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The Nambiquara

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The Indians called Nambiquara live along an arm of the Parecis Plateau that stretches between the tributaries of the Juruena and the Guaporé as far as the headwaters of the Ji-Paraná and Roosevelt. The plateau slopes gently toward the northeast and falls away abruptly to the southwest, into the Guaporé Valley. The vegetation on the plateau is mainly savanna and scrub country, with a few oases at the sources of streams. The Guaporé Valley is mostly forested and fertile. The Indians live at the interface between savanna and forest, building their villages in the former, but making their gardens in the latter.

The Nambiquara speak three different languages which seem related to nothing but each other. Northern Nambiquara (Mamaindé), which is spoken by the groups numbered 1-9 on the accompanying map, is about 70% cognate in core vocabulary with Southern Nambiquara (groups 10-28). The language of the Sabane (Kolimisí), whose homeland was somewhere north or west of Vilhena, is about 50% cognate with each of these languages (Price 1978).

Before contact, the Nambiquara were divided among some 30 interdependent local groups that lived in ranges varying from about 700 km^2 in the central Guaporé Valley to twice that figure in the savanna on the Parecis Plateau. Each local group consisted of a single village or two or more villages that were closer to each other than to other villages. Where there were several villages, there was no single leader recognized as such by all of them. It was preferable to marry a person of one's own village, or failing that, a nearby village, but when no suitable spouse was

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available, marriages were contracted between villages of different local groups. Boundaries between local groups were usually formed by relatively intransitable aspects of the geography such as rivers, swamps and arid savannas. Members of the local group did not perceive of themselves as a group so much as they were seen as such by others. Their ethnocentrism did not take the form of applauding themselves so much as decrying the errors of their neighbors. As a general rule, they had no name for themselves as a group, although they had names for neighboring groups. In short, local groups were not political entities, but the result of ecological variables which produced pockets of higher population density, whose inhabitants were treated as if they were groups by outsiders.

The first clear reference to the Nambiquara occurs in the report of an expedition led by João Leme do Prado which crossed their lands in 1770. They were called "Tamaré," said to live near the Camararé, and characterized as Indians who "wear no clothes and sleep on the bare ground" (Castelnau 1851:167). During the 19th Century, no one seems to have visited the region, and the Nambiquara, together with the Indians to their southeast and northwest, became known as "Cabishí"--a term that originated as a pejorative used by the Waimaré and Kashinití "Parecí" for the Kozárene. They were rediscovered by Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, who began building a telegraph line through their region in 1907. He mistakenly called them "Nambiquara"--a term that had previously been used for a Jê-speaking people who lived between the Rio do Sangue and the Rio Arinos, who later became known as

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Beiço de Pau. The name stuck, and the "Nambiquara" local groups who lived near the telegraph line came into permenent contact with Western society. Other groups, which lived in the Guaporé Valley, were able to remain independent for another 50 years. Then, in 1960, highway BR-364 was built and Brazilians began to take their lands.

The first ethnographer to study the Nambiquara was Roquette-Pinto, who visited the region in 1912. Lévi-Strauss made a hasty but stimulating investigation in the dry season of 1938. Oberg and Boglar worked with a group of Nambiquara who were visiting the Catholic mission at Utiariti, in 1949 and 1959, respectively. More recently, the Nambiquara have been studied by Aytai, Cook, Price, Aspelin and Setz.

Over the course of time, several different economic motives have brought Westerners to the Nambiquara region. In the 1700s, gold was mined between the Rios Galera and Sararé. African slaves who escaped from the mines raided Indian villages and carried off the women. In the 1830s, the gathering of ipecac (a medicinal herb) became lucerative, and in the region where it grew best (groups 23-28), the practice of raiding Indian villages for food and recreation continued into the mid-20th Century (Cabral 1942). A rubber boom that began with the Second World War and lasted through the 1950s brought about the enslavement of Indians from groups 1-5 and 10-12, and caused groups 19-22 to abandon their villages and gardens and go into hiding in the forest. In the 1970s, large corporations began clearing the forests of the Guaporé Valley and converting the land into pasture for cattle.

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Thousands of Nambiquara have died as a result of contact with Western Civilization, even though there was never any war of conquest. They died in terrible epidemics of new and lethal diseases that Westerners brought into the region. Nambiquara medicine men have a high rate of success in treateing the illnesses with which their patients were traditionally afflicted. But they have no techniques for coping with previously-unknown diseases such as measles, flu and tuberculosis. A contemporary account of the measles epidemic of 1945 states that in some villages there were not enough survivors to bury the dead, who were eaten by dogs and vultures (França 1945).

