
Brazilian sertanistas: a bridge between two worlds

Sertanistas brasileiros: uma ponte entre dois mundos

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the *sertanistas*' historical role in Amazon, specifically Marshal Rondon, Francisco and Apoena Meireles, and also to highlight the two forms of indigenous policy they employed, namely protectionist and integrationist, targeting self-isolated indigenous groups. The bibliographical analysis carried out in this study evidenced that the *sertanistas*' work was to bridge the gap between the indigenous and non-indigenous world, in the least traumatic and violent way possible.

Keywords: *Sertanistas*; Amazon; Rondon, Meireles, Protectionist; Integrationist.

Resumo

O presente artigo tem como objetivo analisar o rol histórico dos sertanistas na Amazônia, especificamente, do marechal Rondon, de Francisco e Apoena Meireles, além de destacar as duas formas de política indigenista para com os autoisolados: a protecionista e a integracionista. Neste trabalho, mediante uma análise bibliográfica, evidencia-se que o trabalho dos sertanistas foi fazer ponte entre o mundo indígena e o não indígena, da forma menos traumática e violenta possível.

Palavras-chave: Sertanistas; Amazônia; Rondon; Meireles; Protecionista; Integracionista.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the Brazilian *sertanistas* and their work contacting self-isolated indigenous groups, which are also known as free peoples or peoples in their natural condition, who lived in the region that is currently known as *Amazônia legal*¹. Based on a bibliographical survey, we intend to analyze the *sertanistas*' role as main actors in the contact with Brazilian indigenous populations that chose to live in isolation, those individuals provided a bridge between the self-isolated indigenous groups and the government interests. On the one side, the non-indigenous world, the border society, and the capitalist system. On the other, the world of originary peoples, who despite being permanently self-isolated, kept some sporadic contacts outside their territory to steal some non-indigenous objects that would facilitate their daily work. Analyzing the *sertanistas*' role in the XX century might lead us to break the false idea spread out about them based on a Jewish-Christian Western and Eurocentric perspective of good against evil or civilized against wild. It might also deconstruct the idea of 'white' people against indigenous people.

The article is organized in four parts. After the introduction, we address the individual that can be called a pioneer of the Brazilian *sertanismo*, that is, field marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, and emphasize the impact of telegraph lines introduced by him in the Amazonian indigenous populations' lives, such as the Paiteer Suruí ethnic group. Next, we discuss the post-Rondon *sertanismo*, highlighting the work developed by Francisco Meireles and his son Apoena, and the two dominant indigenist policy models used to deal with originary peoples, namely, the protectionist and the integrationist. Finally, we present some conclusions.

When looking up the word “*sertanista*” in the dictionary and analyzing its meaning, we observed the long historical trajectory of this personality of that time and how it changed over time. According to the Houaiss Dictionary of Portuguese language, in its 2009 edition, the definition of the term *sertanista* is:

¹ The Brazil's legal Amazon (*Amazônia legal*) is a 5,217,423 km² area, which corresponds to 61% of the Brazilian territory. The *Amazônia legal* concept was introduced by the Brazilian government to integrate a region that has been historically not populated; the Law 1,806, of 06th January 1953, was the legal mechanism that provided for the area to be called *Amazônia legal*. That territory comprises the states of Acre, Amapá, Amazonas, Mato Grosso, Pará, Rondônia, Roraima, Tocantins, and part of the state of Maranhão. Despite its large extension, it is the area with the lowest demographic density in the country (around 4 inhabitants per km²), however, it shelters the highest number of indigenous populations and ethnic groups.

1. related with or belonging to the interior/wilderness. 2. The one that explored wild parts of the country looking for minerals/richness; explorers. 3. Refers to the person who visits the wilderness and knows it well, as well as the habits of people who live in the wild; expert on wild place issues 4. The person who lives in the interior/wild territories (Houaiss, 2009, p. 1737).

Wilderness here is understood as land covered with natural vegetation and far from urban and agricultural areas. The *sertanista* is an individual who knows a lot about this type of region. If initially, the definition of the term *sertanista* leads the reader to think about the members of Portuguese expeditions that explored the interior of the country in search of profit and adventure, the so-called *bandeirantes*, at the time Brazil was still a colony. Currently this thought is obsolete due to the role played by the *sertanista* field marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, who was a game changer for being the first explorer to treat originary peoples with respect and without violence. Therefore, the term changed from a synonym to looter and plunderer to protector of the indigenous peoples. Nowadays, the popular idea forged by the prestige the great *sertanistas* acquired within society, identifies those individuals with a humanitarian ideal and of a defender of the originary peoples.

It seems relevant to mention that the *sertanista* position disappeared from the National Indigenous People Foundation (Funai – Fundação Nacional do Índio) in the administrative reform carried out in 2009. The Decree 7,056 of December 2009 that extinguished the *sertanista* activity in Brazil². From that moment onwards, some *sertanistas* retired and/or continued in a position of trust in Funai, while others migrated to the Ethno-environmental Protection Fronts, developing similar tasks as those previously accomplished as *sertanistas* (MILANEZ, 2015).

