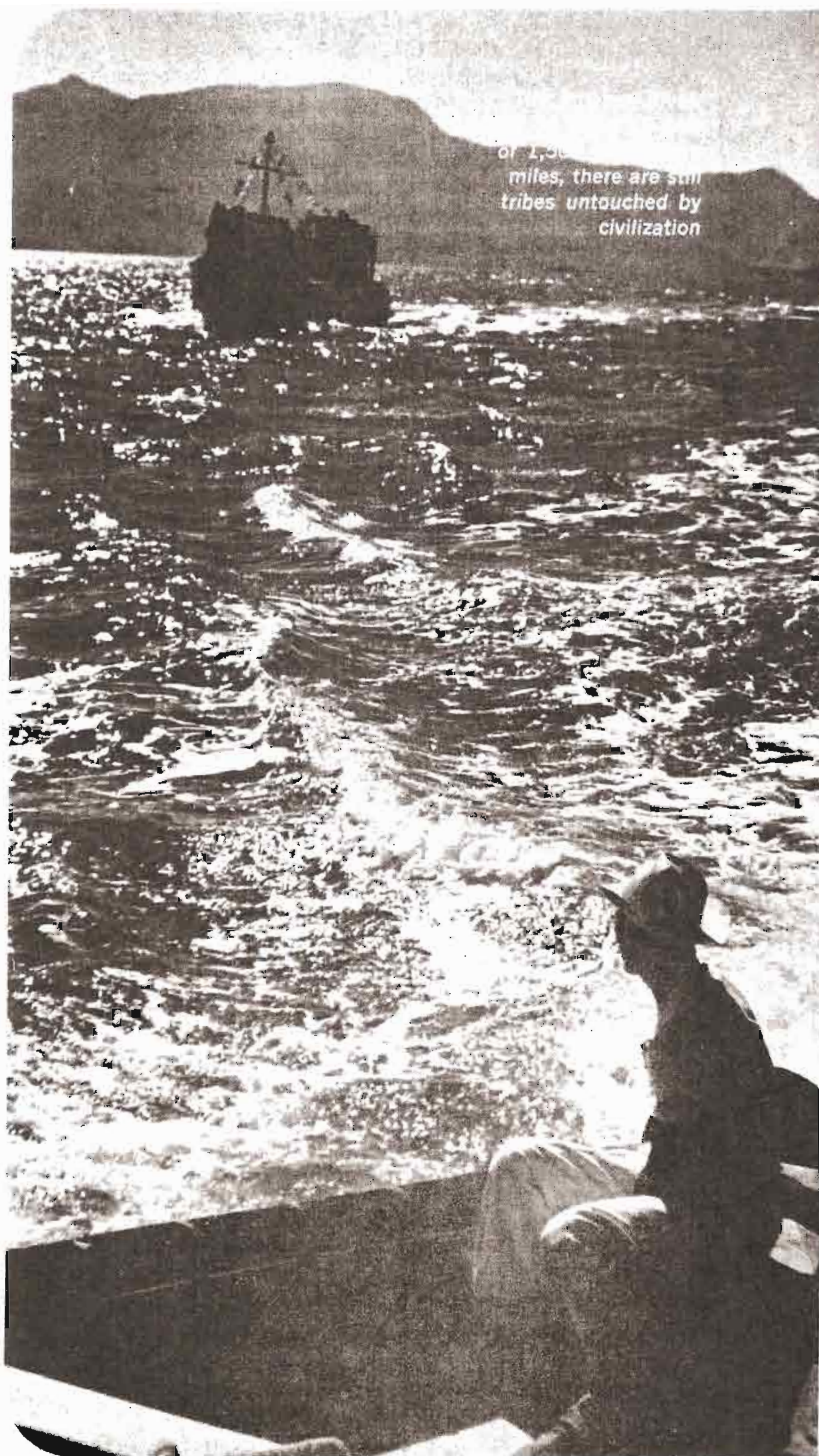
STONE AGE OR TWENTIETH CENTURY

HENRY B. RYAN



Stone Age cultures still exist on nearly every continent of the world, and protecting them is one of the most difficult, if least publicized, minority problems of the twentieth century. In Brazil, for example, where thousands of people live in prehistoric cultural styles deep in the interior, both the Government and private individuals wonder how to save them from extermination as inevitably they come into contact with "civilized" man—with hunters, prospectors, roadbuilders, outpost soldiers, and frontier farmers. There have often been misunderstandings, since the Indians and the frontiersmen have almost no means of communicating with each other, and there have also been frequent squabbles over rights to territory. Yet by far the biggest problem is caused by diseases that outsiders may carry even though they themselves may not suffer from them in any way. Indians, who have no immunization, are decimated by measels, flu, tuberculosis, small pox, typhus, and syphilis, among others.

