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THE AMERICAS

Tyrone Turner is a Fellow of the Institute writing about and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.

Favela Family

SÃO JOSÉ DOS CAMPOS, São Paulo, Brazil **January 20, 1999**

Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

Light-headed from beer and fatigue, we carefully climbed out of the *favela*[1]. Slippery cement steps led us to the city above from the slum below. We crested the ridge, the unofficial barrier between the two worlds, and within minutes were walking through the chic nightclub area of São José dos Campos. At 1 a.m. our party of eight — six *favelados*[2], my wife Susan and myself — walked slowly through the pulsing of lights, the roaring of engines and the surging of adolescent hormones on a Saturday night.

" People above think that we are just robbers and drug sellers," asserted Marcos, a 27-year-old construction worker with whom we had been visiting. He went on to talk about how the people *"acima,"* or above, never descend *"abaixo,"* or below, to know the life of the *favela*: how there are good and bad people in both worlds. The words he used were permanent, unchangeable ones, as if it always had been that way, and always will be.

THE BANHADO

Favelas like the Banhado are not at all uncommon in Brazil. Though the infamous ones belong to the more famous cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, every city has its own precarious areas where the poor live.

When we first arrived in São José Dos Campos, a relatively well-developed industrial area about an hour northwest of São Paulo, several people immediately issued warnings to us about the Banhado. One plainly said we would be shot if we attempted to go there. A longtime resident offered to let us photograph the Banhado from his apartment building overlooking the favela. I asked if we could just go there to meet people, but he confessed to never having made the descent.

Descending is how one enters the Banhado. The city center of São José Dos Campos backs up to a ridge, which falls about 300 feet to lush grasslands gently sloping to the Paraibano River about a mile away. Looking from the *Matriz* (the Catholic Church at the town center), which sits right across an avenue from the edge, one sees only beautifully lush fields, pasture and

[1] urban slum.
[2] resident of a favela.

A photojournalist, Tyrone Turner says that "Youth defines Brazil. From the streetchildren of Sao Paulo to the beaches of Ipanema, they *are* Brazil. The simple fact that half of all Brazilians are 20 years old or less tells the story. My proposal is to study the youth culture of Brazil by focusing on two major areas: the lives of children, particularly the marginalized; and the efforts on the part of government and private organizations to find solutions."

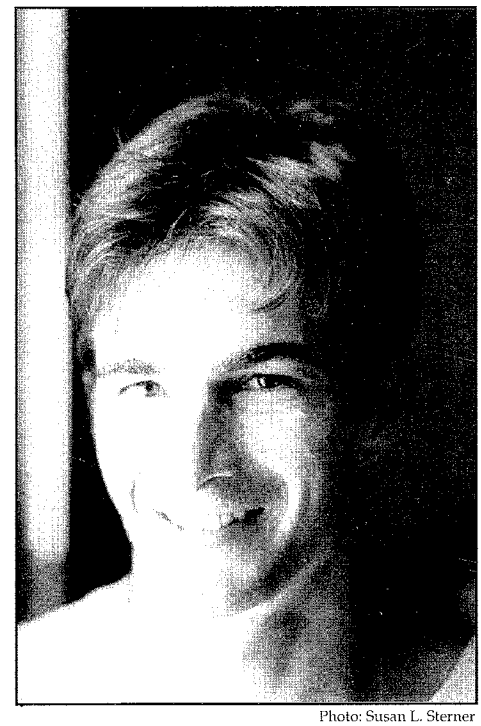

Photo: Susan L. Sterner

Tyrone Turner

With a Georgetown University B.A. and M.A. in Government (the latter with a specialization in Latin American politics) Tyrone turned to photography after serving as supervisor for an international food-distribution program sponsored by the U.S. Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistance in southern Mexico. As a staff photographer for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* he was twice nominated for Pulitzer Prizes, once for a series on Mining in Indonesia and again for a project called "Kids and Guns." When his fellowship began he was working with the Black Star Photo Agency in Los Angeles, carrying out assignments for *LIFE* magazine and other clients.

"In the beginning I would center my study on the huge urban centers of Rio and Sao Paulo in the southeast," says Tyrone. "From there I want to travel into the more rural Pantanal region of the southwest and to the impoverished northeast. The last stop would be the Amazon region, with time spent understanding the indigenous youth of the rainforest. I want to take a leap of faith and ask the Brazilian people to accept me, to allow me to live with them and tell their stories."

some farmland. New housing can be spotted with the mountains of the *Serra da Mantequeira* forming the backdrop in the distance.