In the Brazilian contemporary history, *sertanistas* were mostly social actors that worked somehow as ‘parachutes’ in the jump certain self-isolated ethnic indigenous groups experienced when joining national society and the capitalist system represented by the border society. Let’s try to understand who the self-isolated peoples are and what the term ‘isolation’ means when applied to indigenous groups. According to the *Directrices de protección para los pueblos indígenas en aislamiento y en contacto inicial de la región amazónica*,

² Verify Law n° 6.001, de 1973, on the webpage of the Republic Presidency. Available at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/L6001.htm . Accessed on: 02 Jul. 2021.

Gran Chaco y la región oriental de Paraguay (Guidelines of protection for the indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact of the Amazon Region, the Gran Chaco and the Eastern region of Paraguay), set by the United Nations (UN):³

Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation are indigenous peoples or segments of indigenous peoples who do not maintain sustained contacts with the majority non-indigenous population, and who generally reject any type of contact with persons not part of their own people (ACNUDH, 2012).

In the Brazilian context, the denomination “isolated”, according to the National Indigenous Foundation, means

Specifically indigenous groups that do not keep permanent relationship with national societies or experience very little frequency of interaction with non-indigenous populations or other indigenous peoples (FUNAI, 2018).

In Brazil, the term officially used is “isolated indigenous peoples” since they are considered to be “in voluntary isolation”, thus, in this text we decided to use the term “self-isolated” to emphasize that those indigenous peoples decided to live in isolation. However, other parts of the American continent use diverse terminology. For example, in Colombia, this type of population is defined as “peoples in natural state”, which opposes to the Brazilian view of an alleged isolation (OPIAC, 2016).

Even if it is not emphasized in this study, it seems relevant to mention that indigenous individuals that have already been contacted have worked intensely to attract their self-isolated relatives and are even paid for this recruiting work. Most of the non-indigenous *sertanistas* were agents that represented a state agency that was concerned with indigenous populations; many fought hard against genocide and indigenous ethnocide within a resistant political context. The character of field marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, as seen below, was the role model guiding the work of XX century *sertanistas*.

³ See *Directrices de protección para los pueblos indígenas en aislamiento y en contacto inicial la región amazónica, Gran Chaco y la región oriental de Paraguay*. Available at: <http://acnudh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Final-version-Guidelines-on-isolated-indigenous-peoples-february-2012.pdf>. Accessed on: 02 Jul. 2021.

Marshal Cândido Rondon, pioneer in the contemporary *sertanismo*

The economic occupation of the Amazon region, starting in the late XIX century, occurred with the expulsion of several originary indigenous peoples to lands of lower colonizing pressure. The first rubber cycle in the Brazilian Amazon occurred in the late XIX and early XX century. The peak of that economic cycle was observed between 1879 and 1912 due to the great impulse of the automobile industry and the latex extraction from rubber trees, which originally grow in the Amazon forest since that was a key raw material for the development of the automobile market.

It seems relevant to highlight that rubber already had had important use during the industrial revolution started in England in the XVIII century. The machinery industry, its equipment and new consumption goods, which became more and more popular in industrialized countries, used rubber as one of the main components. Such rubber was obtained from the rubber tree latex, which was found in the Amazon Forest. The first rubber cycle created a situation of expansion of the Amazon region with the arrival of thousands of people attracted by the possibility of becoming rich. Due to the rubber international commerce, the states of Amazonas, Rondônia, and Para, and their capital cities, Manaus, Porto Velho, and Belém, respectively, experienced great cultural, social, and architectural transformations, which favored their growth. It was during that economic cycle that an organized process of contact with indigenous ethnic groups started, led by field marshal Cândido Rondon.

From 1890 onwards, the Brazilian government created several committees to build up telegraph lines and posts in the interior of the country. The main objective, in addition to implementing such lines to improve communication, was to boost the occupation of the Amazon region, which covered a large unknown part of the Brazilian territory and would favor the defense of national borders. Such telegraph committees included zoologists, botanists, and other scientists who researched the local flora and fauna. Among those committees, the most emblematic was that led by field marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon⁴. The influence of great scientific

⁴Rondon's committee was one of the groups set by the Brazilian government from 1890, led by field marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, whose main objective was to recognize and occupy an unknown portion of the Brazilian territory to defend national borders, and implementing telegraph lines and posts in the interior to improve communications. Due to this task, Rondon contacted dozens of indigenous groups that were found in the routes followed by the expedition, thus producing great volume of ethnographic and iconographic material.

expeditions⁵ reported worldwide in the late XIX and early XX century, incentivized Rondon and his co-workers to collect extensive ethnographic and iconographic material, in addition to carrying out anthropometric measurements⁶ of the indigenous populations that were contacted (LASMAR, 2001).

