

# THE NAMBIQUARA AND THE ROAD (BR - 364)

An unequal contest is currently being waged in the upper Guaporé valley, in the northwestern corner of the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. The Nambiquara Indians of this area will shortly be faced by all the pitiless consequences of "development" and "national integration", as the mighty Machine flexes its muscles for a final assault on Brazil's western frontiers. An ambitious new five-year program - the Programa Integrado de Desenvolvimento do Noroeste do Brasil - designed to bring the blessings of an export-oriented economy to the area between Cuiabá and Pôrto Velho, will shortly be launched by a consortium of interests including the Brazilian ministries of the Interior, Agriculture and Transport, the governments of the state of Mato Grosso and the territory of Rondônia, and the World Bank in Washington.

Of a total of 48 billion cruzeiros (US\$1.6 billion in mid-1979, when the official estimates were made) close on 10 billion cruzeiros (US\$330 million) will be provided as a direct loan from the World Bank, with the rest of the funds forthcoming from government credit agencies within Brazil itself. Of the World Bank money, slightly under one third (US\$100 million as of mid-1979) will be applied in the single most important item on the development plan, the re-routing and paving of the BR-364 highway.

The significance of this road can readily be appreciated. By joining the capitals of Rondônia and Mato Grosso it will not only speed up communication with Manaus and the Amazon basin as a whole, but also provide the basic infrastructure necessary for the occupation and economic exploitation of a large tract (approximately 25 million hectares) of fertile land along Brazil's border with Bolivia. A glance at the projected statistics for population growth in the area (10.2% per annum in the period 1978-1988) and for the ultimate use to which the land will be put (according to the plan, fully 82% of cleared lands will finally end up as cattle pastures) shows that the policy-makers in Brasília intend a deliberate replay of the disastrous events which have marked other areas of intensive colonization in Brazil in the last two decades - such as that in the Araguaia valley, which was recently the object of a special federal intervention as the result of rapidly escalating social tensions.

To judge from previous experiences elsewhere, the much-vaunted colonization of virgin lands by landless peasants will serve four principal functions:

1. Provide a discredited regime with invaluable propaganda, and an escape valve for land conflicts elsewhere in the country.
2. Bring in cheap labour to clear the land and plant a few years of food crops before the soil is depleted. Through control of government-sponsored "co-operatives" - not surprisingly, a corner-stone of the Programa's stated policy - most of the profits accruing from the exploitation of tropical hardwoods and the marketing of agricultural surpluses will be used to pay back the loans which financed the colonization schemes in the first place.
3. Furthermore, since most peasants are indebted to private landlords or the government land-colonization agency (INCRA) even before they start out, their meagre participation in the profits of wood-felling and cash-crop production will mean that very few of them are ever likely to break even on the whole venture. Many will remain in debt-bondage indefinitely, or find that their plots are exhausted by the time they have paid off their debt, with the result that they must either seek further credit (to pay for fertilizers, etc.,) or sell their land to large agro-industrial concerns, who will convert it to cattle pastures at minimal cost to themselves. It is significant that the Programa notes that 69% of productive land in its area is already concentrated in large estates or latifundios...
4. By means of this process, the Brazilian pattern of land tenure - a mixture of corporate estates and small farms increasingly dependant for their survival on the official credit agencies - is enabled to extend its frontiers to the west, devastating the forest as it goes, and incorporating ever larger areas to the production of exportable commodities.

Where does this leave the Indians, especially those unfortunate enough to lie in the path of the predatory bulldozer? It is symptomatic of the orientation given to the Programa's official document that they are only mentioned in the context of possible impediments to the building of the road. Like the vague promises regarding the preservation of the natural vegetation cover, the references to the Indians seem only to have been included in the document as a sop to international funders, and probably respond to some rather pertinent questions raised about the project at the Washington headquarters of the World

Bank. We will turn to consider the Nambiquara case in some detail, for their recent history provides abundant evidence of the fact that mere statements of good intentions - particularly where these emanate from the Brazilian government - are simply not enough, and should be accompanied by careful plans detailing the responsibilities and obligations of the development agencies with regard to traditional minority groups.

First contacted by the Portuguese in 1997, the Nambiquara already occupied the area which is currently in dispute, a stretch of rolling country lying between the high ridge of the Chapada dos Parecis and the Guaporé river. They remained largely isolated until the second decade of the present century, when FUNAI's predecessor, the Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (SPI), began to undertake a systematic policy of approximation with this Indian group. The arrival of Western diseases - mainly through contacts with rubber tappers and collectors of ipecacuanha root - soon took a terrible toll on their population. Their numbers declined from an estimated 10,000 at the turn of the century, to between 2 and 3,000 at the time of Lévi-Strauss' visit in the mid-1930s, and only 530 in 1975.