Member of the Kamayura tribe, who live in the northern part of the Xingu National Park, an 8,500 square mile area reserved for Indians

One of the people trying to solve the Indian problem is Orlando Villas Boas, a large, burly, sun-tanned man with a beard, mustaches, and long hair that flows down the back of his neck, a hair style that may be a matter of taste or a result of the fact that the nearest barber is hundreds of miles away. Orlando is king in an eighty-five hundred square-mile area of western Brazil, which the Government has marked off as Indian country exclusively. It is named the Xingu (pronounced shing-GOO) National Park, after the Upper Xingu River that runs through it. No one from the outside may enter without Government permission. Those that do have their activities closely controlled by Orlando's careful supervision, and yet he is by no means just a jungle policeman as far as visitors are concerned.

Ritual pre-hunt dance done in the Kamayura village in the Xingu National Park

For people who go there to work and study, his advice, lodging, food, and transportation are indispensable and cheerfully provided. When I was there the guests, some staying for a matter of months, included a French etymologist, a British physician, a U.S. biologist who came to the Xingu from England via a Rhodes scholarship, a Japanese painter, a British and a U.S. filmmaker, and two leading Brazilian journalists. Obviously, if you can get to the Xingu, you can find some of the most stimulating and cosmopolitan company of any place in South America.

Dressed only in shorts, sandals, and a battered fisherman's hat, Orlando strides around the camp, which is called Posto Leonardo and named after his dead brother who once helped in his work. He keeps track of the hundreds of details involved not only in running the camp but in carrying medical and other supplies to Indian tribes throughout the area who may need them. Mostly this is done by airplane. The camp has two tiny two-seater Piper Cubs and, while I was there, had a four-place aircraft loaned by the Philadelphia Summer Institute of Linguistics, a plane normally stationed at the University of Brasilia.

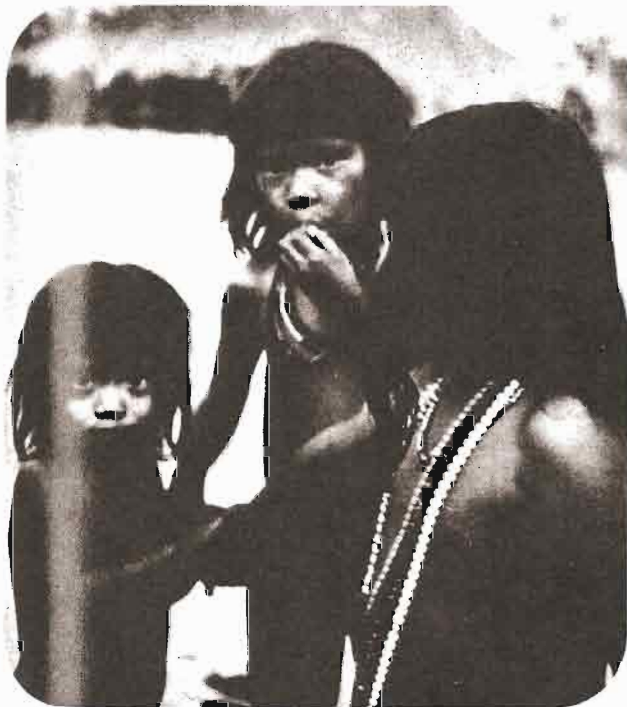
Detail showing branches, grass skirt, and feathers worn by tribesmen during ritual pre-hunt dance

In 1945 Orlando and his brothers Leonardo and Claudio went to the Brazilian State of Mato Grosso, to almost the geographical center of South America, and built the camp and airstrip. There still are no roads into that area of forest and jungle. Consequently, travel for any distance is usually done by small river boats or by airplanes that can land on dirt clearings.

