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OBITUARIES

On the Death of Orlando Villas Boas and the Legacy of the Villas Boas Brothers

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In July 2003 the indigenous peoples of the upper Xingu organized a great *kuarup* ceremony in honor of Orlando Villas Boas (1914–2002). It was held in the plaza of the splendid village of the Yawalipiti, a fitting location since that tribe had been rescued from disintegration by the Villas Boas brothers, and since its chief, Aritana, was groomed for office as a young man by them and is now the genial paramount chief of all the region's tribes. This was the largest *kuarup* ever held, the first solely for a white man, and possibly the last ever.

I was the only non-Brazilian invited to this great ceremony by Orlando's widow Marina and his two sons. It was a deeply moving tribute. The centerpiece of a *kuarup* is a tree trunk, decorated with geometric designs and a huge feather headdress, and then endowed in hours of shamanic ritual to represent the dead man. His family and closest friends gazed reverently at the trunk, conjuring up memories of that ebullient personality. A fire was lit before it during the moonlit night and pairs of shamans, men and women in relays, chanted quietly and waved their *maracá* rattles. When the ceremony ended after the second day, the trunk was floated down the Xingu towards the Amazon and the Atlantic Ocean.

In addition to the spiritual ceremonial around the trunk, visiting warriors of half-a-dozen tribes painted themselves in ornate patterns, donned red, yellow and blue headdresses, and danced in long, stamping lines or performed mock charges towards the shelter containing the trunk. On the second day they held their beloved *huka-huka* wrestling matches—first between tribes (the Kamayurá were winners), and then in scores of friendly bouts between anyone who accepted a challenge or felt like some sport.

I had previously attended the *kuarup* for Cláudio Villas Boas, at which Orlando had made a speech urging the Indians of the Xingu to defend their rights and traditions, and also asking them to hold a *kuarup* for him when he died. I can think of no finer memorial service, with its mixture of showy ceremony, family fairground atmosphere (there were always gangs

of children trying to imitate the warriors), spiritual observance, and above all undemonstrative but profound grief.

Orlando was the eldest and the last survivor of the four Villas Boas brothers. Sons of a failed coffee planter, the four young men were in office jobs in São Paulo in 1943 when they heard that the Vargas government's Central Brazil Foundation was launching an expedition across the then unexplored heart of Brazil. The plan was to cut a trail diagonally from the Araguaia, northwestwards across the Rio das Mortes, to the Xingu and then on towards the Tapajós. This was to open airstrips as weather stations or emergency landing places for planes on the Rio to Miami run. Three of the brothers bluffed their way onto this Roncador-Xingu Expedition (which wanted to hire only backwoodsmen and not city boys like them). However, their leadership qualities soon put them in charge of its field operations. After grueling months cutting across the territory of the hostile Xavante, the expedition in November 1945 finally reached the southeasternmost headwaters of the Xingu.

There were meetings with the upper-Xingu tribes during the ensuing months. The Villas Boas brothers were enraptured by their first sight of that unique grouping of a dozen tribes, which spoke different languages but were otherwise almost identical in their way of life, village plans, architecture, food, body paint and ornament, rituals, and beliefs. So the brothers decided to remain, and they ended by devoting their lives to these peoples. This was a novelty. The indigenous peoples of the Xingu had been visited intermittently, since they were first contacted by Karl von den Steinen in 1884. However, no outsider had remained for more than a few months.

The first difficult contact by Orlando and Cláudio Villas Boas came in August 1948 when they saw "innumerable canoes" on the lower Manitsauá-missu. They bravely waded ashore, each holding two machetes, and confronted a powerful warrior. This contact proved to be with an isolated group of Juruna, a people who had gradually migrated up the Xingu to escape colonial persecution. A far more serious threat came from the belligerent Mentuktire Kayapó (then known as Txukarramãe) who had for several decades terrorized other peoples in these forests and rivers. Although fearless and aggressive, the Kayapó developed a passionate desire for metal cutting tools—machetes, axes, knives—and later for guns and ammunition with which to destroy rivals. Some of them therefore welcomed trade with whites. In 1952–53 the Villas Boas brothers gradually made contact with this tough people, at first using their former enemies the Juruna as intermediaries, and then continuing on risky encounters on river banks and long marches to Mentuktire villages. This was a breakthrough in

bringing peace to the Xingu. The Villas Boas brothers consolidated their achievement by taking some Mentuktire to visit former enemies on the upper river. They persuaded all Xingu peoples to “bury the hatchet” and stop intertribal warfare.

During these early years, the brothers developed an administrative center for the upper river at Posto Capitão Vasconcellos (renamed Posto Leonardo after the third brother, who died during an operation in 1961) and one at Diauarum a hundred kilometers downriver to the north. Leonardo became Orlando’s base, and Diauarum was Cláudio’s. In 1959–60 they made contact with the Suyá near the latter post. This was a Je-speaking people who had been slaughtered by the Mentuktire. The first face-to-face meeting with them was another brave exploit by Orlando, made easier by this group’s desire for tools and food.

During these years, the Villas Boas brothers developed a more controversial strategy of relocating tribes within the Xingu forests. Their first in-migration was of the Kayabi from the Peixes tributary of the Teles Pires, who had been suffering from contacts with settlers and rubber men but enjoyed some protection and religious pressure by Jesuits. The Villas Boas brothers ascended the Manitsauá and then cut a 150-kilometer trail to the Tapajós/Teles Pires. Most Kayabi were persuaded to move east into the Xingu in successive groups, in 1952, 1955, and 1965. Already fairly acculturated (in the parlance of that era), the Kayabi proved to be calm, industrious and efficient—they have always been the mainstay of Xingu governance. For many years, the tribes of the upper Xingu had been harassed by a warlike people whom they knew as “Txikão” (but who know themselves as “Ikpeng”). In 1952 Orlando and Cláudio attempted a contact, after a twelve-day march to the southwest of Posto Leonardo. They surprised a Ikpeng village, but had to run for their lives in a hail of arrows. Twelve years later in 1964 the brothers, with the anthropologist Eduardo Galvão and photographer Jesco von Puttkamer, managed to land a plane near an Ikpeng settlement off the Ronuro headwater. They had another potentially violent encounter. This time, thanks again to the attraction of trade goods, the contact was peaceful. The Ikpeng were then moved into the upper Xingu, close to Posto Leonardo, and another long-running conflict was resolved.

