

Latinamericanist

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
 CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES
 GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

VOLUME 14, NUMBER 2
 MARCH 29, 1979
 JOHN McSHANE, EDITOR

CEDI - P. I. B.
DATA 15/10/79
COD 101722

The Issue of Brazilian Indian Self-Determination

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The Brazilian government is currently reviewing the legal status of the Brazilian Indian. In October of 1978, the Minister of the Interior, Mauricio Rangel Reis, submitted a proposal to the President of Brazil, Ernesto Geisel, concerning a re-evaluation of the constitutional definition of Indian tribes and the eventual termination of official protection of Indian lands. Due to opposition from Brazilian anthropologists and from an international community of researchers, the Minister of the Interior has retreated from his original timetable for ending the official protection of Indian territories and is presently revising his proposition. This proposition, to be presented to the new president at some unspecified date, is being formulated without input from Brazilian social scientists, Funai (Brazilian Indian Protection Agency) personnel, Indian pacifiers, and, most important, the Indians themselves. Instead, the Justice Ministry and the National Security Council are drawing up the decree.

The question of protection of Indian lands is problematic in that Brazil is attempting to integrate the interior of the country into the national economic and political system while at the same time making an effort to minimize the impact of development on the aboriginal groups which are most seriously affected by the process. In this paper, the above conflict is stated as an assumption rather than questioned, since it is doubtful whether development in the interior of Brazil can be retarded or halted at this point in time. Therefore, discussion will be focused upon the means for maximizing Indian input into the policy formulations that affect them and their cultural and biological destiny.

Clearly, partial or total self-determination of Brazilian Indians is a critical issue. Yet, the views of the Indians themselves concerning the land, subsistence, trade, and health problems they are currently confronting are generally unknown. What is needed at this time is the conception and implementation of a strategy to: (a) develop a socio-political base of problem awareness and decision-making among

Indians; (b) convey their opinions and recommendations to the government and the media in order to publicize them in a manner which will provide the widest possible consideration and impact. *At most*, the realization of these goals will enable the Brazilian Indians to participate alongside the national society in planning for the developmental changes which affect the areas in which they live. *At least*, it will allow for Indian peoples to register protests and to solicit support on their own terms from the *civilizados* (non-Indians) who currently represent them.

Brazilian Indians number approximately 100,000. Each group is in a different phase of culture change having been in contact with *civilizado* culture for different lengths of time and to different degrees. Not only are their contact histories different, but their cultures are also dissimilar in terms of subsistence patterns and socio-political adaptations. Due to this diversity, only one group of Indians will be discussed in order to focus on the concrete problems that will affect the realization of the proposed strategy.

The southern Xingu Park will represent a case study for the development of a strategy concerning consensus formation among Indians and information dissemination to the wider national unit. This park is located in Mato Grosso, Central Brazil. Its area is 15,000 square kilometers at this time although an additional 7,000 square kilometers to the north are currently under litigation due to the construction of a road through the Park. The Indians clustered in the Park are generally culturally homogeneous but linguistically diverse having lived in the area since at least 1884 when they were contacted by a German explorer-ethnographer. They are slash and burn horticulturalists who grow manioc, bananas, maize, beans, and a variety of fruits in the fields that surround their villages. Their main protein source is fish which they secure from the many lagoons and rivers that exist in the Park. In the southern part of the Park, Post Leonardo Villas-Boas is located. This Indian Post is the residence of the Funai

administrator of the area. However, it serves other important purposes, providing health care facilities for the ill, dental care facilities, Portuguese instruction, and a communal kitchen where Indians can be hired to work. Ostensibly, the Indians who work in the kitchen learn to prepare *civilizado* foods. However, the administrators of the Park perceive working in the kitchen as participation in the Brazilian culture at a minimum level. For example, at the Post differences in perception of time and scheduling are communicated, the opportunity to learn and practice Portuguese in a systematic manner exists, and numerous occasions to meet and talk to Brazilian *civilizados* occur. In addition, the Indian is paid for his labor in the kitchen with radios, batteries, pans, and cloth which are brought back to the village and distributed.



