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The Xavantes of the Serra do Roncador

◆ by Angela M. Pappiani

For centuries, perhaps even millions of years, the Xavante people, like other Indigenous people around the world, have been developing a different way of being in the world, building their own unique identity, their own unique culture.

They have learned from the stories, passed down by their ancestor from a time immemorial, how to think about the world and how to relate to everything that exists around them, alive and mysterious. They have learned to move between the vast countryside and the dense forests, learning about each animal, each plant, each star and constellation, each movement of the sky, and the river, in complete harmony and connection with everything around them. Taking from nature - and returning - everything that they need for survival: food, shelter, color and beauty, medicine

for the body and spirit.

The unique Xavante identity is marked by the haircuts that distinguish them from any other nation in the world, by their rich and sophisticated language, by the custom of removing eyelashes and eyebrows, by the richly elaborate body paintings done for each ceremony, by the songs that emerges from dreams, by the unique dances and games that unites the people in strong, unified movements, capable of shaking the ground of the forest. This is the people of Auwe Uptabi, true people, Xavante people of the Serra do Roncador.

The first encounter with the "warazu" - whites - occurred 2 centuries ago, when they entered the central-eastern part of Brazil in search of gold and precious stones. After a tentative coexistence with the whites, that ended in ambush and massacre of hundreds of Xavantes, the Auwe people decided to avoid contact with the "warazu". They retreated deep into the forests, seeking out in their traditional territories places that had not yet been invaded.

For close to two hundred years, they had lived in relative peace, with a few confrontations, but still maintaining their autonomy. By the beginning of the 1940's, new attacks from the invaders, now much more aggressive and well organized, brought warfare, death and suffering to the Auwe Uptabi.

The past 50 years have been a period of danger, threats and fear. But this hunting people have learned how to cope with the predators that have continued to invade their territories again and again. In looking for ways to maintain peace, to pacify the "warazu", they learned how to create new forms of coexistence and survival.

The great chief Ahopoen, leader of this Xavante community, guided his people through contact, believing that peace with the whites would be the only way to ensure the survival of the Auwe people. These warriors decided to control their territories with complete autonomy, decided to present themselves to the "warazu" through their own culture.

Cars, with their strange and continuous tracks on the ground, are no longer a mystery to the Xavante people. The youth of the village learn to drive Toyotas, trucks and tractors with ease. Technology such as video cameras, recorders, solar panels, radio transmitters does not frighten them. They are confident in their capabilities, ancestral memory and sophisticated analytical reasoning.

The village of Pimentel Barbosa, which was first contacted over 50 years ago, has been able to successfully maintained its traditions by resisting the entrance of missionaries, government agencies and interference from the outside world. With the strong leadership of the great chief Ahopoe, this village has created strategies to maintain a peaceful coexistence with the "warazu." They decided to choose a group of youth to leave the village to study and live with the whites, to learn the language and customs, returning later, possessing this knowledge, to work inside the community and strengthen the traditions of the culture.

In the 1980's, with the continuing disappearance of animals for hunting, the elders voiced their concerns about the future of the people and the traditions. With the help of the knowledge gained by the youth, who had been prepared in the "world of the warazu," the Xavantes created the Jaburu Project, a research and management project set up to guarantee the continuance of hunting in the territory now enclosed by ranches.

In the last 4 years, The Xavantes, in partnership with the "Núcleo de Cultura Indígena" (an Indigenous NGO), launched the first Indigenous music CD in Brazil - "Etenhiritipá - Traditional Songs of the Xavante." The record was recorded in the village, with professional equipment, and the songs were registered in the name of the village, guaranteeing the payment directly to the authors. Several additional projects came out of the Xavante's first CD. One was a collaboration with the rock band Sepultura on their latest record "Roots." A successful music video was also created to publicize the Etenhiritipá record, and was exhibited at Indigenous film festivals in the United States, Mexico and Europe.

Even with all these contacts from the exterior world, the young men continue to be traditionally prepared in HO (the singles house) for years. They maintain close contact with their godfathers and continue to learn the ancestral traditions. They are taught in this way until the time when their ears are pierced, marking the transition from a child to an adult, and their entrance into the life of a warrior.

During their apprenticeship, the young men follow the animal tracks in their hunting games. They participate in the solidarity game which requires running with large palm tree logs, and also in the secret initiation ceremonies where the real world ceases to exist.

Maybe it is difficult for outsiders to understand the complexities of the contemporary Xavante culture. The clothes, the t-shirts and caps with English inscriptions that no one reads or understands, the machines that FUNAI (the Brazilian government agency for Indigenous people) left when they tried to create an Indigenous development project there... These things mean nothing when the elders join together everyday, to greet the arrival and the departure of the sun, to exchange their impressions of the world on a daily basis, to discuss the path to the future. The "wará", the advice from the adult males, is the strongest institution in the village and is responsible for giving direction and continuing the daily traditions.

It is here that the elders discuss the confrontation between the Xavante community and the culture of "progress." This conflict can be seen at the "Rio das Mortes" (River of Death), a drainage channel from the neighboring ranches and a exportation corridor for Mercosul. For the Xavante people, the river is the fountain of life, of stories and histories, and must remain full of fish, sheltering and feeding many animals, people,

plants, memories. A human being alive, with a past and a future, this is the way of Auwe Uptabi.

In partnership with the Núcleo de Cultural Indígena, the Xavante people are organizing a big event for the middle of 1998, called "Xavante - 50 Years of Contact." This work has reunited various generations from the villages, the elders who participated in the contact with the "warazu" in 1946 and the youth and children that have already mastered [western] writing and drawing skills. Everyone has been working together with the recorders and video cameras and participating in the effort to register the history of this period for the present and for the future.

This event will bring together photographs of the initial contact between the Xavantes and the "warazu," along with original drawings, texts, and objects. A group of 25 warriors will give

singing and dancing performances and traditional rituals and ceremonies will be presented as well. Also on the agenda are plans to make a documentary, a bilingual book in Xavante/Portuguese and a CD ROM.

The Xavante people of Pimentel Barbosa live in an Indigenous reserve called "Rio das Mortes," that shelters 3 other villages in the state of Mato Grosso, in central-eastern Brazil. Six more reserves of the Xavante people still exists, approximately totaling 60 villages and a population of more than 4 thousands Indians.

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For more information and the purchase of postcards and CD's, please contact: Núcleo de Cultural Indígena, Rua Roquete Pinto 381, Previdência - S. Paulo, Brasil, Phone/Fax: 5511-8131754, E-mail: nci@ax.apc.org



Traditional style dwellings in a Xavante village.

Photo: Belo Borges