Nowhere is this demographic decline more apparent than in the Guaporé valley. David Price, an anthropologist with many years' experience in the area, has written: "Indeed, reasonable estimates based on geneological work conducted in the Guaporé valley would indicate that at least two thirds of the population of that region has died in the last ten to fifteen years..." Other groups of Nambiquara - living further north, across the watershed of the Chapada dos Parecis - had entered into permanent contact with Brazilian society as early as 1909, when Marshal Rondon established the telegraph line from Cuiabá to Porto Velho. The less acculturated groups in the Guaporé valley, however, only emerged from their isolation in the early 1960s, when the original BR-364 was opened to traffic along the main ridge of the Chapada dos Parecis. Through the construction of small feeder routes down the escarpment, the valley of the Guaporé river suddenly became accessible, and by the end of the 1960s considerable areas of the valley floor had been cleared for cattle pasture and fenced off with barbed wire.

As recently as 1967, one uncontacted group along the Sararé river (an affluent of the Guaporé) suffered the cold-blooded murder of six of its members by a gang of armed men from the local town, Vila Bela do Mato Grosso. Estimated at 120 when they were "pacified" in 1968, their numbers had declined to no more than 34 in 1975, largely as the result of a terrible measles epidemic in 1971. This epidemic severely demoralized the Indian group, causing them to split up into nuclear families and disperse into the forest. A combined operation involving FUNAI, the Brazilian Air Force, and even a unit of Army paratroopers - the famous Operação Sararé (see photographs) - was mounted to bring them together again. Ostensibly to save them from starvation, doubtless a very real threat at the time, this operation failed, however, to consider the fact that dispersion in small bands constituted an instinctive reaction to the onset of any epidemic, and one which made a good deal of sense from the strictly biological or epidemiological point of view...

Left to roam between the few remaining strips of untouched rainforest, and increasingly dependant on hand-outs of sugar and other exotic foods from the new farms, the Nambiquara of the Guaporé valley seemed headed for rapid extinction as a viable ethnic group. On visiting the area in March, 1973, a Swedish doctor attached to the International Commission of the Red Cross, Bo Akerren, was quoted as saying: "The condition of these Indians is a disgrace not only for Brazil, but for humanity as a whole." Their numbers continued to be decimated not only by the inevitable epidemics of 'flu and measles, but also by a number of other medical factors. These included numerous cases of pneumonia and tuberculosis, and increasing incidence of malaria resulting from the forest clearances, the pollution of the water in their streams by cattle dung (leading to a sharp rise in amoebic infestation and chronic dysentery), and the occasional spraying of their lands with the banned defoliant Tordon 155 ("Agent Orange"), replaced in 1977 by the supposedly safer Tordon 101, both of them manufactured by the infamous Dow Chemical Corp., and used to keep down weeds in the new pastures.

The action of FUNAI, the government agency responsible for their welfare, only served to exacerbate the problem further. In the words of the anonymous author of a confidential report to the Brazilian National Security Council:

"The policies of FUNAI in the case of the Nambiquara have been marked by innumerable contradictions and by a lack of clear philosophical and operational

guidelines. Decree no. 63.368/68, modified by no. 73.221/73 (those which set up the Nambiquara Reserve far from the Guaporé valley, on the other side of the Chapada dos Parecis - ed.), 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..."

Indeed, the catalogue of FUNAI's errors, vacillations and outright misdeeds with regard to the Nambiquara must constitute one of the most shameful chapters in its history, and deserves to be summarized briefly here. In 1968 Decree no.63.368 established the first Nambiquara reserve, located between the Juina and Camararé rivers east of the Chapada dos Parecis and the BR-364, in an area composed largely of inhospitable scrubland or cerrado which only contained two Nambiquara villages and just over 10% of their total population. A bare nine days after the passing of this decree, FUNAI began to dispense "negative certificates" (certidões negativas) stating that there were no Nambiquara in the Guaporé valley, a move which allowed landowners in that area to register their deeds and raise government loans to finance the deforestation of the valley.