Unless at the edge itself, one doesn't realize that between the ridge of the city center and the beautiful landscape beyond, a swath of poverty cuts inconspicuously. Myriad shapes of houses of plywood and cement block, with their corrugated-aluminum roofs and banana trees, line the mud streets. The community of about 500 families hugs the crescent-shaped ridge for about a mile.

In those first days, my interest piqued, I walked to the city center, camera hidden in an obscure bag, and peered into the Banhado. My path ran the economic gamut. From the well-to-do apartment section of São José, I hit the prosperous *Nove de Julho* avenue, passed the *Chopp 2000* bar[3], proceeded on to one of my favorite *padarias*[4], and past a fancy pastry store. That led me to the tennis club, and then the expensive "S"-curve nightlife area — so-called because of the bend in the road.

Soon after the "S"-curve, the restaurants and businesses dwindle. The world changes. On one side of the street, the buildings end, and the Banhado begins. Here the avenue is pure transit, four lanes zooming in one direction. People walk quickly, and favor the side of the street away from the ridge.

What greets you before you have gotten to the little grassy area that runs between the avenue and the ridge of the Banhado is the smell: a mixture of excrement and rotting garbage. An older, bewildered-looking man guards the entrance to a Protestant church where the stench is the worst.

Walking along this top area, the ridge of the Banhado, I searched for a way down. Physically, a paved road ran down the ridge giving way to the dirt paths below. However, I needed an emotional path, a way to hurdle over the preconceptions I had about Brazil. So many warnings about violence, so many articles about impenetrable slums. As I scanned the faces of those loitering on the ridge, I searched for signs of what kind of people lived there, and what kind of life they led.

I don't really know how other photographers begin their work, but for me it is always a struggle. No matter where I am, whether in supposedly "safe" or "dangerous" areas, I get nervous just approaching strangers. Sometimes it is easier to just walk by, to pretend I didn't see something that in reality I knew to be emotionally powerful, disturbing or special. And each time I muster the courage to just interact and talk, I consider it a victory. Ultimately, my work as a photographer is as much about getting myself into the world, to confront other human beings and the possibility of rejection, as it is about finally putting their images on film.

As I rounded the corner one afternoon, and the Paraibano valley and the Banhado stretched out in front of me, I saw a dark, stocky man flying a kite with a group of kids on the ridge above the Banhado. I took this to be

[3] *"chopp"* is the Brazilian word for draft beer

[4] pastry/bread shops that also serve espresso and fresh juices

Portrait of the Cabral family: Eliandra, 6, Pedro, Lucia, Fernanda, 7 and Amanda, 9

my opening and approached. My faltering Portuguese didn't throw him, and he introduced himself as Pedro Alvarez Cabral. Later he would joke that he was a descendant of the Portuguese 'discoverer' of Brazil, Pedro Cabral.[5] He introduced me to his daughters — Amanda, 9; Fernanda, 7; and Eliandra, 6; as well as to two nieces and a nephew.

Pedro said that he lived in the Banhado and pointed in the direction from where I had just walked. I had noticed this little house before, with chickens scratching in the front, and a tree where shirtless men gathered to drink around a smoking campfire.

I asked Pedro who owned the lush, cultivated lands beyond the little houses of the Banhado. From above, I imagined 500 little plots of land, gardens to feed 500 families. He laughed a bit and said that no, a *fazendeiro*[6] owned the land, and sold the produce in the markets above.

What I thought would be a brief encounter turned into an afternoon of conversation, photographing and riding one of Pedro's horses, *'Crioulo'*, or Creole, that he had brought up from below. After a while, we walked to the house that he had pointed out before. There, he introduced me to his wife Lucia, her sister Rita, and Jackson, Rita's husband.

While we stood in the dirt front yard of the small, cement-block house, the children played on an old swing and the dogs growled. Pedro offered me a *"cafezinho,"* or small coffee, and I nodded acceptance. When they handed me a cold beer, I realized that my Portuguese class at UCLA hadn't covered this definition of the word.

