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Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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For a Brazil Tribe, A New Will to Live

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MERURE, Brazil — The Bororos, a once-strong tribe that reached such a state of general despair four years ago that its women temporarily rendered themselves sterile, have begun to bear children again.

"Bororos were so weak and afraid of suffering," said their newly elected chief, Lourenço, who is leading a drive to revive the tribe, "that the women took a secret plant that stops child-birth."

But this year eight babies have been born and four more are expected in this village of 237 Bororos in the far western state of Mato Grosso.

Originally a tall, strong people that dominated a vast area of the Brazilian heartland from Culabá and Corumbá in the west to Golás in the east, the Bororos have dwindled from 6,000 a century ago to about 400 today. Over the years they were decimated by tribal wars, disease, alcohol and battles with white settlers.

Protection Needed

Most of the tribe is now concentrated at the Roman Catholic mission here, where the land is sandy, the rivers distant and the woodlands poor in game. "We need protection or our race will disappear," said Chief Aidji, the tribe's principal spokesman and the father of Chief Lourenço.

The main enemy of the Bororos today is white civilization's vices, diseases and greed for land, Chief Aidji told visitors.

The Bororos' protectors have been the priests and nuns at the Salesian mission here. Since 1902 they have tried to guard the tribe from Brazil's aggressive pioneers—the woodsmen, roadbuilders and ranchers.

Now for the first time, the Bororos have cautious hopes in the Government—represented by the National Indian Foundation—and its pledges to defend Indian territory and culture.



Survival Threatened

The story of the Bororos is like that of most of Brazil's Indians, whose identity and even survival are threatened by the moving frontier.

There are no exact figures for Brazil's Indian population, still widely dispersed in the Amazon basin rain forest and other backlands. Estimates hover around 100,000, although some anthropologists would put the number as high as 200,000. Vaccination and medical care are steadily improving life expectancy. There were a million to three million Indians in Brazil when Portuguese explorers arrived in 1500.

The Bororos had reached a general state of despair by 1969, according to the nuns and priests of the Salesian order. By what apparently was a collective decision they agreed to stop having children. The women of the tribe took a brew from a plant that produces temporary sterility.

Reacting to Society

Chief Aidji explained that the Bororos were reacting to the overwhelming problems brought by increasing contact with industrialized society.

"But we were wrong," he said. He spoke proudly of his 4-month-old grandchild, of the new rise in the tribe's population and the decline in disease. Three years ago 78 per cent of the Bororos had tuberculosis. Today thanks largely to the work of the Salesians there is only one case in the village.

Three months ago, the Bororos held elections and chose four chiefs. Chief Aidji and his son were given the specific task of dealing with land matters. The other two chiefs' job is to save the tribe's traditions, culture and songs.

Integration Inevitable

Sitting on a bench in front of their modern stone house, Chief Aidji and Chief Lourenço gave their views on Indian integration in Brazil's society. Chief Aidji, who is 58 years old, and his 27-year-old son agree that integration is inevitable, but that they must go slowly.

However, they concede that the tribe is now faced with a serious generation gap on the issue.

"The majority are now leaning toward civilization," Lourenço said. "Our sons want to give orders to their fathers and our women want to leave the colony."

Lourenço feels that Indians should remain in areas reserved for them, "acquiring civilized habits little by little" and keeping their traditions.

"The trouble is we don't know how to defend ourselves yet," Lourenço said, adding that Brazilians "don't kill Bororos any more but they are destroying us with their vices — alcohol, cigarettes, diversions."

Chief Aidji explained that the Bororos want the best of two worlds. They want their freedom but they also want comforts like the solid houses built for them by German Roman Catholics about 15 years ago, when it was feared that the tribe was so weak it would be unable to rebuild its traditional palm huts.

"We are not ready to leave the mission yet because we lack many things—education, civic and moral habits, identification documents, and professions," Chief Aidji said, stressing however that it was good for Indians to take occasional trips outside their home areas to see progress in the rest of the country.

Chief Aidji, a Roman Catholic, is often called by his Portuguese name, Eugênio. Earlier this month he became the first Indian named to the Church's Missionary Council for Native Affairs, which is responsible for the general orientation of Roman Catholic missionaries in the field.

Last April, Chief Aidji attended the first gathering of Indian tribal chieftains, sponsored by the council. For three days, 17 Indian leaders, including those from traditionally hostile tribes such as the Bororos and Xavantes, ate and sang together and discussed problems.

Land Recovery Sought

The recovery of lost tribal lands is now the principal objective of the Bororos. Ranchers and farmers have progressively invaded Bororo land and cut down forests for pasture land and farming.

The Bororos need more land because they are trying to regroup all the members of the tribe in this area, and game in the forests is vanishing.

"We have been patient up to now," Chief Aidji said. "But if the Government hasn't established the borders of the Bororo reserve by the end of August, the tribe will take action and began killing the cattle of the invading ranchers, like the Xavantes have done."

At the end of this week, the Rev. Vicente César, president of the missionary council, presented the Bororos' demands to the National Indian Foundation in Brasília and was promised that a reserve of more than 500,000 acres would be set aside for the tribe, including forest land and possibly a stretch along the Carça River.

Meanwhile, the tribal chiefs, with the help of the Salesians, are developing new means of livelihood because they know that even with more forests and rivers, they will no longer be able to live from hunting and fishing.