

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 17
Issue 1 (*includes Issue 2*)

Article 4

1-2-2021

The Villas Boas Brothers and Anthropologists

John Hemming
Independent Scholar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Latin American History Commons](#), [Latin American Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hemming, John (2021). "The Villas Boas Brothers and Anthropologists," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 4, 45-51.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol17/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

The Villas Boas Brothers and Anthropologists

John Hemming

Independent Scholar

UNITED KINGDOM

This paper, originally delivered to the SALSA Conference in Vienna in 2019, covers the period 1946–76. During these three decades the Villas Boas brothers were active with the indigenous peoples of the Iriri, Teles Pires (its tributary the Peixoto de Azevedo), and the upper Xingu River in central Brazil. In many ways their experiences and achievements were unique, never previously replicated elsewhere and certainly never will be again. In addition to arduous explorations and first contacts with five peoples, they improved public attitudes toward indigenous peoples (called “Indians” in their day), changed government agents’ modus operandi, protected indigenous territories in a novel way, and prepared these people for co-existence with modern Brazil without diminishing their pride in their communal societies. But this paper is largely about the Villas Boas brothers’ relations with anthropologists. Readers interested in a more comprehensive account of the brothers’ remarkable achievements and careers should read my new book *People of the Rainforest: The Villas Boas Brothers, Explorers and Humanitarians of the Amazon*.

At the end of the Second World War, President Getúlio Vargas announced a great national drive to *cut into* Amazonian forests—rather than explore them by river, as had been done during the previous four centuries. The spearhead of this thrust was to be the Roncador-Xingu Expedition, to cut a trail from the Rio das Mortes, across hostile Xavante territory, to the Upper Xingu in the center of Brazil. The Xingu is one of the mighty southern tributaries of the Amazon.

The three Villas Boas brothers, Orlando, Claudio, and Leonardo, young men who were well educated to the high school level but without higher education, were the only middle-class Brazilians fired up by the idea of this nationalistic venture. They tried to enlist in São Paulo but were rejected because it was thought that Amazon forests were too challenging for city boys: the Expedition was therefore hiring only illiterate woodsmen. So the Villas Boas took the extraordinary step of quitting routine office jobs and traveling 1,500 kilometers to the Araguaia River in the hope of joining the Expedition. They succeeded, and, as the only literate members of the cutting party, soon found themselves leading it. This great national expedition got ample media coverage, and the Villas Boas were on track to becoming Brazil’s most famous explorers. After seventeen months of tough exploration, in late 1946 the team reached the Xingu’s Culuene headwater, and the brothers saw their first Indians—Kalapalo.

The Roncador-Xingu Expedition’s objective soon changed from opening forests for frontier settlement to clearing a series of airstrips running in a diagonal across the forests of central Brazil. For a few years, the brothers continued exploring Xingu tributaries and cutting hundreds of kilometers of exploratory trails, westward to the Teles Pires River and northwest toward the Tapajós. They opened a series of landing runways, like stepping-stones across the forests of central Brazil—Aragarças and Xavantina (where the Roncador-Xingu Expedition had had its early camps), then one that later became the Air Force Base Xingu, another downstream at Diauarum, and then Cachimbo to the northwest. These airstrips were intended as emergency landing areas and weather stations. But they also opened access to the Upper Xingu, bypassing the need to use the long overland trail from Cuiabá as the early overland expeditions had done since the German anthropologist Karl von den Steinen had first contacted the Xinguano peoples in 1885. The strips were unlit and unpaved but long enough to take twin-engine propeller planes such as the Second World War workhorse C-47 Dakota.

