

the Krahós' white chief



Named paí, or village chief, of the Krahó Indians, the author, covered with feathers set in liquid rubber, is carried triumphantly around the settlement

A VISIT TO A BRAZILIAN TRIBE ON THE TOCANTINS RIVER

HARALD SCHULTZ

"THE KRAHÓS inhabit the right bank of the Tocantins River." This is the customary formula for starting off all "serious" and orthodox articles written about this and other Brazilian tribes.

Some of us, however, wanted to find out more about the Krahós, and gladly accepted the Indian Protection Service's invitation to join its 1947 expedition. Fifty-five staff members took part—including the then director of the service, José Malcher—in addition to journalists, radio men, photographers, motion-picture cameramen, scientists, a doctor, a nurse, engineers, and some who were just curious. I went along for the ride, with my distinguished chief, Professor Herbert Baldus, who is the "father" of Brazilian ethnology and was my professor at the School of Sociology and Political Science in São

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Paulo. In those days we used to call him "Cunhambebe," after the notorious Tupinambá Indian chief who had gone down in Brazilian history as "the greatest man-eater of all times."

The Indian Protection Service was set up by the Brazilian Government in the early part of this century and soon came under the guidance of Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, an army officer—at present a marshal—considered by Brazilians as the Indians' best friend. Some administrations have given the Service more assistance than others, but despite its ups and downs it has established 110 reservations manned by heroic young agents.

On the reservations (or posts) the Indians receive economic and social aid; capable teachers run schools where the children learn about the white man's way of life; and the Service defends the Indians' territorial rights, assuring them, whenever possible, legal title to their lands.

Our party set out toward the banks of the Araguaia, a legendary and wonderful river that cuts through the

jungle in the heart of Brazil and links that part of the country with the Amazon. (The poor river has lately become more and more of a mecca for tourists from all over the world.) When we arrived, we were told that the boat chartered to take us downriver had not arrived, nor was there any news of it. And I won't go into what happens to a large and heterogeneous group like ours when it is marooned in a small town without any of the modern comforts. I decided to go on, boat or no boat, and I easily persuaded both Professor Baldus and Dr. Malcher to join me in a canoe and start out ahead of the others. We could at least pick up some samples of Indian crafts.

Finding a good canoe was not easy, but we had no difficulty in obtaining the few supplies we would need: rice, salt, sugar, coffee, manioc flour, a little lard, a rifle, fish hooks, blankets, and good humor. I nearly forgot to mention matches, without which we could not cook.

We were joined by three Xerente Indians from the Tocantins River region, who happened to be in the little Araguaia town and wanted to go home, and a Javahé Indian whose familiarity with the Araguaia's tricks was welcome. We had no desire to kill ourselves rowing, so we just let ourselves drift downstream, watching the breathtaking scenery of blue sky and lovely clouds, thick woods and open fields. We listened to the water birds' screeching and watched the porpoises play. Here and there we saw a little house or cluster of houses on the shore. We drifted on for days, fishing for our meals and digging a soft bed in the warm sand of the long white beaches.

On the eleventh day out, the rest of the party caught up with us and put an end to our idyl. As I had foreseen, tension was rife; but it did not hinder our work.

From Bananal Island, the center of the Karajá Indians'

The Krahós' favorite sport, relay races in which they carry logs weighing two hundred pounds, develops strength for survival



domain, the group went on to the Rio das Mortes (River of Deaths) to try and locate the fearsome Xavantes, who were then being pacified. I chose to continue on down the Araguaia to the Tocantins, where I hoped to look up the Krahós and get better acquainted with them. This time we made it non-stop in a canoe fitted with an out-board motor. My companion lived near a Karajá reservation and wanted to find himself a bride from a family he knew near the Tocantins. When we arrived at Santa Maria do Araguaia, we found donkeys and a guide for the difficult overland crossing from the Araguaia to the Tocantins. Six days later, after walking through thick underbrush and climbing the Serra do Estrondo (Thunderclap Ridge), we reached the left bank of the Tocantins. The poor donkeys were so small my feet dragged along the ground as we rode. But they were brave animals; without flinching they tackled a steep hill offering only



Krahó men take advantage of the dry season to complete a new roof before the torrential rains of winter come

gravel, loose sand, and big boulders for a footing. I knew that if my donkey couldn't make it we would both be hurled into space.

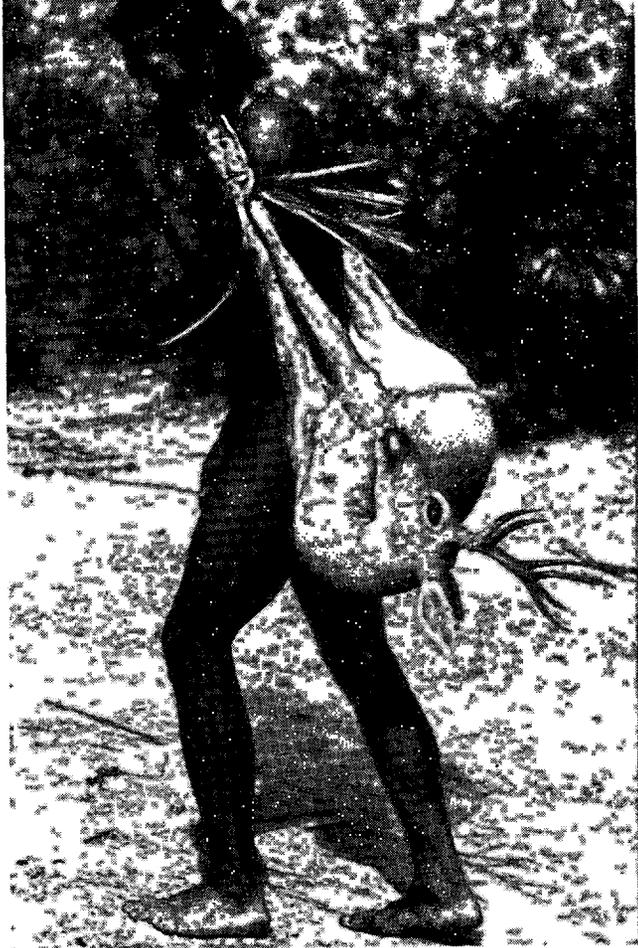
Three more days of riding along the right bank of the Tocantins and we were in Krahó country. Surprisingly, their village was empty except for an old woman with many chins, her daughter, her son-in-law, and her two sick grandchildren. The others were all away on their summer hunt. The old lady was washing a gourd in the clear water, and as we approached she asked: "Does the gentleman bring many pretty things for us, or is he tightfisted?"

