

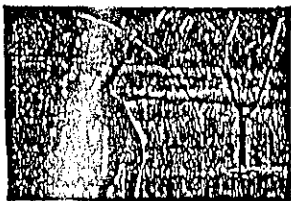
WORLD DEVELOPMENT

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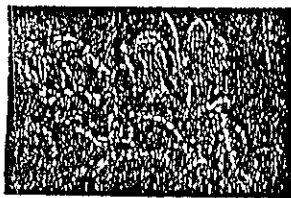
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A Brazilian Tribe Escapes Extinction

By Cherie Hart



Manaus, Brazil—For hundreds of years, Brazil's Waimiri Indians burned their dead and scattered the ashes over nearby Amazonian rivers. One tragic day in 1981, when 21 Waimiri died from measles, the tribe inexplicably broke with their ancient tradition and buried the dead. For the Waimiri, death was becoming a way of life. In percentage terms, the human loss that day was the equivalent of 10 million people dying in the United States.

During the last 20 years, other changes, none of the Waimiri's making, swept over their world. Favoured hunting grounds disappeared as highway BR-174 sliced through their jungle, and miners pushed onto their land. Vast reservoirs created by a new hydroelectric dam flooded thousands of hectares of forest.

Social patterns shifted too. The Waimiri abandoned their communal thatched homes in the forest to live in separate dwellings along the new highway. No longer dressed in twine and leaves, they began wearing store-bought clothes. Ancient festivals marking rites of passage no longer seemed important. Jungle paths were deserted

**Waimiri Indians
are on a journey
towards
survival**

Cherie Hart UNDP

as the Indians chose to trade and barter with the growing traffic along the highway.

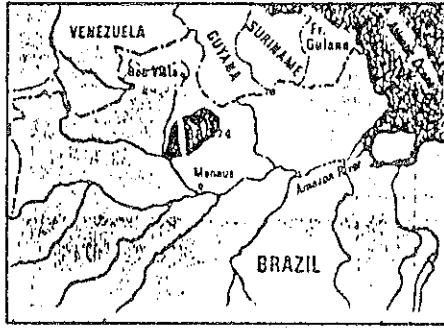
And the Waimiri buried more and more of their dead. Their numbers were leveled not by war or natural disasters, but simply by the effects of outsiders bringing strange diseases and invading their land. The Waimiri's numbers plummeted from 6,000 at the turn of the century to 488 today.

But just as they hovered on the verge of extinction, the Waimiri were able to turn back the clock of destruction. Through a series of innovative projects, a healing process began which has saved them from disease, and is slowly helping them retrieve the core of their rich cultural past.

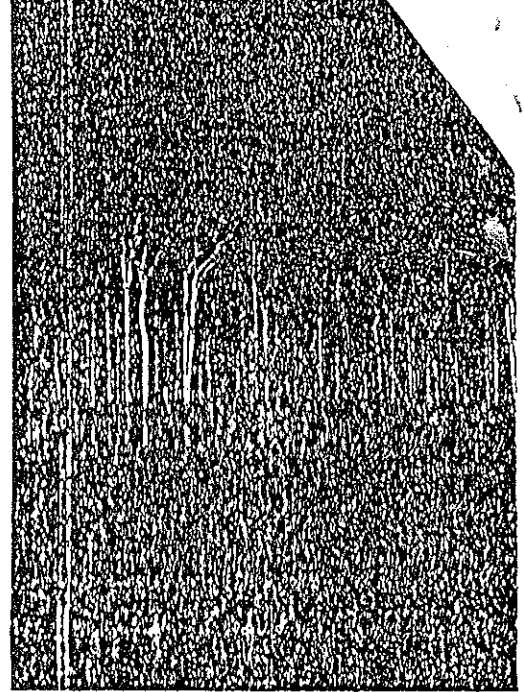
"They can never totally return to the way they were," says Porfirio Carvalho, a consultant for Indian Affairs for the Electric Companies of Northern Brazil (Eletronorte), and former officer of Brazil's National Indian Foundation (FUNAI). "But now the Waimiri are regaining some of what was lost." Mr. Carvalho is author of *Waimiri Atroari—The Untold Story*, a book which put him in jail for divulging government documents detailing atrocities against the Indians.

