring cultural destruction and frequently death to present-day Amazon Indians.

I would like to first review some of the difficulties in researching this paper. "Since 1964 two military governments have curtailed the free flow of news (in Brazil)."[7] Problems of censorship and suppression of information increased the difficulties in writing this paper.[8] When combined with the formidable obstacles of non-familiarity with Spanish or Portuguese these problems become significant.

Estimates of pre-Columbian Indian population in Brazil range from one to six million.[9] These approximations are very preliminary as very little data can be used. The Handbook on South American Indians, published in 1948, concludes:

> For the Tropical Forest and Circum-Caribbean, we have few contemporary estimates. The earliest available figure may be anywhere from 50-200 years after the tribe was first contacted by whites; disease, warfare, slaving, cultural and racial assimilation, and other factors already reduced the population by half or more and in some cases virtually wiped them out.[10]

Whatever figures are accepted, though, it is clear the Brazilian Indian has suffered tremendous population losses.

The present-day Indian population of Brazil is estimated from 50,000 to 200,000, although the later figure is almost certainly overly generous.[11] Tremendous population declines have occurred not only in the sixteenth century but also towards the later part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, from the rubber booms to the present road-building marathons.

A survey published in 1957 by one of Brazil's leading anthropolgists and social historians, Darcy Ribeiro, shows that a large number of Brazil's Indian tribes have been completely exterminated in the last fifty and some odd years.[12] A list calculating the 230 known tribes in 1900 identifies tribes in four stages of integration: isolated, intermittent contact, and integrated. Another list for 1957 shows the same 230 tribes, using the same stages of integration, with the addition of a fifth category--extinct. 87 tribes out of the original 230 are listed in this most recent category, all having disappeared since 1900. The actual decrease in population was from 500,000 to 80,000.[13] Since Ribeiro's survey in 1957 Indian population has continued to decline and is now estimated to be nearer to 50,000.[14] In 1969 Ribeiro predicted there would not be a single Indian left alive in Brazil by 1980.[15] Such pronouncements underlie the stunningly catastrophic Indian population declines and its grim prospects for the future.

Probably the single most cause of these population declines is disease. As Darcy Ribeiro puts it, "The principal cause of decline in the size of Indian groups is disease due to contact with the civilized population...Disease is always the leading factor in the declining of indigenous populations. The history of relations between whites and Indians is largely a chronicle of epedemic and death."[16]

In sixteenth century Brazil it is doubtful that the Portuguese knew exactly what was responsible for the drastic population declines among the Indians. Today, with modern technology and advances in medicine, we are able to diagnose and treat such diseases as smallpox, measles and influenza, cutting deaths to a minimal level. A report presented to the Pan American Health Organization in June, 1968, by Willard R. Centerwall, concerning disease among Indians in Brazil and Venezuela, concludes that, given proper medical care, Indian deaths from measles and tuberculosis could be significantly reduced.[17] Why then isn't this medical care being provided?

An International Red Cross medical fact-finding mission found that as late as 1970 that the rapid decline of Indian populations in areas of contact with outsiders was due to imported diseases. The three doctor team discovered many shortcomings in the medical services provided by the government agency charged with protection of the Indians. The doctors recommended a two stage program designed to control contacts of the Indians with other groups and to immunize them against measles, smallpox, tuberculosis, and influenza.[18] Already in 1946 in the area that was later to become Xingu National Park, all people entering the area were given a medical examination.[19] By not limiting contacts between Indians and whites the government might as well be signing the Indian's death certificate.

Darcy Ribeiro, who worked as an anthropologist for the

Indian Protection Service for a number of years and is a life member of the National Council for the Protection of the Indians, recommended over thirteen years ago that "the nation has therefore a specific responsibility, which should be officially recognized, to help the Indians against the ills which it passes to them and which cannot be resisted with the medical resources of the tribe alone."[20] Without delving into why the Brazilian government has not acknowledged its medical responsibilities and taken prompt action to insure the survival of the Indians, this paper does pose the question because whether it is lack of information as in sixteenth century Brazil or government indifference in the twentieth century, it still represents death to the Indian.[21]

