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FRACTURED LANDS: The Politics of Conservation in North-Central Brazil

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When I visited the northern Brazilian state of Roraima in the summer of 2000 it was said to be "Em Pe de Guerra" -- on the brink of war. A costly campaign of TV and roadside ads financed by the state denounced numerous public and private entities as anti-Brazilian. These included the federal agency charged with indigenous matters, known by its acronym FUNAI; the federal agency charged with environmental protection, known as IBAMA; the Catholic Church; environmental NGOs; national indigenous organizations and local indigenous populations, including the Yanomami, the Ingariko, and the Makuxi. Each entity was charged with the same offense: conspiring to internationalize the Brazilian Amazon, and thus, the state of Roraima.

Outcries against the internationalization of the Amazon rainforest are not new, but the origins of the accusations, as well as their targets, had changed in the twenty years in which I worked there. Anti-indigenism and anti-environmentalism were prominent themes in the discourse of the military regime. That rhetoric continued into the early years of the new democracy. The denouncements then, however, emerged from the nation-state and were aimed at local targets; now, in the year 2000, fifteen years after Brazil's transition to democracy, the denouncements were locally generated.

The paper begins with the Territory of Roraima in the 1970s as a background to explain subsequent events. It then compares two phases in Brazil's transition to democracy: the early period, focusing on the years 1988-1989, and the contemporary setting, focusing on the years 1999-2000. The comparative exercise reveals contrastive strategies, explained by the differing political contexts, as well as

persistent processes, present then as well as now, that continue to drive indigenist and forest policies. The paper argues that current events in Roraima (December 2000) can, in part, be explained by policies instituted by the authoritarian state of the 1970s and 1980s, and perpetuated in the present by entrenched stakeholders.

In outlining the roles of social actors, including state and federal agencies, settlers, development experts, indigenous organizations, and national and transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the internal heterogeneity of a group is minimized for purposes of discussion, on the grounds that it acts in concert in order to bring about a collectively desired outcome. The article points to the differing values assigned to the intact forest by diverse stakeholders and the different fates of the forest attached to competing political agendas.

### **Background**

Roraima is located in the northernmost extreme of Brazil's Legal Amazonia, bordering Venezuela to the north and Guyana to the east. It encompasses the drainage basin of the Rio Branco, a northern tributary of the Amazon mainstem. The area lies within the equatorial humid tropics, yet altitudinal and geological variation sets the region apart from the dominant landscapes of Amazonia and accounts for its high biodiversity, among the highest in the New World Tropics. The range of habitat types includes dense evergreen forests at montane, submontane, and lowland levels, as well as low savannic formations such as campina-campinara and cerrado. The oldest geological formations in the continent are found here, including the resistant and eroded uplands, known as tepuis, with specialized landcover. There is widespread agreement among Brazilian and international conservation experts that the natural landscapes of Roraima merit preservation. Efforts at preservation, however, face a number of obstacles.

Roraima is also site of seven different indigenous populations belonging to three distinct linguistic stocks -- Carib, Arawakan, and Yanomami. Until recently, indigenous peoples constituted the majority of Roraima's population. Of the approximately 40,000 inhabitants of the 225,116 km<sup>2</sup> of the Federal Territory of Roraima in 1970, over 30,000 --- that is, 75% -- were indigenous (IBGE Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 1999). These proportions were altered dramatically by federal resettlement programs in the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Populations of Indigenous Peoples in Roraima, 2000**

Yanomami	11,000
Makuxi	16,000
Wapixana	7,000
Ingariko	1,000
Taurepang	1,000
Waimiri-Atroari	500
Wai Wai	500

### **Colonization: 1975-1985**

Roraima is one of Brazil's last perceived frontiers. Before it received statehood in 1994 Roraima had been a Federal Territory with officials appointed at the national level. Between 1964 and 1985 the government pursued plans to fill the remote, so-called "open spaces" of the Valley of the Rio Branco, citing the slogan "ocupar, desenvolver, e integrar" -- to occupy, develop, and integrate. Over these two decades Brazil's government spent US \$7.5 billion in federally funded programs to clear large tracts of forest for pasturage and colonization. The subsidized resettlement programs would draw people and prosperity into the north, bringing the outlands within the vortex of power and modernization of southern Brazil.

