

WTR 00197

waimiri-atroari:

The Massacres behind the Myth

"The Waimiri-Atroari Indians, who have always been ferocious, are now becoming more amenable and beginning to assimilate civilized customs. After watching a 'kickabout' among employees of the FUNAI [National Indian Foundation] post, they have become admirers of football, to the point of trying to play it. For the FUNAI regional delegate, Kazuto Kawamoto, this means that every day brings the Waimiri-Atroari closer to the whites, without evil intentions. It is believed too that they are beginning to accept our ways and customs, for apart from liking football—and who doesn't!—they attach great importance to wearing clothes and behaving like the men of FUNAI."

—*"Savages Already Want to Play Football,"*

A Critica, Manaus, 5 May 1978

The myth of the Waimiri-Atroari Indians incorporates the central lie that has justified the centuries-old prejudice against Amerindians since the white man first invaded their lands: that they were innately fierce and irrational, that their attacks on the white man were evidence of this innate savagery, and that only the white man, offering enlightenment in his bounty, could tame these wild people and transform them into human beings.

The function of this prejudice was—and still is—to justify the barbarism of the white man in his relations with Amerindians. In the Waimiri-Atroari case, the blanket of secrecy that has for years been drawn over the situation of the group points to a deliberate strategy to allow the myth to grow and thus mask the tragedy of a group that has been consistently persecuted over the centuries and violently attacked with heavy weapons only a few years ago.

The Waimiri-Atroari are Carib speakers who inhabit the forests of southern Roraima and eastern Amazonas, in the lands drained by the Jauaperi, Alalaú, Camanaú, Uatumã, and Santo Antônio do Abonari rivers. FUNAI has only this year admitted that there are Atroari in Roraima, but the land decreed as a reserve—although it has never been demarcated—is entirely in Amazonas; its northern border is the Alalaú, which separates Amazonas from Roraima. There are approximately four times as many Atroari as Waimiri, and Mario Craveiro, coordinator of the "attraction

front" (FUNAI's effort to pacify and settle the Indians), has stated that the Atroari live north of the Alalaú. This means that four-fifths of the Indians—1,000 Atroari—are excluded from the reserved area.



—from L'Express

Why was land reserved so far to the south? Ezekias Heringer, an ex-employee of FUNAI and a member of the attraction team led by Gilberto Pinto Figueiredo in the early 1970s, offered an explanation of the 1971 FUNAI decree that set the limits of the reserve. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Heringer reports, the southern tip of Roraima was thought to be good land for cattle, but it was inhabited by the Atroari. FUNAI's efforts, led by Gilberto Pinto, were thus directed not only at pacifying the Indians to make way for the Manaus-Bôa Vista highway (BR-174), which was begun in the early 1970s, but also at attracting the Indians to the south of the Alalaú to make way for cattle.

The cattle raising has not materialized, but because FUNAI never declared the land in Roraima to be Indian territory, it has now been sold off. All along the BR-174 north of the Waimiri-Atroari reserve live small farmers who have legally occupied their lands and registered them with INCRA, the Brazilian colonization agency. These colonists are now beginning to report the presence of Indians in the area.

During the early 1970s, the Waimiri-Atroari began to attack FUNAI posts and road workers. While the myth of ferocity grew, Gilberto Pinto kept very quiet about events in the northern part of the area. Four times the Waimiri-Atroari attacked the FUNAI posts at Camanaú from their village 100 kilometers to the north. What was happening in the north that drove the Indians 100 kilometers to the south to attack Camanaú?

For years, particularly during the construction of the BR-174 by the Brazilian Army's Engineering and Construction Battalion, there have been verbal reports of bombing and machine-gun massacres carried out by the Brazilian Army against the Waimiri-Atroari. Heringer has stated in the presence of the president of FUNAI that he and Gilberto Pinto, while in the Alalaú River region in 1973, saw evidence of helicopter landings, trees ripped and scarred by machine-gun fire, and bombs "about the size of watermelons." Heringer contends that he piled these bombs into a pyramid and photographed them. It is not clear what kind of bombs these were, but it appears that the Brazilian Army, at the beginning of the 1970s, was using military methods to drive the Indians southward. It also appears that Gilberto Pinto, the FUNAI coordinator of the operations with the Waimiri-Atroari, by not revealing his observations to the public and demanding an inquiry, was guilty of complicity in the use of heavy weapons in attacks on the Waimiri-Atroari.

A colonist along the BR-174 recently said that an employee of his,

**amazonia:
Preserving Diversity**

In a generally unprepared world community of diverse peoples, the most urgent need is to establish an ecologically viable model for continued human existence. As one plank in the platform of any such model must be the preservation of biotic diversity, it follows that deliberate annihilation of any existing human genotypes, by whatever means, especially when their cultural expression has demonstrated continuous harmony with the supporting environment, will impoverish humanity as a whole and mortgage the human prospect generally. For me, this is the paramount consideration. As much as I yearn for the culture and language of Amazonia, as much as I reveled studying its forests and savannas, as much as I savored the varied traditions of its rightful indigenous residents, I know that Olympian arguments for preservation of the status quo cannot hold back the mounting pressures abroad for quickly gained power, prestige, and profit.

