

# BRAZIL'S SIGNIFICANT MINORITY

*by David Maybury-Lewis*

The Indians of Brazil have been much in the news lately. In the summer of 1988, Kayapo from the northern state of Pará sat for several weeks in the antechambers of parliament while delegates drafted the new constitution of Brazil. They were there, in tribal paint and feathers, to urge the delegates to guarantee Indian rights. In March 1989, the same Kayapo Indians played host to a week-long Indian summit meeting at Altamira in the heart of the Amazon to protest the building of dams that would flood their lands. The meeting was packed with other Indians, their supporters, and the international press. Partly because of the Kayapo's efforts, the World Bank and several foreign commercial banks withdrew their support for the dam-building project.

More recent subjects of media attention have been the Yanomamo, an indigenous people who live along Brazil's border with Venezuela. Thanks to the new roads and airstrips that have been built in the area as part of Brazil's extensive Northern Headwaters project, launched in 1985, more than 45,000 gold miners have poured into Yanomamo territory, driving some Indians out of their villages

and destroying their homes. The miners have polluted the rivers, driven away game, and brought disease and starvation to the Yanomamo. The rising death toll—about 10 percent of the 10,000 Yanomamo have perished during the last two years—has stirred angry protests both in Brazil and abroad. In October 1989, a federal court in Brasília confirmed the rights of the Yanomamo to all of their traditional territory, and it called on the federal government to remove the miners from Yanomamo land. The government dragged its feet, pleading that it had no power to enforce the ruling. Recently, Brazil's new president, Fernando Collor de Mello, ordered the destruction of 100 dirt airstrips to restrict access to the region, but the order has not yet been carried out. At the same time, he pledged to balance the Indians' needs with those of non-Indians. It remains to be seen how this balancing act will be accomplished.



*Assembled outside the Brazilian Congress last September, Indians from 76 tribes protested unregulated mining on Yanomamo territory.*

It is surprising in some ways that the Indian question has become such a sensitive political issue in Brazil—indeed, one that authorities now treat as a matter of national security. Brazil's estimated 250,000 Indians make up less than one percent of the nation's population. They are scattered throughout the more

remote regions of a country that is larger than the United States (minus Alaska) and noted for its impenetrable jungles and vast wilderness. The sensitivity is all the more puzzling in light of the marginal role that Indians have played throughout Brazilian history. Even when the first Portuguese explorers arrived in 1500, they found none of the large settled populations that their Spanish counterparts came across—and quickly subjugated—in Central America and the Andes.

The Portuguese were in fact relatively slow to colonize their South American territory. Portugal, unlike Britain, had no large surplus population to send to the New World. (During the 16th century, it had only one million inhabitants.) Moreover, Vasco da Gama had recently discovered the sea route to the East Indies around the Cape of Good Hope, and the Portuguese were intent on exploiting their empire in Africa and Asia, where they dominated the trade in low-volume, luxury commodities such as silks, ivory, and spices. Brazil's sparsely populated jungles offered no similar prizes, no obvious opportunities for rapid enrichment. Indeed, it was only by accident that, in 1500, Pedro Álvares Cabral landed in Brazil and claimed it for Portugal; he had been bound for the Orient when a storm blew him off course.

In addition to seeming a relatively unattractive colony, Brazil was difficult for the Portuguese to hold onto, even though the Indians received the settlers peaceably enough at first. In return for metal tools, the natives cut and supplied the hardwood logs of reddish brazilwood from which the colony took its name. But Indian wars soon erupted, and by the middle of the 16th century, the Portuguese were fighting to de-

fend their settlements not only against the Indians but also against rival Europeans, particularly the French and the Dutch. (The French and the Portuguese struggled for close to 150 years for control of Guanabara Bay, across whose waters the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Niterói now stand.)