In Brazil, it seems that conversations inevitably turn to the subject of *futebol*, or soccer. Pedro mentioned that the following day he would be watching the final soccer match in the Brazilian national tournament between the *Corinthians* of São Paulo and the *Cruzeiros* of Minas Gerais. He said that my wife Susan and I were welcome to join his family. I gladly accepted.

Before coming to Brazil I had dreams of a soccer baptism, getting in the middle of the huge crowds of crazy fans to catch the *futebol* fever. Up until this point, though, we had seen only one of the championship series games between the Corinthians and Cruzeiros on the TV in our apartment. Still, the experience overwhelmed me.

The first goal of that game ignited an explosion of noise in the city drowning out the sound of the TV. Fireworks and screams echoed around the buildings. The deafening white noise surged, but from our window I couldn't tell the source. I set out into the deserted streets to await the next goal and the reaction to it.

Walking along, I was peering up at the tall apartment buildings when the city erupted again — someone had scored. Instead of one point of origin, thousands of apartment windows, each tuned into the same signal, belched cries of joy. During the games of this championship, Brazil was united in rapture before millions of separate soccer TV altars.

En route to watch the Superbowl of Brazilian soccer

[5] In 1500, Cabral 'discovered' Brazil after he was blown off course on his journey from Portugal around the Cape of southern Africa.

[6] large landowner

in the Banhado, Susan and I stopped at the *padaria* on the *Nove de Julho* avenue and picked up cold beer, a *panetone*,[7] and a pocketful of bubble-gum for the children. We approached the house on the ridge of the Banhado and saw the door open, and Pedro holding a small baby. Though he had invited us, he looked surprised that we had actually come.

I didn't understand why the rest of his family was not there, only to learn that I had misunderstood his Portuguese. This was his sister-in-law's house; his was actually farther down in the Banhado. When Rita returned, we left the *panetone*, and ventured out again.

We passed the tree where the shirtless men drink, and took our first steps on a narrow pathway leading down the ridge. Pedro told us that he had actually put in the cement steps that made the path passable, although they were a little pitched forward and treacherous. The steps ended at a mud landing about halfway down the hill, at a small house that operated as a neighborhood store, mechanic shop and bar. In subsequent visits, the same faces stared out from behind cups of beer at whoever descended into the *favela*.

A young boy climbs a gate separating houses in the Banhado near the Cabral's home. One of the oldest in Sao Jose, the favela has been around for about 40 years, and has about 500 families living in it.

In front of a broken-down van next to the store we took a left on a dirt path. The mud in this area of Brazil is crimson red, and creates a terrific slide when wet. We stepped on wisely placed cement pieces along the plywood and barbed-wire fences that protected yards of more red mud. Music and conversation spilled easily from thin shack walls.

At the far end of the trail we walked through a little wooden gate and down into the cement yard of Pedro's home. A modest, well-built house of brick and cement block with a corrugated aluminum roof, it stood out among houses in the area, and even compared with his in-laws' place on the ridge. In the well-swept yard they had an herb garden, and around the side, a small plastic wading pool. A cement-block wall protected two sides of the house. On the third, a vista of the Banhado and valley stretched out below.

Pedro and Lucia bought their home six years ago. As they tell it, the owners, an evangelical family, wanted to sell, but the only family interested in buying practiced *macumba*.[8] Fearful that black magic would enter the neighborhood, they practically gave the house to Pedro for about R$780.[9]

Visiting the Cabrals is not for the diet-conscious. The family vigorously offered fried food and beer, and I felt it would be a great offense to refuse. I learned that the sign for a new beer was not whether the can was finished, but whether its temperature had risen because of slow consumption. Half-filled *Skols*[10] flew from my hand before I could protest, with a *"cerveja estupidamente gelada"*[11] replacing it. Lucia and Rita worked in the kitchen to bring out a supply of popcorn, crackers, fried pork rinds and pan-fried beef with lime.

Susan and I sat in the cramped TV room. Immediately across, the Cabral children and their cousins, six in all, sat side by side like little dolls. They were instructed and constantly reminded to behave in front of the new guests.

During the soccer halftime, Lucia brought out the Cabral family photos — mostly of parties and school

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[7] A light, fruited cake

[8] According to *The Brazilians*, by Joséph A. Page (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1995) an Afro-Brazilian religion practiced in Brazil that includes elements of black magic and Indian animism.

[9] About U.S.$500. The symbol "R$" stands for the Brazilian currency, the *Real*. The exchange rate as of January 20, 1999 was about R$1.55 to U.S.$1.00.