In the area under the post's supervision, most of the tribes are friendly, but some remain wary of strangers. Not long before I arrived, six white men entering the region in a small boat were warned by Indians to stay

out of it. Perhaps the whites didn't understand. They fired guns into the air to frighten the Indians and went on. Shortly thereafter, the Indians, who incidentally had the law on their side in prohibiting entrance to whites whether they knew it or not, swam out, tipped over the boat, and drowned the intruders.

Near the Villas Boas' camp a few of the Indians speak Portuguese and some wear clothes, but most speak only their native languages and wear nothing but a string of beads around the hips. Some of the men also wear feathered armlets and head decorations, plus a kind of twine wrapped around the calves, and occasionally a necklace of shells. Many paint their bodies, and some cut their hair in an even line around their heads and then paint it with a thick dye that gives them the look of wearing a heavy red cap. Others let it grow in long flowing locks, hippie style. It depends on the tribe. The dozen of different tribes speak different languages; some can understand the language of several others, but this is far from a universal phenomenon in the region today.



Kamayura children in the Xingu National Park

Kamayura boy

Orlando and Claudio, his brother, a thin, sallow man who looks like a saint from a Renaissance painting, call their work pacification of the Indians. That doesn't mean turning them into dark-skinned replicas of the white man; it means convincing them to enter and stay in the protected Xingu area in order to preserve their way of living and in many cases their lives, for the outside world is moving in on them, and, the worst danger of all, its diseases are destroying them. The Villas Boas brothers are providing immunization and medical treatment necessary to prolong their lives. At the same time, they keep the Xingu Indians safe from the depredations of outsiders in search of mining and ranching lands, who are not always gentle with wandering tribes that get in their way. Aside from this, they interfere as little as possible in the lives of the Indians, feeling that a major objective has been achieved when a tribe has been convinced to enter the protected area.

It's a small group that works with Orlando and Claudio, including a heavy-set doctor with long wavy white and yellow hair who puffs continually on a pipe. There is also a bush pilot who, in his overalls and straw hat, looks more than anything else like a subsistance farmer in Appalachia. Besides coping with the other problems of the wilderness, they have all had recurrent bouts with malaria. One of them quipped, "Anyone who doesn't have malaria is put out of the community."

Yet the philosophy of the Villas Boas brothers is not accepted by everyone concerned with the problem of protecting the Indian civilizations. One of the people who disagrees is Padre Mario Panziera, a giant of a man who towers over the Xavante Indians at the ten thousand acre Sãn Marco Salesian Mission cut out of scrub forest in Mato Grosso several hundred miles south of Posto Leonardo.

Padre Mario in a gray, knee-length work coat, gray trousers, and a peaked khaki hat, supervises a staff of priests, nuns, and lay workers who run the mission, which is made up of two areas. The first contains open-air workshops, a dispensary, dormitories for the staff, and school rooms. The second area consists of Indians' homes, round thatched huts standing in a great circle about a quarter of a mile in diameter. In front of the huts are tables built of branches on which the Indians place vegetables to purify in the heat of the sun with palm branches laid over them to keep them from getting too dry.

In this compound every night they sing a traditional song marking the end of the day. The men stand in a large circle, bend forward slightly, join hands and sing, repeating their chant in each part of the compound. This is one of many traditional aspects of Xavante life preserved at the mission. Padre Mario, whose voice can knock down trees when he is really interested in his subject, says the

Women and children of a Kamayura family in front of their thatched house

mission tries to maintain as much as possible of the Indians' customs, but not to preserve their communities on ice or totally separate them from twentieth century life, at least twentieth century life as it is known in the Brazilian interior State of Mato Grosso, one of the least developed areas of South America. They use mechanized farm equipment, have electricity from a generator they built with technical help from the outside, process food, make shoes and belts, and, to a limited extent, produce artifacts (they do not want to become a tourist phenomenon, although their location at the moment makes that unlikely.)

There is a reason for developing these skills besides the efficient running of the mission. Padre Mario and the Salesian Order believe that eventually the Indian must come into touch with contemporary life of the outside world. Regarding the Xingu, Padre Mario feels that it is a splendid idea, and he wishes Claudio and Orlando Villas Boas well, but he is afraid that should anything ever happen to the national park and the Indians be thrown into contact with "civilized" man, the Indians themselves, to say nothing of their culture, will be destroyed. It may be farfetched to assume this will ever happen in the Xingu, and yet it is easy to imagine the pressures that will be exerted to break these wilderness "zoning regulations" if it becomes fairly certain there are sizable mineral deposits in the area or a future government becomes convinced that the region is of strategic defense importance.

