

The last of the Nambiquara

For more than 70 years the Nambiquara Indians of Brazil have resisted benign and violent assaults upon their culture. Now the World Bank is helping to finance a road through their lands that could deliver the coup de grace . . .

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Long before the arrival of the White man, the Nambiquara Indians of the Amazon lived in the Guaporé Valley, hunting with bows and arrows, fishing and tending

small gardens. They depended totally on the forest and lived in harmony with it. To the Nambiquara the land they lived on was holy, not only as the source of all their wealth, but more importantly as the home of their ancestor spirits and of their sacred cave paintings.

Today the Nambiquara have good reason to rue the first time they encountered a white man, for the contact has brought them nothing but grief. At the turn of the century, when the Brazilian explorer, Xenopus Rondon, first came face to face with the Nambiquara, the various sub-groups that make up the tribe had a population of between 10 000 and 15 000. Disease, culture shock and acts of violence by outsiders who have expropriated their land has reduced their numbers to 530. Now the World Bank is on the verge of giving Brazil £100 million to build a road



right through what remains of the Nambiquara's traditional lands—an action that will almost certainly mean the physical and cultural death of the Nambiquara.

The first serious threat to the Nambiquara's way of life came in the early 1900s when a telegraph line linking the Amazon to the south of Brazil was passed through the Parecis Mountains at the edge of the Guaporé Valley. The line—and the men who came up from the south to work on it—opened up the plateau to rubber tappers, miners and assorted adventurers, most of whom wanted to lay claim to some part of the Nambiquara's land. The outsiders brought with them diseases such as measles, tuberculosis, colds and influenza, to which the long-isolated Indians had no immunity. They also brought sugar and other goods that attracted the Indians, and that were used by unscrupulous speculators to buy their way on to Indian lands. Many of the Indians soon found themselves landless



Some of the few remaining Nambiquara: Mamandé sub-tribe (left) and a Galera man above. Only 530 remain out of 10-15 000 at the turn of this century

and working in conditions of semi-slavery for the men who had dispossessed them. Prostitution, Christianity and money—all incompatible with Nambiquara culture—came to them with the telegraph line.

The Nambiquara who lived on the valley floor were less affected by the invasion than were their cousins of the plateau. They were also more hostile to those outsiders who did try to enter their land. The penetration of that part of the Amazon intensified in the early 1960s with the completion of the BR364, the road from Cuiabá to Porto Velho, which passes between the Parecis and the Guaporé. The opening of the road coincided with a national movement to "integrate" the seemingly fertile Amazon Basin (whose soil is now known to be exceptionally poor once forest cover is removed) into the economic life of Brazil. Ranches moved into the area, deforesting thousands of hectares each year for conversion to giant cattle pastures. The valley Indians were contacted and "pacified" in 1964; in 1971 seven more groups had been contacted, mostly

North American missionaries who had been among the early waves of immigrants to the area.

Although it had been known since Rondon first penetrated the area that the Guaporé was Indian territory, there was no government agent on the scene to mediate between the invaders and the disease-prone Indians until 1968. In October of that year, the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) announced the creation of a Nambiquara reserve in the arid scrubland north-east of the Guaporé Valley. The one million hectare reserve was one-fifth the size of their traditional lands, and contained only two Nambiquara villages and only 10 per cent of the total population. Most of the Indians refused to move.

Nine days after the announcement of the reserve FUNAI officials began issuing *certificados negativos* ("negative certificates") to ranchers affirming that there were no Indians on the land and that it was therefore free for occupation. The certificates carried an interesting rider to the effect that the holder had a responsibility to transfer the Indians living on his new property to the reserve. One of the large companies that received such a certificate was the Sape Agropecuaria, prominent among whose stockholders was the son of the then Minister of the Interior, the minister with the ultimate responsibility for FUNAI.

By 1971 the whole valley was occupied by large *fazendas* (ranches); deforestation was proceeding apace; and the Nambiquara were severely demoralised, malnourished and depleted in number. Violence against the Indians continued. One village of 120 lost six of its number to hired gunmen in 1967. The following year a missionary "pacified" the group so that whites were able to approach them. In 1971 they suffered a measles epidemic that killed every child under the age of 15. By 1975 only 34 of these Nambiquara were left alive.

