

The Krenaks of Minas Gerais

Today there are about 600 of our people, the Krenaks, distributed throughout three states in Brazil: Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso and Sao Paulo. The reservation in Minas Gerais where approximately 300 of us live consists of 4970 hectares of land.

The process of colonization began in 1500, when the Portuguese, the Krai-Krenton (the non-indigenous), arrived with the intention of finding riches, land and slaves here. Thus one of the most cruel and unforgivable exploration which we have ever seen or known.

Emperor João VI of Portugal decided to declare war on the Krenaks, the “Just War” because to them our people, “impeded the development” of this region. We were almost completely exterminated. To be sincere we were defending nature and for us this war has not never ended: the forced settlements, pacification methods, imprisonments, delimitations of our territories, the negation of our culture, development projects, hydroelectric power dams, factories, private environmental reserves, among other situations, are our current battles and wars today.

There exist on our land many coveted minerals: gold, iron, uranium, manganese, titanium, quartz, palladium and also SEMI- precious stones such as amethyst, agate and black onyx. In the 20th century, the railway, Estrada de Ferro Vitoria-Minas, was built (It is presently administered by the Companhia Vale do Rio Doce, which is the 2nd largest mining company in the world.), in order to facilitate the exploration of our lands, resulting in the destruction of our forests and the pollution of our rivers.

Since the 50s, police repression has forced us to abandon our lands several times. We were even declared officially extinct by FUNAI (the federal government’s institution which deals with indigenous peoples) in 1970. It was only in 1997 that we finally had our territory reintegrated. Nevertheless, the major difficulty today is the re-establishment of our “ancient-new territory”. Ancient because since ancient times we have lived there and new, due to the present physical state in which it now exists. Our territory has been totally modified leaving us without the natural resources that existed and that we have always required. Even so, much of our lands have been left outside the new demarcation, such as the region of the Sete Saloes and Pedra da Pintura, which are sacred areas for the Krenaks.

What has concretely remained of the cultural life of the Krenaks is basically our maternal language, which has been guarded by the wisdom of our elders. And it is through the native language that we are seeking to revive other cultural elements that have been in enforced dormancy during a period of our lives. This is a difficult task because our language has been almost completely annihilated.

Aggressions against our people and the current adverse reactions to our culture are increasingly present and have become almost uncontrollable, and we seem to be on the verge of a social conflict of enormous proportions. It is therefore urgent that everyone is informed of the richness and importance of the culture of the people and therefore to undertake initiatives to make a more harmonic co-existence between people of different cultures. We know that the Federal Constitution dedicated a small chapter to indigenous peoples, recognizing our social organization, costumes, languages, beliefs and traditions, and thereby imposing on Brazilian society the legal obligation of respect and recognition of the ethno-cultural differences of indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, the ignorance and disrespect by Brazilians society regarding culture and traditions still prevails resulting in prejudices and discrimination. It is necessary to demonstrate that these differences that has made Brazil a great nation.

This is where the importance of the dictionary comes in for it reveals to the world the richness of the Krenak language, bringing it out of the shadows in which it was placed for centuries due to the repression against indigenous culture imposed by colonization. This work, which translated the Krenak language into German and now also into Portuguese, demonstrates that a culture can never be silenced and that it should indeed relate with others in a harmonious manner. For it is this dialogue between the cultures that makes the world a dignified place to live in peace.

Shirley, Douglas and Tam Krenak. Krenak Reservation, June 2009