

Brazil Celebrates Today 250 Years of an Indian Warrior's Murder

Contributed by Friar Sérgio Antônio Görger
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This Tuesday, February 7, 2006, marks the 250th anniversary of the murder of Sepé Tiaraju, considered by the Portuguese army's own accounts, "their greatest general."

Three days after his death, 1,500 Guarani from the Misiones region came to be martyrs in what is now the São Gabriel municipality during the 'Massacre of Caiboaté'.

Far from a legend, Sepé was a concrete figure in history. He was one of the key commanders in the Guarani resistance movement to implement the Treaty of Madrid in what is today Rio Grande do Sul.

His personal virtues, and the confluence of factors that he was involved in together with the circumstances of his death made him much more than an ordinary individual. He transformed himself into the epitome of struggle, dreams, and heroic feats of a people.

It is a founding myth that turned into a larger symbol of a project full of contradictions, of the properties of time, full of affirmations, conquests and values. It is enough to say that among the seven different types of people that inhabited Misiones there were no slaves, something that sadly plagued almost all of the rest of the European Christian empire.

The civilization in Misiones supported a society of equals. It was based on collective property, care for the young and elderly, and the land being worked by all. Basic education was accessible by all, and work was a joyous thing, with people singing to and from their daily place of work.

There was a fertile cultural dialogue between the Guarani and the Jesuits, which resulted in democracy and popular participation in the election of leaders in Misiones cities. The period experienced fantastic development of arts, industry, agriculture, and economics.

The Portuguese lance and Spanish pistol interrupted this rich process of civilization that had already begun to mature. After the massacre, sensing the significance of this defeat, the Guarani took the initiative of setting the São Miguel cathedral on fire.

The powerful ruins of that cathedral remain today as an historical scar, an ill-healed wound in the people's history. It is a living symbol of deadly ruins. Sepé is the living symbol of living ruins, of excluded people, the poor, the exploited, the forgotten, the unappreciated, of those searching for their place in the sun, for a little plot of land to share, for decent work, a decent childhood, a respectful retirement and to have their dignity recognized.

The rubble that marks these ruins are found in São Miguel das Missões. The ruins of these people are in the shantytowns, in the fields, farms, jungles, prisons, streets, underneath bridges, in the factories villas, and in the makeshift campsites, indigenous areas, riverbeds and pavements. The cathedral is a complete visual reminder of plastic beauty. Sepé is a memory of revolutionary dreams.

We still haven't fully faced up to this illness in our civilization. In our society's collective subconscious there exists an unresolved sense of guilt. For that reason it is easier for many to say that Sepé is merely a mythical legend, than to recognize that we are only here because of the murder of a project of civilization that was much better than ours.

The latifúndio was thrust into the land that belonged to everyone. Slavery and exploitation were thrust into work that was joyful. In place of bread on everyone's tables, luxury on the table of some, hunger and misery in the homes of many. In place of dignity for all, humiliation of the great masses that need other people's favor to survive.

Sepé died fighting. The Portuguese general Gomes Freire won. The expansionist fury of the European empires, blessed by a Church that was allied with the powerful, made the weight of their swords felt. The brutal massacre destroyed millions of homes and millions of dreams.

Over the destroyed remains of the Guarani civilization, barren lands were planted that caused injustice and inequality, hate, sorrow, and deaths to grow. This is the project that with adaptations over time, rules up to today.

But from time to time the dream of a project of a world of brothers, a society of equals, a land of justice and a life of dignity is reborn from the womb of the earth in the organization and the struggles of the poor.

The ruins of stone are untouchable and they will remain as they are, if faithfully preserved. It's a matter of visible proof of

the destruction promoted by the European empires.

The people's ruins can continue to be stepped on, forgotten, offended, rejected, wounded, restrained, lacerated and destroyed but will always hold the possibility of rising up again. Until the day arrives in which the dream is transformed into living reality.

Guarani groups continue wandering through South America, blood heirs of this project, of those massacred in Caiboaté. The body is often swaying but the look is always firm and fixed on the horizon, sniffing out and intuiting the signs of utopia of one day building a world without evils.

So also the Brazilian people, meeting up again with their deepest roots, thrust into the fertile soil of Guarani civilization, will take up again the building of this project for a just and joyous society, which was interrupted by the cannon balls on the rolling prairies of Rio Grande do Sul in the fateful February of 1756.

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Sepé Tiaraju's project: www.projetosepetiaraju.org.br