When taking part in conferences, field marshal Rondon introduced himself as a *sertanista*. The press also identified the workers from the Telegraph Line from Cuiabá to Araguaia Building Committee as “*sertanistas*”. During the Empire time, those telegraph committees already existed, but it was with Rondon’s incentive that such committees started to have a noticeable scientific and humanitarian character, up to the point of transforming the word “*sertanista*” into a term that defined indigenous peoples’ defenders (MILANEZ, 2015).

One of the events reported in the expedition documents reveals Rondon’s point of view regarding indigenous populations:

Being attacked by the indigenous group, Rondon had his face scratched by an arrow. An officer shouted: shame on the Army if they do not give an exemplary punishment to those barbarians. Rondon interrupted him and said: ‘I am the representative of the army here, and the army is not here to start a war. The Nambikuára do not know that we are in a peaceful mission. If this land were yours and somebody tried to steal it from you, and also shot at you, what would you do, despite being civilized?’ A firm hand and words like this disciplined the troop (GOMES, 2012, p. 130).

Rondon’s personality contributed to an important change in the indigenous policies. It seems relevant to highlight the high degree of empathy that the field marshal had with indigenous populations, since his mother’s great-grandparents were of indigenous origin, from the Bororó and Terena groups, and on his father’s side, his great-grandfather belonged to the Guará group. In 1910, Cândido Rondon helped the creation of the

⁵ Some of the great philosophical and scientific expeditions that covered the interior of Brazil and the Amazon river from the XVIII century onwards, were led by personalities of the time such as Condamine, Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, the Austrian Spix and Martius, the Baron of Langsdorf, the Englishmen Bates and Wallace, Dr. João Severiano da Fonseca, and even the famous anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss.

⁶ Anthropometry is a large part of the biological or physical anthropology. It studies the human body measures aiming to ascribe value to the physical changes of human beings and differences between “races”. Currently, it plays a relevant role in industrial drawing.

Protection Service to Indigenous peoples and Location of National Workers, linked to the Agriculture Ministry (which later on would be known as the Indigenous Protection Service /SPI, Brazilian acronym for Serviço de Proteção ao Indígena). The field marshal was its first president, however, due to several disputes, he did not remain in that position for a long time. The same Agriculture Minister, Rodolfo Miranda, wrote a letter on 02nd March 1910 inviting the Colonel (at that time) Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon to take over the position of head of the Indigenous Protection Service. The content of such letter is shown below:

Mr. Colonel Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon:

I am writing this letter as an official invitation, which I have already made in person, on behalf of the cause of our native peoples.

Our spontaneous choice of your name to promote and direct the catechesis that the Republic Government decided to develop is the formal recognition of your humanitarian and generous conduct, which made you outstand and make us trust in you to deal with those peoples, in the long and heroic journey that you have already carried out in places that had never been visited before, even by the most audacious explorers.

Who, so resolutely and with rare dedication would sacrifice the peace and calm of their homes, or their own lives, to render such a service to the nation? Who can promote the indigenous peoples to the fullness of their dominance within the forests, defended them from the civilization tricks and the hardness of the uneducated life? – a friend, a careful guide must undoubtedly join the requirements of kindness and altruism that must characterize the campaign that shall redeem the abandonment of our native peoples and integrate them to the enjoyment of their rights.

The government shall not keep insisting in old practices that failed their ideals, revealing over time to privilege some that were favored to stop the native race development and destine those individuals to slavery and extermination. Conversely, it is the government obligation, to constitute the catechesis on new bases, giving it republican features, outside the privilege of castes, without worrying with a religious proselytism, and becoming a special service centralized in the Capital and from there spread to the states, where such action is necessary to be carried out patiently and with all effort.

The highest direction of such service is offered to you, if you decided to agree with this invitation, before the official formalities directed to the Ministry to which you belong. And I am fully confident that the common desire will be satisfied by the exercise of your scientific culture, your moral standing, your republican faith, and the willpower that make you the first among all the explorers of the Brazilian territory. With that, I finish this letter offering my highest esteem and legitimate consideration (MIRANDA apud CALDEIRA, 2008, p. 468).

In fact, field marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon was one of the greatest Brazilian *sertanistas* and left a legacy that persists until these days. He was guided by his positivist ideals of serving the human kind with actions that promoted scientific progress, industrialization, and modernization. Following such principles, the integration of indigenous peoples should occur peacefully, rather by excluding them. Rondon opted for protecting the indigenous peoples and assimilating them culturally, upon the kind of education that would add new habits in their routines and promote their “civilization”. Positivists did not consider the indigenous peoples as an inferior race, but rather as a group in a lower evolution stage.

Rondon’s committee real objective was to conquer and assimilate indigenous peoples, by changing their culture. However, the policy of assimilating indigenous peoples into the cultural habits of the “civilized” population, which was chosen by Rondon, represented an advancement in that time, when compared to much more harmful and abusive proposals directed to the indigenous peoples at that time.

