

The Challenge of Brazil's Unreached Peoples

By Ted Limpic

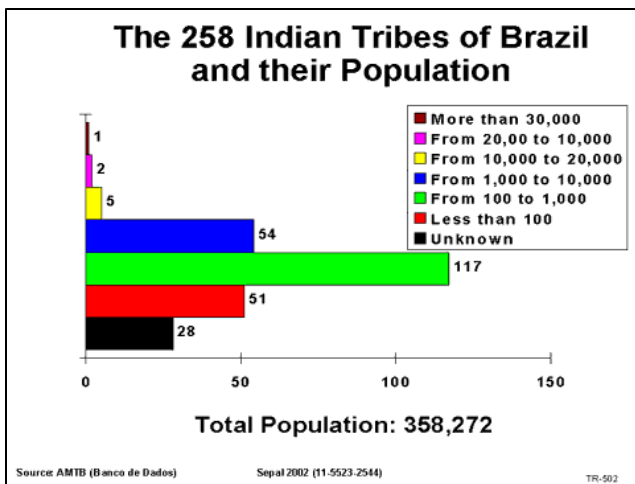
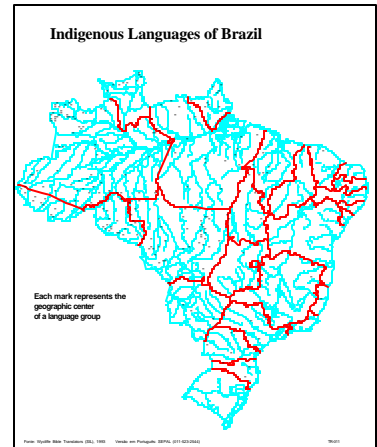
OC International, Brazil (Sepal)

Brazil, the largest country of Latin America, boasts the world's eighth largest economy. The evangelical church over the past twenty years has been growing at 3 times the rate of the population. Today, Brazil's evangelicals number some 19 million, or approximately 12% of the population.

In spite of the tremendous growth of the evangelicals, Brazil is far from being reached. Within its vast borders there are some 258 Indian tribes which represent today one of the biggest challenges facing the evangelical church.

The Sad State of Brazil's Indians

Brazil's Indian tribes are generally not large. Although there are some who have populations above 20,000 (Tikuna, Kaingang, Kaiwa), most are somewhere between 100-1000. The small size of most tribes reveals a tragedy that has too often gone unnoticed. Many Brazilian's tribes have been decimated by diseases contracted by their contact with the white man. Despite efforts by the Brazilian government to provide health services in remote Indian areas, many tribes continue to see their numbers shrink as they succumb to pneumonias and influenzas passed on to them unwittingly by civilization.



Added to this sad situation is the greed of farmers, miners and cattle growers who often invade Indian lands, by force at times, and wreak ecological havoc as they burn the rain forest and push the Indians further into the jungle.

Relatively few of Brazil's government leaders care about the Indian tribes. The Indians' small numbers, geographical isolation and lack of political know-how generally mean that they are often ignored when it comes to receiving government help for better education, health supplies or defining and defending the borders of their tribal land.

It's no wonder then that in some tribes many Indians take their own lives. With no hope for the future and precious few who seem to care about

their "present", the suicide rates in some tribes are extremely high.

The Different Kinds of Tribes

Not all of Brazil's Indian tribes are alike. Besides the obvious differences of language and customs, there are significant differences in how the Indians live.

- The Village Dwellers: Most of Brazil's tribes fall into this category. The Indian tribe has its land on which are many separate villages. Each village might have some 50-60 people who work together in the hunting, fishing and raising of crops: corn, rice, manioc. Most villages are situated on or near rivers. The tribes have their own chiefs, or sometimes a council of elders, who make the decisions.
- The "Protected": In the Valley of the Xingu River there are some eleven tribes living on a reserve that is protected by the government against incursions by ANY outsiders. While this has helped preserve the Indians' physical health, the government will not allow any missionaries to enter, even when the tribes request it. And the chiefs of several tribes have made such requests.
- The "Portuguese-speaking": Many tribes are now physically located near cities where the influences of civilization have had their effect. Some tribes have become assimilated into Brazilian culture. But others, though no longer speaking their native language, have maintained their tribal customs, cultural values and world-view. They speak Portuguese, but remain culturally distant from

those that surround them. This is especially true in the Northeast region of Brazil where there are some 25 Portuguese-speaking tribes who have maintained their ethnic distinctives.