Ironically, Mr. Carvalho once had every reason for turning his back on the Waimiri. In bitter struggles to save their land, the Waimiri fought against all intruders, and in 1974, four of Mr. Carvalho's FUNAI colleagues were killed by the tribe. He survived the attack only because he had left the jungle the day before to get married. Despite the dangers, Mr. Carvalho returned to the Waimiri in 1978, determined to continue working for their protection.

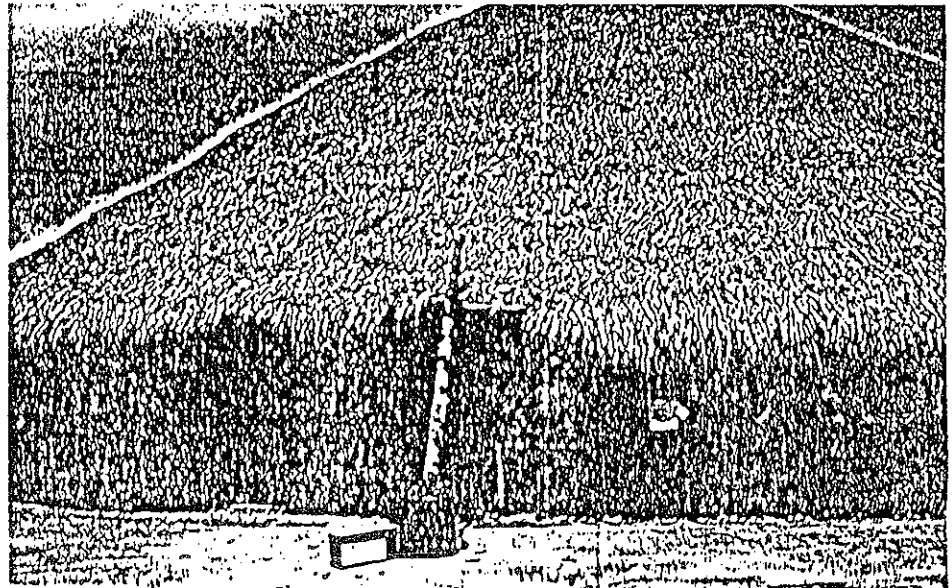
To this day, the Waimiri will not tell him why they spared his life when he returned to their village. When asked why he was willing to risk death to work with the Indians again, Mr. Carvalho shrugs and says, "I don't know. I have a mystical connection with them. I just knew I had to come back."



Waimiri lands in northern Brazil



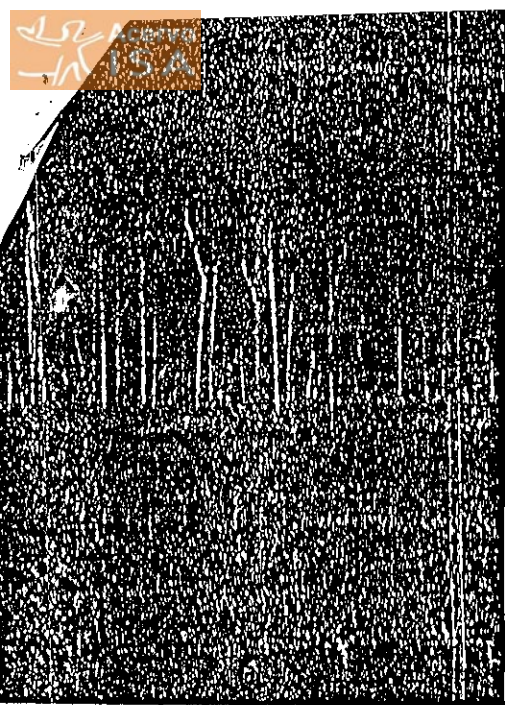
Photos by Charie Hart / UNDP



This communal home is shared by an entire village.