**I**n Brazil, as elsewhere in the New World, the Europeans enlisted Indians as allies, enslaving them when their help was no longer needed. The Indians, of course, fought hard to avoid slavery, and when they were defeated, as they invariably were, they tried to withdraw into the wilderness. But not even their remoteness could fully protect them. By the 17th century, as the demand for labor on the coastal sugar plantations grew, the Portuguese had become accomplished slavers. Their expeditions, called *bandeiras* (from the word meaning flag, or a detachment of armed men), penetrated the most inhospitable regions in search of Indians. The poorer colonists, especially those from São Paulo in the south, became notorious *bandeirantes*, who embarked on grueling slaving expeditions that lasted as long as four years. "These Portuguese do and suffer incomparably more to win the bodies of the Indians for their service than I do to win their souls for heaven," a Spanish Jesuit remarked.

The Portuguese kings of the 17th century displayed considerable ambivalence about the enslavement of Indians. At times, they were persuaded that it would be wiser to educate them into being loyal subjects of the crown. Such a policy, they believed, would help solve the problem of holding and peopling the vast territories. And as the Jesuits constantly reminded the kings, it would also be the Christian thing to do.

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Father Antônio Vieira was the most vigorous 17th-century champion of the Jesuit strategy. His role was similar to that of the more famous Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Spanish priest who had become Bishop of the Indies a century earlier. Vieira could also be as inconsistent as Las Casas, who campaigned against the enslavement of Indians while condoning that of blacks. Vieira, for his part, fulminated against Indian slavery, even as he dispatched missionaries to accompany official slaving expeditions. And he continued to lure Indians into mission villages long after he knew that doing so made them easy prey for slave-hunters. Both Las Casas and Vieira were caught in the same dilemma, one that neither the Spanish nor the Portuguese monarchs could solve: Christian concern for the rights of the Indians ran counter to the interests of the colonists. No one, not even the kings of Spain or Portugal, was powerful enough to force his far-flung subjects to abandon slavery.

Thus, even the Marquis of Pombal, Portugal's virtual dictator for many years under King José I (1750–77), was unable to prevail when he appointed his own step-brother governor of Maranhão in northern Brazil in 1751. The new governor arrived with orders to enforce a 1748 ban on slavery, but before long he was making the same arguments that the colonists had always made. The Jesuits, he said, were abusing their power over the Indians. "They started with general virtue and religious zeal," he wrote, "but have ended in the abominable vice of avarice." Pombal, who had his own quarrel with the Church at home, finally found it more convenient to



*Portuguese bandeirantes (expeditionaries) of the 17th century went into the jungles of Brazil to enslave Indians. Here, a group of bandeirantes meets stiff resistance from Botocudo warriors.*

expel the Jesuits from Portugal and its colonies in 1759 than to persist in the effort to abolish slavery. By then a system of forced labor had replaced outright slavery, leaving the Indians no better off.

At the end of the 18th century, Indians were, in any case, increasingly irrelevant to the life of the colony. For one thing, very few survived. Compared with roughly two-and-a-half million Indians at the beginning of the colonial period,\* there remained only about 100,000 at the time Brazil gained its independence from Portugal in 1822—a small proportion of the country's two million population. In addition to their decimation by disease, maltreatment, and warfare, Indians had been replaced by blacks as the major source of labor. Hundreds of thousands of African slaves toiled variously on the sugar plantations of northeastern Brazil (supporting an economy that resembled that of the antebellum Deep South in the United States), in the gold mines of central Brazil, and, later, on the

\*Precise calculations are impossible, but estimates range from four or five million at the time of the Portuguese arrival to less than one million. John Hemming's figure of two-and-a-half million, cited in *Red Gold* (1978), seems a reasonable, middle-range estimate.



*Cândido M. Rondon (1865–1958),  
first head of Brazil's Indian Service.*

coffee plantations farther south.

By this time, those Indians who remained could be found only in remote regions or on the frontiers of settlement. Fortunately for these survivors, there was no expansionary push westward, such as took place during the 19th century in the United States. In Brazil, the non-Indian population clung mainly to the coastal regions, communicating by sea or by means of a few great rivers: the Amazon, the São Francisco, or the Paraná. All of the capitals of the major states, save one (Belo Horizonte in Minas Gerais), were port cities. Most 19th-century explorations into the heart of the country were undertaken by European scientists, including Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace. Brazilians turned their backs on the interior, leaving the Indians in relative peace.