[10] One type of Brazilian beer.

[11] "A stupidly cold beer," as Brazilians like to describe it.

events — all shot within the last two years. I think the documentation started when they finally could afford a camera, film and processing.

At the end of the second half, as had been predicted, the Corinthians led the Cruzeiros 2-0. Lucia, a die-hard Corinthians fan *"ate debaixo de agua,"*[12] screamed and delighted in the apparent victory; her sister sulked about the fate of the opposition.

The fact that Lucia rooted for anyone but Cruzeiros interested me because the latter team was from the state of Minas Gerais, where the sisters grew up. According to Lucia, though, she's always been fiercely independent, fitting the mythic reputation of *'Mineiros'* (people from Minas Gerais), and had always loved the Corinthians team in spite of the rest of her family. Her independence is evidenced by the fact that even after ten years and three kids with Pedro, they've never married. She says that it doesn't interest her, that she doesn't want to be tied down.

View of the Cabral home with the Banhado and Paraiban Valley stretching out in the background.

The final seconds expired, and Lucia and the children bolted outside, arms waving, as the expected cacophony of fireworks exploded. Neighbors screamed back and forth. Anyone without a TV would not have missed the news. A tape player emerged and samba music kept the celebration going. The young girls imitated the near-obscene dances that they had seen on TV and the adults tried to follow the children. However, not even beer could get Pedro to try.

As the excitement waned, Pedro pointed farther down the hill and asked if we wanted to go to the home of their *compadres*,[13] Marcos and Sandra. Our acceptance prompted a wardrobe change. The girls put on new t-shirts and shorts. Lucia changed into a skirt.

The direction was down, but the path snaked through the maze of the community. Crossing neighbors' yards, opening and closing gates, we slipped down a steep trail to railroad tracks below. The girls held tightly onto Susan's hands, competing for the attention of this American *"Tia,"* or aunt. They released their grip only long enough to run ahead to brag about their new friends from the U.S.A.

We crossed the now-defunct tracks that used to carry freight between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and a wide dirt road that formed the spine of the favela. The next paths we entered felt like cattle chutes, with high walls of discarded plywood as front fences for homes. Putrid smells of sewage hit us in waves as honeysuckle blossoms brushed our faces.

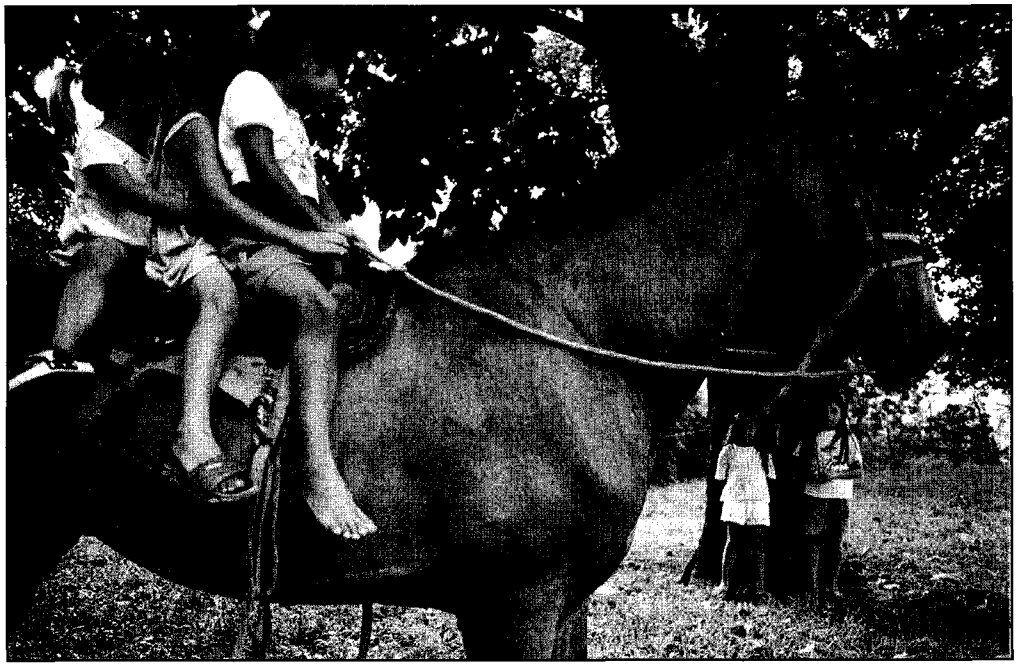
Eyes peered out to see our little parade passing in the twilight. As we walked, Pedro greeted friends with the Brazilian "thumbs up," and a warm *"tudo bem!"*[14], and unyielding faces suddenly smiled brightly. I looked around to get bearings in case we had to leave unescorted, but realized that I had lost mine completely.