- The Uncontacted: As amazing as it might seem, there are still primitive tribes hidden in Brazil's jungles. Recently a friendly contact was finally made with a tribe called the Korubos. No one yet has learned their language because the tribe is still afraid to maintain long-term contact. How many more tribes are there? No one really knows. But there are reports of many.

What Indians Believe

Like the other indigenous peoples of the Americas, Brazil's Indians are of Asian descent. According to anthropologists and archeologists, there once were some 5 million Indians, but now there are only 360 thousand.

Indian belief is basically animistic. They believe in the existence of a spirit world which interacts with the natural or physical world. The shaman (or witchdoctor) serves as the mediator between the two worlds. Indians believe that everything has life: even inanimate objects like water and rocks. Some tribes even believe that certain spirit entities actually inhabit the water, rivers and jungles. Indian mythology, which consists of a series of legends passed orally from generation to generation, serves to explain the various phenomena of life: birth, death, the existence of good and evil, pain and suffering, as well as the origin of all things.

The relationship between the spirit world and the natural world is so close that the origin of disease or illness is always considered to be spiritual. Whenever someone becomes sick, for example, the witchdoctor is called upon to make peace with the spirit that has caused the infirmity. The same is true with such activities as hunting, fishing, and raising of crops. It is necessary to not break the established taboos in order to please the spirits and guarantee success.

The Advance of the Gospel

Missionary work among the Brazil's Indians began in 1913. Until the early 1980's, most of the work was conducted by foreign missionaries (New Tribes, Wycliffe, and others). How far has the Gospel advanced over these years?



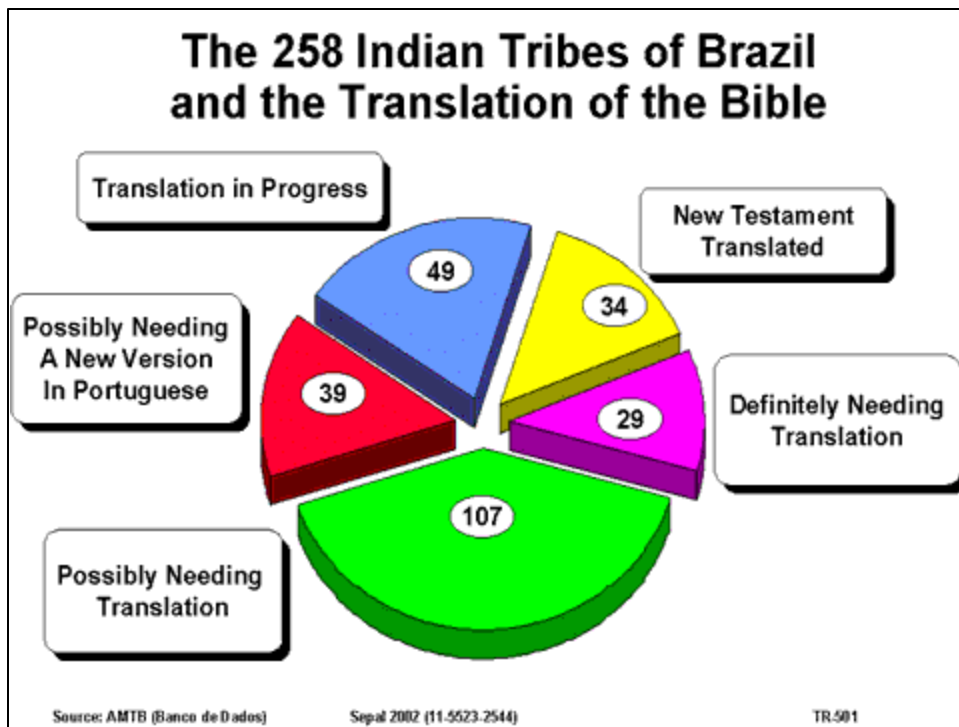
We can rejoice in several key areas.

- In eight of Brazil's tribes there is an established evangelical church where the leadership has been passed into the hands of it's own native leaders and native pastors. Today several seminaries exist for training Indian pastors, and several tribes they are now sending out their own missionaries to other tribes!
- In one hundred tribes there is an active work going on by evangelical missionaries. Some are in the beginning stages of learning the tribal language. Others have translated significant parts of Scripture into the language and are evangelizing and planting churches. Still others are training native leadership and getting ready to pass the leadership into their hands.