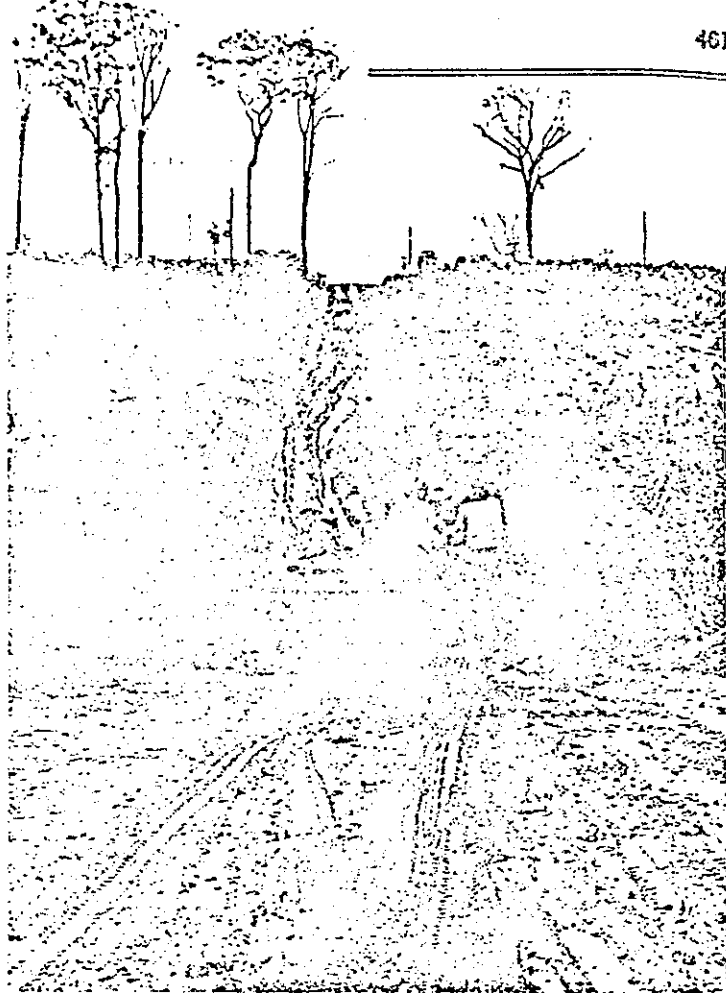
An attempt in 1971 forcibly to remove the remaining Nambiquara to the savannah reserve failed. The Indians refused to remain on land that could not support their hunter-gardener lifestyle and that was far away from their sacred caves and burial sites.

There were by this time some voices raised in protest, though their effect was minimal. A 1973 International Red Cross mission strongly criticised the authorities for the treatment and condition of the Nambiquara. An internal

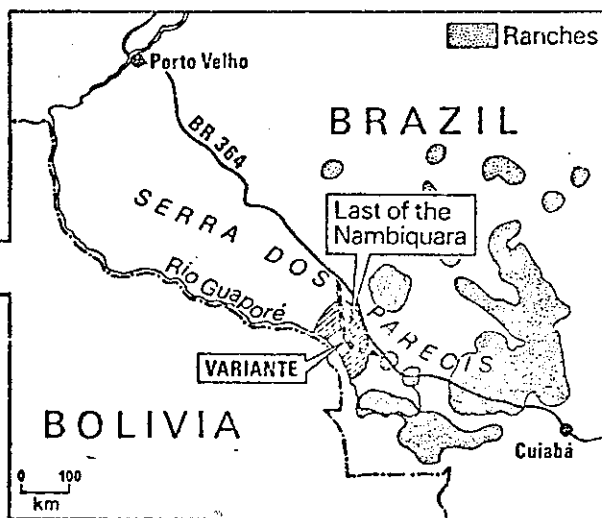
FUNAI report stated, anonymously, that the establishment of the reserve "deliberately ignored all the ethnographic and ecological knowledge regarding this Indian group and its area. It was promulgated with the sole and exclusive aim of attending to the private interests of the *civilizados*."

In 1974 FUNAI had a new president, General Ismarth de Oliveira, whose main task was to restore the agency's credibility after the five year reign of terror of General Bandeira de Mello. Ismarth announced the creation of yet another reserve, a 300 000 hectare site between two affluents of the Guaporé, mostly forested, but afflicted with malaria, and still far from the sacred sites. Again the Nambiquara refused to move. This was a disappointment and a surprise to FUNAI and the Guaporé ranchers who had enthusiastically offered the loan of their own aeroplanes to transport the Nambiquara to their new home. In any case, the issuance of *certificados negativos* was resumed almost as soon as the announcement was made.

Four years later, in December 1978, under growing



Marcos Santilli/Camera Press



The proposed road (broken line) that will carve through the Indians' shrinking "reserves" (hatched). The ranches (stippled), are formed by devastating the forest (above)

public pressure to recognise the Nambiquara's occupation of their own land, FUNAI finally created small reserves around five of the villages, making no provision at all for the remaining three sub-groups. This had the effect of creating islands in the midst of vast deforested cattle ranches. Although the Nambiquara had been given the right to remain on their own land—or part of it—their way of life is severely restricted. They cannot carry on with the forest-related activities upon which they depend for their survival and for the continuance of their culture. Communication, trade and inter-marriage between villages are difficult. All around their tiny isolated island reserves the once-luxuriant forest, home to the wild animals, birds and plants upon which the Nambiquara relied, has been destroyed. The ranchers do their best to see that it doesn't return by spraying Tordon 155 (Agent Orange) and Tordon 101 to keep weeds down. Biocides pollute the rivers; cattle dung makes them carriers of amoebic dysentery. This is the basic strategy—degrade the Nambiquara's land as fast

Colera people at a post building at Wasusu: "not to be reduced to the status of labourers on their own land..."



as possible so that if they ever do get legal recognition of their ownership, it will be valueless to them.

