

“Um Jeito de Vé-los:” Old and New Representations of Indian Peoples in Brazil

by Gilton Mendes

This brief article does not seek to treat a new set of informative facts on Indigenous peoples in Brazil, nor even to undertake an exhaustive analysis of unknown aspects of the social lives of Indigenous people. Nor do I represent the voice and politics of Indian people. I wish to problematize two aspects that I consider important: one, the political strategies adopted by Indigenous organizations to confront the new challenges in contemporary Brazil, the other, a brief frame of the actual economic realities by which they are affected.

Background

There exists in Brazil, approximately 200 Indigenous peoples and each presents a set of particularities with respect to its customs, language, and socio-political structures. They vary in population: The majority are numerically small societies (almost always considered, individually, to have been more populous in the past), reduced to a few hundred or at times hardly a few dozen persons. The areas they inhabit vary in size and, in some cases, have already been officially demarcated. The vast majority, however, remain barely delineated and many more have not even been identified or recognized by the federal government. This means that Indigenous peoples in Brazil live in constant insecurity in relation to one of the most essential resources that they have always possessed: the land!

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Indian peoples inhabit environments where they have always existed in singular ways, seeing and interpreting the world in ways that are specific to each. They have established a very intimate and continuous relation with their surroundings, which leads us (or should lead us) to question the rational, dichotomous, and generic vision of mankind and nature, characteristic of “Western society”: on one side humankind and its interests, on the other, nature, static, revealing itself through phenomena...

Indigenous peoples are seen and represented in a form that is almost always negative, both in the elaboration of discourses—which are also practices—as in people’s consciousness, as a consequence of the former.

State policies nearly always fall within the realm of “welfare,” envisioning native communities as dependent on their protection and initiatives. From this point of view, Indian people are seen as in a process of progressive integration into national society, components of a claimed “unitary nation.” The church vision, like that of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is not too distant from this continuous provision of welfare and protection, always in a way that fulfills its own interests.

All this would tend towards another level of representation: the internalization of the national society’s cultural values by native peoples themselves, often taking on the role of the “protected,” subject to state politics and programs and actions originating from civil and religious entities. Yet this in no way implies that Indian peoples do not consider themselves individuals belonging to a different society.

New Strategies of Organization?

With completely different cultural realities from national society and with low population numbers, Indigenous peoples in Brazil are faced with huge adversities in the realm of national politics. For this reason, that they have constantly reformulated the forms of resistance and strategies to valorize their rights, their interests, their demands.

Here it is now necessary to mention the fight against the revision of Decree 22/91, which regulated the process of demarcation of Indigenous and other special lands. Presently, the signing of Decree 1.775 by president Fernando Henrique Cardoso has unleashed a new national mobilization, perhaps the largest ever, of entities devoted to the Indigenous cause. This mobilization is calling for the revocation of this Decree, itself a fundamentally altered version of its predecessor as far as the security of Indian lands are concerned. This situation shows a capacity for political catalysis, including one with “international effects.”

It is necessary to draw attention to one of the most relevant aspects of the Brazilian reality which is the conduct of many organizations working in support of Indigenous peoples. These, in general, have taken on the role of mobilization and dissemination of information on communities that are “disadvantaged” in relation to the state and distant from the urban centers and the political decisions, and those with limited contact with national society. In many cases, these organizations integrate themselves thus creating a third coalition phase in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous combine for a single cause and representation.

The ethnic diversity of Indian peoples in Brazil has perhaps been one of the main factors for the generation of resistance initiatives because it has produced a direct relation of multiple local forces capable of mobilizing, internally and intensively as well, each particular society. On the other hand, it's also important to note that the new strategies adopted have been similar to those used by the different social groups of national society. Strategies that, often, result in internal conflicts and difficulties, and are capable of clashing with the more traditional expressions of the different native societies (see Interview with Jacir José de Souza).

A Brief Layout of the Economic Relations

If cultural diversity is reflected in the search for new possibilities for political organization of Indigenous people, in the confrontation against the interests of groups or persons belonging to national society, the same is true in the economic arena.

Each particular society presents a different history of economic relations with surrounding societies. At the same time that some Indigenous peoples are engaged in intense commercial trade, there are others that have had minimal contact with any market. Between these two extremes, there are those who are engaged in seasonal commercial trade.

The decade of the 1970s deeply marked the lives of Indigenous people in Brazil in that, through the elaboration of gigantic "development" projects and in the "interest of national security," the authoritarian state staked out a policy of occupying the Amazon. This opened two bloody wounds: the violent contact with peoples previously isolated, leading to partial or total extermination, and the irresistible incentive for millions of persons to migrate with aim to settle the "terras inabitadas" of the Amazon.

Hundreds of particular undertakings in the Amazon have followed and continue to follow the major roads

leading into the interior, supported by federal incentives (along with scandalous corruption). These cut through tens of thousands of miles of forest and savanna, without the slightest preoccupation for the destruction they entail, both for native peoples and their environment. In the end, natural resources have been wasted, particularly timber, and massive deforestation has followed the installation of rural industries.

Many Indigenous groups, in the face of this stampede, were removed from traditional areas where natural resources abounded and relocated in regions completely unknown to them or already drained of the same



resources. This has resulted in untold hardship, as evidenced by the high rate of suicide existent in groups like the Guarani-Kaiowa.

Many other peoples continue to suffer the consequences of these large-scale projects (dams, timber extraction, mines, roads, factories, fisheries, agro-industries, etc.) established around or even inside their territories. For many, the only option left open is seasonal labor outside of their Indigenous area, selling their labor for ranches or in regional markets at derisory rates, or migration to cities, where they live in conditions of extreme poverty.

Diverse evaluations made of the Indigenous situation in Brazil are practically unanimous in that these trends

have made things much worse: destroying traditional forms of production, sharpening "dependence" on outside aid, and leading to environmental collapse.

In this context, today, perhaps more than ever, the question of Indigenous peoples' relation to the market (the generation of income, the management of natural resources, and the maintenance of an integral, rational, balanced life in relation to the environment) is more complex than ever.

Contemporary initiatives in the field of the Indigenous economy have followed the trend of increased small-scale projects. Governmental programs (as imposed by international finance banks) have encouraged undertakings belonging to the category of "sustainable development" projects. Indigenous organizations themselves and support organizations are inclined to favor economic activities that increment production within Indigenous areas; activities that seek to add value to products destined for specific markets; activities centered around the rationalization and exploration of determined natural resources for a greater participation of native communities in the production and organization of work for commerce.

The positive side of these decisions cannot be denied, just as the results are not grandiose and immediate. Time is being bought to be able, more clearly and decidedly, to find exists that are proper and "independent." On the other hand, one must also inquire if this doesn't constitute a new political strategy utilized by national society, geared towards its own economic interests, aiming at the incorporation of new markets, especially those held as "alternative."

In the end, one must finally ask, to what extent these initiatives constitute *de facto* something new, or are they leading Indigenous people, once again, into "modern" and sophisticated schemes of economic exploitation.

* Title: "A Way of Seeing Them"