One of the first beneficiaries of this development was the Sapé Agropecuária company, whose shareholders included the son of the then minister of the Interior, Costa Cavalcanti. On denouncing this fact to the press, the ex-secretary-general of CIMI, father Antonio Iasi Jr., was subjected to a humiliating spell of interrogation at the Federal Police headquarters in Cuiabá. No fewer than 21 other such "negative certificates" were subsequently granted to various large firms with stakes in the Guaporé valley, and many of them actually included clauses undertaking to transfer out of the area any Indians who might later be found within their estates. This detail is alone sufficient evidence on the fact that FUNAI was not acting out of ignorance of the real situation - as it has often claimed - but rather, deliberately connived with landowning interests to deprive the Nambiquara of their best lands (those in the Guaporé valley) and move survivors to a reserve which offers them virtually no conditions for survival at all. Such action is not only immoral, but also strictly illegal under the terms of Brazil's Indian Statute and FUNAI's own internal code of practice.

By 1974, after a failed attempt to transfer the Mamaindê, Negarotê, Alantesu and Wasusu sub-groups to the reserve north of the Chapado dos Parecís, the new President of FUNAI - Gen. Ismarth Araújo de Oliveira - was forced to recognize the errors of the previous administration. A new reserve of 300,000 hectares was established by Decree 74.515 between the Galera and Sararé rivers, the only affluents of the Guaporé that had remained relatively free of intruders. An American anthropologist, David Price, was contracted to organize the Projeto Nambiquara, with the aim of convincing the Indians elsewhere in the valley to come into this second reserve, as a means of protecting their interests and avoiding difficult and time-consuming legal wrangles over the possession of lands already in the hands of large fazendas. His assessment of the situation was subsequently supported - with a few modifications - by a Brazilian colleague, Pedro Agostinho da Silva, who was sent by FUNAI in 1975 to write an independant appraisal of the situation.

Unfortunately, however, many of the Indians who agreed to the move later contracted malaria in their new home, and felt culturally disorientated by the loss of their traditional sacred sites.- the springs and caves which form the resting places of their ancestors, and which are intimately bound up with the history of each local descent group. After the loss of many of their number through illness, most of the Nmbiquara again returned to their places of origin. A few cases will serve to illustrate the gravity of the situation which they encountered on their doorsteps.

The Hahaintesu subgroup, whose village was now located only fifty metres from the airstrip of the Zillo-Lorenzetti ranch, were soon hemmed in by a stout barbed-wire fence - ostensibly to keep the cattle out - and also had their fields sprayed from the air with grass seed, to prevent the growth of crops. On the Fazenda Vale do Guaporé, the Swiss administrator, Max Mosman, denied medical attention from his very well equipped dispensary to two Nambiquara women suffering from pneumonia. They died a short time later. To be fair news of these atrocities made some impact in Brasilia, and in 1976 the FUNAI anthropologist Noraldina Viera Cruvinel was dispatched to the area to search out a new solution to the problem.



Amongst the various alternatives under consideration, it was decided to abandon most of the large reserve in the Guaporé valley - a move explicitly condemned by Noraldino and all the other anthropologists involved, and even by FUNAI's Indigenist Council itself - replacing it with a series of small areas around each of the local residence groups. Unfortunately, though perhaps predictably, the business of demarcating these areas has been rendered extremely difficult by political pressure and actual physical intimidation from the large landowners and their employees. The Hahaintesu area, for example, was reduced to 22,500 hectares, squashed between the Cofap, Zillo-Lorenzetti, and Confap and Conguape fazendas, who between them lay claim to no less than half a million hectares - the equivalent of a square with sides 70 kilometres long.

The recently established Wasusu, Alantesu and Negarotê areas vary between 12,249 and 13,480 hectares each, well below the 31,400 hectares which Price recommended as the minimum for each village. Furthermore, the creation of Nambiquara islands in the midst of huge agri-business concerns has had an extremely disruptive effect on their social practices, since each village is traditionally exogamous and must seek wives in other neighbouring communities. In July 1979 the anthropologist Noraldino - basking in the relatively liberal climate prevailing in FUNAI under the presidency of Adhemar Ribeiro da Silva - recommended the creation of a continuous reserve as the only means of guaranteeing the traditional cultural practices of the Nambiquara. His suggestion was shelved by the new administration of Col. Nobre da Veiga, and meanwhile, deforestation has proceeded in the Guaporé at an alarming pace, with the clear intent of destroying the Indians' habitat before it can be protected by law. Three sub-groups, the Mamaendê, the Alakatesu and the Waiksu, are still without any official areas at all, and have suffered repeated beatings, threats, and even the burning of their houses by the hirelings of the local landowners.

