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## The Kararaô of Central Brazil by Gustaaf Verswijver

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*The Kararaô of Central Brazil* by Gustaaf Verswijver. Geneva: Fondation Culturelle Musée Barbier-Mueller, 2020. 206 pp., plates, maps, appendices

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In 2010 a census showed that there were over nine thousand Kayapo (self-designation *Mebengôkre*), divided into six groups. The largest of these were the *Mekragnoti* (2,853), *Gorotire* (2,823) and *Xikrin* (1,818), and the smallest by far were the *Kararaô*, numbering only 54. Because they were so few, the *Kararaô* lack some of the attributes of a full Kayapo community, such as a men's house. They have therefore been neglected by anthropologists. So it is timely that the great historian of the Kayapo, the Belgian anthropologist Gustaaf Verswijver, has rectified this neglect following four seasons of fieldwork among the surviving *Kararaô*. (We know from Verswijver's *The Club-Fighters of the Amazon* (1992, revised 2018), *Mekragnoti* (1996) and other books what a meticulous researcher and writer he is.)

In the first chapter Verswijver helpfully gives a summary of daily life among all Kayapo, and the factors that make these peoples distinct—their large circular villages, located by streams rather than rivers; their rich and complex cosmology, ritual life and social organization; the importance of the men's house and the political societies within them; the long and arduous instruction to become a leader of one of these societies; rotational movement between villages, which could be twenty or thirty miles apart, when hunting and fishing resources became exhausted; the many ceremonies and rituals, of varying importance; naming ceremonies and the significance of different types of name; age grades; deaths, funerals and burials. Anyone embarking on a study of a Kayapo group would do well to start with this overview.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, relations between the Kayapo and Brazilian settlers deteriorated, because the former increasingly wanted guns and ammunition, whereas the latter wanted cheap labor for rubber-tapping and nut gathering. By the twentieth century, most southern Kayapo were in the large village *Pukatoti*, on the *Riozinho-Fresco* tributary of the middle *Xingu*. Schisms and feuds are common in Kayapo villages, and in 1930 a men's society called *Kararaô* (after a battle cry) left *Pukatoti* under a belligerent leader.

Before long, these breakaway *Kararaô* fragmented into three small groups, and this book is a very detailed history of what became of each of the three. Gustaaf Verswijver used his command of the Kayapo *Gê* language and his lifetime's friendship with many of them, to conduct no less than seventy-nine interviews, as well as "manifold informal discussions," among both Kayapo and Brazilians, and deep research in archives, to elaborate their movements and events during the past eighty years.

These long migrations were punctuated with meetings with Brazilians, sometimes friendly with farmers giving the Indians food and even guns, but more often hostile, with the *Kararaô* raiding farms to take possessions, sometimes killing men and, on three occasions, kidnapping women to live with them. Reprisals could be violent, with posses trying to find and kill the elusive indigenous people and at *Vitoria* (near the modern *Belo Monte* dam) in 1940 inviting a group of men in apparent friendship but massacring them while they were sleeping in a shed. At other times, settlers tried to get *Kararaô* as unpaid workers to gather Brazil nuts, tap rubber or hunt for jaguar skins.

There were peaceful contacts—known then as "pacifications." But every one of these ended in tragedy from disease, as has happened with dreadful inevitability throughout Brazilian history. One group befriended by local people in 1939 near *Porto de Moz* at the mouth of the *Xingu* (a remarkable eight hundred kilometers north of their original *Pukatoti* village) was struck by "calamitous" influenza from which many died. *Francisco Meirelles*, one of the Brazilian Indian Protection Service's top *sertanistas*, used lavish presents includ-

ing many guns and much ammunition to pacify another Kararaô group far up the Curuá tributary of the Iriri River in 1957. But fifty of these died from a disastrous epidemic of influenza, followed in 1958 by forty-four deaths from measles. Meirelles settled other Kararaô in 1960 at Baú stream off the Curuá River, but these were also almost extinguished by fights with other Kayapo and sickness. In 1965 another Indian Protection Service (SPI) team sought a headline by “bravely” contacting a Kararaô group on the Jaraucu River (in forests west of the Xingu, close to its mouth on the main Amazon). But once again flu struck, killing over forty people, and the moribund SPI was too broke to send medicines or evacuate the sick. That Jaraucu group, in forests northwest of modern Altamira, was reduced to about forty. In 1967 one man brought measles into its village. The effect was horrendous, with twenty-two of its thirty people killed. The Villas Boas brothers happened to be there (on an attempt to contact the Arara people) and Orlando shouted at a journalist not to photograph the scene of horror with corpses everywhere and a stench of death. Claudio Villas Boas luckily had some of the new measles vaccine, and immediately saved the eight survivors with it.

The third small group of Kararaô decided to shun contact with Brazilian society. During these decades it settled for a while near the lower Iriri, and then moved gradually in a great circle, up the Iriri and Curuá, east across two rivers to close to São Félix on the middle Xingu, then back north alongside that big river. This group was contacted peacefully by the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI, the reorganized successor agency to the SPI) in 1971. But by then it was reduced to twenty-four people, all of one extended family that had been forced into incestuous parentage because it had only two young men. FUNAI moved rapidly, and got a large triangle of forest where the Iriri joins the Xingu declared as the Kararaô Indigenous Territory. This is where Verswijver did much of his research, with his friends in that now expanded community. He feels that there could well be four small groups of uncontacted Kararaô—one of these not far from Prainha on the main Amazon River.

Verswijver could be criticized for too much history rather than anthropology, for devoting a book to such small groups, and for bewilderingly many Kayapo names. But Kayapo society is well known, and these small groups of Kararaô were often too small to practice all the ceremonies they would have wanted. What emerges is Verswijver’s deep affection for all his informants, and his unrivalled almost uncanny knowledge of the three groups’ vicissitudes and migrations. I can think of no comparable narrative of a beleaguered people’s struggles to survive.

*The Kararaô of Central Brazil* is a beautiful book, with almost two hundred pictures, most in color, from archival sources, journalists, sertanistas, and particularly by the author. So the book’s Kararaô come to life. There are also excellent maps and charts.

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