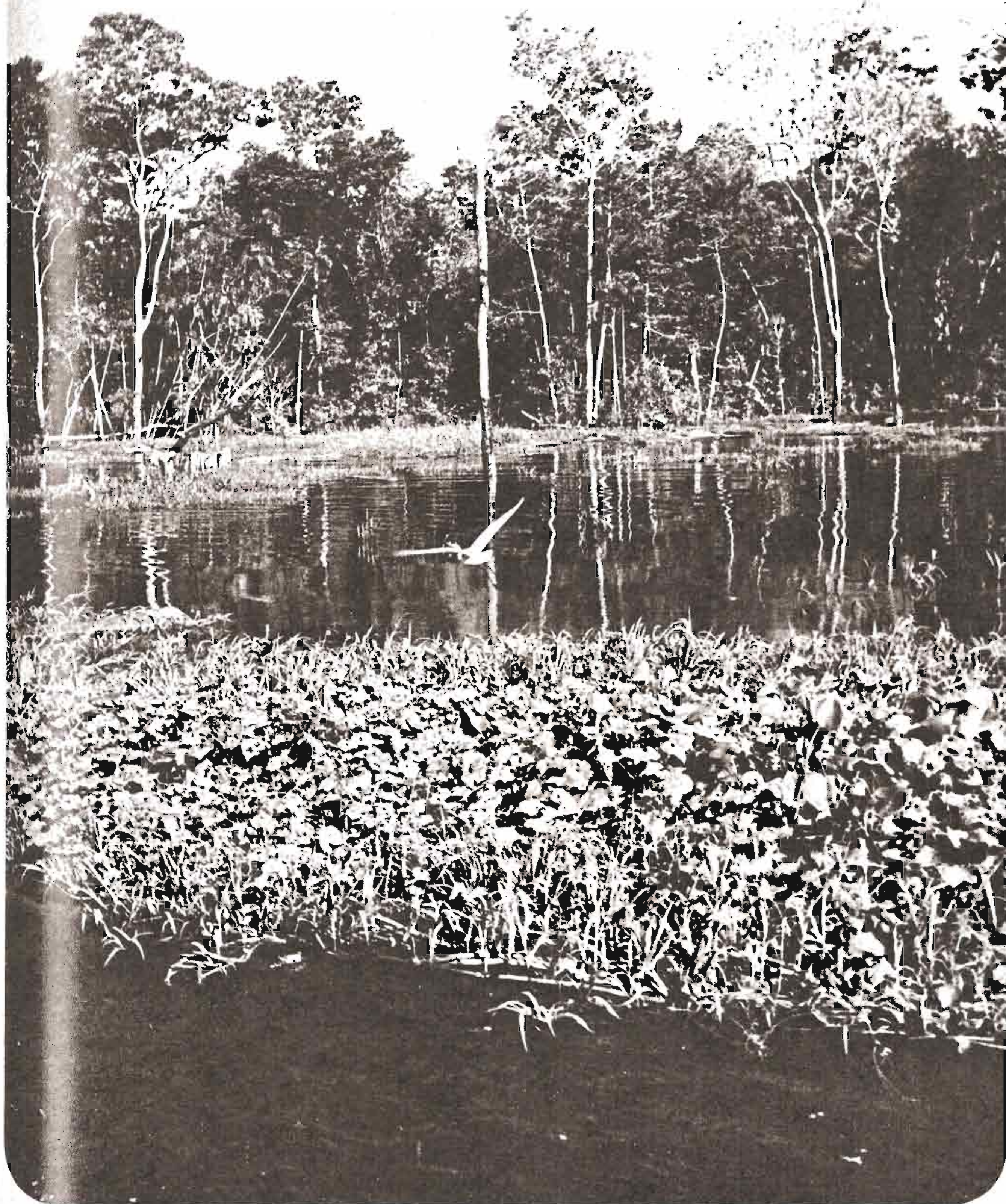
Padre Mario believes that if the Indians know nothing of the contemporary world around them, have none of its skills, they can become, at best, second-class citizens should it ever engulf them, as he fears it will in almost all cases. And it must be admitted that the Villas Boas brothers are vague about who will carry on their work when they are gone, hoping that the Ministry of Interior will replace them with equally competent and dedicated men.