Later I would discover that the people who live in the Banhado, though poor, were relatively better off than those in other *favelas* in São José, and certainly better off than those in some of the slums of São Paulo. The Banhado was about 40 years old, and had electricity and water. A small police station sat near the entrance,

[12] Which means "until under water" and refers to the fact that the fan would not renounce their loyalty to their soccer club even then.

[13] *Compadres* are godparents, when one refers to *compadres* of a child's baptism. *Compadres* are the best man and maid/matron of honor when referring to a wedding ceremony.

[14] "Hey, how's it going?"



Amanda, far right, and Fernanda, wait their turn as their sister, Elianda, and their cousins ride on Pedro's horse, "Crioulo," on the top edge of the Banhado.

though it was not manned at night. Problems with crime and drugs plagued the community, but Pedro and Marcos said that life was mostly quiet.

On later visits, the way that Pedro dealt with me as a photographer pointed to the potential for violence in the community. I had accompanied Pedro a few times to meet others, drink beer at the community *barzinho* (little bar) and shoot pictures. On one trip I stood on a ridge and photographed four teenagers walking up one of the wooden-walled paths that emerged from the *favela*. The youths seemed shy, and we exchanged greetings before they walked on.

Afterwards, Pedro warned me not to shoot overall photos into areas where he didn't know the people well. Because of the drug trade, someone might not understand, and think that I was connected with the police. He said such a misunderstanding could not only be dangerous for me, but for him and his family.

* * * *

Arriving at Marcos' and Sandra's home, as the troops marched through the door, everyone kicked off their sandals. Susan and I saw this and started to remove our sneakers, but were stopped. "You are not accustomed to going barefoot," they insisted to us, the guests, who were tracking in the most mud.

The inside of their home, built by Marcos, had an austere, functional look. Bare light bulbs illuminated brick walls adorned by 8x10 portraits of their two children, small Catholic prayer posters and championship photos of the Corinthians team. Their luxury items filled an entertainment center, complete with TV and stereo. Marcos proudly showed off their music CDs, including Bon Jovi, Kiss and the Beatles, along with the hot samba groups.

More samba, more dancing, more beers. Either my comprehension or their enunciation was slipping (probably a little of both), because I found myself nodding in agreement to sentences that sounded Russian. They mumbled, I fumbled.

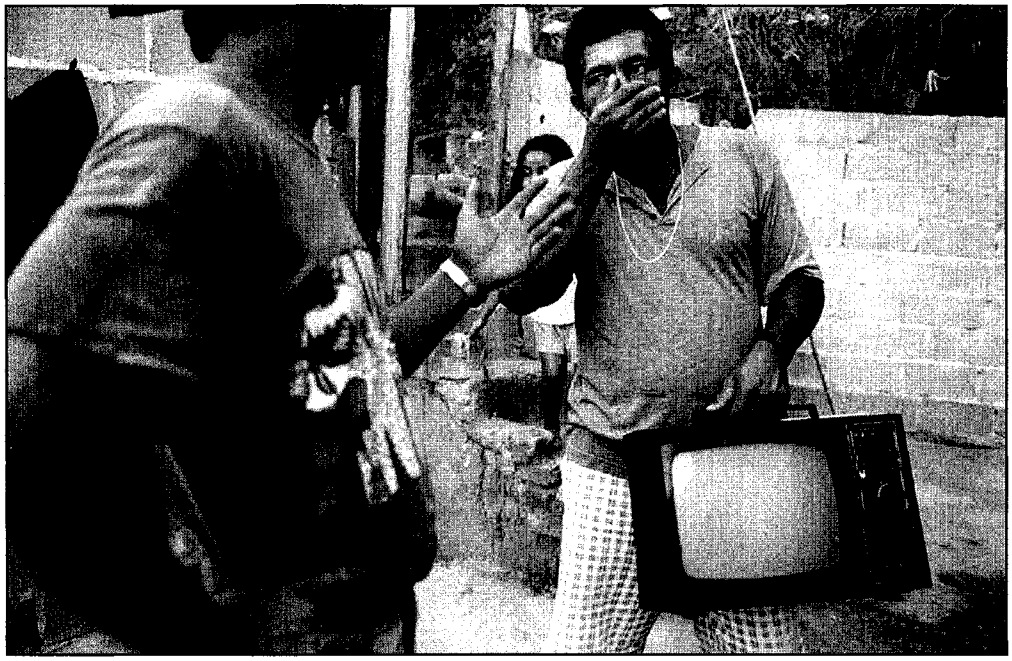
I did learn, though, what is harder than finding a way into the Banhado — leaving the Banhado. Fatigue hit Susan and me hard, and I tried to tell Pedro that we needed to leave. "OK, OK, but first you must have a *"saidera"* (the parting drink, which comes from the verb *"sair,"* meaning "to leave"). Our glasses filled, we toasted health and watched the samba lessons in the next room. Three more *"saideras"* later, we were still toasting in the kitchen.

