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## Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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# The Gospel and the Gold Rush

*An idyll ends for Indians caught between missionaries and miners*

"If it weren't for the gold, all would be well. We would have time to prepare the Indians for the maliciousness of the white man." So says Father Norberto Hohenscherer, one of the many Salesian missionaries who have governed, educated and protected 20,000 Indians of the Tukano and other tribes over the past seven decades in remote northwestern Brazil. Time, however, is rapidly running out for both missionaries and Indians. The discovery of potentially vast lodes of gold and other minerals is transforming life in a wide region around São Gabriel da Cachoeira, a small town in the Amazon jungle.

Indeed, the gold rush has set off a multisided conflict that now seems to be escalating. Indian activists accuse the Salesians (named after the 17th century French saint Francis de Sales) of destroying their traditional culture and replacing it with the values of European Christianity. At the same time, the Indians face aggressive outsiders: mining companies, free-lance prospectors and the Brazilian military. Bringing this simmering conflict to a head is the imminent retirement of Dom Miguel Alagna, 75, the autocratic bishop who for the past 20 years has reigned over the Arizona-size diocese from his unpretentious whitewashed brick residence in São Gabriel.

Until the gold strike three years ago, the Salesians' placid principality resembled the 18th century Jesuit compounds in Paraguay that are celebrated in the film *The Mission*. The Indians' spiritual traditions provided a foundation for the Salesian priests and nuns who supplanted the tribal shamans. The Salesians stressed education and introduced infirmaries, orchards and craft workshops. The Indians became heavily dependent upon the mission, which bartered or bought handicrafts and art, resold them to outsiders and used most of the proceeds to maintain the church's services.

The undisputed lord of this domain was the bishop. Until very recently, "Dom Miguel was a strongman," observes Anthropologist Luciene Guimarães de Souza of the government's Indian agency. But now the frail prelate has reached the Vatican's mandatory retirement age and will soon return home to Sicily.

Though the Salesians deny it, critics say Dom Miguel meddled in tribal politics to advance promission Indians, threatened excommunication for those who disobeyed and even controlled access to the military planes that until lately provided the only transportation in and out of the area. A fervent anti-Communist and admirer of the military, Dom Miguel belongs to the minority of Brazil's bishops who oppose left-wing liberation theology, which follows Marxist-style analysis of social oppression.

FRIDMAN—SYGMA

**Dom Miguel: "I never imposed anything"**

*Strongman of an Arizona-size domain.*

When the Tukanos found gold in the Serra do Traíra region in 1984, the Salesians' paternalistic domain began to crumble. Soon hundreds of Indians were panning streams, only to encounter exploitation from white buyers who paid them 50% below market price for the gold. Then about 2,000 well-armed white *garimpeiros* (prospectors) appeared. To *garimpeiros,* "Indians are wild animals—brutes," says one former prospector. A *garimpeiro,* he adds, "is not afraid to kill or be killed. He earns easy, spends easy." These prospectors have recently been supplanted by two powerful mining companies that have government concessions to prospect on Indian land. Also on hand are an unknown number of soldiers, who are building a $109 million network of outposts to prevent gold smuggling and to keep Colombian rebels and cocaine couriers from violating the Brazilian border.

One Tukano leader, Benedito Machado, angered by the forces aligned against his people, says, "The church taught us to turn the other cheek, but it taught us nothing about the cunning, the subtleties and lies the white man uses." Nevertheless, the 200 Indian leaders who attended a three-day summit meeting last month in São Gabriel with mining, government, military and Salesian representatives proved to be highly articulate—patently a result of their missionary training. In florid speeches, they demanded land rights so they can levy royalties on gold that is mined, as well as better communications, health care and education. The government has yet to act.

Little was said at the meeting about the Salesians, but Robin Wright, an American anthropologist at the State University of Campinas in Brazil, notes that inevitably "the mission structure is being replaced by a new economic structure based on mining." Mission income is declining, and though 130 village elementary schools survive, two of the six boarding schools for advanced students lie abandoned.

While Dom Miguel welcomed the military and the mining companies, many among the 45 nuns and 17 priests who remain at the mission are suspicious of both but fear deportation if they speak out. The bishop, annoyed by criticism of his paternal rule, declares, "They accused me because I was civilizing the Indians . . . I never imposed anything, but in the schools they learned things and saw that witchcraft was wrong." Nonetheless, younger priests like Father Alfonso Casasnovas admit that the church is overcoming past errors by working to "rediscover values" of the old culture.

Many of the Tukanos remain allies of the church. At the summit meeting one Indian teacher, Brasilino Borges Barreto, proclaimed that "it was the missions that gave us this level of knowledge." Said another, Getúlio Bruno: "Our civilization began on May 23, 1923." That was the day on which the Salesian missionaries came to his tribe. —*By Richard N. Ostling. Reported by John Barham/Manaus*

SALESIAN MISSIONS

**Tribal children eating lunch at a Salesian mission school**