But not for long. The Indian question became a national issue once again in the early 20th century, when German immigrants who were beginning to open up new farmland in the southern states of Paraná and Santa Catarina came into conflict with Indians who claimed the land as their own.

These skirmishes attracted international attention when Czech anthropologist Vojtěch Frič, who had collected artifacts in the area for the Berlin and Hamburg museums, addressed the 1908 meeting of the International Congress of Americanists in Vienna. He reported that colonists in Brazil were hiring *bugreiros* (Indian killers) to rid the land of natives. Frič described these *bugreiros* as "human hyenas" who attacked Indian villages by night and slaughtered their inhabitants. His revelations were extremely embarrassing to the government of President Afonso Pena, which was trying to recruit immigrants and didn't want prospective settlers from Germany to think they might be moving to a savage frontier.

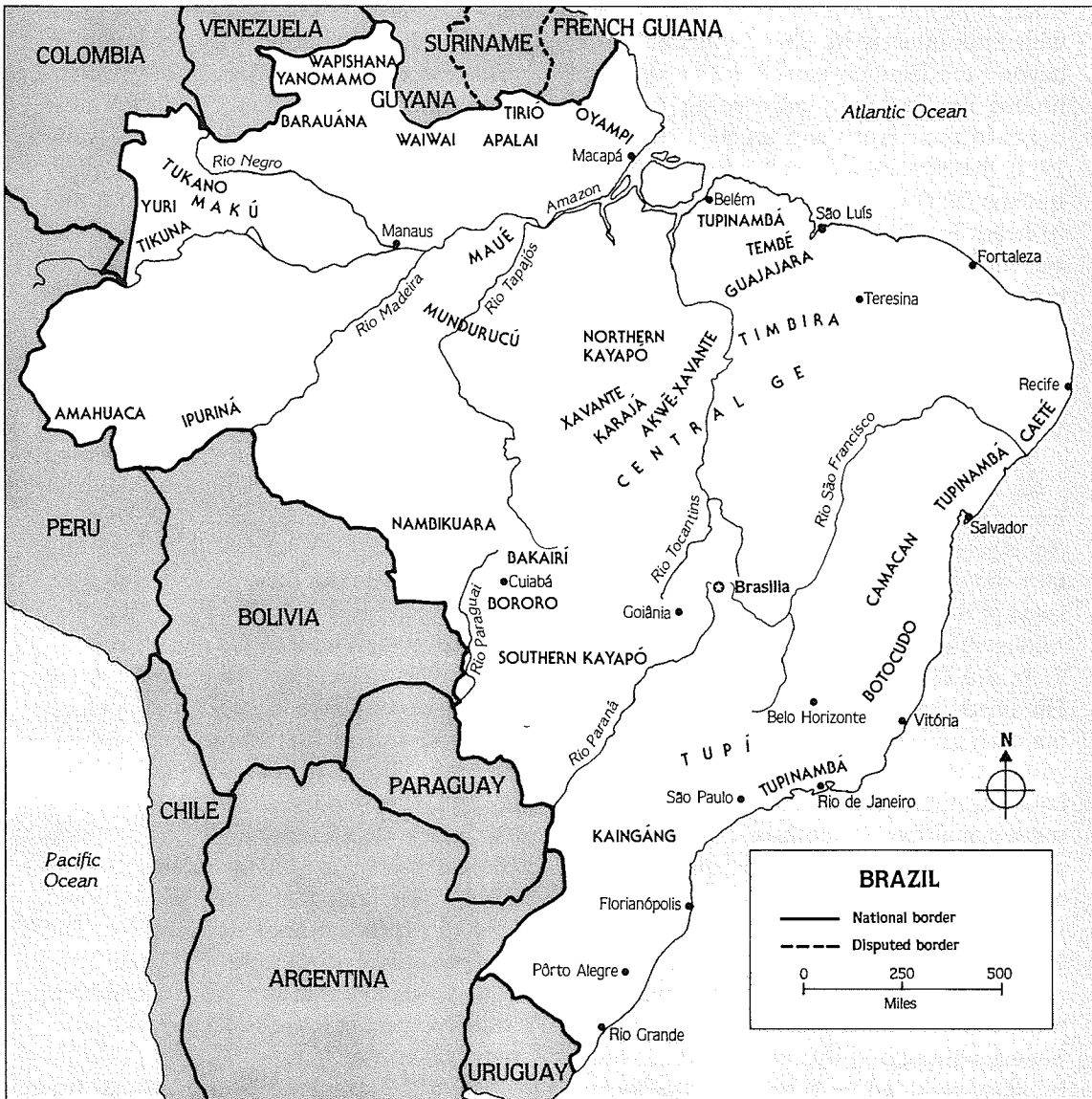
The issue quickly became a matter of national debate. Professor Hermann von Ihering, a German-Brazilian scientist who headed the prestigious Paulista Museum in the city of São Paulo, defended the settlers. They were the vanguard of civilization, he argued, and the Indians would have to give way before them. The Indian cause was taken up by a young army officer and engineer named Cândido Mariano Rondon.