The Villas Boas had never previously seen indigenous peoples and had no training as anthropologists or in the Indian Protection Service. But they became so enchanted with the Xinguanos (Upper Xingu Indians) that they devoted the rest of their lives to helping them. During the next quarter century, they made five first contacts—of hostile groups of Juruna (now called Yudjá), Metuktire Kayapó, Suiá (Kisêdje), Txikão (Ikpeng), and Panará. They were also involved in four sometimes-controversial rescue migrations into the Xingu—of groups of Kaiabi (Kawaiweté), and of Ikpeng, Tapayuna, and Panará. Anthropologists are almost never present at first contacts, which are led by elite *sertanistas* of the FUNAI (National Indian Foundation, before 1968 dubbed the Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (SPI)). However, the anthropologist Harald Schultz made a second contact with the Suiá (now Kisêdje) in 1960, and anthropologist Eduardo Galvão was on a fleeting first contact with the Txikão (now Ikpeng) in 1964.

More importantly, the brothers developed a new relationship with Xinguanos, as avuncular friends and equals rather than as colonial-style administrators. They appreciated that change was inevitable. But they were determined to regulate and slow its impact, so that indigenous societies could adapt and survive. And they used their celebrity status in the media to change Brazilian public opinion in favor of its indigenous peoples.

In 1947, Heloisa Torres (an anthropologist/archaeologist who had by then been director of the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro for a decade and the first woman to head a major Brazilian institution) saw an opportunity and sent three anthropologists to study the Xingu peoples and collect artifacts for her museum. The leaders were Eduardo Galvão (the first Brazilian to get a doctorate in anthropology, from Charles Wagley in Florida), and his colleagues Pedro Lima and Mário Simões. Their studies were fundamental in defining the Xinguanos societies' unique characteristics. But the magnificent artifacts they collected were tragically lost in the 2018 fire that destroyed the Museu Nacional's Quinta da Boa Vista palace in Rio de Janeiro.

In 1951 a group of enthusiasts had the groundbreaking idea of getting this entire forested region protected for the dual purposes of saving its indigenous peoples and their tropical forests and making them available for scientific study. The four proponents of this audacious plan were Orlando Villas Boas, Air Force Brigadier Raymundo Aboim (the head of Brazilian Civil Aviation), and two anthropologists, Torres and Darcy Ribeiro (the latter had just joined the staff of the Indian Protection Service). In 1952 the four had a meeting with Vice President João Café Filho, who asked them to draft legislation for the proposed park; he then took them to present this to President Getúlio Vargas. Their proposal was to protect a gigantic area of pristine forests and their inhabitants, and to make this area accessible only to invited scientists.

Nine years of fierce struggle ensued, with intense media campaigning both for and against the proposal, and endless political scrutiny in committees of Congress and Senate. There was also financial chicanery because the governor of Mato Grosso realized that the huge park would sequester almost a quarter of his state, and he therefore connived to sell much of the Xingu forests to land speculators. Each side of the issue had its newspaper and magazine supporters; Orlando Villas Boas and Brigadier Aboim published eloquent and passionate arguments for the park. The logjam finally broke in 1961, with the landslide election of the Villas Boas's family friend, Jânio Quadros, as president of Brazil. Previously, as governor of São Paulo state, he had visited the Xingu and admired the brothers' work with its indigenous peoples. Quadros therefore got the assent of the governor of Mato Grosso by drastically reducing the park's size, and he then rammed it into law via presidential decree.

This 26,000-square-kilometer Xingu Indigenous Park was the first huge reserve of its kind in the world. Although much reduced from the original proposal, it was still the size of Vermont or Massachusetts, larger than Wales, and almost as big as Belgium. Because Brazil's indigenous peoples had a right to their lands—later enshrined in the 1988 constitution—and they were the only people who could live sustainably *within* forests without destroying them, this park served the dual purpose of protecting both Indian lands (fundamental to their cultural survival) and tropical rain forests, the world's richest ecosystem. Importantly, this concept has since been replicated in gigantic indigenous territories throughout Brazil and other South American countries—to the environmental benefit of our entire planet.

The Xingu Indigenous Park was not a national park as understood in other countries, as it was closed to everyone except its indigenous inhabitants and anthropologists studying them. The park was originally also intended to attract natural scientists, but these chose to study flora, fauna, and ecology in other more mature and accessible Amazonian forests. The Villas Boas also welcomed short visits by journalists, photographers, politicians, activists, and anyone they felt could help the indigenous cause. But the brothers rigorously excluded missionaries, adventurers, tourists, settlers, and all exploiters of natural resources.

