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The International Campaign on Behalf of Brazilian Indians
A Participant's View

Anthropologists, those social scientists who pride themselves on their objective view of humanity, are increasingly becoming advocates of the human and cultural rights of the peoples whom they study. Anthropology is by nature an extremely personal enterprise, and it is not surprising that many anthropologists have taken sides with the people they studied, rather than merely observed them as disengaged outsiders. What is new, however, is the growth of several organizations, staffed by anthropologists, whose main purpose is to advocate the rights of indigenous peoples. Among these organizations are the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) in Denmark, Survival International in England, and Cultural Survival and the Anthropology Resource Center (ARC) in the United States. The anthropologists who are members of these organizations are not content with merely studying the exotic lifeways and customs of tribal peoples. They want to insure that the voices of these people will be heard in government Indian policies and modern programs of economic development.

For the past decade, I have been an active participant in the international campaign on behalf of the rights of the more than 250,000 Indian people of Brazil. When I first visited Brazil in 1969, it was going through a period of phenomenal economic growth. As ~~a North American~~ familiar with ~~less developed~~ countries in Latin America, hence I could easily understand the economic euphoria that was gripping Brazil. New automobile factories were being opened in the booming industrial suburbs of São Paulo; high rise apartments were going up along the beautiful beaches of Rio de Janeiro; television sets were being displayed in the windows of department stores; and highways were being built into the most isolated rural villages. Rapid economic development, at least according to the military government that had controlled Brazil since 1964, promised to make the country one of the world's major industrial and political powers.

Not everyone, however, was pleased with the results of the Brazilian "economic miracle." Many observers noted that Brazil~~ian~~'s economic growth was taking place at the price of increased income disparities between the rich and the poor, urban sprawl and environmental pollution, and the suppression of basic political rights. The government's own statistics showed that for every increase in the Gross National Product, there was a corresponding rise in the country's infant mortality rate. Brazil was growing, but at the expense and welfare of more than two-thirds of its population.(1)

Perhaps, the most tragic victims of the Brazilian "economic miracle" were the country's Indian tribes. In 1970, the Brazilian government announced that it was going to build a trans-continental highway network across the largely undeveloped and unexplored Amazon region. The government did not conduct any assessment of the potential social and environmental impacts of the development program before building this highway network. Hence, it was not surprising that the first reports that came back from the region in the early 1970s concerned the decimation of Indian tribes and the destruction of the delicate ecology of the Amazon rainforest.(2)

Many Brazilian anthropologists were outraged that the government had neither demarcated native lands nor vaccinated Indians against diseases before the building of the new roads. There is a long history of protectionist Indian legislation in Brazil, and one article in the Brazilian Constitution specifically recognizes Indian land rights. During the early 1970s, however, it was impossible to protest the government's failure to fulfill its legal responsibilities to Indians, because of the repressive political situation that existed in Brazil. If anthropologists spoke out, they faced the prospect of imprisonment and torture at the hands of the military government's police and security forces.

This situation posed special ethical responsibilities for foreign anthropologists who were doing research in Brazil. Increasingly, we found that our Brazilian colleagues were asking us to carry back information to the United States and Europe in order to alert the world about what was happening to Brazilian Indians. A number of our Brazilian colleagues felt that Indian policy was one area where the government might respond to international pressure and publicity.(3)

It was essential to place the Brazilian Indian situation in an international context, because much of the technical and financial support for the Amazon development program was coming from institutions outside of Brazil. The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, for example, had provided the Brazilian government with loans for highway, port, and hydroelectric plant construction. Companies such as United States Steel, Bethlehem Steel, Alcoa Aluminum, King Ranch, and Georgia-Pacific among others had large investments in the Amazon. Further, much of the aerial-photographic reconnaissance of the Amazon was undertaken with technical assistance from the United States. Without this foreign aid and investment, the regional development program in the Amazon could not move ahead.

