

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB-34 Brazil's Indian Service

Prudente de Moraes 805 c/6
Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro
March 5, 1965

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

In its early years the Indian Service (Serviço de Proteção aos Índios) was noted for putting into operation the "most enlightened Indian policy in the Americas". That was half a century ago. Today it is criticized for not advancing the Indians more fully and quickly into Brazilian life.

Actually any discussion of the Indian Service today is mostly academic; it has not been equipped since the early days to put any policy into practice. Working ineffectually out of offices in the out-of-the-way Indian Museum, it seeks to protect the interests of some 100,000 tribal Indians scattered throughout the country's undeveloped interior. (Even today the exact number of Indians in Brazil is unknown. The Indian Service estimates somewhere between 50,000 and 300,000 Indians exist in Brazil but reminded me that previously unknown tribes are still being discovered.)

Since 1963 the planning authority for the Indian Service has been the Conselho Nacional de Proteção aos Índios (National Council for the Protection of the Indians). I found their office in a make-shift five room suite near the center of Rio, presided over by 69 year old Senhora Heloísa Alberto Tôrres. "The Service is rotten," she told me.

"The staff is made up of people with little or no social science education or experience. It has had seven Directors in the last nine years and they have been mainly from the army. The Government seems to think that because Marechal Rondon who founded the Service was Army, Army men must be the best qualified for the job. What we need are people who know something about the Indians professionally. The Service, over the years, has also been shifted from one Ministry to another - from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Labor to the Ministry of War and back to Agriculture. And each shift has an accompanying change in personnel and emphasis. Indian affairs ought to be free from such changes, more autonomous.





Marechal Cândido M.S. Rondon

Marechal Cândido M.S. Rondon set about organizing the Serviço de Proteção aos Índios e Localização de Trabalhadores Nacionais (the latter section was removed to another department a few years later).

Rondon, influenced by the positivism of August Comte and many years' experience in working with Indians in the Mato Grosso, didn't look upon them as uncivilizable brutes who had to be exterminated for the sake of national progress as did many of the Brazilians on the frontier. He believed that the tribes could be dealt with amiably, that even the hostile ones could be pacified and that, given the protection of the Government, they would evolve to take their places in Brazilian civilization. His philosophy was more or less summed up in a sentence which became the motto for the Service: "Afrontar todos os perigos, até a morte; mas matar, nunca!" (Confront all dangers until the death; but to kill, never!)

The regulations which were passed with the creation of the service gave the Indians legal protection for their lands and the right to be themselves; that is, their customs and beliefs were legally respected. The path proposed for their progression from tribal ways

"The Service has approximately 100 Indian posts and even these are not fully manned because of the smallness of the budget. In 1963 it was a ridiculous 28 million cruzeiros (about \$20,000) and this situation has been made worse by the continuing inflation. The picture of the Indian Service today is, to say the least, not a good one."

Things were different when the Service was organized in the early part of the century. At that time the westward penetration of Brazilians was often resisted by a number of hostile tribes. In many places, even close to some of the major urban centers, a virtual state of war existed with the Indians. Pressure was put on the Government to do something about settling the problem. And among the public leaders there were many who advocated that relations with the Indians should be improved without the usual resort to violence or annihilation. Thus in 1910, at the invitation of the Government,

to those of civilization was one of evolution; it was believed that one culture could not be substituted for another abruptly.

The job taken on by the Service was never an easy one. They have sought to make their influence felt among tribes with a variety of languages and cultural patterns (There are at least 40 different Indian languages in Brazil today as well as some 200 dialects). They have to penetrate dangerous virtually inaccessible areas in order to work with some of the tribes. They have to struggle against the distrust and hostility of Indians who have suffered bitter experiences with the White man. They have to work continually to protect the Indians and their lands from hostile and demanding White settlers, especially in Brazil's back country where national laws have not been easily enforced. And against prejudice they have sought to educate Brazilians generally to respect the Indians, their rights and culture. The Indian Museum was founded in 1942 for this purpose, to help Brazilians see the extent of the Indian civilizations which exist in their country.

