

urubú-kaäpor:

Ecological Destruction in Northern Maranhão

The Urubú-Kaäpor Indians occupy an expanse of primary forest between the Gurupí and Turiaçú rivers in northern Maranhão. In 1969 the Brazilian government opened the BR-316 highway, linking São Luís with Belém and cutting through the eastern portion of Kaäpor territory. White settlements soon arose in the dust of abandoned Kaäpor villages along the new road. Many trees have been cut down on both sides of the highway, and the land once covered by these trees is now under either intensive cultivation or pasturage. The consequences for the Kaäpor living near the BR-316 have been fourfold: more epidemics, loss of people, disappearance of game animals, birds, and fish, and cultural decline.

The Kaäpor village of Taboca lies about twenty kilometers west of the highway. The loss of people from epidemics of measles, influenza, and resulting emigration has been acute: in 1970, 124 people lived in Taboca; in 1975, fifty people; and in 1979, only twenty-two. Indians in all five villages near the highway have witnessed the disappearance of game animals, such as tapirs, deer, and coatis, on which they once relied for subsistence. Because Brazilian settlers are now using nets to catch fish, in contrast to the Kaäpor practice of using bows and arrows, the supply of fish in streams on Indian lands is dwindling. The region has also lost many species of birds whose nests were destroyed as the trees fell. As a result, feather work, for which the Kaäpor were distinguished as recently as ten years ago, has virtually disappeared.

Indians on the western fringe of the Kaäpor territory face similar dangers. In the early 1960s, the Brazilian minister of the interior ceded 900 hectares of the adjacent Tembê reservation to the Swift-Armour company for beef pro-

duction and timber export. In the mid-1960s, Swift-Armour sprayed the defoliant Agent Orange throughout the region. According to some Kaäpor Indians who live nearby, "The plane passed overhead, spraying poison over the jungle. The wood of the trees began to dry out; fish, alligators, everything, began to float dead in the water." Afterwards, many Indians suffered a fever, and today 2 percent of the Kaäpor population are deaf. In the absence of a medical investigation, it is impossible to know whether or not the spraying of defoliants is responsible for this; nevertheless, in the 1950s no visitor to the Kaäpor reported the presence of deaf persons.

The immediate future looks bleak for the Kaäpor. The local FUNAI agent has recently received funds to construct

two new roads, an infirmary, and a new Indian post. The road will lead from a white settlement near the BR-316 to a site within the Indian reservation. According to the FUNAI agent, the Indians must adopt the local way of life, entering the regional economy through intensive agriculture. Paradoxically, he claims that one of his goals is to increase the Kaäpor population. Although the roads may help the Indians export their produce, white settlers will find it easier to move in and cut down the remaining virgin forest to the west. The obvious result of this process will be the complete destruction of the delicate ecosystem on which the Kaäpor depend and, even worse, the decimation of their ranks through new epidemics.

William Balée

cintas largas: The Situation at Aripuanã

Though most of the 500 to 1,000 Cintas Largas Indians live in isolation in eastern Rondônia and western Mato Grosso, violent conflict with whites flared when prospectors bombed the Indians in 1963. After the completion of the Pôrto Velho-Cuiabá highway (BR-364) in 1968, FUNAI established two attraction posts in the Aripuanã area. At the Rio Roosevelt post, a young Cinta Larga, who claims that post employees were bringing in disease and coveting Indian women, organized the killing of a journalist and a FUNAI worker in 1971. In 1974, some Cintas Largas from the Rio Aripuanã post entered a small town, the Humboldt Laboratory; they caught diseases, some died, and the rest returned to the forest.

In 1977, the situation of the Cintas

Largas was still problematic. Seventy to 100 Indians had lived safely at Rio Roosevelt for three years, and 100 more were in permanent contact with Rio Aripuanã. Relations with those living in the forest, however, remained uneasy.

Although land has now been delimited for the Cintas Largas between the Roosevelt and Aripuanã rivers, the Indians are not secure. Some live north of the area; relations with FUNAI are limited and ambivalent; and contact with Brazilians may introduce disease. The danger is increasing now that a new highway has opened between Humboldt and Vilhena on BR-364. There are disturbing reports of unregulated contacts at ranches, at Humboldt, and along the new road. Population may be dwindling inside the park with no one doing anything about it.

Denny Moore

ARC NEWSLETTER

© 1979 by the Anthropology Resource Center (ARC, Inc.). Published four times a year by ARC, Inc., 59 Temple Place, Suite 444, Boston, MA 02111. Telephone (617) 426-9286. *President:* Shelton H. Davis. *Research Associate:* Robert O. Mathews. *Directors:* Gerald D. Berreman, Kenneth S. Brecher, Stephen M. Fjellman, Joseph G. Jorgensen, Eila Leibowitz, Laura Nader, Paul Shankman.

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