During the 1970s INCRA, the National Department of Resettlement and Land Reform (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agraria), instituted at least six separate colonization programs in Roraima. In some cases colonists were required to show agricultural or financial skills; in some cases (but not all) they were required to show a positive history of bank credit. Although the terms of contract varied to some extent, all programs allotted land parcels with facilitated titling and financial incentives for development. In many cases INCRA also provided physical and administrative infrastructure, including transportation for colonists, technical assistance, and commercialization of production. In every case the goals of the projects were to produce visible economic results in the short term, and to promote rapid integration of the region into the national and global economy

in the long term.

Massive roadways were initiated to facilitate colonization and national integration. A north-south axis, known as BR 174, would link Boa Vista with Manaus to the south and Sta. Elena in Venezuela (and, ultimately, Caracas) to the north. A grand roadway plan, designed to traverse northern Amazonia, cut through western Roraima, linking it with BR 174 and thus the urban markets to the north and south. (Although that roadway system, known as the Northern Perimeter Road (BR 210) was never completed, the Roraima stretch remains.) Agricultural clusters bloomed in herring-bone pattern along the new highways and their feeder roads. By 1982, just seven years after program initiation, more than 300 large-scale ranching operations replaced formerly forested lands. Forty-two new towns lined the two federal highways.

Facilitated by new roads and financial incentives for domestic migration, the population of Roraima increased geometrically. In the three years following the 1977 opening of Brazil Road 174, the population doubled. By 1991 it was three times its size in 1980 and 12 times that which it had been in 1950. Through in-migration the indigenous portion of the state's population fell to only 14%.

#### **Population of Roraima 1950-1991\***

**1950 18,116**  
**1960 28,304**  
**1970 40,885**  
**1980 79,159**  
**1991 217,583**

**\*Source IBGE 1999**

Along with the creation of agricultural nuclei came federally planned towns and municipalities that linked smaller entities into larger administrative centers. Four of the seven municipalities were inserted inside legally demarcated indigenous reserves. At the time of statehood in 1994 the populations of the four municipal implants ranged from 9,000 to 14,000 each and totalled 46,000 non-Indians (Freitas 196; CIR 2000). The illegal formation of political units within indigenous territories was a deliberate attempt to fragment and undermine the integrity and self-governance of the local indigenous people.

#### **Transition to Democracy: 1985-1990**

When civil elections were held in Brazil in 1985 it was the beginning of a slow and uneven

transition to democracy. The last half of the decade of the 1980s continued to be dominated by a strong, centralized state representing powerful economic interests and focused on national security issues.

In 1985 José Sarney, the first civilian president following years of military governance, presented a landmark speech that illustrates the ideological position of the times. The speech, entitled Nossa Natureza, underscored the threats to Brazilian sovereignty posed by international entities who would use preservationist language in order to obfuscate their own opportunistic goals to exploit the riches of the forest (Chernela 2000). Preservation was synonymous with foreign appropriation.

Sarney's strong opposition to forest preservation and native land rights continued the policies of the previous years in which rapid development of the northern frontiers was a way of ensuring Brazil's sovereignty over its hinterland. In 1985 vast tracts of Amazonia were placed under national security in a program known as Calha Norte, combining resettlement, economic development, and security along Brazil's northern borders.

Sarney's legacy in Roraima is best illustrated by his creation, between 1988 and 1989, of two conservation units: the Floresta Nacional (FLONA) de Roraima and the Parque Nacional do Monte Roraima, and his proposal during the same period, of a Yanomami reserve segmented into 19 separate units. The indigenous lands and conservation units created by the Sarney presidency obfuscate underlying military and economic motives. Today the very identities and legalities of the units are in question. The legacy is one of discord.