Of partly Indian descent, Rondon was a religious positivist who followed the scientific creed of Auguste Comte and believed in the brotherhood of man. During the 1890s, while laying telegraph lines in the central states of Goiás and Mato Grosso, Rondon had gone out of his way to befriend the Indians. Because of the success of his missions and of his efforts to make peace with the redoubtable Bororo Indians, Colonel Rondon was given command of a major project in 1906. He and his men were to lay a telegraph line across Mato Grosso and a huge, unexplored area of Amazonian jungle (now called Rondonia) to the frontiers of Peru and Bolivia. One night, after having been shot at several times by Nambikuara Indians who re-

mained invisible in the forest—the colonel's carbine and saddle, hit by several arrows, are now museum pieces—Rondon gave his nervous men a famous order that later became the motto of Brazil's Indian Service: "Die, if need be, but never kill." Fortunately, Rondon and his men did not

die; nor did they kill. Their expedition was a success, and Rondon returned to Rio de Janeiro a hero.

Rondon's triumph lent credence to his view that Indians, if treated fairly, could be made into useful citizens. His arguments were taken up by intellectuals in Rio, then



*The approximately 250,000 Indians of Brazil make up less than one percent of the nation's total population. There are about 180 indigenous tribes, some of which are located above.*

the nation's capital, as well as by scientists at the National Museum. The racist severity of the policy advocated by von Ihering and the Europeans stood in marked contrast to what Brazilians proudly considered their own more characteristic kindness and willingness to compromise. Educated opinion rallied to Rondon's side. In 1910, the Brazilian legislature, dominated by landowners with little interest in what happened at or beyond the frontier, passed extraordinarily liberal legislation guaranteeing Indians rights to their lands and their customs. In 1911, the Service for the Protection of the Indians (SPI) was created, with Rondon as its head. Predictably underfunded, the SPI was unable to protect all of Brazil's Indians, but this was not a great problem at first: The Indians' remoteness was still their best protection.

The creation of the SPI seemed to be a popular vindication of Rondon's principles—that Indians were not irremediably savage, that they had certain rights which should be protected, and that they should be helped to become useful citizens of the republic. But in fact, most Brazilians still thought like von Ihering. Why, then, did Rondon's views prevail in 1910? His charisma was not the only reason. In the early 20th century, many educated Brazilians were embarrassed by their nation's backwardness and by the central government's inability to control the rural oligarchs. They were eager for modernization and a stronger, more united nation. Rondon's notion of nation-building was both modern and Brazilian. The SPI, a federal agency, would help bring even the most remote inhabitants of Brazil into the nation, although at this early stage, nation-building included no expansionist schemes for the settlement and development of the western regions.