The next and possibly the fatal blow to the Nambiquara is due to be struck by the World Bank. In line with its campaign to help "the poorest of the poor", the Bank has unofficially agreed to give Brazil £330 million to develop the Cuiabá-Porto Velho area of the Amazon for cattle ranching. Of this £100 million will be earmarked specifically for rerouting the existing road through the pitifully small Nambiquara reserves.

Under this scheme 25 million hectares of land will be developed, 82 per cent of which is destined to be cleared for ranching. Sixty-nine per cent of the land in the area is already concentrated in the hands of a few large land-owners who rear cattle for export. (Brazil's domestic beef consumption has declined since the first World Bank cattle loan in 1967 was made conditional on the lifting of export restrictions.) These corporate ranchers will benefit by the project's upgrading of roads, provision of slaughterhouse facilities, and a government-sponsored colonisation scheme that will ensure a supply of cheap labour.

The official development plan makes no mention of the Nambiquara except to warn that they may interfere with road building. One of the arguments for rerouting the existing unpaved road is that stone chippings from nearby caves—the sacred caves of the Nambiquara—can be cheaply and conveniently used for paving the variant. This economical measure might indeed be expected to enrage the Nambiquara.

The variant will cut through one Nambiquara village, pass within a few kilometres of three others, and go over land occupied by, but not officially allocated to, two other sub-groups. Anthropologists and the Nambiquara themselves demand first of all that their lands should be joined in one continuous reserve; it should certainly not be divided even more severely by a highway.

Anthropologists and champions of human rights in Brazil and elsewhere have written to Robert MacNamara, the born-again president of the World Bank, demanding that the bank take no further steps in granting the loan until adequate safeguards have been provided for the physical and cultural survival of the Nambiquara. It is time that the bank made such safeguards an essential

condition of all loans that will affect in any way the existence of tribal peoples.

The bank's Environmental Affairs Officer, Robert Goodland, visited the project area and recommended that an anthropologist and an ecologist be hired to make a thorough study of the area and of the project before any funds are committed. So far the bank has not acted on Goodland's advice. Bids on work for the initial stages of the project are due to go out this month on the tacit understanding that the bank will soon forward the money.

The Brazilian government is set on this "development", although one of the two states involved is known to be far less keen on it. The Minister of Transport stated in June that the storm of

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protest aroused by the announcement of the project (which was kept under wraps until the last possible moment) would not influence his government or the World Bank. He is undoubtedly aware that the bank is in the awkward, but not unusual, position of having to loan money—no matter how unsuitable the project—in order to keep up with MacNamara's ambitious schedule for increasing the flow of aid to the poor (and incidentally the flow of repayments to the bank). After all, the borrowing government repays the loan with interest whether or not the project is a fiasco, and no one has yet defaulted on a World Bank loan.

Astonishingly, the Nambiquara have not yet given in to the series of crushing blows delivered to their culture and their physical well-being over the past 70 years. David Price, an anthropologist from the University of Harvard, has been helping them to sell their artifacts to local traders or through the marketing arm of FUNAI. This branch of FUNAI is not the ideal outlet for it gives the Indians only about 20 per cent of the value of their work and keeps the rest in a fund, to be dispersed as FUNAI sees fit for the benefit of the group as a whole. Some of the Nambiquara from the valley are also managing to raise enough crops to sell the surplus to local ranchers. Many Nambiquara are learning Portuguese to help them in negotiations with the outside world.

Despite the buffeting they have received, the Nambiquara have retained much of their original culture. Their view of the world, their sense of identity and their religious feelings remain, but they are willing to co-exist with the dominant culture, to trade with whites, and to learn Portuguese. What they do not want is to be reduced to the status of stoop labourers on their own land and to lose their culture in an amalgamation with Brazilian society at the lowest level.

Under Article 198 of the Brazilian Constitution, the Brazilian Indian Statute of 1973, the legislation creating FUNAI, (and several international conventions to which Brazil is a signatory) the Nambiquara have a right to adequate land, protection of their natural and legal right to physical safety, essential health care, and respect for their ancient way of life.

The Brazilian government and the World Bank have an obligation to cease all activity on the Cuiabá-Porto Velho road until the Nambiquara's rights have been assured. □