#### **CONSERVATION UNITS AND INDIGENOUS LANDS:**

##### **The Floresta Nacional (FLONA) of Roraima and the Parque Nacional de Roraima**

A system of conservation units known as PSUCBs (Sistema de Unidades de Conservação do Brasil) had been in place since 1979 when the then Secretary of the Environment formulated criteria for the identification of lands to be set aside for preservation. In 1988 Sarney created a new kind of conservation unit, the Floresta Nacional, or National Forest, known as the FLONA. According to IBGE and WWF, who list it in their 1995 classification of federal conservation areas in Brazil, the category FLONA is described this way: "Esta área foi criada com fins econômicos, técnicos, ou sociais" (IBGE/WWF 1995). In other words, the FLONA not only permits the exploration of forest resources, it was created for technical, social,

or economic ends. The FLONA, then, although a "Conservation Unit" regulated by the federal agency charged with environmental affairs, now IBAMA, is explicitly established to further economic, rather than preservationist, ends. The first FLONA, the Floresta Nacional de Roraima, was established by Sarney in 1989. It lies in the middle Mucajai River within lands occupied by the Yanomami. In the same year Sarney created the Parque Nacional do Monte Roraima. It lies within lands belonging to the indigenous Ingariko and Makuxi.

### **Fractured Histories I: Terra Indigena Yanomami**

In accordance with the Indian Statute of 1973, FUNAI (the federal bureau of Indian Affairs) formally identified 9,419,108 ha as traditional lands of the Yanomami in 1985. By 1988, however, the agency reduced the size of the delimited territory by 13% to 8,216,925 ha. In 1989 the Yanomami reserve was altered once again. This time it was partitioned into 19 separate parcels or "island reserves" in two states, Roraima and Amazonas. In this last arrangement 23 Yanomami communities were left outside the area (Albert 1991: 45) and two conservation units placed inside it.

The FLONA of Roraima, 2,664,685 ha (WWF/IBGE 2000) established as a National Forest by Sarney in 1989, reduced Yanomami lands by 30%. When a second conservation unit within Yanomami territory in the state of Amazonas is considered, the Parque Nacional do Pico da Neblina, the total amount of land to be converted from indigenous territory into conservation units is 5,781,710 ha, or, 71% of the earlier designation (Albert 1991: 45). Within three years lands formerly identified by federal agencies as Yanomami territories had been reduced by two-thirds. How can we explain this abrupt shift in policy?

With the 1975 publication of satellite imaging data by Radambrasil, Roraima's reputation for subsoil mineral wealth began to grow. A new kind of immigrant was drawn to the federal territory: the miner. **Cassiterite** was mined in the 1970s in western Roraima. Word of new gold resources caused immigration to soar in the mid-eighties; by 1987 Roraima was in the midst of a full-scale gold rush. The quest for gold brought over 40,000 goldminers into Yanomami territories -- four times the numbers of Yanomami. In 1987 the airport of Boa Vista, capital of Roraima, was one of the most active in Brazil: over 400 planes moved wildcat prospectors into and out of remote clandestine air strips. In 1987 the federal Department of Mining (Departamento Nacional de Producao Mineral, DNPM) granted 363 authorizations

for mineral exploration within the Yanomami territories (Albert 1991:44; Ricardo 1999). Goldminers brought diseases, including malaria and river blindness, causing morbidity and mortality rates to peak.

With the end of the Sarney presidency and preparations for the United Nations' Conference on the Environment (UNCED) in Brazil, mining activity was interrupted. In 1991 the Federal Police, acting on executive orders from then President Collor de Mello, destroyed clandestine airstrips and removed wildcat miners. Many goldminers, however, continued to carry out illegal mining operations, causing, in 1993, the deaths of 16 Yanomami men, women, and children. Recently, (October 2000) FUNAI-Roraima announced plans for a new mobilization effort to remove miners from Yanomami lands.

As a new conservation unit, the FLONA (Floresta Nacional) had been introduced by Sarney in 1988, just one year after the onset of the gold rush. The FLONA of Roraima, established months later, shifted the legal status of 3 million ha from "indigenous territory" to "conservation unit." Yet, the FLONA, ostensibly a unit of environmental preservation, allowed commercial activities, including logging and mining, prohibited in indigenous territories.