The Xingu became a mecca for anthropologists, for six reasons:

1. The new airstrips made access by plane easy. So for three decades the Brazilian Air Force provided a regular weekly service of *free* flights in its DC-47s or other propeller-driven planes. Only authorized persons could join these flights, which was easily controlled because the planes took off from guarded military bases.
2. The Villas Boas maintained two posts (Leonardo, on the headwater rivers, and Diauarum to the north on the main Xingu), and these theoretically had all basic amenities, including radio communications and stores of food, tools, and necessities. (There were, of course, times when some of these supplies were missing, particularly at Diauarum.) The park also had an office in São Paulo that provided a host of services for the Indians and researchers, including a mail service.
3. There was some medical care. In the early years, and before the arrival of the Villas Boas, the small populations of Xingu peoples had been devastated by epidemics of outside diseases such as influenza and measles. This was gradually overcome, first by occasional doctors' visits. Then a resident nurse, Marina Lima, did her best at everything from obstetrics to dentistry. But when Marina tried to leave, in her mid-twenties, Orlando was so distressed at the thought of losing her that he proposed and married her—and it was a very happy marriage despite a thirty-year age gap. The greatest change came in 1965 when Dr. Roberto Baruzzi brought a team of volunteer doctors from the São Paulo Escola Paulista de Medicina. Under an agreement with this teaching hospital, teams of volunteers came every year from 1965 to the present to administer preventive medicine and health care to the Xinguanos (Villas Bôas Filho 2014). There was provision for emergency evacuation by boat or plane to Posto Leonardo and then, if necessary, to a hospital; eventually there was a small airstrip at every village. Thus anthropologists had fewer medical worries than at other remote locations.
4. There was no competition from missionaries or rival researchers, and no danger from adventurers or criminals who roam around other forests, because access to the secluded and well-ordered realm was only via military planes.
5. The Xinguanos prided themselves on generosity and hospitality, and did not seem to mind anthropologists living among them and prying into their lives—provided, of course, that those visitors were generous to them, respected their customs, and behaved well. Many bonds of deep friendship developed between researchers and their indigenous hosts.
6. There was tremendous potential for research about these unacculturated peoples with their long-established spiritual beliefs, mythology, and social structures. There was also exciting study of the newly contacted groups. And there was transition. Berta Ribeiro saw change itself as a research opportunity. She wrote that “this process is seductive for us anthropologists, because we see in miniature how a homogenous people reacts when its cultural remnants are under pressure from a dominant society: ours” (B. Ribeiro 1979:92).¹

Few places in Amazonia had one of these advantages, and none offered all six of them. Thus during the decades when the Villas Boas brothers were running what became the Xingu Indigenous Park, some thirty-five anthropologists worked there, most for more than one season. They are listed in an appendix to this paper.

There were only two drawbacks for anthropologists:

- Permission to research in the Xingu could be fiendishly difficult to obtain. A foreign researcher had to have a Brazilian host institution and often an individual counterpart. The SPI (and after 1968, FUNAI) had to grant approval—and neither was noted for its speed or efficiency. So, also, did the dreaded National Research Council, with its almost xenophobic obstructiveness.
- The Xinguano peoples of the upper river numbered few and were almost identical to one another. Thus, once a people had been well studied—as they all were—it became difficult to find new fields of research.

During their three decades in the Xingu, the Villas Boas brothers learned a lot about its peoples, and they wrote popular books about the alluring Indians, and particularly about their mythology. Their book about myths was in simple language, in the way that shamans and elders told them. It was published in 1970 and then translated, with a glowing introduction by the American anthropologist Kenneth Brecher (Villas Boas 1970, 1973).