The construction of telegraph lines, led by Rondon, aimed at integrating, in terms of both territory and communications, the north of the country to the rest of its territory. In the region that later on was called Rondônia, the expedition implemented a long and continuous wiring, fixed on wooden or iron posts, opening a 10-meter-wide path on the prairies and 50-meter wide within forests. At the same time, a 6-meter path followed along the line and at each 90 kilometers a telegraph post was installed with a guard. Such telegraph system that had certain importance in the 1930 revolution, was the guide for the road that was built sometime later linking Cuiabá and Porto Velho. Some of those posts implemented by field marshal Rondon were the starting point for small villages or cities such as Vilhena, Pimenta Bueno, and Ariquemes (THÉRY, 2012).

One example of how Rondon's expeditions reached the indigenous peoples might be the case of the Paiter Suruí ethnic group. João Batista Lopes (2000 apud MENDES, 2017) reported that field Marshal Rondon's expedition entered in direct contact with the Paiter Suruí group that lived close to the Cacoal Village. The Brazilian military had got acquainted with that ethnic group, and found some archeological vestige such as utensils, pan parts, and axe-shaped stones, which made them name a river in that area Axe river. According to Céderic Yvinec (2011), from the installation of the telegraph lines by Rondon's expeditions in the region currently named Cacoal, the first non-indigenous groups arrived to the Axe river area and had some of their tools stolen by the Paiter Suruí.

When the elderly of the Paiter Suruí tribes talked about Rondon's telegraph line, they reported not having direct contact with the field marshal, but that they had small conflicts with the workers of that project as a reaction to noticing that their territory was being invaded (SCARAMUZZA, 2020).

The telegraph lines installed by Rondon, in the early XX century, which crossed the Paiter Suruí land, were affected by the attraction this type of metal had on the indigenous individuals. Joaquim Suruí reported:

the Paiter Suruí people found this thing, you see? That wooden post holding the line... then there was something that looked like a cup. Something made of glass that would be at the end of the wire, then they put that wood post down, then there were huge nails there, they broke the glass and got that nail to make necklaces, that is it... put the wood down, broke the glass, got the iron thing. Then, another individual would see it and want it... would go and do the same thing. Rondon's people did not attack... The Suruí would only do that where there was nobody. I don't know how they found out there was a nail inside (SURUÍ, 09 Oct 2019).

The Paiter Suruí people put down a lot of telegraph posts since they were inserted in their territory. Their attraction to the new materials that formed the telegraph lines was the motivation of their attack to the new structures. The Paiter Suruí individuals would remove parts of those materials for their own use, since they could be used as cutting utensils (SCARAMUZZA, 2020). Therefore, for the Paiter Suruí, the installation of telegraph lines by that part of Rondon's committee, resulted in the appearance of a source of new materials to be used in their daily lives. For other ethnic groups, Rondon's work resulted in their incorporation in Brazilian society in a less traumatic

experience than the previous ones since the field marshal did not use violence against the indigenous peoples.

It was at the time of Rondon's expeditions, in 1916, that the new Brazilian civil code was implemented⁷, which for the first time referred to the indigenous theme. According to that code, the indigenous peoples should "adapt progressively", upon a guardianship system which would support their incorporation in civil life, common to all Brazilian citizens. According to Darci Ribeiro, "Up to the publishing of the Brazilian Civil Code, indigenous peoples were compared to fully incapable individuals that required guardianship by the orphans' judges" (RIBEIRO, 1996, p. 225). In 1928, the Law 5,484⁸ gave a new impulse to the resignification of the indigenous' civil capability, and from that point onwards, the indigenous should be subjected to the state direct guardianship, represented by the Indigenous Protection Service (SPI) and, Later on, the Funai, took over this guardianship. The Law 5,484, article 6, read:

The indigenous peoples of any class that are not completely adapted must be under the state guardianship, which shall exercise according to the degree of adaptation of each one, intermediated by the Indigenous Protection Service and the National Workers' Location inspectors, and such inspectors can request or appoint proxies, to apply on behalf of those indigenous individuals, before justice and authority, performing all acts provided for in the applicable law (BRASIL, 1928).

We observed that the state should fulfil the role of "guardianship-representation", with the purpose of "civilizing" and transforming the indigenous peoples into productive beings for the nation, converting the native individuals into productive peasants. The indigenous individuals could only get freed from this guardianship upon their insertion in the non-indigenous world, that is, according to the parameters of the non-indigenous culture (BECKER; ROCHA, 2017). The following section shows that this model was followed by Francisco Meireles and his son Apoena Meireles.

⁷ See the 1916 Civil Code, on the Republic Presidency webpage. Available at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/Leis/L3071.htm. Accessed on: 02 Jul 2021.

⁸ See the Law 5484 of 1928, on the Deputy Chamber webpage. Available at: <http://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/decret/1920-1929/decreto-5484-27-junho-1928-562434-publicacaooriginal-86456-pl.html>. Accessed on: 02 Jul 2021.