The FLONA of Roraima, then, would open areas of dense forest cover to mineral companies and prospectors who could obtain access to these areas by means of "environmental protection" zones. The conservation status of these lands would not uphold prohibitions on destructive exploitation of forest resources. On the contrary, the status, as defined, would facilitate access. Should the area remain an indigenous territory, exploitation of resources would require elaborate authorization, including approval by the indigenous peoples themselves and by the National Congress.

Although a continuous Yanomami territory was demarcated in 1992, the contradictions in federal authority and responsibilities have not been resolved. The status of the FLONA continues to be a subject of dispute between IBAMA and FUNAI. The conflicting designations by two government agencies with differing priorities creates a chimeric composite of incompatible components. The units of conservation inserted within the reserve are legally subject to regulation by the federal agency charged with environmental protection (then Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento Florestal or IBDF, now IBAMA). Yet these regulations are potentially incompatible with the territorial rights of the Yanomami, upheld by the federal agency charged with indigenous affairs, FUNAI, and guaranteed by the Constitution. In fact,

FUNAI, responsible for the identification of Yanomami lands, denies the legality of the FLONA of Roraima, even as its sister agency charged with environmental affairs, IBAMA, affirms it. The FLONA, still listed in July 2000 by IBAMA as a legal environmental unit, receives the strong backing of mineral, energy, timber, and ranching sectors.

### **Fractured Histories II: Terra Indígena Raposa/Serra do Sol**

A surprisingly parallel series of events characterize the struggle to demarcate indigenous lands in eastern Roraima. The Terra Indígena Raposa/Serra do Sol, called here TIRSS, (but also known as AIROSOL for "Area Indígena Raposa/Serra do Sol) was legally identified by FUNAI in 1977 as the traditional lands of the Makuxi, Wapixana, and Ingariko. At that time FUNAI delimited 1,678,800 ha in posse imemorial to the indigenous inhabitants. When, however, FUNAI moved to formally demarcate TIRSS in 1998 (Portaria MJ #820 11-12-98), it was challenged by local landowners utilizing an untested legislative procedure, Decree 1775, that allowed for contest in the final phase of tenure legitimation. The case represents the first challenge utilizing the new Decree at the highest level of jurisprudence. The challengers, who received the backing of the state of Roraima, proposed replacing a single, continuous reserve with a series of smaller island reserves. The proposed dismemberment from an integrated indigenous territory into a series of small "Bantustans" is the very strategy utilized by the federal government in the Yanomami demarcation process a decade before.

However, in 1999, opponents of demarcation were local landowners -- settlers who had been brought into the region by the federal government of the seventies and eighties. The positions held by these interests were endorsed unanimously by Roraima's congressional delegation. The state of Roraima rallied to the support of the contestants, creating a powerful coalition of ranchers, miners, and local state authorities in opposition to the federal agencies FUNAI and IBAMA. A heterogeneous cohort of federal agencies, the Church, national and international non-governmental organizations, and indigenous organizations, was homogenized and collectively accused of "conspiring with international influences." In this representation, newcomers are cast as insiders, while natives are cast as outsiders.

In opposition to local land-owner and state challenges the the Ingariko and Makuxi of eastern Roraima reached out to international support networks. The Conselho Indígena de Roraima, or CIR,

spearheaded a counter-campaign, calling upon allies from the human rights and environmental advocacy sectors. The campaign, utilizing electronic communications, mobilized national and international pressure in favor of demarcation of an intact reserve.

Opposed by local elites that represented them as a solid anti-nationalist block, and recognizing a common threat to their mutual concerns, environmentalists and indigenists combined efforts and effectively organized against local pressures to block a reserve. The electronic campaigns launched by the indigenous organization CIR were able to rally international networks of environmentalists and human rights advocates who could surpass local opposition. Efforts by landholders to utilize new judiciary mechanisms failed because they were incompatible with guarantees in the constitution of 1988.

In September 2000 the high court ruled in favor of FUNAI on the grounds that none of the challenges could alter the traditional rights of the indigenous inhabitants. (It is likely that the executive decision was a response to pressures from domestic and international NGOs.) The land tenure process now awaits final federal recognition, a public declaration known as homologacao.