Howard S. Irwin

who until 1975 had worked as an office clerk in the camp of the Sixth Engineering and Construction Battalion, had described one of these attacks. The employee said that one day in 1974, shortly after an incident on the road in which the Indians had killed three road workers, a captain of the army announced that he was going to "bomb the region" so that the road building could continue. According to the employee, the captain closed off a section of the highway, which was still under construction, and went off in a helicopter equipped with bombs, boasting that he was "going to show the Indians who is boss."



A FUNAI employee at the Abonari post, at the entrance to the reserved area, further confirmed the occurrence of armed attacks on the Indians. Manuel Angelico da Silva, a Sataré Indian, stated that many Waimiri-Atroari had been killed, especially during the building of the road. Although he was unable to specify numbers, he said that there were Indians in the villages crippled by gunshot wounds. Journalist Edilson Martins, in his book *Nossas Indios Nossos Mortos*, notes that the Indians fear and hate the sight of a uniform. Heringer has added that FUNAI agents themselves were far more afraid of the army than of the Indians: the mere movement of a leaf in the forest was enough to bring on a hail of machine-gun fire from soldiers who had orders to shoot on sight.

The extent of the massacres of the Waimiri-Atroari by the Brazilian Army will probably never be known, but as long as there is no official inquiry into the case the rumors will continue to spread. Indian agent Sebastião Amancio's wild suggestions in 1975, after the death of Gilberto Pinto, that FUNAI should use dynamite and fortresses against the Waimiri-Atroari may not have differed much from the army's

actual pacification tactics in previous years.

Now that the BR-174 highway is complete and the Indians are caught between colonists to the north and south, they face a new threat: the Balbina Dam hydroelectric project. Although the details of the Balbina project are secret, an engineer on the site has revealed that the Uatumã River will rise about thirty meters, inundating an area of 300,000 hectares, or 3,000 square kilometers. Colonists along the BR-174 have attempted to find out from Eletronorte, the regional utility in charge of the project, how much land will be flooded. Even though their livelihoods are in jeopardy, the colonists cannot obtain clear information.

It is certain that a stretch of the BR-174 and the southern part of the Waimiri-Atroari reserve will be flooded. Manuel da Silva, the FUNAI employee at Abonari, stated that the region around Abonari will be completely flooded and the Indians will have to be moved. He added that the coordinator of the FUNAI attraction front, Mario Craveiro, was aware of the inundation but the Waimiri-Atroari themselves had not been informed about the danger. In a 13 October 1979 interview with the Manaus newspaper *A Noticia*, Craveiro did not mention the repercussions of the Balbina project or any FUNAI plans to move the Indians from the area.

Since March 1976, after Indians capsized a FUNAI agent's canoe on the Abonari River, the Indian foundation has prohibited its employees from going to Indian villages in the forest. FUNAI's policy in the Waimiri-Atroari area is now one of attraction to its posts, and the Indians, according to the 13 October interview with Craveiro, are visiting the posts more frequently. From mid-September to mid-October, a group of 134 Atroari camped at the Terraplenagem post, where three Atroari boys have lived for some time. The Indians are encouraged to participate in the productive activities of the post, and they receive all the benefits of civilization: football, manioc flour, plastic bowls, old clothes.

At the small guard post on the Abonari, at the entrance to the reserve, live seven "acculturated" Indians, employees of FUNAI. Manuel da Silva said that there were eighty employees of FUNAI in the region, almost all of them Indians: Sataré, Mundurukú, Tukano, Makuxi. "Civilized Indians," da Silva said, "we are all civilized

Indians." The hammocks slung around the walls of the employees' hut were outnumbered only by the rifles hung on pegs. "We have to be armed in case the Waimiri-Atroari attack," said da Silva. "They have already killed a lot of people."

So the myth of the Waimiri-Atroari persists in the secret area sliced by a highway, sandwiched between small farmers, threatened with flooding by the Balbina Dam, and controlled by the Sixth Army Battalion. FUNAI offers only the most superficial information in the face of a situation that is increasingly grave. All the ingredients are present for continued conflict and more killings on both sides. Unless determined and honest measures are taken soon to secure the Waimiri-Atroari territory, we can only expect the bloody history of these Indians to continue.

Anna Presland

**amazonia:
Apocalypse Now**

The Indian cannot exist without the forest, but in the decade preceding 1974, 11 million hectares of forest were cleared, while in 1975 alone 4 percent of the remaining trees were destroyed. It is a process that shows no signs of mitigation. In January of this year, Brazilian newspapers reported the details of a secret deal by which huge tracts of Amazonia were to be sold off to acquire the foreign currency to liquidate the current balance-of-payments crisis. The *Folho de São Paulo* estimated that 40 percent of the forest would be sold to foreign concessionaires.

Worse still, Brazil has stated that it will shortly switch from the use of imported oil to alcohol for use in its industries and motor vehicles. It is proposed that some of this fuel will be made from sugar cane, but technical journals such as *Data Shell* have spoken of more sinister possibilities, mentioning the almost endless reserves of power represented by the trees of the Amazon forest. Two barrels of petroleum substitute can be made from a ton of wood, and the forest is estimated to contain 415 billion cubic feet of timber.

This is the one apocalyptic fact that dominates the future of the Indians of the Amazon. For however good may be the intentions of the government, their fate cannot be separated from the fate of the trees.

Norman Lewis