Armed conflict has been and is a principal factor in the decline of Indian populations in Brazil. To comprehend the vastly superior military capability of even the sixteenth century Portuguese, who confronted Indians armed largely with bows, using cannons and other forms of gunpowder staggers the mind and sickens the stomach. Even today civilizados confront tribes such as the Kreen-Akarores or the Cinta Largas with dynamite, helicopters and machine-guns when faced with stone-age weapons.[22] The results are predictable as Darcy Ribeiro concludes: "Given the disparity between the two parties in confrontation, the Indians can deter the pioneering fronts only for a time, at a tremendous cost in terms of their own

population. The deterrent is successful only until indigenous resistance has stimulated a concentration of forces capable of advancing on the Indians like andirresistable avalanche."[23]

The Brazilian government itself, released a report in March of 1968 listing over 1,000 charges against government officials supposedly protecting the Indian. The charges ranged from massacre to murder and torture of Indians.[24]

Often times other Indians are bribed to attack a troublesome tribe as was tried with the Kayabis against the Cinta Largas or the Mundurucos against the Muras in Rondonia.[25] Frequently, tribes will fight each other as a displaced tribe, forced out of its habitat under pressure from advancing whites, will encroach upon another's land.[26]

The number of Indians killed by armed conflict is extremely difficult to estimate, especially because of the remoteness of the area in which they live and the problem cited in footnotes seven and eight. Also, these deaths are inter-related with other causes of death. The Xavantes, who lived in central Mato Grossoaand who numbered more than 5,000 just a century ago, are an example. They resisted most fiercely the encroachment of white civilization. Marvene Howe, a New York Times reporter, wrote in 1974 that the Xavante population had declined to less than 500 and attributed the decline to internal fighting, disease and battles with settlers.[27] In late 1973 the chief of the Xavantes threatened to go to war because Xavante land was being invaded by settlers and land-

owners despite government promises to the Xavantes. In October of 1973, three Xavantes were assassinated by local ranchers. The situation remains critical as the Indians have squared off against the large landowners who refuse to leave.[28]

Anthropologist Enrique Gorostiaga commented in Latim America, 'Even if the hostile attitude of the Indians is justified, it will serve as a pretext for the landowners to exterminate them completely.'[29]

The most senseless and the most enduring of the causes for Indian population declines was and is the greed for land and minerals. Darcy Ribeiro, commenting in the International Labor Review states,"The discovery of any element suitable for exploitation--a stand of rubber trees, mineral ores, essence-yielding plants or of any area suitable for a particular crop sounds the Indian's death-knell: they are evicted or massacred on the spot."[30] Whether it was gold to the sixteenth century Portuguese or bauxite for ALCOA hundreds of thousands of Indians have suffered invasion of their lands and often times death.

The Portuguese set up sugar plantations soon after their arrival and enslaved the Indians to work for them. So, not only were the Indians put off their lands, but they were also put in bondage. "The processes of murder and enslavement slowed down during the next three centuries, but did so because there were fewer Indians left to murder and enslave...The loss of life is said to have been greater than that involved in the slave trade with Africa."[31]

The rubber boom of the late 1800's and early 1900's was extremely devastating to Indian populations in the interior of Brazil. Sir Roger Casement exposed the fact that over 30,000 Indians had been virtually murdered by the British-owned Peruvian Amazon Company in the lust for borracão or the gum from the rubber tree.[32]

Orlando and Claudio Villas Boas, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1971 for their work among the Xingu Indians of northern Mato Grosso, were recently forced to retire from the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI). Orlando summarized his life's work:

> The whole of the center of Brazil, as impenetrable as it is, has been ransacked by the whites. You already know about the misery of the serigueiro (rubber gatherers) and the slaughter of the Indians...All this for relatively paltry results, for a few thousand tons of poor quality rubber, a few handfuls of diamonds, a few pinches of gold. Yes, I've been beaten by the lust for wealth.[33]

The Tchikaos were cited by the London Times: "Ten years ago there were 400 Tchikaos, but in 1966 they were overrun by diamond prospectors who shot every Indian they met. Now only 53 survive in Xingu Park."[34]

Case after case of ruthless murders, illegalities and crimes of every sort were committed against the Indians in the exploitation of land and minerals. A document released by a

group of Brazilian anthropologists at the XLI Congress of Americanists in Mexico City lists some of the latest Indian sacrifices on the altars of inhumanity.[35] From the Jurunas to the Tembes, the treadmill of lust for land and minerals continues as Brazil's vaunted new highway system spreads through the Amazon jungles, bringing access to minerals for some and death and cultural destruction to others.[36]

Chief Aidji of the Bororos recently told a visitor, "The main enemy of the Bororos is white civilization, diseases, and greed for land."[37]

This researcher feels incompetant to conclude the true motives of the Brazilian government in the building of the costly road system which has been described as the road that starts at nowhere and goes to nowhere. It is clear, though, that the government is falling woefully short of fulfilling its own stated mission of protecting the Indians.