A number of superimpositions on the demarcated lands, however, implanted by the federal government during the decades of the 70s and 80s, remain. These include an illegal municipality, three towns, 64 ranches, 4 rice plantations, and a conservation unit. The last is the proposed Parque Nacional do Monte Roraima, identified by José Sarney in 1989.

### **Parque Nacional do Monte Roraima**

As it is proposed, the Parque Nacional do Monte Roraima, identified by José Sarney on June 28, 1989 (Executive Decree #97,887) would comprise 116,000 ha along Brazil's frontiers with Venezuela and Guyana. The area, containing some of the highest biodiversity in Brazil, is of extreme conservation interest. However, the proposed site is inhabited by over 1,200 indigenous Ingariko (also known as Pemon) and Makuxi who have occupied it for centuries, and whose lands were identified by FUNAI in 1977 and demarcated in 1998 as the Indigenous Territory Raposa/Serra do Sol (Portaria MJ 820). In the name of conservation, the proposed park would remove over 100,000 ha from the indigenous reserve.

Although the Park was declared over ten years ago, the first proposal of a National Park by the Secretary of Environment of the State of Roraima with IBAMA appeared as recently as April 2000.

Although this preliminary work plan, known as the "Plano de Manejo: Parque Nacional do Monte Roraima" (Electronorte, IBAMA, and ABES-RR 2000), lacks systematic environmental or social impact reports, it recognizes the existence of indians living inside the designated area and the prior claims of FUNAI on their behalf. Indeed, the report states that FUNAI "maintains that the national Park of Roraima and Mount Roraima belong to the Terra Indigena Serra do Sol" (Electronorte et al. 2000).

The long-time occupants of the region, the Ingariko, testified in May 2000 that they were first alerted to plans for a Park only two months before, when a small contingent of selected Ingariko were invited to meet with the authors of the Plan. It is clear that the legally recognized indigenous inhabitants had not been provided the necessary audiences ("ouvido," hearing) guaranteed them under Brazil's 1988 Constitution. Many are not familiar with the meanings or requirements attached to a National Park. The inhabitants living within the designated area are therefore not in a position to discuss the Park in an informed matter, and less likely to ratify it, a matter also required by the Constitution.

The Ingariko, whose lands lie within the area proposed for the Park, are hunter-horticulturalists whose cultural and physical survival is intricately related to the intact forests. Regulations associated with National Parks could theoretically restrict indigenous exploitation of resources. For example, IBAMA's regulations on hunting could keep Indians from exercising traditional, and possibly, sustainable, hunting practices. A different danger is that commercial activities allowed in the National Parks, such as tourism, would bring non-Indians and infrastructure into the area in a manner that would be deleterious to both the forest and the indigenous inhabitants. The current draft includes plans for developing recreational and touristic activities. According to the Indian Statute, these activities would not be permitted in indigenous areas, but they could be allowed within a National Park. Moreover, the Plan proposes military operations in the Park, including permanent installations. The military facilities would entail major disturbances in this pristine region, including clearcutting forest and operating large aircraft, both threats to fragile wildlife. The plan for the Park appears to restrict only its hunting inhabitants, whose livelihood depends upon the standing forest and whose existence until now has been compatible with its perpetuation. In contrast, plans for the Park would open the area to recreation-seeking consumers, for whom the forest is a commodity, and the armed forces for whom the forest is a zone of potential military operations and frontier surveillance.

These uses, written into the original Sarney plan, strongly suggest an interest by the state of Roraima that is other than preservationist.

The superimposition of a conservation unit over an indigenous one creates legal incongruities and administrative stalemates. The indigenous Ingariko have asserted that they will not tolerate their exclusion from lands occupied by them for millennia. Such a situation threatens the stability and sustainability of any conservation plan. It is now widely recognized by environmental advocates that no preservation effort can succeed without full endorsement and participation of the local residents.

Once again, an area of purported conservation use, a National Park, will reduce lands traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples -- the Ingariko and Makuxi -- in a manner that 1) is incompatible with indigenous territorial rights, and 2) endangers, rather than conserves, important neotropical habitats. By this administrative move, lands currently occupied by the hunting Ingariko could be illegally reduced to less than half. A rare and fragile landscape could be lost.