The success of the Indian Service has depended, or course, on the development of a highly qualified and devoted staff. Equally important has been the extent to which the Government has been willing to finance their work and to delegate to them powers to protect the Indians. Initially the Service was successful because it had these requisites. Professional people who had campaigned for the creation of the Service and who had worked with Rondon in the interior helped to fill most of the positions. Their work was backed by the Army in which Rondon and many of his supporters had recently served. And the Government, pleased with the prospect of Indian pacification which would remove the threat to White settlement, was happy to give them the necessary financial support.

This did not last long. In 1913 the budget of the Service was slashed 60% and was not restored until 1925. Five years later Getulio Vargas came into power and Rondon lost favor because he was not a participant in the change. Since the Service and Rondon's prestige were closely linked it almost suffered extinction during the 1930's. Thus, in its first 30 years it had sufficient money to be active for less than 10, and those 10 years were not consecutive.

Although Vargas sought to reactivate the Service in the 1940's and José Maria de Gama Malcher tried in the 1950's as its Director, it has been bogged down by bureaucratic and political meddling. It has not been able to carry out without interference for any length of time the policy to which it is pledged or to protect the Indians from White encroachment.

It hasn't even been able to keep its Indian post staff uncorrupted. In some areas staff members have used their positions to exploit the

Indians to such an extent that the Indians today distrust them more than they do the local Whites. "When we sell our produce or the fish we have caught," the leader of one tribe has said, "we have two prices, one for the Indian post (the high one) and one for others. It is because they take such advantage of us."

The Service has been able to pacify most of the nation's Indians and has instituted helpful educational and medical projects on a hit and miss basis but the general lot of the Indians is a poor one. Even the pacification of the Indians has worked against the Service since it relieved the Government of any Indian threat. Also it made the friendly Indians easier prey for those who profit by exploiting their labour and stealing their lands. The Service suffers as a protector since it lacks the power to protect. It seeks to be successful on the frontiers where the Indian policy, formulated in the coastal cities, has never been accepted. Many settlers see the Indians as savages to be used or eliminated with no compunction and some of the local leaders in the Western States are often a law unto themselves. Whenever land has been needed or valuable and Indians were in possession they soon lost it. This was commonly done by attacking and expelling the Indians under the allegation that they were ferocious and thus a threat to civilized society, or that they sheltered criminals who passed for Indians or that they were cattle thieves. Sometimes they gave Indians other lands, less valuable, in a distant place and demanded their compulsory transference and then legally took over the valuable land which had "been abandoned".

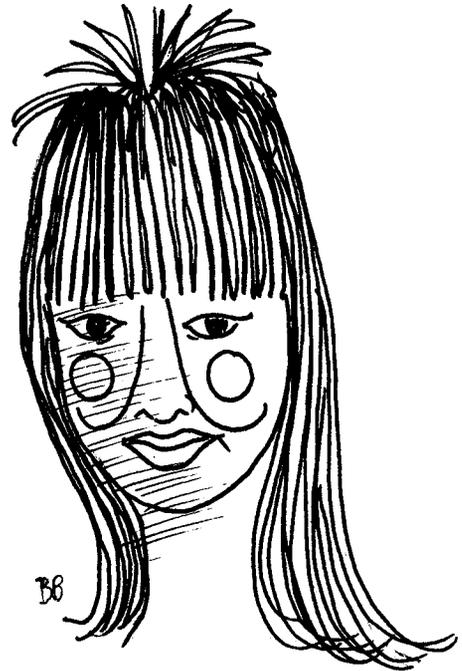


"Yet another form of alienation of Indian lands is their invasion by 'sertanejos' (backlanders, generally of mixed racial stock, who have little means of livelihood) who have been convinced by the plantation owners that such lands are Government-owned and thus are open to all. When the number of invading settlers becomes so advanced that it threatens the survival of the Indians, conflict is fanned giving the plantation owners the opportunity, in an appeal to justice, to intervene to maintain order and to treat the Indians as simple criminals who can be punished." So writes Darcy Ribero, one of the most knowledgeable persons about Indians in Brazil today according to a Service staff member. (However, she explained, "He was head of our Study Section and later of the University of Brazil but then he got mixed up in politics with Goulart." He is now in exile.)