There were two more controversial relocations. The first was of the Tapayuna from the Arinos headwater of the Tapajós, 400 kilometers west of the Xingu. Anthony Seeger had identified them as being relatives of the Suyá. Their lands and lives were under heavy pressure from settlers; and they had been hit by epidemics. So it was decided to airlift the Tapayuna into the Xingu. Only a proportion of the tribe made the move, and they did not fully understand what was happening. To critics, this smacked

of what we now call ethnic cleansing, for the lands on the Arinos were immediately colonized.

The final contact by the Villas Boas brothers was with the Panará (then called Kren Akroré), on a tributary of the middle Tapajós. This belligerent nation fought and frightened all its neighbors, including even the Kayapó, and its men were thought before contact to be gigantic in height. Cláudio led most of the arduous Panará expeditions, from 1968 onwards. He finally achieved face-to-face contact in February 1973. The tribe's situation deteriorated catastrophically after contact—within two years over ninety per cent had died of disease. The Cuiabá-Santarém road was built along the western edge of their territory. Dealings with road builders and some FUNAI personnel were disastrous. Prospectors, loggers, and land speculators encroached on their forests. Orlando had originally insisted on the Panará's constitutional right to their land, but he reversed this as the crisis deepened. So in January 1975, on orders from the president of FUNAI, the brothers orchestrated an airlift into the Xingu of some seventy remaining Panará. There has been much criticism of this relocation. Most of the tribe's fine forests on the Peixoto de Azevedo were immediately invaded and destroyed. The few survivors were unhappy in the alien world of the Xingu, despite efforts to make its tribes (their former enemies) welcome them. Notably, the twenty-year diaspora of the Panará ended in 1995, with their return to the only surviving part of their forests, on the upper Iriri river.

During their thirty years on the Xingu, the Villas Boas brothers developed a novel attitude towards the Indians. Although poor linguists and with no anthropological training, they intuitively established a rapport with these peoples, treated them as equals, learned about each individual's concerns, and made limitless time to converse with them. These were usually serious discussions of tribal affairs, hunting, and sex. Orlando's powerful presence and ebullient personality helped. There was humor and joshing when appropriate, but invariable respect prevailed, with none of the patronizing superiority of some FUNAI and missionary staff. Indians were rulers in their Xingu homeland, and the Villas Boas brothers were there only as amiable representatives of the outside world, not as colonial administrators. When I was with the team from the Aborígenes Protection Society that in 1972 reported on over forty FUNAI establishments all over Brazil, the Xingu was the *only* place where indigenous people were genuinely in charge. When the brothers left, in the late 1970s, the Xingu was soon run for FUNAI by indigenous directors.

The Villas Boas brothers valued native cultures, but not in a romantic way. They also published useful anthologies of mythology. They evolved a regime whereby Indians experienced change, *but only at the speed they*

themselves wanted. So whatever outside influences the Indians requested were introduced—metal tools, clothing and, later, radios, bicycles, even computers, televisions, and other gadgetry. The only items excluded were those that competed directly with any tribe's trade specialty (such as the Waurá manioc pans) and firearms (that would rapidly have depleted the forest game). The legacy of these policies is that these peoples are still among the most self-assured and successful in retaining tradition and absorbing innovation.

The brothers from São Paulo also excluded missionaries. Some of these frustrated proselytizers spread rumors that they were keeping Indians in a “human zoo” for the delectation of favored tourists and anthropologists, or that they lived lives of luxury. Anyone who shared the Spartan existence on the Xingu, or saw how smoothly its native inhabitants adopted the few imports they wanted, knew how untrue these calumnies were. Another innovation, particularly by Orlando, was to appreciate the importance of politicians, military men, and the media in furthering the indigenous cause. They invited politicians of every persuasion to see the edenic beauty of the Xingu, courted the military (particularly the Air Force, on which they depended for weekly supply flights), and the press. A charismatic performer, with the glamour of an explorer who helped attractive Indians, Orlando achieved star status in Brazilian society. But he did it more for his indigenous friends than for personal glorification. Internationally, he gained many awards, including the Royal Geographical Society's gold medal, and he and Cláudio were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

The greatest achievement of the Villas Boas brothers was the creation of the Xingu Indigenous Park. The proposal for this park was drafted as early as 1951 by Eduardo Galvão, Darcy Ribeiro, and Orlando Villas Boas, but it took a decade of political struggle before it was signed into law by President Quadros in 1961. The Park was radical in its attempt to combine saving indigenous peoples by protecting their land on a massive scale, with the attendant benefits of conservation of a pristine environment, and creation of a field for scientific research (the latter never really happened). The original proposal was to protect the entire basin of the upper Xingu, but during the negotiations the sources of most headwaters and tributaries were removed. Even so, the resulting Park of some 26,000 square kilometers was by far the largest indigenous protected area in South America, and it proved to be the prototype of many others. Thanks to this foresight by the young brothers from São Paulo, the protected territories of Brazil's indigenous peoples now cover 11% of that vast country, and the tribes of the Xingu enter the twenty-first century with considerable optimism. They were right to hold the largest *kuarup* to honor the memory of their champion.