That changed. Getúlio Vargas, an oli-

garch from the cattle-ranching plains in Brazil's far south, seized control of the government in 1930 and set about creating a more powerful central government, enacting a wide range of social legislation, and encouraging new industries and agricultural diversity. One part of Vargas's modernization program was the opening up of the west, but he did not pursue it very energetically. It didn't matter. A spontaneous westward movement was already underway, building momentum during the next 30 years. This movement received a strong boost in 1960, when the nation's capital was transferred from Rio de Janeiro to the new city of Brasília, in the sparsely populated highlands of central Brazil. The controversial new capital was established by President Juscelino Kubitschek, himself a native of Minas Gerais, Brazil's only major inland state. Kubitschek hoped that the capital would help open up the interior, and it did. Brasília was soon connected by good roads to the coast and also to Belém at the mouth of the Amazon. For the first time in the nation's history, the north, the center, and the southeast were linked by easy overland routes.

When the military seized power in 1964, it stepped up road construction, intending to move beyond central Brazil and open up the far west and the Amazonian regions. The uninhibited development programs pushed by the generals during their 20-year rule had a disastrous effect on the Indians—so disastrous that Brazil suddenly found itself facing charges of genocide from the international community. The Brazilian authorities were shocked. How could a country that protected its Indians in the tradition of Rondon be thought guilty of such a crime?

The SPI found itself in a dilemma. If it tried to defend the rights of the Indians, it would be accused of impeding development in the form of cattle ranching, log-

ging, agribusiness, and mining. The views of the military government were made quite clear. Rangel Reis, the minister of the interior, went so far as to say that cattle were the *bandeirantes* of the 1970s. Meanwhile, the government's development strategies stimulated a growing hunger for land throughout Brazil. The landless poor started to flock to the frontiers, and Indians soon found themselves facing outsiders who wanted either to uproot them or to exterminate them.

The government was certainly never in favor of killing Indians, but it took no steps to protect them from the predictable effects of unbridled frontier expansion. The SPI, caught in the middle, was at best ineffectual. At worst, it was complicitous. Increasingly, it tried to instill an entrepreneurial spirit in its posts, using Indian labor or the natural resources on Indian lands to make a profit for the Service (or for individual members of it). Some of its officials accepted bribes or were persuaded to conspire with the invading frontiersmen.

When these scandals were revealed in 1967, the government dissolved the service that Rondon had created and replaced it with the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI). None of the guilty agents of the old service served time in jail, however, and FUNAI soon faced the same dilemma that its predecessor had.

In 1975, Interior Minister Reis launched a campaign for the "emancipation" of the Indians, presenting it as the equivalent of black emancipation. But the emancipation of the blacks came about with the abolition



*A Franciscan missionary supervising the work of Indians. The engraving is by João Maurício Rugendas, who travelled throughout Brazil during the early 19th century.*

of slavery in 1888. The Indians, nearly a century later, were not slaves. So what, Indians began to wonder, were they being emancipated from?

It was soon clear that the government intended to free them from the tutelage of FUNAI and indeed from their very identity as Indians. FUNAI was urged to "civilize" the Indians as quickly as possible so that they would no longer have any reason to claim special protection (and so that FUNAI itself could go out of business). But the Indians were not interested in this kind of rapid assimilation. They were fighting for their lives in some parts of Brazil (along the route of Rondon's first expedition to the northwest, for example, as well as in the Amazonian regions); and everywhere they were struggling for their land and customs. They pointed out that their rights were guaranteed under Brazilian law and that FUNAI was supposed to protect them. In December 1978, Indian representatives from 13 tribes in seven states wrote to President (and General) Ernesto Geisel:

We are not impressed by the pronouncements made in the press by the minister of the interior or the president of FUNAI in defense of emancipation. Only we, as victims of that policy, can make an honest appraisal of what this emancipation means. If fine speech could solve our problems, we would not be in a situation today so distant from what the Indian Statute was to have protected. We say the emancipation sought by the minister of the interior will cause the detribalization of indigenous communities, and consequently will destroy them individually and collectively. For the Indian must live in his own communities, with full liberty of cultural tradition and freedom to possess the land.