When the Indians have not been decimated by the White man's bullets, diseases brought by the

newcomers have helped. Ribero concludes that nearly 87 tribes have totally disappeared in the last 50 years, not by incorporation into the national society but by death of all the tribesmen. With the prevalence of the same conditions he predicts that 57 of the 143 tribes known today will disappear by the end of the century. And a weak Service provides no buffer for weak Indians.

"But the time is coming for a change," believes Senhora Heloisa of the Council. The Council is now completing its first full survey of the Indian tribes; their population, physical condition and state of civilization. Once this is completed plans can be made to help each tribe's development. She hopes that with definite proposals for action the Service will be expanded and improved. "We want the Indians to have greater opportunities for education, not only to read and write but to gain practical knowledge as well, so they can learn trades and improve their farming techniques in order to better sustain themselves. We want to make more clear the titles to their lands, their land boundaries. Reservations are needed in which the Indians can be better protected even when a state seeks to interfere." Shuffling papers full of plans and reforms, she exuded optimism. "I expect to talk to the President soon about our needs."



Her optimism is not shared by others. One scholar believes the state of the Indian Service is a just reflection of the attitude most Brazilians have toward the Indians. Brazilians, he told me, do not like the Indian when he is too near but they can look on them romantically when they are at a distance in either time or place. There are light-skinned Brazilians who are proud of their Indian ancestry, of the fact that they are descended from some of Brazil's oldest people. But a close Indian ancestor is not something to speak of; if such exists it is seldom acknowledged.

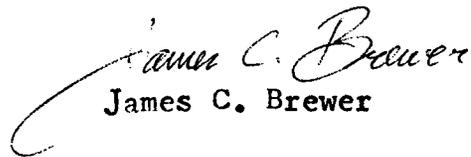
Gilberto Freyre, Brazil's foremost social chronicler, points out that Brazil owes much to the early Indians; that the Indian men made possible the initial development of sugar cane as one of the country's greatest assets and that Indian women filled the places of absent Portuguese women in forming the first Brazilian families. Much more, for Indian soldiers fought alongside their masters to protect

Portuguese homes and plantations from the Spanish and the Dutch and helped to open up the backlands to habitation. And the women, perhaps even more than the men, helped to bring into Brazilian culture some of its most prized customs: the hammock, the daily bath, the burning over of the land before planting new crops, the roasting of fish over coals, the habit of going barefoot, the use of pepper and the coconut drinking cup as well as cashew nuts, manioca flour, Indian corn and the 'bicho' or game of chance. But there are no monuments to their contribution as there are to "Mãe Preto" and "Pai Preto" (the Black Mother and Black Father) in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro respectively to signify the contribution of the Black man to Brazil. The majority of the people settled in the cities on the coast look upon the Indians in the Amazon or the Mato Grosso as colorful people who add admosphere to publicity posters for the Tourist Bureau. They care little or nothing about their welfare or about the abuse they may suffer from Brazilians who live near them in those areas.