The Villas Boas's attitude toward anthropologists was businesslike—not as affectionate and jocular as their dealings with Indians. Being mildly eccentric themselves, they particularly liked anthropologists with warm or flamboyant personalities—such as Ken Brecher or Tony and Judy Seeger. But they gave polite help to all. As far as I know, they banished only two: one man for flagrant pedophilia with boys and a woman for having sex with young men.

In my notes from 1971 I recorded a conversation with Claudio Villas Boas when he was in a dyspeptic mood. He lambasted anthropologists who, he felt, tried to classify native society into neat pigeonholes or to squeeze the Indians' broad conception of life into their own Western experience. For him, the worst were the few who wrote in academic jargon and were obsessed with such minutiae as parentage and sibling relationships. These individuals “form a little gang, write theses that no one reads, copy what others have written, and are all a group of frustrated failures.” This was of course grossly unfair. Claudio himself propounded confused and impenetrable notions of philosophy and half-baked socialist dialectics, which Sydney Possuelo (a future *sertanista* and president of FUNAI, initially trained by Claudio), I, and others found difficult to understand—even though we greatly admired the speaker. But the Indians loved their long conversations with the brothers because these came from a deep understanding of tribal affairs and gossip. I doubt whether either brother read the anthropological studies of Xingu peoples, most of which were excellent, deeply sympathetic to indigenous people, and readable by laypeople—but often only in English, which the brothers did not know.

A few anthropologists criticized the Villas Boas. Rafael Bastos (1987–89) wrote a paper called “The Invention of the Saga of the Villas Boas Brothers,” as though their decades of dedicated work had been mere public relations hype. He was apparently unaware that once the media decide to push a story nothing can stop them, and that the terrific media attention given to these glamorous Brazilian explorer-humanitarians did wonders for the public perception of indigenous peoples. Bastos claimed it had been wrong to persuade warlike peoples to stop fighting one another, to produce what has been called the “Pax Xinguana.” He wrote that this peace was imposed arbitrarily and brutally and that it was unnatural for indigenous warriors, whose belligerence was a “dramatic factionalism” (ibid.:395). Orlando's son (a professor of law) commented that this was like deploring vaccinations because they prevented “natural” diseases from killing people (Villas Boas Filho 2014). Also, the twelve Xinguano peoples had ceased intertribal fighting and merged peacefully before contact.

Others criticized from the opposite flank. These individuals felt that the brothers were moving too slowly. Their policy of gradual change left Indians unprepared for the fatal arrival of modern civilization—which was inevitable. The anthropologist Pedro Agostinho da Silva admired the Villas Boas's work. But he worried that the isolated and “sealed-off environment, artificially maintained” they created did not prepare Xingu society for economic reality. It was essential to prepare for “gradual transition from a subsistence to a consumer economy, without the loss of ethnic and social cohesion” (1972:272)—which was precisely what the Villas Boas strove to achieve. Other researchers instead praised them for this slowing down. Thomas Gregor wrote: “Today, thanks to Orlando and Claudio Villas Boas,

Indian lands and culture remain essentially intact” (1977:20). Berta Ribeiro said that “change is less violent because it is guided by the wisdom, intuition, and generosity of men like Claudio and Orlando” (Ribeiro 1979: 92).

So, the critics were a minority. Most anthropologists who worked in the Xingu were very grateful. A typical tribute came from Gregor (who wrote a superb study of the Mehinaku): “I was privileged to meet the administrators of the Post, Claudio and Orlando Villas Boas. These courageous brothers virtually single-handedly established the Xingu Park and protected its frontiers from [undesirable intruders] . . . [They] generously gave me the hospitality of the Indian Post, the help of their staff, and their encouragement for my work” (1977:xiv). Similar acknowledgements by other anthropologists also spoke of “hospitality,” “collaboration,” and “encouragement.” Carmen Junqueira (1973) used her anthropological skills to study the administration and philosophy of the park itself as though it were a social entity.