> FUNAI's mission is a dual one. First, it pacifies hostile Indians so that Brazil, an underdeveloped nation, may extract the riches of its vast wilderness area as efficiently and painlessly as possible. Second, it protects the Indian it pacifies against the harmful aspects of our civilization with which they cannot cope.[38]

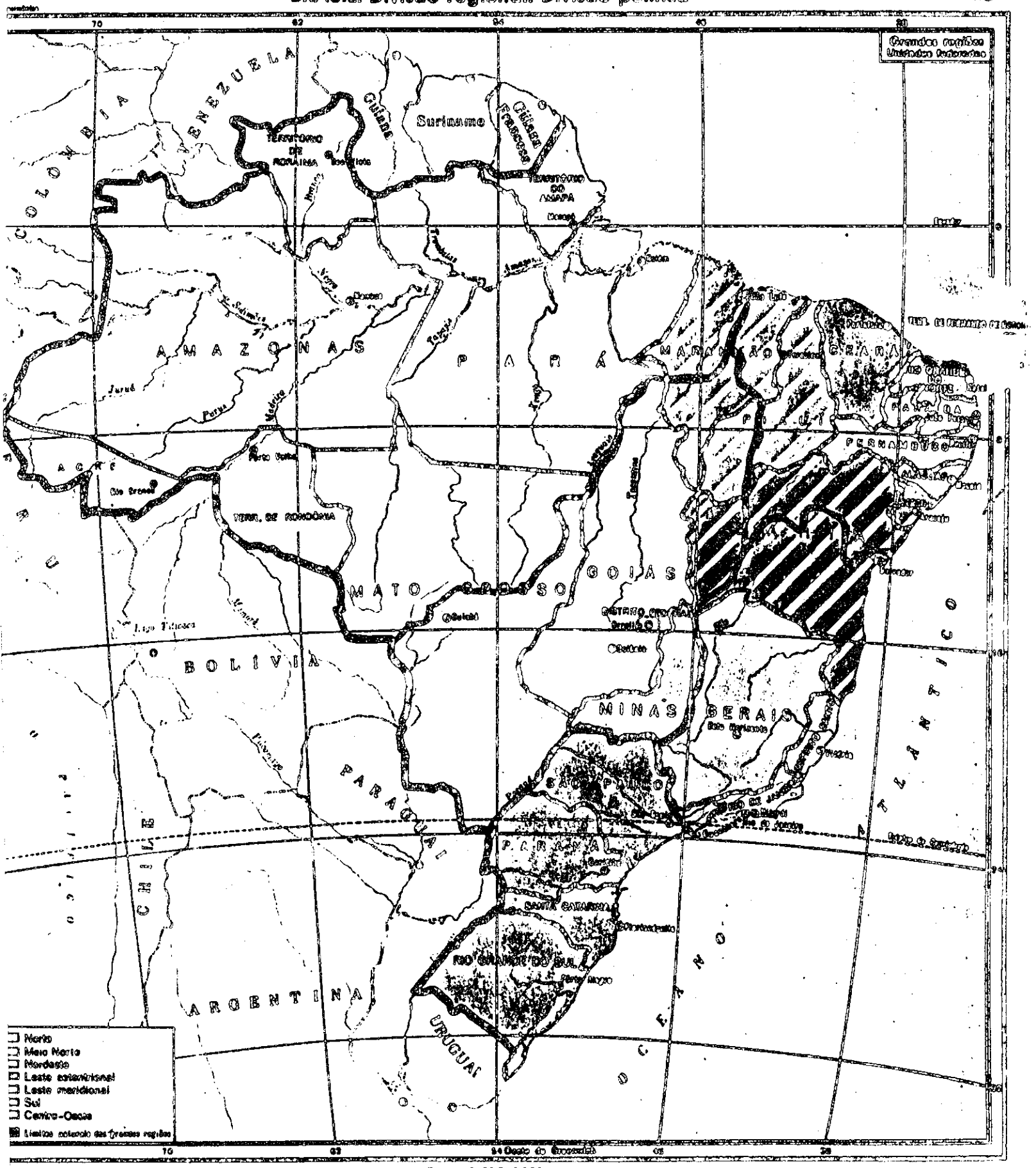
It would appear that the Indians need some protection against their "protector."

