How to court an isolated tribe

By Heather Pringle

In June 1909, a Brazilian military engineer instructed his assistant, Severiano Godofredo d’Albuquerque, to tame and pacify the Nambikwara, an isolated group living in the path of a new telegraph line pushing into the upper Amazon River Basin in western Brazil. Albuquerque and his men followed a practice pioneered by missionaries: They set up an “attraction front,” building a small frontier post in Nambikwara territory, planting a garden nearby, and allowing the tribe to raid the crops. As the sorties increased, Albuquerque began leaving out metal tools, too. Finally, in August 1910, when a Nambikwara chief appeared during daylight in the garden, Albuquerque made contact, embracing the chief and dressing him and six of his companions in European clothing.

Nearly 60 years later, during a taped interview with American anthropologist David Price of Cornell University, an elderly Nambikwara described what happened next. Vitorino Nambikwara explained that his people initially traded woven ornaments and manioc flour for the newcomers’ metal tools. But soon the men at the post demanded more. “When we asked for something, we had to work for it,” Nambikwara recalled. If he and others refused to do physical labor, they were cut off from the steel machetes, axes, and other metal goods that they had come to depend on.

Such attraction fronts were an engine of sweeping cultural change. Brazilian missionaries used them to draw isolated, animistic societies out of the forest and into missions, where the people could be converted to Christianity. Government officials used the fronts early in the 20th century to transform traditional tribespeople into a settled workforce capable of building telegraph lines and roads in the Amazon’s harsh conditions. Many saw the policy as enlightened.

But for indigenous groups, the attraction fronts were the beginning of disease and dependence. Government employees often hugged the tribespeople, ate with them, and gave them “clothes and hammocks,” says Antenor Vaz, a former senior official at FUNAI, the federal agency responsible for Brazil’s indigenous peoples. In doing so, they also shared their pathogens, to which the newly contacted had no immunity.

The Nambikwara, for example, suffered devastating losses. Price estimated that the group numbered some 5000 people at the beginning of the 20th century. By 1969, that number had plummeted to 550, according to a census he conducted, and by 2010 the count was still only 1950, according to a census by Brazil’s National Health Foundation.

In the wake of such repeated tragedies, FUNAI frontiersmen helped convince the Brazilian government to abandon attraction fronts and adopt a no-contact policy in 1988 (see main story, p. 1080). Today, anthropologists consider the fronts a shameful chapter in Brazil’s history. “It was a mess,” says anthropologist Cristhian Teófilo da Silva of the University of Brasília. “And it has been proven to be genocide.”

Decades after being drawn into contact with outsiders, some Nambikwara still live in poverty.

Influenza, chickenpox, and other infectious diseases. Today, Lenin reports, the Xinane are doing well and the Xinane base remains open. “They know that if there is any situation of health or territorial invasion, the team is there to help them,” he says.

So far, contact has not meant death for the Xinane. But some observers think that last summer’s achievement was mostly a matter of luck. In an online report, physician Rodrigues notes that the virus contracted by the Xinane happened to be relatively mild, possibly a rhinovirus or adenovirus; a more serious virus such as influenza might have killed many. And some critics think FUNAI and the Ministry of Health moved much too slowly when disease broke out. The Xinane, Arisi says, “did not receive prompt and proper emergency treatment.”

In light of these experiences, Rodrigues thinks that FUNAI and the Ministry of Health need contingency plans that can be activated immediately, with specially trained health teams and stockpiles of vaccines and medicines available on short notice, as well as helicopters to ferry them to inaccessible corners of the Amazon. He adds that the Brazilian government needs to provide better health care in remote indigenous villages such as Simpatia, to help the villagers as well as to reduce the likelihood of disease transmission to isolated groups.

Lenin himself conceded last August in the public hearing in Brasilia that more funds and planning are required to protect isolated groups. “Now, our concern is to have … teams ready to make this work in relation to health,” Lenin said. “Either we, in fact, do a competent, skilled intervention, or we will be talking about repeating the histories of contacts, where the mortality of indigenous groups was very high.”

SITTING IN A shady tropical garden in one of Brasilia’s middle-class neighborhoods, Antenor Vaz frowns as he considers the tale of the Xinane. A crisp, precise man in his 60s who once trained as a physicist, Vaz is the person who systematized FUNAI’s procedures for protecting isolated people after the agency moved to a no-contact policy in 1988. Since leaving the agency in 2013, Vaz has monitored and critiqued its activities, hunting down obscure FUNAI reports and presentations online and publishing his findings.

FUNAI, he says, lacks the funds and human resources it needs. In 2014, the Brazilian government approved just 2.77 million reais ($1.15 million) for finding and protecting isolated groups, 20% of what FUNAI requested; this year, the government again provisionally approved 2.77 million reais, less than 15% of the amount FUNAI re-
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