Post-Rondon *sertanismo*

During the military dictatorship, a law was created in the Brazilian legal system to give a new regulation to the legal status of indigenous peoples. On December 19, 1973, Law 6001, known as the Statute of the Indian, was published. This law intended to “preserve the culture of indigenous communities and integrate them progressively and harmoniously into the national community” (MEYER, 2014, p. 92). Therefore, the law continued to maintain guardianship of indigenous people, who were not recognized by the competent authorities as integrated into national society, somehow perpetuating the colonizing project of integration. The Statute of the Indian instituted norms for the treatment of indigenous peoples in areas such as education, culture, health, property, land and reserve areas, civil registration, labor conditions, in addition to criminal and civil procedural norms. This had the purpose of achieving the “integration” of the indigenous individuals in Brazilian national society. In short, this guardianship vision of restricted and rigid representation portrayed indigenous people as beings without the power of speech and decision; as if they did not have the ability to direct their own lives (BECKER; ROCHA, 2017).

Although the legal category of the indigenous people defined during the military dictatorship showed them as incapable beings, who needed to be integrated into civilization, it should be noted that the 1973 Statute of the Indian presented some advances in the rights of indigenous people. One example is its Article 2, which established

Art. 2nd It is the responsibility of the federal, state and municipal governments, as well as the bodies of the respective indirect administrations, within the limits of their competence, for the protection of indigenous communities and the preservation of their rights: I - to extend to the Indigenous peoples the benefits of common legislation, whenever applicable; II - to provide assistance to Indigenous individuals and communities not yet integrated into the national community; III - to respect, by providing the Indigenous peoples with means for their development, the peculiarities inherent to their condition; IV - to ensure to the Indigenous peoples the possibility of free choice of their means of life and subsistence; V - to guarantee the voluntary permanence of the Indigenous peoples in their habitat, providing them with resources for their development and progress; VI - to respect, in the process of integrating the Indigenous peoples into the national community, the cohesion

of the indigenous communities, their cultural values, traditions, uses and customs; VII – to execute, whenever possible with the collaboration of the Indigenous peoples, the programs and projects aiming at benefitting indigenous communities; VIII – to use cooperation, initiative and personal qualities of the Indigenous individuals, with a view to improving their living conditions and their integration in the development process; IX – to guarantee to the Indigenous individuals and communities, under the terms of the Constitution, the permanent possession of the lands they inhabit, recognizing their right to the exclusive use of the natural resources and of utilities existing on those lands; X - to guarantee to the Indigenous peoples the full exercise of the civil and political rights that they are entitled to pursuant to the applicable legislation (BRASIL, 1973).

The *sertanistas* and other employees of the SPI or Funai, depending on the time, were responsible for establishing a bridge between Brazilian national society and the indigenous people, and many of these historical actors were convinced of the importance of their work to defend the indigenous populations. As recurrently happens in Brazil, the application of the Statute of the Indian was a complicated task, a series of articles of the law seemed mere decorative writings, since the historical facts narrate an imbalance between the written law and the enforced law, mainly regarding the collaboration of political power and the forces of repression with the advancement of the economic borders at any cost.

After Rondon's pioneering work, the Villas-Bôas brothers continued his legacy during the "march to the West". From the point of view of a foreigner, like the editor of National Geographic magazine, Bill Allen (2003), the figure of the *sertanista* is a typical Brazilian profession, which mixes works such as government bureaucracy, indigenist activism, ethnography, and exploration.

Throughout the *sertanistas*'s history in Brazil, two different models of indigenist policy were used to deal with self-isolated indigenous peoples, namely, the protectionist model and the integrationist model. The so-called protectionist model was based on the ideas of field marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon and its pillars were erected with the work of the Villas-Bôas brothers, in the Xingu Indigenous Park. This model defended that the indigenous populations should be protected by the public power against border expansion fronts, through the creation of national reserves so that, over time, the indigenous people living in those parks would "integrate"

(using the language of that time) in Brazilian society. (MILANEZ, 2015). The understanding relationship developed between Rondon and the Villas-Bôas is demonstrated in Orlando Villas-Bôas's testimony in an interview carried out by Maureen Bisillat and published in 1995 in the book *Guerreiros sem Espadas* (Warriors without swords):

Raising our awareness of the responsibility we have for the Indigenous peoples, that we must keep them alive, speaking, defending them, even shouting if necessary! Rondon, during most of his life, defended the need to bring the Indigenous peoples to civilization, giving them conditions of also being civilized individuals. Only at the end of his life did he recognize that the only way to save the Indigenous tribes would be to preserve them in their environment, living their own culture. When we took the expedition forward without clashing with the Indigenous groups, as Rondon wanted, he was very grateful and appointed us his delegates for the entire area of Central Brazil. We received handwritten letters from him, and we got to know him in person. One of the greatest humanists we have ever had, Rondon was a milestone. Before him, an Indigenous individual was an animal, one of them found in the forest would be killed like a pig. Rondon was the one who made our laws aware and made the Indigenous individual a respected figure. The greatest crime that was committed against him was that he was never awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, as he deserved, for introducing the policy to protect indigenous peoples in Brazil. (BISILLAT, 1995, p. 76).

