

Rape of the lost world

'The white man built roads, houses, farms and opened the way to disease, poverty and death.'

Waldir Tobias, Makuxi Indian, Raposa-Serra do Sol, Brazil

The Makuxi are a hunting and farming people who live in a hilly region known as the Guyana Shield, near Mount Roraima on the border between Brazil and Guyana. Mount Roraima is one of the oldest geological formations in the world, and is best-known outside Brazil as the setting for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Lost World'.

There are an estimated 22,000 Makuxi, of whom nearly 15,000 live in Brazil and the rest in Guyana. In Brazil, they are concentrated in the Raposa-Serra do Sol Indigenous Area in the border state of Roraima, north of the Amazon rainforests. There is a spectacularly beautiful land of mountains, tropical forest and savanna, where they raise cattle. Not surprisingly, then, the Makuxi believe that they, and the neighbouring Ingarikó people, are descended from the brothers Macunaima and Anique, the children of the sun. Macunaima and Anique discovered a tree known as Waxacá, the Tree of Life, which is the origin of all the plants and wild fruits on which the Indians' lives depend. The brothers left

behind them some good legacies, including the gift of fire, but they also created disease and the hardships of nature. The Makuxi believe that *stkaton*, the life principle, governs everything and comes from the sun.

Raposa-Serra do Sol has two distinct seasons; winter, with heavy rainfall from May to September; and a long dry summer between November and March. In summer, the Indians plan hunting and fishing expeditions and visit friends and relatives in neighbouring villages – such visits are not possible in the rainy season. Fishing is a favourite Makuxi activity, both as a pastime and as an essential source of food, but it is often made difficult by the drying-up of rivers and streams.

Makuxi villages are linked together by a complex network of paths and tracks. They range in size from settlements of two houses to large communities with clusters of houses built around central courtyards. These communities are based on ties of marriage and family. Makuxi extended families hunt together, but the planting of crops for personal use is done by individual households. Houses are built and repaired during the dry season, when the Indians have easier access to wood and clay for the walls and can gather palm leaves for the roofs.





When Makuxi marry, they live in the wife's family's village and submit to the authority of their fathers-in-law. A young husband has to provide his father-in-law with game and carry out domestic services like house maintenance. When the couple have children, they can move to their own plot of land. The father-in-law is the most important figure in Makuxi kinship groups. When he dies the group often dissolves and married men return to their original villages, taking their wives and children with them.

Colonisation and Violence

Suffering centuries of greed, exploitation and violence have given the lives of the Makuxi a darker side. Since their 'discovery' by European invaders, and their colonisation by the Portuguese in the eighteenth century, they have experienced land theft, murder, torture and slavery. Today, in Brazil's 'new democracy', they are still fighting for recognition of their most basic human rights.

According to the Brazilian constitution, all Indian land must be officially demarcated. However, no attempt has been made by either the federal or state authorities to protect the Makuxi from the ranchers and gold miners who treat them with brutality and bring pollution and disease to their territories.

Ranchers started to invade their land about 100 years ago. Many now occupy large tracts of Indian land, and employ hitmen to intimidate the Indians. During the last 20 years miners have also entered the area, in search of gold and diamonds. Siding with these powerful interests against the Makuxi, state authorities have consistently obstructed the demarcation process. On 7 January, 1995, 50 military police and seven soldiers invaded a camp set up by Makuxi to prevent the illegal construction of a hydroelectric dam on their land. Two Indians were severely beaten up, and over 400 have been expelled

from their homes because of the dam. The Makuxi are facing random violence, including murder; 12 Indians have been killed in such incidents since 1988.

Currently, the German government is committed to financing a demarcation programme as part of its contribution to the Pilot Plan for the Amazon sponsored by the Group of Seven largest industrial nations. The agreement specifically excludes Raposa-Serra do Sol because the Brazilian military claim that the border with Guyana is 'strategically significant', and because politicians have their eyes on the area for 'development'. Already a new town has been built in Raposa-Serra do Sol, encouraged by the state government of Roraima. This will encourage more outsiders to settle on Makuxi land.

Makuxi action

The Makuxi are now in the forefront of the campaign for Indian land ownership rights to be recognised throughout Brazil. They have founded their own hospitals and schools, and set up road blocks to stop their lands being stolen.

In 1996 the Brazilian government signed Decree 1775 which allows third parties to challenge indigenous territories which have not been ratified. The state of Roraima and a number of ranchers occupying land in the Raposa-Serra do Sol lodged challenges to FUNAI's proposed demarcation. In December 1996 the Minister of Justice declared that the Raposa-Serra do Sol Indigenous Area would be reduced by one fifth and that five mining zones would be created within the reserve. The Makuxi will lose valuable seasonal hunting and fishing grounds, and at least 20 villages will be left out of the demarcated area. The mining zones will encourage even more miners to enter the area increasing pollution and violence. The Indians are lobbying the Brazilian government to overturn the Minister's decision.

Survival supports the Makuxi in their determination to prevent their lives and lands being destroyed, and demands that the Brazilian government honour its constitution by demarcating the Raposa-Serra do Sol Indigenous Area immediately. Recognition of Makuxi land rights is essential to their survival as a people.

Background Reading

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