Fifty-two years ago, in 1969, the British anthropologists Francis Huxley and Nicholas Guppy and Robin Hanbury-Tenison and I created the nongovernmental organization Survival International. We then had the idea of nominating the Villas Boas brothers for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 and again in 1972. Anthropologists from many countries eagerly supported this bid, as it would do so much good for the indigenous cause. These included top British anthropologists; in France, Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Société des Américanistes de Paris; and in the United States, the American Anthropological Association under Charles Wagley. In Brazil itself, the Museu Nacional wrote to the Nobel Committee that “without any doubt all Brazilian anthropologists support [the nomination] without reserve” (Fénelon Costa 1970).

Although they did not become Nobel laureates, the Villas Boas brothers received with medals, awards, and honors from many countries. The academician Antonio Callado praised the “magic brothers” for their achievements as explorers which had culminated in the Xingu Indigenous Park, “a creation of love, and as such I think that it will endure for a long time, or perhaps will never end” (2012:13). Darcy Ribeiro declared that “Orlando, Claudio and Leonardo had the most extraordinary and beautiful lives of which I know . . . Their daring and generous adventures would have been unimaginable had they not actually lived them.” He admired the courage with which they contacted potentially dangerous tribes—“a sad business for those peoples, but less damaging because it was conducted by the Villas Boas” (2012:11).

Notes

¹This and subsequent translations from the Portuguese original are my own.

References

- Aufderheide, Patricia
1995 “The Video in the Villages Project: Videomaking with and by Brazilian Indians.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 11(2): 83–93.
- Agostinho da Silva, Pedro
1972 “Information Concerning the Territorial and Demographic Situation in the Alto Xingu.” In Walter Dostal (ed), *The Situation of the Indian in South America: Contributions to the Study of Inter-Ethnic Conflict in the non-Andean Regions of South America*. Trans. W. J. O’Hara. Geneva: World Council of Churches, pp. 252–283.
- Bastos, Rafael José de Menezes
1987-89 “Exegeses Yawalapity e Kamayurá da criação do Parque Indígena do Xingu e a invenção da saga dos irmãos Villas Boas.” *Revista de Antropologia* 30–32 (1):395.

Callado, Antonio

- 2012 “A doce républica do Tuatuari.” In Orlando and Cláudio Villas Boas, *A Marcha para o Oeste: A epopeia da Expedição Roncador-Xingu*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, p. 13. [orig. 1994]
- Fénelon Costa, Maria Heloísa
1970 Letter to the Société des Américanistes de Paris, 22 Jan. 1970, in Funai’s archive in Brasília.
- Gregor, Thomas
1977 *Mehinaku. The Drama of Daily Life in a Brazilian Indian Village*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hemming, John.
2019 *People of the Rainforest: The Villas Boas Brothers, Explorers and Humanitarians of the Amazon*. London: Hurst. [US distributor: Oxford University Press]
- Junqueira, Carmen
1973 *The Brazilian Indigenous Problem and Policy: the Example of the Xingu National Park*. Copenhagen: IWGIA [International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs] Vol. 13.
- Ribeiro, Berta
1979 *Diário do Xingu*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, p. 92
- Ribeiro, Darcy
2012 “Os irmãos Villas Boas.” In Orlando and Cláudio Villas Boas, *A Marcha para o Oeste: A epopeia da Expedição Roncador-Xingu*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, p. 11. [orig. 1994]
- Villas Boas, Orlando and Cláudio
1970 *Xingu: Os índios, seus mitos*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores.
1973 *Xingu: The Indians, Their Myths*. Forward by Kenneth S. Brecher (ed), trans. Susana Hertelendy Rudge. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Villas Boas Filho, Orlando (org)
2014 *Orlando Villas Boas e a construção do indigenismo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora Mackenzie.