And so the wheel of time revolves in Brazil as five hundred years of Indian/white relation melt into history.

The diseases brought by Europeans continue to decimate Indian people. The massacres and slavery of the sixteenth century make way for the programmed destruction of the 1900's. The greed for gold is superseded by the greed for bauxite and Indian populations continue to dwindle rapidly. And so it goes.....

As Robin Hanbury-Tenison states, "If we, who call ourselves civilized, deserve the name at all, then we should no longer seek to destroy all the products of other cultures in the blind rush for material prosperity. Doing so will only hasten our own destruction."[39]

BRASIL. Divisão regional. Divisão política



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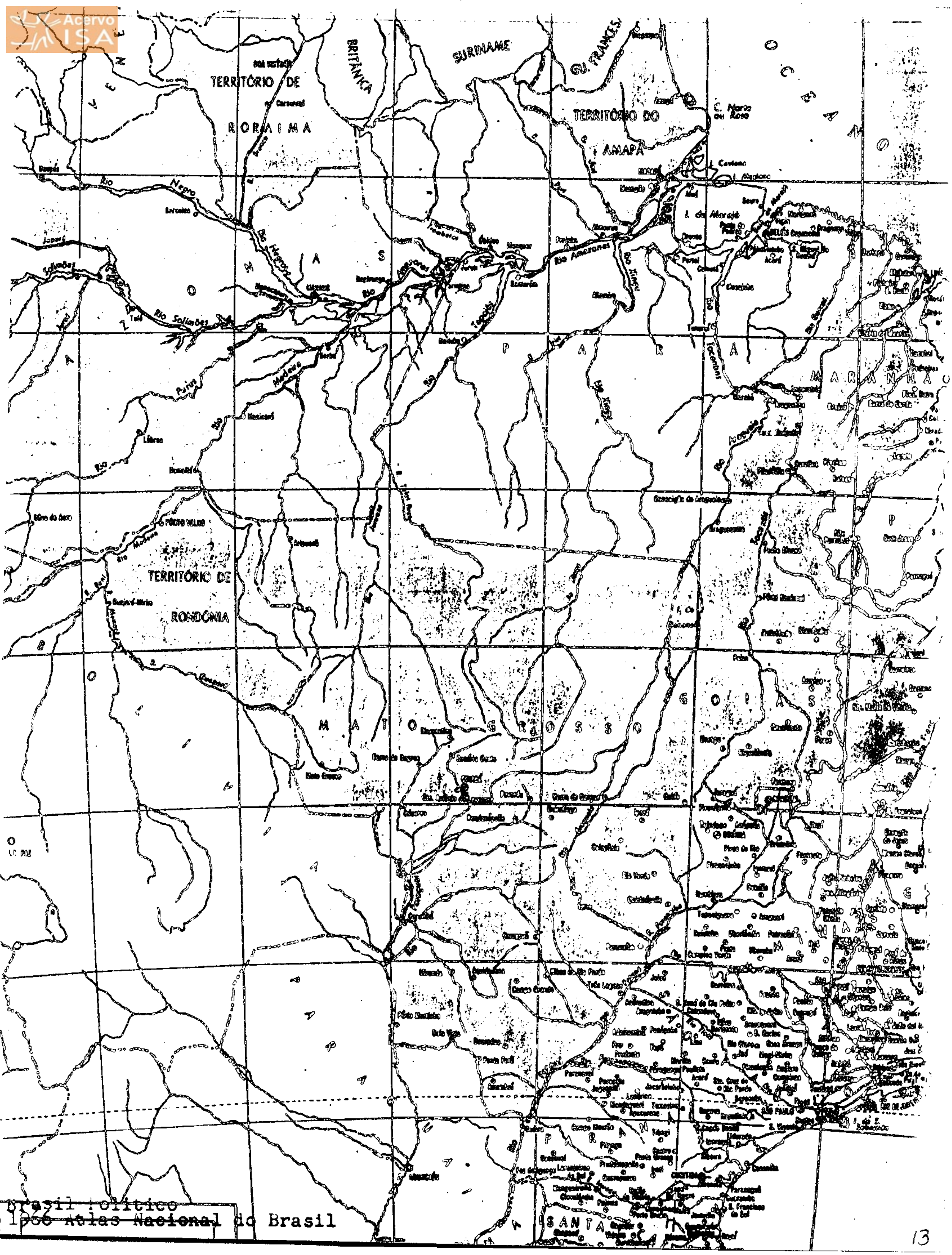

Brasil Político
1966 Atlas Nacional do Brasil

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ward Barrett, "A Review of the History of Population Decline after the Conquest," Lecture presented at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, January 7, 1975

[2]It is exceptional, though, that so many Indians in Brazil, located mainly in the Amazon rain forests, have survived until quite recently, virtually untouched by "civilization."

