

Review

WELCH, James R., SANTOS, Ricardo Ventura, FLOWERS, Nancy M. & COIMBRA Jr. Carlos, E. A. *Na Primeira Margem do Rio: Território e Ecologia do Povo Xavante de Wedezé*. Rio de Janeiro: Museu do Índio/FUNAI, 2013, 248 p.

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Wedezé is an Indigenous Reserve situated on the east side of the Rio das Mortes, Mato Grosso State, where, according to their oral history, the Xavante people established their first permanent settlement after relocating from Goyaz Province to the Rio das Mortes region in an attempt to escape colonial violence in the mid-nineteenth century. About a century and a half later, in 1970, the Xavante were relocated from there to the current Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Reserve, located on the opposite side of the river. Nevertheless, this forced relocation did not separate them physically or sentimentally from the “first side” thanks to memories of the dead their buried and frequent visits to hunt, fish, and collect. Additionally, Wedezé is the Xavante village with the earliest occupation in the region, going back to 1850-1890, and one of the longest periods of permanent occupation (1956-1970).

In the 203 pages of *Na Primeira Margem do Rio*, the authors address the connection between the Xavante and Wedezé, or the Xavante from Wedzé. Ethnographic photographs used as narrative resource (42 figures and more than 28 full-page images) and instructive and necessary tables (24) conduct the reader to a human landscape described and analyzed with acuity and sensibility, a combination that proves especially productive. One of the most meritorious aspects of the book is precisely the fact that it resulted from the shared experience of four anthropologists engaged with the same ethnographic subject. This study population generously offered its knowledge to the authors for the production of an Identification and Delimitation Report (*Relatório de Identificação e Delimitação*) for an Indigenous Reserve of special relevance to them, a report published in turn in book format. In this sense, *Na Primeira Margem do Rio* constitutes a four-handed (possibly eight)

anthropological exercise, whose internal unity stems from the complementary relationship between the authors' various areas of thematic interest – history, migration, ecology, demography, and economy – regarding Wedezé, the first side of this river occupied by the Xavante.

The book's various thematic focal points complement one another but nevertheless receive highly specific and detailed treatments, which would hardly be possible, were it authored by a single anthropologist. The reader benefits from this configuration, which offers in a single source a multifaceted view of the Xavante, obtained by cross referencing ethnographic records produced by these four authors and other ethnologists who, like them, have contributed to the rich Xavante ethnology, as well as Xavante oral reports collected by the authors, which focus on their various historical movements and settlements near the Tocantins, Araguaia, and das Mortes rivers. Each family group tells a slightly different version of these events, versions that reproduce the same basic movements among the set of former villages identified by the oldest indigenous individuals from Wedezé and Pimentel Barbosa.

Na Primeira Margem do Rio is thus simultaneously a history of the enduring relationship between an indigenous people and its ancestral territory and of the process of mobilization to reconquer it, complemented by discussions of Xavante ecology and subsistence economy in the cerrado biome – both strictly articulated with the cosmological and ritual plane – and with the demographic profile of the population established in this locale for a century and a half.

This is a history of *longue durée*, intersected by the colonial and national history in several especially impactful moments for the Xavante. Over the period 1764-1788, when agriculture was beginning to replace the decaying cycle of gold mining, they roamed Goyaz Province, after which some crossed the Rio Araguaia and came to occupy the interfluvial region extending to the Rio das Mortes. From the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, a significant portion of the population established itself to the east and west of this last river, in such villages as Wedezé and Sõrepré.

The March to the West (*Marcha para o Oeste*), under the Vargas administration, whose alleged purpose was to occupy and develop economically the central regions of Brazil through promotion of livestock production, identified the Xavante as an obstacle to be overcome, leading to increased efforts

in the early 1940s by the Indian Protection Service (*SPI - Serviço de Proteção aos Índios*) to establish contact with them. In 1946 a first group was compelled to do so, which triggered a huge influx of trade, followed in the 1950s and 1960s, when the Xavante were weakened by disease and clashes with settlers, by more or less widespread contact with the SPI and Salesian missions installed in the region. In 1970, after successive movements, the Wedezé group was pressured to return to the place known as Etênheritipá, later called Pimentel Barbosa, on the west side of the Rio das Mortes.

The pattern of intense mobility observed until then changed most notably due to territorial reductions accompanying increasing occupation of the region by ranchers and the impetus for sedentarization promoted by indigenous posts installed by the SPI and the National Indian Foundation. The latter sold a significant portion of the territory to private interests involved in large-scale commercial agriculture. The practice of trekking, a traditional activity involving prolonged hunting and gathering expeditions and associated with the high mobility of villages, in some cases temporary villages whose duration was determined by political circumstances and natural resource availability, became severely limited, which led to increased pressures on the environment in the immediate vicinity of villages and restrictions on ritual activities. The special relevance of these expeditions, held regularly until the 1980s, can be measured by the fact that most current Xavante villages are located in places previously used for camping.

The Pimentel Barbosa and Wedezé indigenous reserves constitute, according to the image communicated by our authors, green “islands” used for subsistence, raw materials, and ceremonial purposes, extensively surrounded by monocultures and pastures. The predominant vegetation is cerrado, which, with different phytophysiognomies – open grasslands, especially grasslands with small shrubs or palms; cerrado grasslands with herbaceous grasses, trees, and diverse shrubs; cerrado *sensu stricto*; dense woodlands (*cerradão*); and gallery forests – ensures plant and animal resources for Xavante biological and social reproduction.