Finally, the lot of us made the reverse journey, through the pathways, across the railroad tracks, and up the hill. We emerged over the crest of the ridge as I had watched others do.

In plastic sandals (the omnipresent footwear in São José) Pedro and Marcos accompanied us on the 20-minute walk to our apartment building. I felt a bit awkward as we approached. Pedro works as a night doorman in a building much like the one we are staying in now. The lives of the people in that building are closed to him. We thanked them for inviting us into their homes, turned, and waited to be buzzed in by the guard.

PEDRO AND LUCIA

Both Pedro, 33, and Lucia, 28, started working early



Pedro finishes trading for a horse with another resident of the Banhado by throwing in a black and white TV and a bird. Trading services and goods is common for Pedro and his friends.

in life in order to supplement their families' income. The Rio de Janeiro neighborhood where Pedro grew up was poor, but was not a *favela* (as he points out strongly). The youngest of three sons, with a father who didn't "spare the whip,"Pedro left school at age 10 to sell ice cream at the famous beaches nearby. At age 18, he was still making minimum wage as a bartender in a French restaurant in Rio.

Arriving in São José dos Campos just to visit, he met Lucia and stayed, working in various construction and hard-labor types of jobs. For the previous 18 months, he had been working as a night doorman at a wealthy apartment building here in São José, one that houses many of the foreigners that work for the industries in the area.

Pedro, with his calloused hands and easy laugh, considers himself fortunate, making R$370 a month (or "*três salários*"[15]), about U.S.$240.00 or U.S.$1.50 an hour. His employment includes government health insurance and pension, which is taken out of his pay every month.

Lucia is from the state of Minas Gerais, just north of the state of São Paulo. A small, thin woman who looks older than her 28 years, she was one of nine children born to rural farming parents. Her father worked for a *fazendeiro*, picking his coffee and farming his land for much less than minimum wage.

Starting to work when she was eight years old, Lucia helped out after school, picking and drying coffee. She remembered that as a child, though she did the same work as the adults, she was paid much less.[16] The landowner sent her wages directly to her family.

As she looked at her daughters playing with their Christmas dolls, she recounted that the first present she ever received was on her 13th birthday — a pair of sandals from her father. She is proud of the fact that her daughters' lives are wealthy in comparison.

At 13, she left school to help her mother at home. On and off until she reached 15 she tried to re-enter school, only to leave again to work. That year, she moved to São José to live with her sister Rosaly and started cleaning houses full time. She sent half of her earnings back to her mother until she and Pedro met in a disco in São José. Soon after, she became pregnant with Amanda, and began keeping all of her income for her family.

Nowadays she works three days a week, which contributes R$120 a month (about U.S.$86) to the family income, as well as doing the housework and caring for the three girls.

Their home, as described before, is small but well-constructed in the upper areas of the favela. Made of cinderblock, with a tin roof and a cement floor, the house consists of a small TV room, a kitchen, a bathroom and a bedroom.

Since buying the home six years ago, they have counted on the help of family and *compadres* to make improvements. The *compadre* of one of their girls, Marcos (mentioned above), a construction worker, wired the

[15] "Three times the minimum wage." Salaries are described according to how they relate to the national minimum wage of 120 *reais* a month- about U.S.$77 a month, or about U.S.50 cents an hour.
[16] Men made the highest wage, then women, then children.