The integrationist model, on the other hand, was guided by imperatives of a developmental nature, based on the argument that indigenous communities should be economically integrated into Brazilian society as quickly as possible, to become part of the large workforce reserve. This policy aimed at giving impetus to the expanding regional economies in the border zone, to be integrated into the more developed regions of the country. This model had no interest in the indigenous culture since indigenous peoples were only seen from the perspective of production relations. It seems relevant to emphasize that the integration model emerged in the historical context between the so-called "Amazon operation", in 1966, and the National Integration Plan I, in 1970, with the purpose of subordinating indigenous policies to developmental imperatives. "Integrationist" *sertanistas* also fought to preserve the survival of indigenous peoples from a different perspective.

Two prominent integrationist *sertanistas* were Francisco Meireles and his son Apoena

The work of Francisco Meireles, as a *sertanista*, was characterized by always assuming an “integrationist” opinion. For him, the solution to indigenous peoples’ problems depended on their integration into the nation and the economic development of the country. Through integration, the indigenous peoples could become good farmers and/or cattle breeders, thus achieving their emancipation and economic independence. According to Francisco Meireles (1973, p. 9), “The confinement or resistance to progress, [would] inevitably lead to marginalization and, consequently, to the destruction of the native groups”. This posture contrasted with the protectionist model of the Villas-Bôas brothers, which Meireles and his team referred to as “utopian *sertanismo*”. In the text *Índios Brasileiros* (Brazilian Indigenous Peoples), written by Francisco Meireles in 1973, just before he died, the *sertanista* addressed severe critique to the Villas-Bôas’s protectionist position, while defending his integrationist posture

I have been, all my life, a peacemaker among hostile tribes. I am responsible for the civilization contact with the Xavantes, Caiapós, Pacáa Nova, Karipuna, Cinta-Larga and many others. Well, in all the first peaceful contacts, the Indigenous peoples invariably requested, in the speeches they usually made on those occasions, that we transformed them into people like us, we are people [...]. There are those who claim that the rough life of the Indigenous peoples is better than our civilization. But those who think like that do not abandon our society and do not adopt and indigenous lifestyle for themselves, and that is how we know they do not believe this nonsense [...]. My experience of 35 years of indigenous work allows me to say that the solution to the Indigenous peoples’ problem does not lie in their confinement, nor in the resistance of their defenders to the development of the country. On the contrary, the solution lies in integration, not only of indigenous peoples, but also of the entire poor population of the Brazilian interior, in the development process. Confinement or resistance to progress will inevitably lead to marginalization and, consequently, to the destruction of the native peoples (MEIRELES, 1973, p. 5; 7; 9).

Francisco Meireles considered the protectionist model defended by the Villas-Bôas a type of utopia that would lead indigenous peoples to marginalization. According to him, based on his experience, the indigenous

peoples wanted the same “progress” that national Brazilian society could offer to their non-indigenous communities. However, according to the anthropologist and Funai presidente, Márcio Gomes,

Some analysts of the Brazilian indigenous movement already tried to place in opposed fields, as if these were two distinct orientations, on one side the Villas-Boas brothers, and on the other, Chico Meireles. One side proposing the isolation of indigenous peoples under a cultural dome, while the other side was in favor of cultural assimilation. Apoena defended the latter. In fact, this is a simplistic analysis of the whole Brazilian indigenous issue. Both the Villas-Boas and Chico Meireles were in favor of the cultural autonomy of indigenous peoples and the role of the state in empowering them to face the assimilation proposals that threatened them. The Villas-Boas brothers dedicated their lives to the establishment of the Xingu Indigenous Park, with its own cultural specificities. Chico Meireles worked in several fronts, never dedicating his efforts exclusively to a specific situation (GOMES, 2008, p. 1).

During the march to the West, the *sertanistas* and their fronts organized to attract indigenous people doubled their importance, stimulating the so-called “contact *sertanismo*”. In this perspective, Francisco Meireles formed, in his integrationist view in favor of development, a large group of *sertanistas*, such as Afonso Alves, Raimundo Alves, Rubens Pastrana Tavares, Júlio Reinaldo de Morais “Camiranga”, João Carvalho, Souza Leão, including his son, Apoena Meireles. Those *sertanistas* worked between the 1950s and 1970s for large projects linked to the Superintendency of the Amazon Economic Valorization Plan (SPVEA-Superintendência do Plano de Valorização Econômica do Amazonas), created in the mid-1950s. (CASAS MENDOZA, 2005).