This reproduction continues, as it did traditionally, supported by the combination of collecting, hunting, fishing, and practicing agriculture in the cerrado, and, since the 1950s, complemented by rice cultivation, wage labor, and social benefits deriving from the federal government. Cattle production,

previously practiced for some time, is now reduced to a few head in the Pimentel Barbosa reserve.

Collective hunts, frequently associated with ceremonial activities, often require the use of fire. This modality generally occurs in open grasslands early in the dry season (May/June), as well as in areas of cerrado and dense woodlands, closely associated with male moiety and age set systems (usually youth hunt and fish for secret ceremonial activities in locations distant from the villages). Wedezé, due to its abundance of large game animals, has been continuously used for collective hunts, which makes it a place of reference for cultural activities and for offsetting the environmental pressures affecting Pimentel Barbosa.

Recent studies have shown that fire is a distinctive feature of the cerrado due to an evolutionary history of fires (anthropogenic or not) that resulted in the development of a significant proportion of underground plant biomass. Thus, controlled burning regimes can have a positive effect on cerrado biodiversity, whether in the form of pollen and nectar availability for pollinivorous and nectarivorous insects or better adaptation by many cerrado plants and animals. Accordingly, controlled fires are an important technique for environmental management, and the Xavante demonstrate possession of extraordinary ecological sensitivity and effective knowledge of the environment in which they live. Unsurprisingly, therefore, for them the burning of vegetation is not restricted to a hunting technique or landscape management strategy but moreover constitutes an important symbol of ethnic identity and a highly valued form of promoting social values and capabilities among young men.

Hunting with the aid of fire is not, therefore, randomly practiced, but is systematically planned under the leadership of elders who, in the course of conversations in the *warã* (men's council), consider a number of factors, among which are the appropriate time, season, position of the stars, weather condition, soil moisture, dryness of leaves, amount of dry plant matter on the soil surface, time elapsed since the last fire in a given area, and spatial distribution of fire events, considering the types of vegetation and availability of natural barriers such as waterways, wetlands, and gallery forests.

A significant portion of their traditional botanical knowledge is considered secret and therefore not likely to be shared by those who have no

ties to Xavante individuals, families, or social groups. In the face of such a restriction, the authors chose to focus on only two domains not considered of specific ownership, i.e., plants of dietary and technological relevance, except those guarded in the female domain (wild roots and tubers). With regard to fauna, 98 bird species of cultural value, less than the total number of bird species used by them, were identified and distributed into nine different types of landscapes and vegetation, namely cerrado areas (64.3%), dry forests with bamboo (63.3%), gallery forests (49.0%), inundated grasslands (46.9%), rivers (23.5%), anthropogenic landscapes (pastures, 21.4%), lakes (19.4%), buriti palm forests (10.2%), and mountains (2.0%) (cf. Table 6.6). Several species occur in more than one environment.

Territorial restriction and increased population growth in combination have given rise to internal village divisions and subsequent movement to form new villages. Presently, the Wedezé and Pimentel Barbosa indigenous reserves, which are two of nine Xavante reserves and comprise a total population of over 1,500 inhabitants, are characterized by a young population distribution, with more than 50% of individuals under 15 years of age and a small number of seniors for all villages. The total fertility rate estimated for the period 1999-2004 was 7.7% live births per woman, a level considered elevated even though it reflects a decreasing trend, on average at 1.4 fewer children per woman. Moreover, mortality rates are also high, especially infant mortality, which is five times higher than the national rate and illustrates a poor health and nutrition profile.

Future projections for cerrado conservation are not encouraging and there is no concerted public policy to change the unfavorable picture. An example of this is the divergent goals of the Ministry of Environment, which works towards increasing the percentage of protected areas in the cerrado (protected areas currently include 2.2% of the original area of the cerrado), and the Ministry of Agriculture, whose goal is to bring approximately 100 million additional hectares of land under agricultural use (MACHADO et al 2004, p.7¹).

If opening pasture for beef cattle used to be the main precipitating cause of deforestation in the cerrado, in recent years the pressures come from

1 MACHADO, R.B et al. Estimativas de perda da área do Cerrado Brasileiro. Unpublished technical report. Conservação Internacional, Brasília – DF, 2004.

soybean plantations. Information from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*) database (SIFRA – available at <http://ibge.gov.br>) indicates that the area used for soybean agriculture has increased enormously (MACHADO et al, 2004, p.7).

As part of this scenario, the advance of the agricultural frontier in the region between the Araguaia and das Mortes rivers constitutes a serious threat to the conservation of this rich ecosystem. The intensification of colonization in eastern Mato Grosso since the 1960s and 1970s has impacted the environment, resulting in extensive areas of deforestation, siltation of waterways, and erosion, principally along the banks of major rivers due to destruction of riparian forests. The establishment of soybean, rice, and sugarcane monoculture entailed impacts on the flora and fauna. Large-scale commercial agriculture has degraded the region's native vegetation and fauna, turning areas of cerrado into pastures and fields.

Consequently, the Xavante territory becomes essential for the region's environmental conservation because it is one of the few areas where extensive and continuous portions of cerrado remain. Occupied by the Xavante in 2009, which in turn led to the formation of the Working Group (*Grupo de Trabalho*) for conducting the studies that resulted in the Identification and Delimitation Report, the Wedezé Indigenous Reserve awaits a decision on its demarcation. If favorable, such a decision must be credited to the Xavante's persistency and, complementarily, the high ethnographic and ethnological quality of the studies that supported the decision and which are available to the reader of *Na Primeira Margem do Rio*.

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