It is in the context of these many and varied abuses of the Nambiquara people that we return to a consideration of the new BR-364. The course of the old BR-364 - which follows the ridge of the Chapada dos Parecis - runs through arid and barren country of no economic interest, and little benefit will accrue from its construction across these sandy wastes. The interministerial team responsible

for the Programa clearly recommends that the new paved highway should be re-routed through the Guaporé valley to serve the expanding cattle ranches both with its own sheer presence, and through the construction of an infrastructure of small feeder roads. This "development" of the Guaporé valley is clearly seen as a high priority, and not only for its commercial worth, but also for the favourite Brazilian motive of "national security" (the Guaporé river forms a natural frontier with Bolivia). In this case, the road traversing the Guaporé valley - known to the Programa as the variante Pontes e Lacerda/Barracão Queimado - is not really a variante at all, but rather, the main pivot of the entire project. Indeed, there is documentary proof that the original survey of its course was undertaken by a group of government-contracted engineers (Euler S/A) as far back as 1975 (see Anexo to the Programa: p.26) and that it was always intended to form part of the new BR-364.

If this is true, then the Brazilian authorities responsible for the Programa have been deliberately hiding their real intentions from the public, and the spokesman for the minister of Transport was lying when he said the decision to include the variante was only taken in 1979 (see ESP 5/6/80). Indeed, when a group of Brazilian indigenists met Dr Robert J. Goodland (the head of the Office of Environmental affairs at the World Bank) towards the end of 1979, they still reasoned their exposition of the impact of the new road on Indian communities on the assumption that it would follow the course of the old BR-364, along the Chapada dos Parecis. It is as the result of their sudden discovery of the true intent of the Programa, that we have been asked to alert world opinion to the imminent threat of destruction to the remaining Nambiquara of the Guaporé valley.

The Programa (p.107) blithely asserts that: "A survey of the areas of Indian reserves was undertaken together with FUNAI, to avoid cutting through any of these, even at the cost of sacrificing the technical conditions of the variante..." So deliberate a misrepresentation of the facts will have extremely serious consequences for the Nambiquara, as has been pointed out to us by a Brazilian indigenist with direct first-hand experience of the area. The reserves of the Alakatesu and Waiksu sub-groups, for example, have yet to be established, and may well straddle the intended course of the new road, one of them at a point



known as base 6, 54 kilometres from Barracão Queimado. Furthermore, the road will cross the upper Sararé at a point presently occupied by a village of some of the very least acculturated Nambiquara, who have the misfortune of living outside the area officially allocated to them, further downstream. The road will also skirt the edges of three other Indian reserves - those of the Hahaintesu, the Alantesu and the Wasusu - inevitably bringing disease, prostitution and cultural disintegration in its wake, and putting paid to the Indians' just struggle to increase the size of their holdings to an adequate area, one that ensures the continued survival of their traditional way of life. Finally, it has also been pointed out that one of the much-vaunted advantages of the variante - its relative cheapness and the ready availability of stone chippings for the road core - may well spell the end of the sacred cave paintings of the Nambiquara, which are located in the escarpment of the Chapada dos Parecis, outside of the official reserves, and many of them at points likely to serve as quarries for the road-builders...

A final detail in this chronicle of woes takes us from Mato Grosso to Brasília, where a Nambiquara by the name of Itamarai is currently eking out a living from the sale of handicrafts to the tourists, which he manufactures in a small shack located in one of the slummy satellite towns on the outskirts of the federal capital. On 12th May, Itamarai - having obtained little satisfaction from the local health service - attempted to gain an audience with Mario Andreazza, the minister of the Interior, in order to solicit medical attention for his four month old son, who was suffering from dehydration. He was turned away unceremoniously. Three days later, he appeared at FUNAI headquarters, carrying the dead baby in his arms: "This is how you treat the Indians..." he cried out to the staff, who shrank in horror as he walked down the corridor. Cornered by the press, the new superintendant of FUNAI, Otavio Pereira Lima, immediately disclaimed any responsibility for the child's death, stating that he had been examined by a FUNAI doctor only a few days previously, and found to be in good health. Visibly flustered by all the adverse publicity, the superintendant later conceded that FUNAI would carry out an internal inquiry into the matter, to find out if (and notice, "if", not "why") there had been any negligence in dealing with the case...

ONE DEAD BABY IN THE CORRIDORS OF POWER  
HOW MANY MORE IF THE VARIANTE GOES THROUGH?