The work developed by Meireles can be described as a style that fulfilled the *sertanista* action purpose in an integrationist and assistance-based approach, his contact strategies, tactics and techniques were carried out as peaceful initiatives, numerous expeditions, a kind of courtship with the indigenous groups, mounted expeditions, invasions of villages or camps, the use of music in attractions; and, finally, the form of initial intervention in the lives of indigenous peoples, consisting of the introduction of economic techniques and integration into the regional market (FREIRE, 2008).

Francisco Meireles occupied the position of head of the Indigenous Protection Service for ten years, from 1942 to 1952, in the former territory

of Guaporé (currently Rondônia) and, in 1964, he took over the Production Division of the Territory of Rondônia. Due to the relevance of his work, he received, the Rondon Medal of Merit in 1969, the most prestigious award from the government of Rondônia. Francisco Meireles's link with Rondônia continued with his son Apoena, who preserved his legacy. On 25th July 1973, Francisco Meireles died, after a heart attack, at the age of 65. In 1974, he was honored with the Medal of Indigenous work Merit, in the post-mortem category. José Aparecido da Silva, in an interview given to Zeus Moreno Romero, recalls Meireles:

I, for me, Chicão (Francisco Meireles)... father...everybody has defects, but I, personally about Chicão, I have nothing to say against him. Whenever I needed, he helped me, and many indigenous individuals still like him. If you go interviewing people around, you'll see many indigenous people still like him as the head of the IPS, understand? (SILVA, 10 out. 2019).

José Apoena Soares Meireles, son of Francisco Meireles, was born in the Xavante indigenous reserve, on the Pimentel Barbosa indigenous land, in Mato Grosso in 1949. The delivery was assisted by the *sertanista* Noel Nutels, close to Rio das Mortes (Death River) (NEWLANDS, 1985). The name Apoena was a homage paid by his father, Francisco Meireles, to a Xavante tribal leader, whom he had met during his first contact with that ethnic group in the 1940s (BECKESTEIN, 2004). In the Xavante language, Apoena means "the one who sees further". In fact, Apoena spent his first years of life among this indigenous people. The Meireles lived in the city of Rio de Janeiro; however, Apoena accompanied his father in several contact expeditions, since he was 8 years old. Thus, he grew up among them, learned their idiom, their costumes, and their direction skills within the forest. According to Apoena Meireles,

The forest is our mother, it gives us everything we need: it kills our thirst and hunger, protects us against the cold, shelters us, and provide resources to cure diseases. We only need to like it and know it. Unlike the ocean, it does not kill anybody (NEWLANDS, 1985).

When Apoena was 15 years old, he started to learn how to work in the Parakanã attraction front, in the region where years later the Tucuruí hydroelectric power plant was built (Tocantins River, Pará). When he was 18, he joined his father in the work with the Cinta Larga indigenous group. At this age, he also contacted the Paiter Suruí tribe.

When Apoena was 20 years old, he worked almost alone in the official contact with the Paiter Suruí, and when he was 24, he joined the Waimiri-Atroari attraction front. In the following year, he established relations with the Avá-Canoeiro and Krenhacarore (also known as Panará) indigenous groups. When he was 28 years old, he contacted the Zoró people, traditional enemies of the Paiter Suruí, and negotiated the peace between these two ethnic groups. At the age of 30, he approached and started conversations with the first Uru-eu-wau-wau indigenous groups (GOMES, 2008).

Therefore, with his work in the attraction fronts, Apoena Meireles demonstrated how well he learned several techniques from his father, Francisco Meireles. One of these techniques was named the traditional “courtship” technique, which before Francisco Meireles used it, had already been applied by Rondon. Such technique consisted in clearing a place in the woods where a kind of hut was built with some gifts in it, such as pans or knives, next, a path was opened that led to that ‘attraction’ which had to be located close to the indigenous and non-indigenous places enabling the contact between them. Such attraction technique requires a lot of patience since, many times, months pass before the first indigenous approximations occurred. Afterwards, intense exchange of gifts from both sides occurred, thus creating some trust from one group to the other, which was usually followed by an amicable contact. This was mainly carried out with indigenous populations that saw non-indigenous individuals as a real threat. Referring to the use of this type of technique, Apoena Meireles wrote about his work “promoting peace” among the Cinta Larga:

The pacification work took around three years [...] the traditional method was applied, that is, gradual phases of “courtship” (exchange of gifts left in huts, which included arrows, necklaces, bracelets, among others, swapped for knives, pans, and other useful utensils) until a peaceful contact was obtained (MEIRELES, 1973, p. 16).

Apoena can be considered a good follower of his father, Francisco. However, he had his own point of view, which was also integrationist, but less than his father. Because he had grown up among indigenous groups, his fight was something in his personality that blended with the indigenous world. He seemed to have an immediate and silent communication with it (LEONEL; MINDLIN, 2007). Throughout the dictatorship period, the young Apoena took part in the important parade of the *Cem Mil* (a Hundred Thousand) in

Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro, in June 1968. At that time, he was arrested twice; however, for working in the interior, he kind of managed to scape from the oppression of the military dictatorship seen in urban centers. Many of his colleagues were chased, mainly with the application of the Institutional Act 5, of 1968 (AI-5)⁹. During his work as a *sertanista*, Apoena experienced some facts that marked his life story forever.