In 1976, my colleagues and I at the Anthropology Resource Center conducted a study of multinational mining and petroleum companies in the Amazon and the effects of their activities on Indian tribes. In contrast to conventional anthropological research which is based on fieldwork among a specific group of people, we gathered our information from trade journals, interviews with international development agency officials, and site reports that other anthropologists had sent from Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru. To obtain maximum public exposure for our findings, we released a report on our study at a press conference during the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C. (4)

In January 1977, just at the time that President Carter was making known his human rights policy, we established an office in Washington in order to bring the situation of Brazilian Indians to the attention of policy makers, members of Congress, and human rights activists. As a result of this effort, ARC was invited to participate in a special United Nations Non-Governmental Organizations conference on the topic of "Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas" held in Geneva in 1977. A year later, ARC testified before a briefing of the House Subcommittee on International Development on the subject of "The Impact of Brazil's 'Economic Miracle' on the Amazonian Indians." (5)

Since then, the center has helped to coordinate the international campaign in support of the land rights of the Yanomami Indians of Brazil. The large amount of ethnographic and film documentation on the Yanomami has given them a special place in anthropology. Until recently, they were considered to be one of the last and largest unacculturated Indian groups in South America. In 1974, the Brazilian government began constructing the Northern Perimeter Highway along the southern part of Yanomami territory. At the same time, mineral companies discovered large deposits of uranium and cassiterite (an ore used in the production of tin) in an area occupied by more than 4,000 Indians. Along the southern and eastern border of the Yanomami homeland, the government began the settlement of colonists and cattle ranchers. These abrupt and uncontrolled contacts have had devastating effects on the health and culture of the Yanomami. Anthropologists Kenneth Taylor and Alcida Ramos, who have done fieldwork among the Yanomami, report that several hundred Indians have already died from diseases as a result of contacts with highway workers, prospectors, and settlers.(6)

In June 1979, a group of Brazilian anthropologists, clerics, and citizens submitted a proposal to the Brazilian government calling for the creation of a 16-million acre Yanomami Indian Park. Despite numerous promises, the Brazilian government has refused to create a land area for the Yanomami. Throughout 1980 and 1981, gold and diamond prospectors invaded the Yanomami territory without any control by the government. Recent reports indicate that measles and whooping cough epidemics are now spreading throughout the Yanomami homeland. In July 1981, missionaries reported that 21 Indians had died from measles in one village and that other villages were in jeopardy.

In response to this situation, ARC, the American Anthropological Association, the Indian Law Resource Center, and Survival International of England and the United States submitted a formal complaint on behalf of the Yanomami to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS). This complaint, the first of its kind ever presented to the OAS, called for international intervention in order to alleviate the conditions faced by the Yanomami tribe.(7) 2nd

The Yanomami campaign and other campaigns efforts on behalf of Indian peoples have brought to world attention the serious human rights violations being committed against indigenous peoples. In November 1980, the IVth Russell Tribunal met in Holland to discuss the current situation of genocide and ethnocide faced by ~~several~~ Indian nations throughout the Americas. In September 1981, another international conference was held under UN auspices in Geneva to discuss the land rights of indigenous peoples. Currently, ARC is planning an international conference on the subject of "Transnational Corporations and Indigenous Peoples." This conference will bring together indigenous leaders and non-Indian experts to discuss international strategies for countering transnational companies who are exploiting mineral and energy resources on Indian lands.

In the future, Indian organizations themselves will bring their grievances before official agencies such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States. Anthropologists can play a role in these efforts by providing indigenous organizations with information and by showing the relationships between their struggles and the wider problems of human and planetary survival. As many people have noted, the world today is a "global village." Working together with indigenous peoples, rather than just studying them as objects of curiosity, anthropologists can make that village a better place to live.

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Footnotes:

1.) Sylvia Ann Hewlitt, The Cruel Dilemmas of Development: Twentieth-Century Brazil (Basic Books, 1980).

2.) Shelton H. Davis, Victims of the Miracle: Development and the Indians of Brazil (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

3.) Shelton H. Davis, "The Social Responsibility of Anthropological Science in the Context of Contemporary Brazil," in Ahamed Idris-Soven, Elizabeth Idris-Soven, and Mary K. Vaughan (eds.), The World as a Company Town: Multinational Corporations and Social Change (Mouton Publishers, 1978), pp. 211-220.

4.) Shelton H. Davis and Robert O. Mathews, The Geological Imperative: Anthropology and Development in the Amazon Basin of South America (Anthropology Resource Center, 1976).

5.) "Briefing on Impact of Brazil's 'Economic Miracle' on the Amazonian Indians," Subcommittee on International Development, Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 6 September 1978.

6.) Kenneth Taylor and Alcida Ramos, The Yanoama in Brazil, 1979, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Document 37, 1979.

7.) Anthropology Resource Center, The Yanomami Indian Park: A Call for Action (Anthropology Resource Center, 1981).