The government's policies also aroused opposition among non-Indians. The Indians, scattered as they were, started to organize in their own defense; deputations of chiefs were frequently seen in Brasília, coming to put their case directly to the authorities. They were supported by the Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI), an arm of the Catholic Church, by pro-Indian organizations largely started by anthropologists, and by the National Association for the Support of the Indians, whose chapters started springing up in major cities, including Pôrto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. The plight of the Indians soon attracted international attention. In 1979, a World Bank report noted the Indians' "increasingly precarious position"; its observation that "diseases transmitted by the new settlers have decimated whole tribes" was not the only one that seemed to echo back over four centuries of history.

The pro-Indian movement gathered momentum during the period known as the *abertura* (opening), which began in 1977 when Geisel announced his intention to return the country gradually to civilian rule. In the Brazilian press, discussion of the pressure on Indians became a kind of pretext, or cover, for discussing the military's development program, which had placed

such a severe burden on the poor, especially those in rural areas.

In 1985, when the civilian administration of President José Sarney took over from the military, the need to veil debates disappeared, but the Indian question did not. To the contrary, it became the subject of even stormier debate, largely because the Indians and their demands highlight many of the unresolved issues in modern Brazilian politics.

This was made abundantly clear in an unusual series of articles carried for a full week in 1987 on the front page of Brazil's major newspaper, the *Estado de São Paulo*. The articles appeared while delegates were meeting in Brasília to draft a new constitution. Collectively titled "The Conspiracy against Brazil," they were intended to discourage delegates from heeding the demands of pro-Indian groups. These groups wanted the constitution to declare Brazil a multi-ethnic nation, with Indian lands and customs guaranteed. Their opponents argued that Brazil was a melting pot, a society that welcomed people from other cultures, *provided that they were willing to assimilate into the mainstream*.

The articles in the *Estado* alleged that the pro-Indian advocates were conspiring against Brazil while pretending to defend the rights of indigenous peoples. They were guilty on three counts: First, by calling for a multi-ethnic Brazil, the pro-Indian groups were dividing the nation. Second, they were in league with foreign churches in an effort to internationalize the Amazon. And third, they were working covertly with foreign mining companies, for if they succeeded in preventing Brazilian mining companies from exploiting minerals on Indian lands, Brazil would be forced to buy minerals from abroad. Outraged, the Catholic Church took legal action against the *Estado* and showed that its allegations were



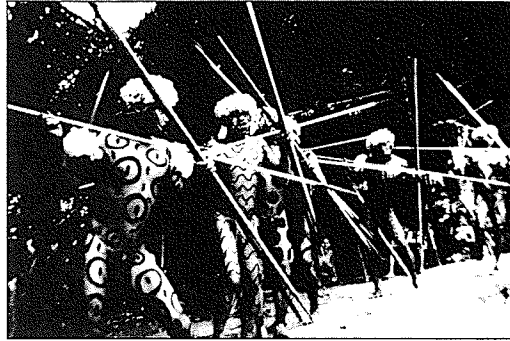
based on reports that were partially or misleadingly quoted, and in some cases actually forged. Nonetheless, the campaign of vilification put the proponents of Indian rights on the defensive.

In May 1988, the constitutional convention voted not to declare Brazil a multi-ethnic society. It also refused to provide Indian lands with protection against mining interests, although it did limit the circumstances under which these lands could be mined. At the same time, somewhat contradictorily, the rights of Indians to their lands and customs were written into the constitution, and FUNAI's "emancipation" policy was excluded.

As a result of these decisions, Brazil's Indians find themselves in a curious state of constitutional limbo. Their right to their customs is guaranteed, but it is unclear how they are to maintain their way of life in a nation which officially insists that it is a melting pot. Moreover, the partial constitutional victories for the Indian cause have done little to mitigate the violence that continues to be done to them.