Once again, two federal agencies are in a tug of war over conflicting and overlapping regulatory responsibilities. Such a dilemma would appear to pit environmental and indigenous advocates against one another. However, closer inspection shows that the Plan would meet neither the standards of indigenists nor environmentalists. The designation "Conservation Unit" is, in these cases, a political strategy designed to accomplish ends not explicit in its denomination.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

A comparison of indigenous land demarcation efforts in Roraima, a state in the Brazilian Amazon, between 1989 and 1999, demonstrates a number of unexpected patterns. The review reveals a legacy of conflict, often the result of government agencies whose contradictory and ambiguous regulations apply to overlapping spheres of influence.

The strong centralized state that characterized Brazil's authoritarian government from 1964 through 1985 was slow to change, with the earliest stages of democratic transition still dominated by federal consolidation of power. With the subsequent weakening of the central government and a strengthening of power by the states, the balance of power shifts. In this later, contemporary phase, emergent strategies link formerly powerless local actors with international ones to pressure a weakened government to obtain goals.

In struggles for land rights by the Yanomami in the late 1980s and the Makuxi-Ingariko in the late 1990s attempts were made to divide an indigenous territory into islands with interstitial areas vulnerable to entry by outsiders. In each case, too, conservation units were superimposed over indigenous lands creating bureaucratic ambiguities and allowing entry by commercial interests, including mining and tourism, into areas that would otherwise be off-limits to these activities.

The strong nation-state of the 1970s and 80s designed conditions to occupy and privatize formerly free or open forest resources and to facilitate the flow of these resources to external markets for revenue generation. This was accomplished in the 1970s through land titling tied to federal colonization programs.

The process was furthered by José Sarney in the 1980s under the guise of conservation and regulation. Sarney created the FLONA, a conservation unit that appeared to restrict access to natural resources, but, in fact, facilitated predation and ownership. Moreover, two conservation units, put in place by the Sarney administration, are in conflict with both indigenous rights and congressional authority over resource access: the Floresta Nacional de Roraima and the Parque Nacional de Roraima, both superimposed on indigenous territories, and resulting in conflicting postures, rights, and regulations by federal agencies. The impacts of the problematic processes and policies put in place in the 1980s persist in the present.

In 1989 the still centralized nation-state under José Sarney attempted to carve a single Yanomami reserve into parcels. In 1998-9 local land-owners, supported by Roraima state, attempted to utilize new legislation to accomplish the same end by opposing the federal government. In the Yanomami case the move to divide a continuous area into an archipelago emerges from the strong nation state and the economic interests it represents. In the TIRRS case the attempt to divide is made by local stakeholders who attempt, unsuccessfully, to utilize judicial means to challenge the legality of the reserve.

Later, in the context of a weakening state, local interests put in place by the authoritarian regime of prior decades, attempted to protect the commoditizing processes by limiting the extent of indigenous, communally-owned territory in democratic Brazil. With its weakened central state and growing independent state confederation, the state apparatus backed the local landholders.

In the shift to democracy and strengthening of transnational advocacy networks, emergent strategies link formerly powerless local actors with international ones to pressure/force the hand of

weakened governments to obtain goals.

In this spectrum of actors, formerly heterogeneous and apparently incompatible constituencies were cast as allies. By representing formerly independent entities as a solid anti-nationalist block, powerful interests succeeded in pushing advocates of both indigenous rights and natural conservation into a collective defensive posture. The result was a synergy in which the mutual support of differing constituencies was politically effective. The local settlers, engaged in forest-destructive enrichment schemes, fail to create an antipathy between environmental and indigenous advocates who saw the weaknesses in the regulatory functions associated with conservation units.

The struggle was waged electronically, initiated by grassroots indigenous organizations who worked with Brazilian NGOs to amass international support from both pro-indigenous and pro-environment. In the face of entrenched opposition from local elites and patronage networks, newly emerged local grassroots indigenous organizations reach **outside** Roraima to the international community. In this context of '**decentralization**' and growing international alliance, emergent strategies linked formerly powerless local actors with international ones and transnational instruments to force the hand of weakened governments to obtain goals.

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## NOTES