Pedro holds and kisses his daughter, Amanda, at one of the bus stations in São José dos Campos. They were heading to a picnic about an house from the city with other friends.

house, and oversaw the cementing of the area immediately surrounding it. Lucia's brother helped put up a cement-block fence around most of the house, adding a bit of security. Improvements and inflation have brought the value of the house to around R$5,000 (U.S.$3,226) They admit that only through this informal system of help could they have gotten these things done. No one can afford to pay for things outright.

The only way the poor can afford consumer goods in Brazil is credit. This does not imply the ubiquitous credit cards of the U.S., or a bank loan. Few in the Banhado have even a checking account. Merchants offer the credit directly by setting two prices, "a *vista*" or "a *prazo*," for the same items from gas, to clothes, to washing machines.

The first price, "*a vista*" means that one buys it outright, in one payment. With "*a prazo*," the payments are spread over a number of months. The latter reduces the initial payment, but as expected, the overall price turns out to be significantly higher. This national system of layaway is both a democratization of credit, and a penalty of heavy interest for the majority of Brazilians too poor to pay up-front.

The Cabrals pointed proudly to the refrigerator, oven and television in their home and instead of naming the price, named the months it took to buy each one. Even the dolls the girls received for Christmas, which totaled R$160 (almost one-half of Pedro's R$370 monthly salary), will not be paid for until 15 months are up.

Overall, their life is rich, one that they have worked hard to build. When I asked Pedro about his dreams, he grabbed Amanda, the eldest, as she passed. He brags about her smarts, that she is one of the best in her class. He hopes that she can "be someone in life...not like me." When I challenged Pedro on such a pessimistic view of his own achievements, he explained that he just wants her to have a better job, like in a bank.

The girls mimic similar ambitions. Amanda, who prefers school over summer vacation, says that she wants to be a teacher. Fernanda, with a mouthful of crooked teeth, says that she wants to be a dentist. The youngest, Eleandra, switches back and forth between the goals of the other two — teacher, then dentist, then teacher.

WHITHER THE *REAL*?

What remains to be seen with this family, and others in the Banhado, is how the sinking Brazilian economy will affect them. In just the last few days, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and his government stopped dumping federal reserves to protect the *Real*, and allowed it to seek its market value against the U.S. dollar. Immediately, it fell about 25 percent, and still continues to fluctuate. Expectedly, the price of imported goods (electronics, petroleum, etc.) is climbing.

Already the poor are feeling the pinch. Bread will cost 10 percent more because of the rise in the price of imported wheat. The local specialty stores, which carry items only under R$1.99, are raising their price to R$2.99 because of the high percentage of imports in their stocks.[17]

However, with the memory of the 1980's hyperinfla-

[17] Both items are according to the local São José Dos Campos paper, the "*Vale Paraibano*," from January 20, 1999. Also mentioned was that more than half of the wheat consumed in Brazil is imported, with the majority coming from Argentina.

Eliandra holds one of the three dolls her parents bought for the girls for Christmas. The R$160 they paid for the dolls (about U.S.$100) is almost half of her father's monthy pay.

tion still fresh in the country's memory, the mere fear of *anticipated* inflation might spark an uncontrollable knee-jerk reaction. Merchants might jack up prices on goods that have no relation to the international market, even before inflation has actually occurred.

Rising unemployment also foreshadows a return to harder times. Ford Motors, which produces cars near São José dos Campos, laid off hundreds of workers during the year-end holidays. General Motors announced a work stoppage until April because of a weakening auto market. Other large manufacturers report slowing consumption. Though these firms directly represent only a portion of the jobs here, many businesses and jobs are indirectly affected.

As for Pedro and Lucia, the recent years of low inflation and steady employment have resulted not only in a financial boost, but also raised expectations of a better life for their family. As they slowly built walls and bought appliances, they were hoping to eventually leave the *favela*.

However, like millions of working poor, they are extremely vulnerable to economic downturns. They have no savings, except in the form of their modest home and possessions, and they exhaust their paychecks quickly. If the Brazilian economy worsens, it will hit them hard and fast, eroding their assets as well as their dreams. ❑

Photo: Susan L Sterner

The author at the Cabral home, holding one of the Cabrals' nephews