APPENDIX

Anthropologists and other researchers active in the Upper Xingu during the Villas Boas years, 1947–76 (Dates of activity are approximate; and indigenous peoples are referenced as spelled during those years)

- 1946–76 – Orlando, Cláudio, Leonardo **Villas Boas** meet **Kalapalo**; then study all tribes during subsequent decades
- 1947–50 – Eduardo **Galvão**, Pedro **Lima** with **Waurá**, **Kamaiurá**, **Mehinako**
- 1950 – Eduardo **Galvão** with **Juruna**
- 1952–61 – Mário **Simões** with **Mehinako** and other peoples
- 1952 – Kalervo **Oberg** (doctor) with **Aweti**
- 1955 – Gerhard **Baer** and René **Fuerst** with **Kalapalo** and other peoples
- 1955–66 – Gertrude **Dole** with **Kuikuro**
- 1956–61 – Robert **Carneiro** with **Kuikuro**, **Trumai**
- 1958 – Adrian **Cowell** with **Aweti**, **Metuktire**
- 1959–61 – Adélia Engrácia de **Oliveira** with **Juruna**
- 1959 – Murillo **Villela (medical doctor)** with Orlando **Villas Boas** on **Suíá** contact
- 1960 – Harald **Schultz** with **Suíá**
- 1961 – Richard **Mason**, John **Hemming** on Iriri Expedition ambushed by **Panará**
- 1962 and later – Terence **Turner** and Joan **Bamberger** with **Metuktire**
- 1962 – Eduardo **Galvão**, Mário **Simões** on **Txikão (Ikpeng)** contact attempt
- 1963, 1964 – Mário **Simões** reports on all Xinguanos
- 1965 – Harald **Schultz** and Vilma **Chiara** with **Waurá**, **Suíá**
- 1965–2010 – Roberto **Baruzzi** and **Escola Paulista de Medicina** doctors with all peoples
- 1965–71 – Carmen (Lima) **Junqueira** with **Kamaiurá**

- 1965–75 – Mickey **Stout** and Ruth **Thomson** linguists with **Metuktire**
1966–67 – Protásio **Frikel** with **Suiá**
1966–68 – Mark **Münzel** with **Kamaiurá**
1967 – Renate **Viertler** with **Kamaiurá**
1967 – Aurore **Monod** with **Trumai**
1967 – Adrian **Cowell** on contact attempt to **Panará**
1967–68 – Murillo **Villela**, Jesco von **Puttkamer** with **Villas-Boas** on **Ikpeng** contact
1967–75 – Patrick **Menget** with **Ikpeng**
1968 – Ellen **Basso** with **Kalapalo**
1968 – Adélia **Oliveira** with **Juruna**
1968–69 – Philip **Hugh-Jones**, Anthony **Smith** and medical team
1969–74 – Thomas **Gregor** with **Mehinaku**
1969 – Georg **Grünberg** with **Kaiabi**
1969 – Bo **Akerren**, René **Fuerst** and others, Red Cross medical survey
1970–71 – Kenneth **Brecher** with **Waurá**
1970 – Dr Roberto **Baruzzi** medical examination of **Tapayuná** on arrival in Xingu
1971 – Robin **Hanbury-Tenison** survey for Primitive People’s Fund (Survival International)
1971 – George **Zarur** with **Aweti**
1971–73 – Cláudio and Orlando **Villas-Boas** on **Panará** contact expedition
1971–73 and later visits – Anthony **Seeger** with **Suiá**
1972 – John **Hemming**, Francis **Huxley**, René **Fuerst** survey for Aborigenes Protection Society
1972 – Pedro Agostinho da **Silva** with **Kamaiurá**
1974 onward – Gustaaf **Verswijver** with **Metuktire** and other **Kayapó**
1974 and later visits – Maureen **Bisilliat** photographed many Xinguanos
1974–80 – Rafael José **Bastos** with **Kamaiurá**, **Yawalapiti**
1975 – Roberto **Baruzzi** medical study of **Panará** airlifted into Xingu
1975 – George **Zarur** with **Kalapalo**
1975–78 – Richard **Heelas** with **Panará**
1976–80 – Bruna **Franchetto** with **Kuikuro**
1976 – Eduardo **Viveiros de Castro** with **Yawalapiti**
1977 – Etienne **Samain** with **Kamaiurá**
1977 – Berta **Ribeiro** with **Kaiabi**