After 70 years of exposure to Western disease in the virtual absence of Western medicine, there are only about 600 Nambiquara left. All local groups have been reduced to a fraction of their former numbers; some are nearly extinct. Some remnants have coalesced, while others remain in their traditional homelands. Most of the survivors of groups 1-5 and 10-12 live together with the few remaining Sabane in the westernmost corner of the Nambiquara Reservation, just east of Vilhena. According to a recent report, group 6, which numbered about 20 individuals when first contacted in 1977, has been wiped out by measles. Group 7, which hid out until last year, is now in contact with Brazilian settlers. Groups 8 and 9 continue in their traditional areas. Groups 13 and 14 merged for several years, then separated again. Groups 15 and 16 continue to exploit their traditional ranges. Groups 17 and 18 merged and moved east to be under the protection of the Missão Anchieta at Utiariti. One or two survivors

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of group 19 now live with group 20. Between group 20 and group 9 there may be another group that is still evading contact. Group 22 has allied itself with group 21 so as to live on the Hahaintesu Reserve, but it continues to use its traditional range. Group 23 has merged with 24, and 25 with 26. Groups 27 and 28 still live in their traditional homelands.

Protestant missionaries first came to the Nambiquara in 1924. Since then, there have been representatives of the South America Mission, the New Tribes Mission, the Missão Cristã Brasileira and the Wycliffe Bible Translators. Their primary interest has been to evangelize the Indians, and with few exceptions, they have done little to promote the Indians' material well-being.

A couple of short-lived and ineffectual Indian posts were founded in the 1920s. Apart from this, official government intervention in the affairs of the Nambiquara began in 1943, when Post Pyreneus de Souza was founded, with backing from the Rubber Development Corporation, to put the Indians to work extracting rubber for the war effort. In 1968, a reservation was created on top of the plateau, and the FUNAI undertook to remove the Indians from the fertile Guaporé Valley and resettle them within its boundaries. According to reliable sources, José Costa Cavalcanti, who was then Minister of the Interior, had a personal interest in property located in the Guaporé Valley. In 1973, a strip of land between the Rio Camararé and the Rio Doze de Outubro was added to the Reservation. Evidence suggests that this was not done to benefit the Nambiquara so much as to

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put the squeeze on property owners who had land in the area. Within a year and a half, the same FUNAI employees who had caused the strip to be added to the Reservation were negotiating its return to private hands. They also engineered a decree, in 1974, that enjoined further "development" in the area between the Rivers Sararé and Galera until the land problems of the Indians in the Guaporé Valley had been solved. This interdiction was lifted, a little over two years later, even though no solution had been found. Generalizing from these events, one might conclude that official policy has been to ignore the Indians as much as possible, and only make decisions affecting them when a profit can be made at their expense.

Those who have suffered most are the Nambiquara who live in the Guaporé Valley. Least prepared to deal with Western society, they have borne its heaviest impact. In 1970 most of them were leading independent, self-sufficient lives, much as their ancestors had done, on lands that had always been theirs. Within a few years they were crushed by multi-million-dollar agribusinesses that were beyond their power to comprehend. Since they could not even speak Portuguese, they were given little more consideration than the beasts of the forest.

The FUNAI first tried to move local groups from the Guaporé Valley to the Reservation, and then from the central Valley to the "Interdicted Area" at its southern end. In both cases, the Indians walked back home. When the FUNAI realized that it would not be possible to move local groups without making a

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large and long-term commitment of funds and qualified personnel to help them settle into their new homes, it changed direction and adopted a policy of making a tiny, "island" reserve for each local group. Four such reserves were created in 1979; two of them were reduced in size to placate landowners during the course of their demarcation. Other local groups have not yet had even a tiny part of their traditional lands recognized.

Two very capable Indian agents have been working in the area since 1975. Sílbene de Almeida is responsible for groups 19-28, and Marcelo dos Santos is in charge of groups 8 and 9, at the northern end of the Valley, as well as other groups who speak the Northern language (1-5). Unfortunately, much of their effort has been neutralized by the FUNAI's denial of adequate support. From 1975 through 1979, the Indian population of the Valley (groups 8,9 and 19-28) rose at an average annual rate of 2.1%. But this figure is small compared to the rate at which the population <u>would</u> have grown, if infant mortality had not been so high. Three quarters of the people who died from 1975 through 1979 were under the age of 15; 30% of the babies born did not survive their first year.

The Brazilian army is currently building a road through the Valley that will link Pontes e Lacerda with highway BR-364. This road, which will be asphalted as part of Project Polonoroeste, passes through the homelands of four groups that have not yet been given reserves, and within a short distance of three established reserves that are entirely too small. Scarcely ten years after coming into permanent contact with Western society,

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the Guaporé Nambiquara will find themselves living in a neon jungle. If they are to survive, they need more land, they need adequate health care, and they need to be taught how to deal with a market economy and infectious diseases.

These are reasonable objectives. There are competent, highly motivated Indianists who want to help the Nambiquara. Recent reports of money to be budgeted for Indian work in the Polonoroeste area suggest that there will be no shortage of funds. Whether the Indians live or die, then, will depend on the intentions of the people in power, both in the Brazilian government and the World Bank.

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NAMBIQUARA LOCAL GROUPS