[3]Norman Lewis, "Genocide," The Sunday Times, London, 23 February, p. 43

[4]Russell Hamilton, "A Review of Brazilian Literature," Lecture presented at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, March 4, 1975

[5]Julian H. Steward, "The Native Population of South America," The Handbook of South American Indians, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Smithsonian Institute, 1949), pp. 668

[6]Edwin Brooks, "Twilight of Brazilian Tribes," Geographic Magazine, January, 1973, p. 306

[7]John C. Merrill, C.R. Bryan, M. Alisky, The Foreign Press: (Louisiana State University Press), 1970, p. 203

[8]Censorship in Brazil
"Habeas Corpus," Latin America, 17 January 1975, pp. 21-22
"Riding Over the Indians," Brazilian Information Bulletin, Winter, 1974, pp. 14-15

[9]Estimates range from A)1,100,000 B)1,000,000-4,000,000 C)3,000,000-6,000,000 D)4,000,000
A)Steward, p. 666
B)"Brazil: The Indians' last stand," Latin America, 14 February 1975, p. 54
C)Lewis, p. 41
D)W. Jesco von Puttkamer, "Requiem for a Tribe?", National Geographic, February, 1975, pp. 256-257

[10]Steward, p. 657

[11]Estimates of present-day population A)50,000 B)68,100-99,700 C)100,000 D)100,000-200,000
A) Robin Hanbury-Tenison, A Question of Survival: (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York), 1973, p. 264

B) Darcy Ribeiro, Indians in Brazil in the Twentieth Century: (Institute for Cross-Cultural Research, Washington, D.C.), 1967, p. 115
C) Brooks, P. 306
D) Marvene Howe, "For a Brazil Tribe, A New Will to Live," New York Times, 2 August 1974, p. 29

[12]Ribeiro, Indians, pp. 81-90

[13]Hanbury-Tenison, p. 264

[14]Ibid.

[15]Lewis, P.59

[16]Darcy Ribeiro, "Social Integration of Indigenous Populations in Brazil," International Labor Review, May, 1962, p. 469, April, 1962, p. 341

[17]Willard R. Centerwall, "Biomedical Challenges Presented by the American Indian: A Recent Experience with Measles in a 'Virgin-Soil' Population (Pan American Health Organization, Sept., 1968), pp. 77-81

[18]"Red Cross Says Aid is Needed by Indian in Amazon Urgently," New York Times, 23 February 1971, p. 2

[19]Noel Nutels, "Medical Problems of Newly Contacted Indian Groups" (Pan American Health Organization, Sept., 1968), p. 70 (See Footnote #17)

[20]Ribeiro, Integration, p. 469

[21]Being unfamiliar with Portuguese this writer feels severely limited in commenting on Brazilian political matters.

[22]Lewis, pp. 51-53
Lucien Bodard, Green Hell: (Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, New York), 1971 p. 287
Puttkamer, Requiem, p. 256
Indigena, Inc., "Supysaua," A Documentary Report on the Conditions of Indian Peoples in Brazil, Berkeley, Calif., p. 37

[23]Ribeiro, Indians in Brazil, p. 114

[24]Lewis, p. 41
"Brazil's Vanishing Indians," Newsweek, 3 July 1972, p. 26

[25]Lewis, p. 51
Bodard, pp. 165-166

[26]Steward, pl 668

[27]Marvene Howe, "Brazil's Xavantes Live Uneasily on Frontier's Fringe," New York Times, 4 August 1974, p. 29

[28]"Brazil: Indian Drums," Latin America, 16 November 1973

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ribeiro, Integration, April, p. 334

[31]Lewis, p. 43

[32]Indigena, p. 36
Lewis, p. 44
Bodard, pp. 90-91

[33]Bodard, pl 155

[34]Lewis, p. 36

[35]Indigena, "Supysaus," pp. 35-41

[36]Ibid., 56-59

[37]Marvene Howe, New York Times, 2 August 1974, p. 29

[38]W. Jesco von Puttkamer, "Brazil Protect Her Cintas Largas," National Geographic, September, 1971, p. 421

[39]Hanbury-Tenison, p. 11

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