The first real assault on the tribe began in the early 1970s when Brazil's then military government launched a network of roads throughout Amazonia. Construction of BR-174, the main north-south highway which cuts through the Amazon jungle for 700 kilometres from Manaus to Boa Vista, introduced measles, malaria, flu, tuberculosis and a host of other diseases to the 12 main Waimiri villages. While the Indians fought fiercely against the white man's encroachments, their immune systems were powerless against disease.

Then came the arrival of the Paranapanema mining company, which simply took over 526,800 hectares of Waimiri land, bringing even



Over 30,000 hectares of Waimiri land were flooded by the Balbina Dam.

more outside contact and more disease. The final blow was the completion of the Balbina Dam in the late 1980s. With a capacity of merely 250 megawatts—enough to meet only half the yearly power needs of the city of Manaus' 850,000 people—the dam is now widely regarded as an environmental atrocity. Even government experts concede that the size and cost of the project were so enormous that the dam should never have been built. But it was, flooding 30,000 hectares of forest and forcing the evacuation of two Waimiri villages.

All over the Amazon, the story was the same. Developers, often with government backing, brought highways, settlers, cattle ranches, mines and hydroelectric dams. Throughout Brazil, more than 90 tribes have disappeared over 90 years.

Eventually, the debate over whether or not clearing and burning large areas of rain forest contributed to carbon dioxide build-up and the greenhouse effect, turned the future of the Amazon

into an international political issue. Development funds from abroad began to come with environmental and social policy strings attached. For the first time in Brazil, environmental impact studies became an integral part of the financing and licensing procedures for new hydropower plants.

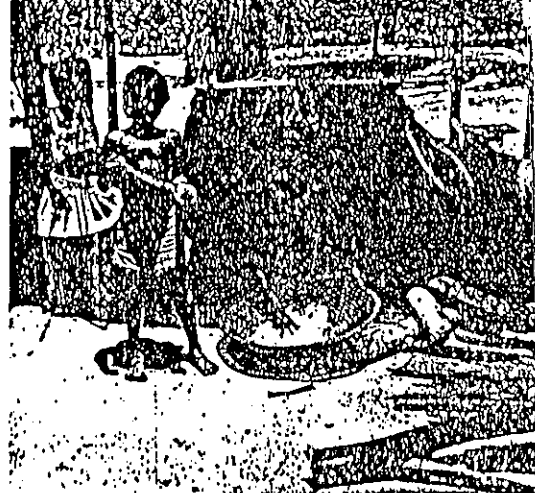
"While academics, environmentalists and anthropologists had been denouncing the fate of the Indians for 20 years, development thinkers have only recently begun to consider the plight of the country's 230,000 Indians and the destruction of the environment around them," says architect and anthropologist Luiz Galvão, president of the DAM Foundation, which promotes the rational use of the Amazon's timber resources.

For the Waimiri, the change in Brazilian attitudes meant deliverance from extinction. No one could erase the damage already incurred, but it was not too late to protect future generations from badly planned development schemes.

In a dramatic shift in policy, Eletronorte, which built and operates the Balbina Dam and four other hydro-power plants in Amazonia, created a special Department of Studies in Environmental Effects in 1987. Its purpose was to train experts within Eletronorte who would be capable of forecasting and controlling the environmental consequences of hydro-power construction.

"Eletronorte's operations in the 1970s had one goal in mind—to produce energy," says United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Representative Eduardo Gutierrez. "When the political climate changed in the mid-1980s, discussions began which addressed environmental issues. The hope was to avoid any future major disasters like Balbina. There was no stopping the growth of energy production. It just had to become more rationally planned."

In 1988, with US\$300,000 in technical assistance from UNDP,



Preparing bread for a traditional festival.

Eletronorte's new Department began giving the social, cultural and health effects of hydro projects the same degree of importance as the ecological consequences of such ventures. "This was the first attempt to assess all environmental elements in one package," says civil engineer Sebastião Oliveira, national director of the project. "We finally realized that we could no longer continue to study water or soil or indigenous populations in isolation of each other."

In and around Eletronorte's existing Amazon hydro projects, fisheries experts studied aquatic life. Water experts developed mathematical models for simulating the hydraulic and chemical properties of Amazonian water systems. Soil experts surveyed biological properties of nearby land. Architects and anthropologists assessed the cultural and sociological changes within local communities after a dam is built. Two medical doctors evaluated the health conditions of area populations, devising a new methodology for collecting medical data and improving the health of indigenous people.