Despite the good news of what the Lord has already done, the challenge of the unfinished task is daunting. **Nearly half of Brazil's tribes are still without any evangelical missionary presence.** Can they hear the Gospel in some other way? Sometimes yes. The 25 tribes of the Northeast which speak Portuguese have the best chance to hear the Gospel. But for the remaining tribes (more one hundred) the opportunities are greatly reduced due to their linguistic and geographic isolation.

The Translation of God's Word

We see a similar situation when we inquire into how the translation of Scripture has gone over the past years. There is much to be thankful for: 34 tribes already have the New Testament translated into their language, and in 49 tribes there is translation work currently in progress. But there is much to pray about: at least twenty-nine Indian tribes definitely need their own translation (no other language is similar enough) still do not have one verse of God's Word translated into their language! There are another 107 tribes whose situation needs further study, but many of these will certainly need their own translation as well.



Brazil's Evangelical Church

Although in the past much of the work among Brazil's Indian tribes has been conducted by foreign missionaries, big changes are now happening. The Brazilian government no longer issues visas to foreigners intending to serve as missionaries among the Indian tribes. So, the young evangelical church of Brazil must take an even more active role in reaching it's own Indian tribes.

Brazilians have already been very involved for many years. New Tribes of Brazil now sends out some 150 Brazilians to the tribes, joining those sent out by the Brazilian Baptist Convention (30) and some 20 other agencies. In all, some 500 Brazilians are already serving as missionaries among Brazil's Indian tribes.

But the potential is so much greater. In Brazil today there are some 70,000 evangelical churches. Plus, there is a growing missionary movement. Back in 1987 a huge Ibero-American missions conference was held in Brazil. Since that watershed event, the number of missionaries serving outside of Brazil has tripled. We can rejoice that 13% of all Brazilian cross-cultural missionaries are serving in the 10-40 Window.

However, the number of Brazilians serving among the Indian tribes has remained static. Back in 1989 some 500 Brazilians worked with Indians. Today there are still only about 500.

That's why new efforts are being made to help the Brazil church understand the great needs represented by Brazil's Indian tribes:

- A special edition of an Adopt A People Manual has just been published which highlights the challenge of Brazil's Indians. Together with a set of prayers cards and transparencies on the Indians, this "Indian Awareness Kit " is now being used in churches around Brazil
- New cooperation among the Brazilian mission boards and agencies which work with Indians is now helping to better strategize and deploy resources.
- Some national initiatives like "Brazil 210" will be including all of Brazil's Indian tribes as target areas in their effort to mobilize the Brazilian church in fulfilling the goal of seeing a healthy church planted in every community of Brazil by the year 2010.

The Challenge of the New Millennium

Certainly there are other people groups within Brazil which are very needy: the large Japanese and Chinese immigrant communities, the Gypsies, and especially the 2 million Muslim Arabs represent key challenges. Also there is the challenge of the Amazon river dwellers, some 5 million, who speak Portuguese but are separated from the Gospel primarily due to their geographical isolation.

Nevertheless, as we move into the 21st century we pray for the Lord to move in mighty ways to complete the unfinished task represented by Brazil's Indian tribes.

The challenges are great::

- The jungle can intimidate many with it's isolation, dangers and disease
- The tribal populations are small, so it's a labor of special love and divine compassion
- Language learning can be a intimidating task requiring patience and perseverance
- The government and secular sociologists do all they can to discourage missions work

But we know that our Lord is greater. And His desire is to redeem precious lives from EVERY "nation, tribe, people, and language".

Interceding with the Father

As we look to the future, may we rejoice for what the Lord has already done, the fruit of many years of sacrificial service. But may we also be interceding for what He yet desires to do ...

- Pray for the Brazilian church to catch a greater vision for the urgency of reaching the remaining unreached tribes
- Ask God to bless the cooperation among Brazil's mission boards and agencies and cause it to increase
- Pray for more Brazilian young people to become inflamed with a passion for the Indians and be willing to face the challenges of reaching them
- Intercede for the Brazilians who train new missionaries, especially the specialized courses offered in linguistics, anthropology and jungle survival.