But the Salesian missionaries, while following a middle road between complete isolation and total integration, meanwhile shelter the Indians a good deal. In fact, a visitor has the sensation that he is at a rather unique sort of preparatory school. Indians living at São Marco and at nearby missions are forbidden to go into any town or city. The padres, in an effort to remove the desire, tell them, truthfully, that they will be regarded as woodland curiosities, they will be swindled, they will pick up vices such as smoking and drinking that will be bad for their health, to say nothing of diseases that may destroy it. One feels a strong element of paternalism at the mission, the price the Indians pay for the tranquility and prosperity they find there. Although the Indians have their own assemblies, the padres obviously run the show and have a controlling hand in all aspects of life at the mission. Even on hunts they see that Indians do not let fires get out of control or trespass in areas where their presence might cause friction with mission neighbors. On the big annual hunt, mission staffers follow to provide medical treatment for anyone who may get hurt or fall ill, often the result of snake bite.

The missionaries have gotten the Indians into clothes, and it is obvious that Xavantes have come to equate apparel with decency just like any other twentieth century man, a concept that does not prevail in the Xingu, although a few Indians there wear clothes for the protection they offer and wear them with a great deal of

Indian house under construction with others in the background at the São Marco Mission. Xavante Indians, once among the fiercest in Brazil, now live mostly on mission or governmental reservations

Amazon River near Manaus
in North Central Brazil



Xavante man preparing to do a series of ritual dances for a film being made there. Unlike the Xingu Indians, they do not normally go naked, but have stripped here to recreate dances of the past

Father Mario Panziera, Salesian priest who is head of the mission, with a Xavante, a blind man and one of the oldest men at São Marco

distinctive flair. It is common to see either a man or a woman wearing just a shirt, for example, and not another stitch. When I was at São Marco, however, a U.S. film-maker convinced reluctant Padre Mario to have a group of young men remove their clothes and do their traditional dances as they would have done in the past. On the understanding that the film was a historical documentary, he agreed, but said it would have to be made outside the village. If not, the other villagers would be scandalized. After the group piled into a truck, drove out to a remote spot in the woods, and began to strip down, it was obvious the performers were highly embarrassed, at least until the ham in them took over and they got carried away with their act.

Another example of the change of attitude on the part of the Xavante, once among the fiercest Indians in Brazil, was seen when Padre Mario pointed out a man who he said came into the mission several years before. The man, who brought a group of Xavantes with him, said they were all good; the bad ones, some twenty, according to Padre Mario, who says he has no reason to doubt the story, he killed before he came in. Yet when the padre politely but firmly told him to do a service for us, the man obeyed instantly.

But if the mission Indians are humble with the padres, they have a personal dignity unusual in any people and are scrupulously honest, unlike some living around the Villas Boas' jungle headquarters who beg constantly and occasionally steal. Indians there literally ask for the shirt off your back, taking it in their fingers with one hand and with the other pointing to it, then to themselves, and in pidgin Portuguese saying, "You give . . . me . . . give . . . me." The mission Indians would be stunned and probably embarrassed if you gave them presents, aside from the fact that the Salesians don't allow it, believing that receiving gifts from individuals or from the Government is not only demeaning but ruinous of the Indians' self-reliance. Indians there provide their own food and shelter. Any other items they may need, except for medicine, which is dispensed freely by the padres, they buy from a mission store, using mission currency that they earn for work such as shoemaking, lumbering, farming mission lands, and so on.

If the padres have taken away the more heroic attributes of the Xavante, they seem to have brought the Indians a kind of personal and communal satisfaction that probably grows out of the deep religious conviction of converts. The Villas Boas brothers, on the other hand, say the Indian needs nothing to lead the most fulfilled life of any man on earth except to be left alone. They claim he has few complexes or frustrations, provides what he needs with less effort than his civilized counterpart, and has no drive to accummulate beyond a certain point easily attained. "They live today the way most men are struggling to live in the future," says Orlando.

Both the Villas Boas and Padre Mario want to preserve as much as possible of the Indians' way of life, although, of course, the padres have the ultimate mission of changing their religious values. Both are, nevertheless, aware that their efforts may prove inadequate as twentieth century civilization creeps into the heart of the South American continent. □

Henry B. Ryan is a professional writer who lived in Brazil for several years and traveled extensively there.