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Diamonds' Glitter Fades for a Brazilian Tribe



Lalo de Almeida for The New York Times

A Cinta-Larga tribe member played a traditional instrument in the Roosevelt Indigenous Area in Brazil.

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ROOSEVELT INDIGENOUS AREA, Brazil — Some of the world's most abundant deposits of diamonds are embedded in the reddish soil of the Amazon jungle here. But for the Cinta-Larga Indians who live on this remote reservation, that discovery has brought more misfortune than riches.



In April, the Cinta-Larga tribe and Brazil's environmental police agreed to close a diamond mining camp in the Roosevelt Indigenous Area.

Outside miners began prospecting in earnest in 1999 and soon overran the Indians' lands, bringing with them drink, drugs, disease and prostitution. Dazzled by the promise of quick wealth from their dealings with the outsiders, tribal leaders have accumulated debts they cannot pay — especially now that the police have set up roadblocks on the reservation's borders to prevent illegal diamond trafficking.

Cinta-Larga means Broad Belt in Portuguese, a reference to the tribe's former habit of wearing bark sashes around the waist. For generations, the Cinta-Largas chose to live in isolation here along the banks of the Roosevelt River, named for Theodore Roosevelt, who led an expedition through this region of the southwestern Amazon some 90 years ago.

“Back then, we had no idea what diamonds were worth,” recalled Roberto Carlos Cinta-Larga, a tribal leader who, following tradition, uses the tribe's name as his surname. “We didn't have money in those days and didn't even

really know what money was, because our nature was to stay apart from everyone else and not cultivate friendships.”

But in the 1960s, a highway was built west of here, opening the jungle to exploitation by loggers. The discovery of gold, tin and finally diamonds increased the opportunities for the Cinta-Largas but also their resentment of white encroachments on land that the Brazilian government had set aside for them.

Two years ago, the tensions finally boiled over. In an episode that is still under investigation, and for reasons that remain unclear, the Cinta-Largas killed 29 miners who were working without their permission at the mine on the reservation.

Since then, the Cinta-Largas have become the most notorious of Brazil’s hundreds of Indian tribes, reviled in the press as bloodthirsty savages who want the diamonds for themselves and insulted when they leave their reservation for nearby towns. In hopes of countering those negative portrayals, tribal leaders recently invited this reporter to visit.

“We want it known that, despite what our enemies say, we are not mining diamonds,” Ita Cinta-Larga, another tribal leader, said as he inspected the mining pit and its collection of abandoned hoses and sluices. “We still catch miners trying to sneak in now and then, but it’s pretty calm here now, and that’s the way we want to keep it.”

In return for an \$810,000 grant for community development from the Brazilian government, the Cinta-Largas agreed in April to shut down the mine, allow the state environmental police to patrol the site and refrain from killing intruders. But the money is now running out, and Pio Cinta-Larga, a tribal leader, warned that unless more help is forthcoming, “when the year ends, the truce expires with it.”

Mauro Sposito, director of the Brazilian Federal Police’s Amazon task force, said that in view of the tribe’s history, such threats must be taken seriously. “We know that they are violent and that something could occur, which is why the main principles of our activities from the start have been to try to negotiate and avoid the use of brute force,” he said.

Ivaneide Bandeira Cardozo works with an environmental and indigenous rights group, Kaninde. She cites another factor that the tribe is reluctant to discuss out of shame and embarrassment. “From what the Cinta-Larga women told me, they were tired of seeing the miners raping girls as young as 14 and bringing in drugs,” she said. “So they pressed their men to take a stand.”

Rômulo Siqueira de Sá, an official of the National Indian Foundation, the government agency that deals with indigenous affairs, said diamond money led many Cinta-Largas to buy cars, houses and other goods on credit through white intermediaries. With the mine shut and government funds running out, he said, they have fallen behind on payments and are facing repossession claims. As a result, the pressure to resume illicit diamond trading and reopen prospecting to outsiders is growing.

