

## Guarani Indians Intent on Getting Land in Brazil

Contributed by Spensy Pimentel  
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Some 500 leaders of the Indian group Guarani-Kaiowá of Brazil and Paraguay are meeting this week in the city of Japorá, state of Mato Grosso do Sul. The Indians are discussing ways to ensure that they get land rights. They are also looking into ways to strengthen relations between the two groups as they prepare for the National Indian Peoples Conference scheduled for next year.

When Brazil was discovered by Europeans in 1500, there were an estimated one million Guarani Indians living on millions of square kilometers in what is now southern Brazil, parts of Argentina and Bolivia, and most of Paraguay. In modern Paraguay, Guarani remains an official language, and is spoken by more people, especially in rural areas, than Spanish.

Along with the Guarani, another large Indian group lived in Brazil. They were the Tupi, who formed what we would call a nation-state, inhabiting an area that ran from modern São Paulo north to Maranhão.

Although the Guarani Indians shared a common cultural heritage, they never formed a single sociopolitical unit like the Tupi. Rather they lived in different areas sharing only their language, a lingua franca which permitted easy communication throughout their vast lands.

Presently in Brazil, there are three Guarani groups: the Guarani Mbya, mainly in the southeastern coastal region; the Guarani Nhyandeva, who call themselves simply "Guarani," who live further inland in Paraná and São Paulo, and in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul; and the Guarani Kaiowá, who live only in the southern part of Mato Grosso do Sul, but are found in Paraguay, as well.

The Guarani Indian groups took different routes to their fate under white civilization. The Guarani Mbya were herded into Jesuit missionary settlements in the 17th century in an effort to civilize them European-style.

Meanwhile, the Kaiowá drifted deeper into the forests in the area now along the border of Brazil and Paraguay, between the Apa and Miranda rivers. As it is an isolated, remote region they remained practically untouched by white civilization until the middle of the 19th century.

But when it came, white civilization came with a vengeance in the form of the Paraguay War (1864-70). Much of the bloody fighting took place exactly where the Kaiowá were living so it was inevitable that they would have ever more contact with whites.

And then, in 1880, the Brazilian government gave Thomas Larangeiras, an entrepreneur from Rio Grande do Sul, a permit to exploit an enormous tract of land (over 5 million hectares) for tea (maté tea, also known as Paraguay tea).

The tea plantation effort swept up the Kaiowá and many stray Nhandeva, as well, and lasted for some 60 years until around 1940. During that time the Indians bartered their labor for jerked beef and salt, among other things.

In 1943, the Getúlio Vargas government established an experimental farm (Colônia Agrícola Nacional) in Dourados (Mato Grosso do Sul). It attracted white farmers who employed the Indians as farm workers and handymen (doing "clean up" - "limpeza") for another 30 years, until the early 1970s.

Things changed in the 1970s in the vast interior of Brazil, especially in Mato Grosso do Sul where most of the Guarani were living. The region got integrated with international markets and there was an economic boom based on soybeans and beef.

That forced the farmers to become agribusinesses. But, agribusiness does not have any place for Indians doing "limpeza." The Indians had become expendable and downright undesirable. That would have profound consequences for Guarani society.

The foundation of Guarani society is the extended family. There are cases of one hundred relatives living in one house; happily, if the house is near a river for fishing and some land for crops and hunting.

The family is led by an older couple who have shaman-type ("xamanísticas") abilities that are important for the group for three closely interconnected reasons: the group's health and wealth (good hunting, fishing and harvests), and its relationship with the gods. If the group is healthy and has good hunting, fishing and harvests, that is considered a sign that the gods are pleased with the group.

Three or four of these extended Guarani families would live around a kilometer or so from each other, forming a kind of community. The families were connected through marriage and would come together regularly for parties which included the exchange of gifts and a community meal. For almost one hundred years they lived alongside the white man in Mato Grosso do Sul, precariously preserving their way of life.

That came to an end in the 1970s, when the Guaranis were displaced by modern agriculture. Unwanted, they were moved in random fashion to one of eight Indian reservations that had been set up at the beginning of the century by what was then called the Indian Protection Service (SPI, Serviço de Proteção ao Índio).

The reservations were located near cities, in keeping with the conventional wisdom of the time that what the Indians needed was to be "civilized." They were seen as "less advanced," and it was believed that through contact they would eventually become just like whites.

The random aspect of the relocation put serious strains on the Guarani families. They were separated and tossed together with other families. There was overpopulation. For example, the reservation near Dourados, Mato Grosso do Sul, had a population of one thousand in 1950; today there are almost 10,000 Indians there.

Other problems haunted the Indians in their new homes. On one hand, the younger Indians demanded more contact with, and goods from, white society. On the other, the older Indians had less room for their own traditional hunting and planting. To make matters worse, the only work available was as a sort of sharecropper on white farms and in sugar cane fields.

Social deterioration set in. There was a rash of suicides and violence as the Guarani family collapsed.

Today there are some 30,000 Guaranis (Kaiowá and Guarani Nhyandeva) in Mato Grosso do Sul, living on 40,000 hectares. That works out to little more than a hectare per person, or five hectares per core family. Specialists say a Guarani family needs at least 40 hectares if they are to live in their traditional way.

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