Manioc is one of the staple foods for the Xinguano Indians. It is cultivated by slash and burn horticulture in the fields around the village. After cleaning and processing the tubers, the women roast the flour on a ceramic griddle over a slow fire. These griddles are secured through the Xinguano trade network.

Three important obstacles to the development of a united socio-political base exist in the Xinguano area. They include the problems of multilingualism, tribal autonomy and separatism, and issue awareness. These problems will be discussed separately below. In addition, resolutions to the problems will be offered.

The Xinguano area is occupied by a number of linguistically distinct groups. Arawak, Tupi, Carib, and independent language families are represented by the different tribes. Within each language family, tribes with mutually intelligible dialects exist. However, in any discussion of constructing a broad communication-action network, the inability of tribes to communicate with each other verbally must be counted as a most serious impediment. An obvious solution would be the development of Portuguese as a lingua franca which would allow not only for communication between tribes but for increased interaction between Indians, and non-Indians such as Park-administrators and journalists. Portuguese instruction is offered at the Post; however, attendance is sporadic, and the impact of the program has been minimal in that only thirty-three Portuguese speakers have been counted among the Indians. The most serious problems with the program seem to be the distance of the place of instruction from many of the villages, the length of time that must be spent away from the village and the fields while undergoing instruction, and the inability of the Portuguese instructor to speak the Indian

languages.

Due to the fact that the Xingu area is linguistically diverse and that a lingua franca, logically Portuguese, must evolve prior to the construction of a socio-political foundation, a method must be devised so that this lingua franca can be effectively taught to, at least, the *chefes* in each of the tribal villages. A Brazilian Portuguese instructor cannot be expected to learn some four or five separate Indian languages and then travel from village to village teaching Portuguese. Therefore, the alternative that is offered here is that the anthropologists and linguists who are already working in the area and who return on a regular basis for research purposes be tapped by the Portuguese instruction program. These researchers who speak the languages of the groups they are studying can be used to provide a more complete and continuous instruction than is currently available to those who cannot leave their villages for lengthy periods of time. A flexible system that will combine personal research in addition to language instruction can be worked out between the researcher and the Park administration. In addition, a program of goals and methods can be devised by the Post instructor and the researcher in order to furnish continuity within the village-specific situation. That is, usually Funai officials do not allow more than one researcher in a village at a time. Thus, researcher presence is staggered through time. Goals and methods by researcher as well as by periods of time can be coordinated by the Post instructor in order to maximize impact of researcher presence and instruction.

A second series of related obstacles to the development of a firm socio-political base in the Xingu are village autonomy, geographic distance between villages, and tribal separatism. The Xingu area may be integrated on a cultural basis, which is certainly an important factor in political integration; however, conflict between groups and perceived tribal differences are still highly visible and represent obstacles to the unification of the Xinguanos into a political entity.

An infrastructure that can be employed to integrate the area more extensively than it is now already exists in the southern Xingu area. This infrastructure includes ordered spheres of economic exchange, kinship relations, and ritual festivities. The spheres have been extremely important in the past in binding the area together in a manner that prevents the escalation of hostilities into raiding and warfare among the groups. These networks can now be built upon in an effort to fully concretize relations between the autonomous villages.

For example, economic trade spheres are wide networks in which balanced and generalized exchange occur between villages on a regular basis. In balanced and generalized exchange, the returns on a traded object are either delayed with value deemphasized or immediate and equal in value. In both forms of exchange, the economic factor is minimized in that one consciously avoids taking advantage of one's trading partner, or maximizing one's returns. Instead, the social variable is stressed. One visits with one's partner, shares their food, plays soccer with them, and refers to them by a special term that connotes a particularly intimate relationship. In addition, trading partners who interact for many years establish their sons or daughters as special trading partners, in effect creating a permanent economic link between two villages.