“The chiefs want government money so that they can pay private debts derived from illegal activities, and there is no possibility whatsoever that the government is going to do that,” Mr. Sposito said. “Brazilian law does not permit such a thing. What the government can do is support the development of the community and provide orientation, but not more than that.”

Most of the Cinta-Larga leaders are men in their late 50s and early 60s, from a generation that the Brazilian anthropologist Ines Hargreaves calls “the orphans of contact.” They were born while the tribe lived in isolation, and so they can vaguely recollect both that idealized past and the suffering they experienced as children when Brazilian society erupted into their world with violence and disease.



The Roosevelt Indigenous Area contains rich diamond deposits.

“I was already a teenager by the time miners had killed thousands of our people, gunning them down in their malocas,” or lodge houses, said Ita Cinta-Larga, who gave his age as about 60. “My own father died that way, and I can still remember the bodies laid out and everyone crying.”

All told, 27 Cinta-Larga leaders have been named as suspects in the investigation into the killings of the miners. Though none of the leaders interviewed here would admit direct responsibility, they all acknowledged that members of the tribe were involved in the killings, which they said were the result of their frustration at seeing their complaints ignored by Brazilian authorities.

“We had asked the Federal Police over and over again to make the miners leave, and when they didn’t we took miners prisoner and delivered them to the police ourselves,” said Pio Cinta-Larga, who often serves as the tribe’s liaison to the outside world. “But the police would release them the same day, and the miners would immediately come back and threaten and make fun of us Indians. So we said, ‘Enough is enough, let’s show these people who we are.’ ”

Mr. Sposito acknowledged that the tribe had turned in miners but noted that those who illegally invaded Indian territory were entitled to be freed on bail under Brazilian law. That explanation does not satisfy the Cinta-Largas, who see the police checkpoints on roads leading in and out of the reservation as an infringement upon their sovereignty rather than as a measure meant to protect them.

“These are our lands, and we’re in charge here,” said João Bravo Cinta-Larga, whom critics of the tribe have singled out as perhaps the most intransigent of the chiefs. “No one can come in here and tell us what to do. We have never allowed ourselves to be dominated by anyone, and we’re not going to start now.”

Depending on how it is used, the word “bravo” can mean either courageous or irate in Portuguese. João Bravo Cinta-Larga seems to be both, complaining bitterly that the nickname “Lord of the Stones,” given to him by the Brazilian press, and the accusations that he has used the diamond wealth to enrich himself at the expense of his own community are malicious lies.

“I had a power plant built so that we can have electricity, and we also started a fish farming project,” he said. “We are not just diamonds.”

Other Cinta-Larga leaders have used money from diamonds to buy large herds of cattle or to invest in orchards, hoping to sell fruit to the Brazilian market. But the police say that tribal leaders also have hundreds of diamonds hidden away and that they have concealed mining equipment in the jungle, ready to resume prospecting on short notice.

Recently, the Cinta-Largas were persuaded to sell some of their stones through the government's savings banks rather than illegally to middle men, the argument being that they would get a fairer price. But the auction fetched much less than the Indians expected, adding to their distrust of the government.

"They promised that representatives of our people would be flown to the auction to see how it was done, and then they didn't keep their word," Pio Cinta-Larga complained. "There were a lot of good stones, but instead of the millions they said we would see, we got almost nothing. They deceived us, just as the white man always does."

Mr. Sposito responded that the Indians seemed to have forgotten that "taxes exist, and we can't create a law that eliminates that." He added: "The leaders are aware of this. They all have cars and drivers licenses and bank accounts and houses in town. So they know what their obligations are."

Geologists say the diamond potential of the reservation here has barely been scratched. Tribal leaders, however, seem torn between contradictory desires: to keep outsiders away so that they can exploit the wealth themselves and to leave the diamonds in the ground untouched.

"I used to think that money was good and that I wanted to be rich, but now I don't," Pio Cinta-Larga said. "A little bit might be good, but a lot is not. It only brings problems and suffering, when what we really want is tranquillity."