

The Indigenous Population

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In 1500 Pedro Álvares Cabral's fleet, which was en route to India, landed at Porto Seguro in what is now the state of Bahia. The territory that comprises modern Brazil had a native population in the millions, divided among hundreds of tribes and language groups. Their ancestors had lived in this land for as long as 30,000 years. There is no way to be certain of the exact size of the population or its distribution. Many areas that were inhabited in 1500 were later stripped bare by epidemics or slave hunters. But scholars have attempted to make estimates based on contemporary reports and the supposed carrying capacity of the land. For Brazil's Amazon Basin alone, demographer William M. Denevan has suggested 3,625,000 people, with another 4,800,000 in other regions. Other estimates place 5 million inhabitants in Amazônia alone. More conservatively, British historian John Hemming estimated 2,431,000 people for Brazil as a whole. These figures are based on known tribes, although many unknown ones probably died out in the devastating epidemics of the colonial era.

Certainly, the indigenous population exceeded that of Portugal itself. The early European chroniclers wrote of multitudes along the coast and of dense populations in the Amazon Basin. Far from being awed by the newcomers, the indigenous inhabitants displayed curiosity and hospitality, a willingness to exchange goods, and a distinct ability at aggressive defense. However, they could not prevent the devastation caused by the diseases carried by the Europeans and Africans. Tens of thousands succumbed to smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, typhoid, dysentery, and influenza. Whole peoples were likely annihilated without having had direct contact with Europeans as disease was carried along the indigenous trade routes.

The Indians spoke languages that scholars have classified into four families: the Gê speakers, originally spread along the coast and into the central plateau and scrub lands; the Tupí speakers, who displaced the Gê on the coast and hence were the first met by the Portuguese; the Carib speakers in the north and in Amazônia, who were related distantly to the people who gave their name to the Caribbean; the Arawak (or Aruak) speakers in Amazônia, whose linguistic relatives ranged up through Central America to Florida; and, according to sociologist Donald Sawyer, the Nambicuara in northwestern Mato Grosso (see Language, ch. 2). These were not tribes but language families that comprised many language groups. Numerous tribes also spoke languages unrelated to any of the above. Warfare and migrations carried peoples from these linguistic families to various parts of Brazil. The Europeans took advantage of the cultural differences among the Indian peoples to pit one against the other and to form alliances that provided auxiliary troops in their colonial wars.

Portugal viewed the Indians as slave labor from the outset. When Portugal began its imperial ventures, it had a population of about 1 million. Indeed, in the mid-sixteenth century Portugal's population was so sparse that much of its territory was uncultivated and abandoned. African and native Brazilian slaves were common on the streets of Lisbon. Portugal's colonial economy in Brazil was based on slavery. Initially, the Portuguese

bartered with the natives to bring brazilwood and other forest items to the coast. However, when the natives had accumulated all the tools and pots that they needed, they showed a lack of interest in continuing the arrangement. Consequently, the Portuguese turned to violent persuasion. The enslavement of the natives shaped much of the history that followed.

Just as Indian unrest had aided the Spanish conquerors of Mexico and Peru, so too did the Portuguese profit from arriving at a time of turmoil. The Tupí speakers had been shifting steadily from the south in a massive migration to coastal areas, displacing the resident Gê speakers, many of whom moved into the interior. This population shift had triggered continuous warfare against non-Tupí peoples and against Tupí subsets. It involved set battles that arrayed hundreds and, in some reports, thousands of warriors in fierce hand-to-hand combat. Some of the fighting went beyond struggles over control of land or resources to vendettas in which captives were sought and in some cases reportedly cannibalized. The Portuguese used these vendettas to keep the Indians from uniting against them and subsequently to obtain slaves. The conquest of Brazil was not a simple toppling of an organized empire as in Peru, but a drawn out, complicated process that spread over huge distances, different peoples, and centuries. Thus, it is not surprising that the Brazilian elites developed myths about racial harmony, peaceful change, and compromise that often have colored the interpretations of historians, thereby distorting understanding of Brazil's past.

Just as Portugal was different from the rest of Europe, so too would Brazil be different from the rest of the Americas. Portugal was both an agrarian and a maritime monarchy that used its control over land grants to discipline the nobility and its issuance of trading licenses to attract local and foreign investment in its overseas ventures. As merchant-king, the monarch supervised an economic system that imported timber, sugar, and wine from Madeira and the Azores, gold from the Guinea coast, spices from India, and dyewood and forest products, then sugar, gold, gems, and hides from Brazil. These products were then reexported to Europe.

The Portuguese established themselves on the Brazilian coast in their drive to control Europe's trade with India and East Asia. They secured "title" to what became eastern Brazil in their attempted division of the world with Spain in the Treaty of Tordesillas (see Glossary) of 1494. During the next centuries, the Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, and Dutch changed the South American continent's trade patterns, which previously had been focused internally. Seeking profits, the Portuguese marshaled Indian labor to provide exportable products. The commercial objective that initially had prompted overseas operations became the first principle of Portuguese colonization. Brazil was not to be a place where Europe's religious dissidents sought freedom of conscience. Rather, to paraphrase historian Caio Prado Júnior, the colonization of tropical Brazil would be "one vast commercial enterprise." Colonial Brazil's reason for being was to supply dyewood, sugar, tobacco, eventually gold and diamonds, cotton, coffee, and later rubber for the European and then world markets. The externally oriented colonial economy consisted of enclaves that faced seaward and that considered only their own commercial interests.

In his 1843 essay, "How the History of Brazil Should Be Written," Karl Friederich Philipp von Martius urged the study of the three basic racial groups--indigenous peoples, Europeans, and Africans--to obtain a clear understanding of the country's history. Yet when he discussed the interactions between the Indians and the Portuguese, he wrote that the former were only a few primitive tribes and that the "colonies developed and expanded almost without caring about these Indians." Although he could not have been more wrong, historians have echoed his attitude repeatedly. The natives, rather than being few, were in the millions, and the Portuguese determination to exploit their labor shaped frontier expansion and set Brazil's modern boundaries.