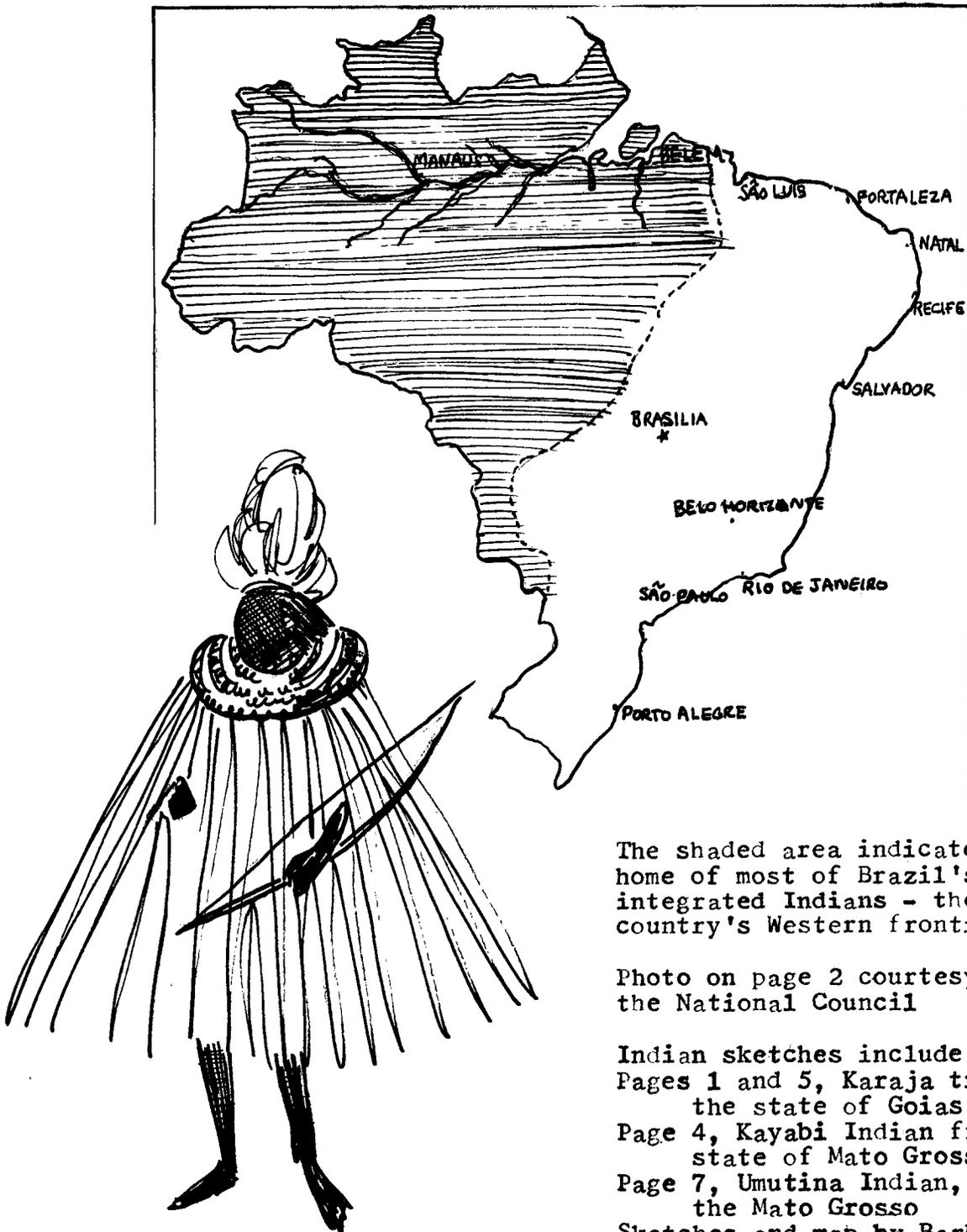
I have the impression that few people are willing to accept The Indian as he is. And even after he becomes more educated, more civilized, he is accepted only reluctantly into the full framework of Brazilian society. Public prejudice and apathy are not stimulants which will help the Indian's cause. Perhaps if the Indian again became a threat to Brazilian development the Government might again be spurred to more interest and constructive action in support of the Service. Now, however, the present Government has many more immediate and pressing problems and, unless prodded vigorously, may not even realize the condition of a number of scattered tribes inthe country's least inhabited areas.

Six months after I first talked to Senhora Heloísa I returned to see what had developed from their survey and their plans. She was still chipper among her papers. "I expect to talk to the President any day now," she told me again.

Sincerely yours,


James C. Brewer

Received in New York March 15, 1965.



The shaded area indicates the home of most of Brazil's non-integrated Indians - the country's Western frontier.

Photo on page 2 courtesy of the National Council

Indian sketches include:
 Pages 1 and 5, Karaja tribe in the state of Goias
 Page 4, Kayabi Indian from the state of Mato Grosso
 Page 7, Umutina Indian, also from the Mato Grosso
 Sketches and map by Barbara Brewer