These economic spheres of exchange are not the only means by which villages are connected. They are also related by kinship. In the past, Xingu tribes were predominantly endogamous in that they married within the group. However, as depopulation of the area took place and potential marriage partners became increasingly scarce, marriages between tribes took place more frequently. Now substantial numbers of so-called foreigners live in each village. Their presence necessitates frequent visits from their kin as well as the observation of in-law labor and gift-giving obligations. These marital ties and the behaviors associated with marriage constitute another powerful link between villages.

In addition, a number of important festivities take place in the southern part of the Xingu. During these celebrations, larger numbers of tribes congregate in order to commemorate the dead, mark puberty rites of passage, solemnize marriages, and practice sports. The advent of these festivals is usually announced by a messenger who visits each village inviting them to attend the event. Upon the messengers departure, leaders in the village go to the central plaza and discuss the proposition. A consensus is achieved in the village concerning action to be taken, and the invitation is either accepted or rejected. If it is accepted, pledges for contributions and gifts to the host village are made.

In developing a strong political base in the Xingu that will allow for the generation of opinions and recommendations based upon consensus of tribes, the economic, ritual, and social infrastructure already in existence must be expanded and solidified. Such features as messengers who announce meetings, kinship and economic cooperation between tribes, and small-group decision-making procedures can be employed in inviting tribal participation in regular conferences held at the Post with Park administrators. At these conferences, important questions concerning land use, subsistence practices, health programs, education, and Indian-non-Indian relations can be discussed, and recommendations formulated.

The question of whether or not Xinguanos, a relatively unsophisticated group when compared to other indigenous peoples of North and South America, would consent to participate in such a conference was answered at the Xinguano forum that took place in September 1977 at Post Leonardo. The forum was ostensibly organized so that the Indians could express their appreciation to a modern dance group which had performed for them. However, the session quickly became a rally during which certain complaints concerning *civilizado* encroachment on Xingu land were expressed.

The third, and final, problem to be discussed here is the absence of Indian awareness concerning the problems they are being confronted with at this time. The vast cultural differences between non-Indian Brazilians and Xinguanos have resulted in the Xinguano's lack of understanding of Brazilian national problems and the social, economic and political forces that lie at their root.

In order to circulate information regarding problems and to assist in their definition and solution, frequent meetings between Park administrators and the Indians in the Xingu are in order. These conferences would be instrumental in defining those areas which threaten the cultural and

biological survival of the Xinguanos. They would also be important for explaining the causes of the problems and, as such, for communicating essential information to the Indians. Due to the fact that the Xinguanos themselves will some day administer the Park, the latter is of the utmost importance.

In addition to regular meetings with the park administrators, peaceful encounters with other Indian groups should be encouraged in an effort to create solidarity between the Xinguanos and other tribes by convincing them that all Indians in Brazil are confronting similar problems. In 1977, a group of Xavante visited the Post to play soccer with some of the Xinguanos. The Xinguanos were extremely curious about these foreigners and attempted to trade with them. Members of the Nafuqua tribe also invited a number of Xavante to their temporary Post quarters for manioc and fish. After they had eaten, a discussion, significantly in Portuguese, ensued concerning subsistence activities and trade items. Apparently, the Xinguanos would be very receptive to visiting and being visited by those groups of Indians such as the Xavante who are now only legends among them.

A third point is less a suggestion than an observation. Most Xinguano villages have at least one transistor radio. Some villages have up to three. These radios have become important sources of information for the Indians in general. Through listening to the hourly news, they are now able to differentiate the President of Brazil, the President of Funai, and large landholding interests, as well as a number of different politico-geographic areas such as Brasilia, Mato Grosso, and some of the important coastal regions. Perhaps it would be wise to encourage the use of these devices by making them, in addition to the batteries on which they operate, easily available to the Indians. It is possible that they may constitute the most important single factor in culture change that is occurring at this time in the Park.