Brazilian schoolbooks glorify the *bandeirantes* who built the nation, glossing over their slaving activities by asserting that the work of Indians (and later of blacks) was necessary for the economy of the colony. Similarly, elimination of the Indians in more recent times is justified in the name of civilization. The official policy of successive administrations, both military and civilian, is that assimilation is the Brazilian way. Furthermore, so this official rationalization goes, Indians who cling to their own way of life "stand in the way of development."

To be sure, the last justification depends on a very narrow definition of development. Protected Indian lands do get in the way of land grabbers and speculators, of rapacious mining interests, and of ranchers who wish to turn vast tracts of territory into



*Yanomamo Indians, a Stone Age people, parade with their spears during a tribal feast.*

grazing lands. These are precisely the people who have been assisted in Brazil by government subsidies and by the government's willingness to look the other way when they do violence to Indians and to the rural poor. But this is neither the only nor the best way to pursue development. Other possible strategies would encourage or at least accommodate people such as rubber-tappers, smallholders, and indigenous producers. Indians throughout the Americas have shown that they can adapt to market forces and still maintain their own cultures, as, for example, the Hopi have done in the United States and the Xavante and the Kayapo are doing in Brazil. The latter are now beginning to market fruits and other forest products that they have grown on their own lands. The Indians' way of doing things may even suggest better local strategies for economic development than those that have been so disastrously followed in recent decades. Scientists have only recently begun to discover the true value of agricultural and forestry techniques that the Amazonian Indians have used for centuries. Darrell Posey, an anthropologist who worked among the Kayapo, found that these practices offer "thousands of ways of making the living forest more valuable than the destroyed forest."

The supposed requirements of that "development" in whose name Indians and

others are threatened with impoverishment are, then, merely a fiction. But the powers that be continue to exploit this fiction.

Even though the grandiose development policies pursued for so many years by the military have thrown the nation into an economic and social crisis, Brazil's leaders continue to point to the Amazon and other regions of the far west as the solution. According to their vision, Brazil taps the resources of its hinterland and colonizes the frontier with people drawn from the poverty-stricken masses.

But the reality so far has failed to live up to the dream. The resources have not been as abundant as was hoped, and the process of extracting them has involved continuing violence against the inhabitants and the environment itself. The damage to the Amazonian ecosystem has provoked a worldwide outcry, which in turn has aroused Brazilian nationalism. Brazilians resent being told that the Amazon is a global resource—President Sarney even called this kind of insistence a form of "colonialism." The Brazilian military sees such international concern as a thinly veiled attack on Brazilian sovereignty. It pushed through the Northern Headwaters program in 1985 in order to secure the Amazonian frontiers for Brazil and to encourage settlement.

The military, which retains considerable influence even within the present administration, is not about to let considerations of Indian rights interfere with its grand de-

sign. As a result, important decisions concerning Indian affairs have been taken out of the hands of FUNAI and are now routinely made by the nation's security council. This is justified on the grounds that Indian questions are frontier questions, but that is not the main reason.

**B**razil today is engaged in intense national introspection. Its citizens are reflecting on the bitter experiences of the recent past, on the dire present situation, and on the prospects for the future. They are aware that the people have paid a high price for the development that was imposed on them. They resent the fact that they are now being dunned by rich countries to repay huge debts (now totalling \$114.6 billion) that were incurred by dictators over whom they had no control, for money spent on they know not what.

But Brazilians are not just arguing about their economic future. They are rethinking their constitution and their political institutions. Most of all, they are reflecting on what it means to be Brazilian and on what kind of a nation they want theirs to be. At the moment, social justice is high on the list of popular concerns, and while the Indians are not the only ones who suffer, their plight is the most dramatic reminder of how the weak are mistreated. That is why the military and the other powerful supporters of the development policies of the past 25 years consider the Indian question a matter of national security.

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