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mato grosso: Troubles in the Xingu National Park

The Xingu National Park in Mato Grosso, one of Brazil's few large Indian reserves, has for decades been considered the showplace of Brazilian Indian policy. The strong, healthy Indians performing their traditional ceremonies and living unmolested by frontier expansion, the exploitation of their labor, or the presence of missionaries have become the image of the Brazilian Indian both in the country and abroad. The Xingu has been justly considered an example of what Brazilian Indian policy could be: guarantee of land, respect for native culture, and careful attention to preventive and remedial medicine. The founders of the Xingu Park, Orlando and Claudio Villas Boas, were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on the basis of their work.

Now the showpiece is curtained, "closed for repairs." The Xingu Indians are angry. Once they showed they had ideas of their own that were not necessarily those of their mentors, their medical assistance was diminished and they were silenced. They are prohibited from speaking their native language on two-way radios, letters to and from the area are censored, journalists and anthropologists may not enter the region, and the Indians have difficulty obtaining authorization to take the plane out of the park.

This punishment is the result of the Indians' expression of self-awareness and independence, which has been growing over the years. The Xingu Indians were always encouraged to think for themselves, first by the Villas Boas brothers—especially Claudio—and later by Olympio Serra, who replaced them as administrator of the Xingu Park in 1974. But ironically, in the current conflict between the Xingu Indians and official authoritarianism, the Villas Boas brothers have appeared on the side of the whites.

In 1978, Orlando Villas Boas, together with the president of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) and a TV station in São Paulo, developed the idea of a soap opera titled "Aritana," the name of a Yawalapiti leader, and partly filmed in one of the Xingu Indian villages. The TV station promised the Indians payment in trade goods, but the Indians say they never received them. Olympio Serra, officially responsible for guaranteeing that

the Indians were not being exploited, was not even consulted. He accused the TV station and the president of FUNAI of exploiting unacculturated Indians—a misdemeanor that carries a six-month prison sentence. In the middle of a serious measles epidemic, which subsequently claimed several lives, Serra was fired as director of the Xingu Park.



—From *Tempo e Presença*

The Indians objected to Serra's dismissal; many groups liked him because he listened to them and respected their opinions. The Indians went to Brasília and São Paulo to protest, threatening to sue the TV station. The president of FUNAI and the Villas Boas brothers could not believe that the Indians were acting for themselves; they blamed "outside agitators" for every initiative that did not suit them. Over the protests of the Indians, another man was put in Serra's place and given the task of "pacifying" the Indians. He was obviously frightened by the Indian threats, for during the short time he stayed in the Xingu he never appeared without being heavily armed.

The past year has seen a constant attempt to "divide and conquer." Fearing independent court proceedings, FUNAI promised to sue the TV station on behalf of the Indians. Nevertheless, it has done absolutely nothing to pursue litigation. Large gifts of trade goods—bribes—given to one group and not to another undermined the Indians' unity. Factional splits, always present in Xingu Indian politics, were exacerbated. Puppet assemblies were arranged without the presence of dissident Indian leaders, and FUNAI used the decisions of these "representative assemblies" to justify repressive policies. Meanwhile, many of the central problems of the Indians go unresolved.

Anthropologists and pro-Indian

organizations are concerned about what is happening in the Xingu. It looked for a while as though the "picture window" through which the world was to see "real" Brazilian Indians had become a true showplace, where Indians simultaneously fought intruders and took a united stand against the authoritarian actions of FUNAI. The government of Indian affairs by Indians themselves—a proper goal of Indian policy—seemed to have arrived. But the Indians' efforts at self-determination were stifled and punished.

If the situation in the Xingu Park is bad, the rest of Brazilian Indian policy seems to be worse. In March 1979, a new president of FUNAI, Adhemar Ribeiro da Silva, was appointed. Apparently a poor choice, he surprised observers by becoming a proponent of demarcating Yanomamö lands in Roraima. He also took action against the invasion of Indian territory in Rondônia, the economic exploitation of Indian lands, and corruption within FUNAI. His policies, however, were too strong for the tastes of the governors of several territories and states, and his drive against corruption earned him many enemies within FUNAI. Ribeiro da Silva resigned seven months after his appointment.

The outlook for Brazilian Indians appears at the moment to be grim indeed. Ribeiro da Silva's administration, like the early work of the Villas Boas brothers in the Xingu National Park, offered a brief hope for a more just Indian policy. Today our hopes are diminished, but we in Brazil intend to continue our efforts for rapid demarcation of Indian lands, medical assistance, and self-determination for Indian tribes.

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Porantim

Porantim is a new Indian newspaper published by the Indian Missionary Council (CIMI) in Manaus. Appearing monthly, the newspaper covers recent changes in Brazilian Indian policy, meetings of Indian leaders, and news of the growing Indian movement in neighboring countries. An annual subscription can be obtained by sending \$15 to CIMI-*Porantim*, Caixa Postal 984, Manaus, AM, Brazil.