The Nafuqua Indians are one of the Xinguano groups. They reside on the banks of the Ipa Lagoon in a village made up of six long houses. The Nafuqua, Matipu, Kalapalo, and Kuikura Indians live in close proximity and speak mutually intelligible dialects. In terms of size and influence, they comprise an important Xingu faction.

The elimination of impediments to the development of a unified political base in the Xingu area is only the first step in ensuring Indian input into policy. The second step regards communicating those recommendations that emerge from this base to the proper agencies in an effective manner. The

most obvious channel of communication is from the Funai administrators who will meet with the Indians. They can accomplish this goal in three ways: (a) by directly communicating Indian recommendations to their Funai superiors; (b) by employing the media in precipitating necessary confrontations between Funai and the Ministry of the Interior (as was done in the case where direct action had to be taken against certain Air Force personnel living in the Park who were sexually exploiting Indian women); and (c) by taking Xinguano Indians directly to Brasilia to lobby for themselves with senior Funai official.

Journalists are also occasionally present in the Park. Meetings between these journalists and key Indian leaders can be arranged in order to allow for the media to have direct access to these leaders and to question them in detail on their recommendations. These sessions will not only aid in the dissemination of information to the broader national society, it will also be instrumental in focusing the Indian suggestions through the interchange that occurs.

Finally, researchers can be important regulators of information that flows in and out of the Park. At the American Anthropological Association meetings held in 1978, researchers from three continents joined together in an informal committee to provide supportive actions for the Xinguanos. Not only will the committee furnish suggestions on education, health and subsistence programs, but they will contact the media concerning serious problems that endanger the integrity of the Park, publish about the Xinguanos in scientific as well as other types of journals, and apply direct pressure through European, American, and Brazilian organizations upon the Brazilian government concerning administration of indigenous areas.

The Xingu National Park has been used as a case study in determining some of the problems that will be encountered in increasing indigenous peoples input into national Brazilian policy formulations that directly affect their survival. The suggestions are surely not definitive. They are offered in an attempt to initiate a more intense dialogue on a subject that will become increasingly important, critical in fact, as development in the interior of Brazil accelerates.



Suggested Readings

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An introduction to the Writings of José Honório Rodrigues

Gary Miller is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History at the University of Florida. He has a B.A. and M.A. in History from San Diego State University and has done additional work at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain. Mr Miller's research interests are the Spanish and Portuguese empires and the role of the military in the third world.

Social scientists have traditionally demonstrated an ethnocentric bias toward the Third World which in many ways is still very pronounced in the Western world. Recently, however, an increase in the study of Third World history and historians has paralleled global reality. Politically, socially, and economically, Westerners have begun to come to grips with societies that heretofore few understood. The most successful attempts at bridging the cultural gap, at least the most successful from our point of view, have come through interaction with those who are familiar with the so-called developed world and its methods of research and investigation. It is the intent of this essay and selected bibliography to briefly examine the work of one of these social scientists, José Honório Rodrigues.

Professor Rodrigues, perhaps Brazil's most prolific historian, is the author of over sixty books and articles.

Currently he is Executive Director of the Brazilian Institute of International Relations and Professor of Brazilian Economic History in the Faculty of Economic Sciences of the University of Guanabara. In addition to his academic duties he has held several positions with the Brazilian government, is a member of numerous honorary societies, and has served on the editorial boards of several scholarly journals.

Rodrigues was born in 1913 in Rio de Janeiro to descendants of the founders of that city. In many of his works one can detect a prejudice toward his native state. He received his formal education at the University of Brazil, graduating in 1937. As specific courses dealing with history were not part of the curriculum, his historical training is largely self-taught. He is not isolated from world historical trends and their influences are evident in his works. Rodrigues has been influenced by Brazilians such as João Capistrano de