It was these medical findings that ultimately saved the Waimiri from extinction. In 1988, Eletronorte committed \$3 million to a 25-year project aimed at compensating the Waimiri for loss of land. Health, education and demarcation of land boundaries comprised the key elements of this project.



Chief Temehe (right) with teacher Edith Lacerda and a young Waimiri.



Edilberto Fouseca conducts a morning class.

Photos by Cheese Hart / UNDP

The ambitious effort is being managed by FUNAI, with technical support from the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Manaus, and the University of the Amazon.

The first priority was to bring urgent medical aid to the vanishing Waimiri. "There is no question that if this programme had not been put in place, the Waimiri would have become extinct," says tropical medicine expert Dr. Rômulo Saboia, who was part of the medical group hired by Eletronorte. "Malaria, measles and tuberculosis had nearly annihilated the tribe."

The tribe's critical condition warranted some unusual medical applications. "We had to break some rules," says Dr. Saboia. "The standard medical principles for vaccinations did not apply to these isolated people. We had to vaccinate the very old along with the very young, because no one had immunity against these diseases."

Dr. Saboia claims that the Waimiri now have the best health conditions of any people in Amazonia. The tribe's population growth rate has reached an astounding high of 7.5 per cent. Last year, only two Waimiri infants died—an infant mortality rate of just four per 1,000.

With the Waimiri's health under control, project staff turned to a more subtle issue: reviving the Indian's cultural heritage. A team of 10 teachers from the Department of Ethno-linguistics at the University of the Amazon created an innovative curriculum without textbooks and traditional classrooms, and

without the religious agenda of previous teachers who came as missionaries. The unique approach is developing a written form for the Waimiri spoken language—Karib—while teaching people to read at the same time.

Everyone participates. Men and women, young and old, come to class each day, bringing their dreams and hopes, memories of their first contacts with white men, and recollections of favorite myths. Their stories are then spelled out phonetically on the blackboard, with the teachers seeking the group's advice about how the words should be formed. When a consensus is reached, the stories are then entered into a book for future generations of Waimiri.

"Using their own culture and history as told by themselves, the richness of their past is remembered and preserved," says Edilberto Fouseca, who, along with his wife Edith Lacerda, is part of the teaching team.

"The old ones love retelling their favorite myth—about a parrot who marries a Waimiri," says Mrs. Lacerda. "The parrot teaches her husband to sing and then tells him to share the gift of song with the other Indians. By recounting this myth, the old reiterate to the young the importance of their ancient songs as vehicles for passing on knowledge, culture and history."

Mr. Carvalho is optimistic about the Waimiri's future prospects. "By merging modern change with remnants of their past, they are, in a sense, going back to the future," he says.

While the Waimiri's cultural past is being reconstructed, their lost land cannot be recovered. The mining company has been allowed to retain the 526,000 hectares it originally claimed from the Waimiri. The 30,000 hectares flooded by the dam are gone forever. But official boundaries have now been delineated and guards control a road-block at the main entrance to the Waimiri territory. For the time being, the Waimiri have free reign over 2.6 million hectares.

Since the project began, the Waimiri are rarely seen walking along BR-174. They have abandoned their shacks on the highway and have moved back to communal homes in the forest.

Waimiri Chief Temehe, sporting a T-shirt that depicts an Amazon jungle scene with the words "Don't Destroy" printed across it, asks all visitors for batteries. He wants to take photos of the next day's festival, and record the songs which will celebrate their young men's passage into manhood. Cameras and tape recorders are as much a part of their lives as bows and arrows. When asked if life is different for the Waimiri now, Chief Temehe replies, "We still hunt and we still fish. Our children will live as we live. And we will move further into the forest."

Many of the Waimiri women, who are preparing bread for the upcoming festival, are pregnant. Their young ones survive now, they say. Only the very old Waimiri die these days. Their *anhon* are sprinkled over the nearby rivers. ■