The *sertanista*'s task was not free of suffering, fight, disappointments, and human losses, which in Apoena Meireles's case marked his personality. He knew that the first contacts were always tragic for the indigenous groups since they were exposed to illnesses, for example, which could kill them. But he was also aware, that it could not be done differently since they were trying to protect the indigenous peoples from the advancement of the civilization borders. Regarding the Paiter Suruí, who had been officially contacted in 1969, diseases infected their population in such a way that in 1971, the Paiter Suruí decided to leave their tribes in the forest and get accommodated at the Funai unit, to receive medical treatment (MINDLIN, 1985).

At the same time, Apoena also lost people that were very close to him. The first losses he felt were those of the journalist Possidônio Cavalcanti Bastos, who in 1969 started to work as a *sertanista* along with Apoena and his father, in the initial contact phase with the Cinta Larga group, and Acrísio Lima, a Funai civil servant. Both Possidônio and Acrísio were killed in 1973 by the Cinta Larga indigenous groups, who felt threatened by the invasions to their territories carried out by the Itaporanga Colonizing Company (MILANEZ, 2015).

According to Márcio Gomes (2008), it was all a big misunderstanding. Their bodies were found by Apoena decomposing in the forest, which impacted him quite strongly. There was also a serious accident that exploded the plane piloted by his friend Ari Dal Toé and was witnessed by Apoena. Another great loss that marked Apoena's personality was that of his fellow Zé Bel, who after having lived 15 years with indigenous groups, was killed by a bullet on his chest, nobody ever found out whether it was an accident, a murder, or a suicide. For Apoena, Zé Bel's death made him feel "mutilated" (NEWLANDS, 1985).

⁹The Institutional Act number Five (AI-5) was the hardest of all Institutional Acts issued by the dictatorship president Artur da Costa e Silva on 13th December 1968. The AI-5 resulted in some politicians that opposed the military regime losing their offices in interventions ordered by the president in municipalities and states, and the suspension of any constitutional guarantees, which ended up resulting in the institutionalization of torture, commonly used as a valid instrument in the military regime.

Apoena Meireles opened his own path, after learning from his father Francisco Meireles. He earned the recognition of his peers, not without persistency, struggle, and dialogue, and became a personality admired by the ethnic groups he worked with. For the Paiter Suruí, the personality Apoena Meireles will never be forgotten. They even named a school after Apoena Meireles within their territory located in Sete de Setembro. On the other hand, Apoena will also be remembered by the disastrous forced contact with the Avá-Canoeiro group and his participation in the Kanoé tribe contact. The two main negative episodes in Apoena Meireles's career. Apoena Meireles reached the position of Funai president, for a short period, between November 1985 and May 1986, during the government of President Sarney.

Apoena Meireles's thought regarding the indigenous issue in Brazil was summarized in his testimony to Newlands in 1985: "the indigenous issue is not a problem to be solved by me, by the Villas-Bôas, or by anyone else. It is a structural issue, a problem of the majority".

Final Considerations

The personality of the Brazilian *sertanista*, during the XX century, stood out for being a historical actor who helped to cushion the impact of the contact between the self-isolated indigenous people and typical national border society, becoming a bridge between the indigenous and the non-indigenous worlds. Marshal Rondon was the pioneer of the Brazilian contact *sertanismo* on the borders of different territories and managed to incorporate large tracts of land populated by indigenous peoples into Brazilian national society. Rondon was also at the forefront of a new non-violent formula to deal with self-isolated indigenous peoples, although it must be recognized that the expansion of the agricultural frontier within indigenous territories in the Amazon was and has been quite violent, as can be seen even today, with the case of the Yanomami.

Francisco Meireles and his son Apoena continued the work following the principles adopted by Rondon. However, the non-violent way of contacting the indigenous people was not without dangers, as some *sertanistas* died while carrying out their work, in addition to having to deal with historical contexts that were not favorable to the indigenous cause. For years, they coexisted with the different policies adopted to deal with newly contacted indigenous people, the integrationist one (initiated by Rondon and continued by the Meireles)

and the protectionist one (by the Villas-Bôas brothers). However, the two different policies had the same objective: to protect indigenous peoples.

In summary, these two conceptions of understanding the world established by Brazilian *sertanistas*, somehow helped to mitigate the impact that the typical society of the Amazon economic border had on the indigenous populations recently absorbed by the capitalist economic system. The profession of *sertanistas* was exclusive to Brazil and mixed bureaucratic, ethnographic, exploratory and indigenist activist work. The role of the *sertanista* historical subjects stood out for developing a high degree of empathy with the indigenous populations.

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