We were invited to their house and asked to cure the sick babies. Every time I'm in the jungle, somebody mistakes me for a doctor, and more often than not I have no choice but to try and bring them relief. Fortunately, this time I succeeded. The next day, when I went back, the good old woman looked at me affectionately and offered to cut my hair Krahó style, which meant pruning it to expose the scalp along two parallel lines from forehead to neck. I agreed. She painted my face

red and declared that from then on I was her grandson and that my name was Vuvú. She was serious, too. When the men came back from hunting, I was introduced to them all as Vuvú and soon my new relatives were calling me *Ketí* ("little uncle") or *Itúa* ("my nephew"), and I, in turn, had to call her *Tuí* ("granny"). Happy people these, glad to be alive, though none of the problems brought by their recent contact with civilization had been solved.

In the evening we would sit outside in the round clearing in the center of the village and talk things over. One broad avenue circled around the village, and from each house a perfectly straight and well-kept path led to the central plaza, which measured roughly 660 feet in diameter. Each day started with the young women standing facing the sun and singing, and ended the same way, after long hours of hard work interspersed with fun, sports, dances, and more songs.

Many years before they had been great hunters, but more recently they were forced to turn to agriculture. The old women told us that in days gone by you could see the tracks of tapirs, pigs, wild deer, and anteaters, and the hunters would bring back so much meat they had to drag it. The women would make *berarubus*, enormous meat pies that can measure up to thirteen feet square on special occasions. Here is how they do it: They make a dough of manioc flour, spread it on a layer of banana leaves on the ground, and top it with the meat. Then they fold the leaves around the food, tie it with



João Creoulo is the champion hunter—and Don Juan—of the village. But inroads of civilization have made deer like this a rarity

the family unit—a fundamental trait in Indians.

But such fat days did not last. The Indians had the best pastures and the most fertile fields, a condition that civilized men, always eager for economic progress, obviously could not tolerate. After all, economic progress is sacred, the sky is the limit, and if you happen to disagree, worse luck to you. Their lands were invaded by whites who owned horses, dogs, and firearms. They would bring in their own herds and kill off the horses the Indians used for hunting. These lands had belonged to the Indians, for thousands of years. Nevertheless the new "owners" thought it their right to expel, even to kill, people who had no place in their economic mechanism, although these people owed nothing whatever to civilization.

Hunger became acute. The Indians would go hunting as before, but they came back empty-handed; they would go farther out, with the same results. For days on end all they had to eat was a little boiled manioc, with no salt, no fat, not even a little meat to flavor it. One day the men might manage to bag a wild deer, but the hunters had to distribute the meat equally among all the villagers; they themselves would get nothing, for if a hunter eats of the animal he has killed, his weapon will never again hit the mark. Then after more days and days with nothing but manioc roots, a sweet potato, a little rice, the Indians would become sad and cease to sing at night; in the morning, however, they would feel good again and sing a welcome to the new day before the sun



Typical scene in one of the Krahós' three remaining villages. Their peaked houses are covered with palm thatch

strips of bark, and place the package on red-hot rocks. They cover the whole thing with palm leaves and earth, and let it roast overnight. The next day the Krahós' national dish is ready, and everyone gets an equal share, even widows and orphans, the sick, and others who did not help. Share-and-share-alike is the Krahós' rule, but this does not mean that they are promiscuous morally or in their treatment of material things. On the contrary, they adhere to the principles of individual property and

rose on the horizon. Hope was born anew, and they had faith in destiny once more.

In the evening discussions we decided their best way out would be to substitute cattle-raising for hunting; they could kill a cow, share the meat as usual, then enjoy their traditional log races. No change in ritual at all. They were delighted.

These meetings had their comic side: the men wore no clothes at all, yet they spoke Portuguese like any of the white farmers living near by. Seated around on the sand in the plaza the village chief and the "council of elders" looked for all the world like a bunch of city nudists holding a convention. Whenever a commercial airliner flew over, they insisted on knowing which company it belonged to and whether the war was over or the Germans were still going around killing all the world's citizens, including the Krahó Indians. That bit of intelligence they had picked up in a remote town they had once visited.

Days, weeks, finally three months went by, and we were still there among these sincere, friendly Indians. Summer's heat and drought were over, and the first dark clouds of the rainy season gathered on the horizon. This is the time for the Krahós to start their initiation rites, and they make merry for days on end, for the new crops have been planted and they must wait for the rains before they can cultivate them.

On a beautiful evening toward the end of summer, we were bathing as usual in the crystal-clear river after the



The young boys' ear lobes are pierced and larger and larger wooden discs inserted. The girls think this makes them very handsome



At right, an adult dons his discs

log race, a daily event enjoyed by the men, young and old alike.

"Vuvú! You shall be our *paí*!" one of them said to me.

I paid no attention, but a while later another repeated, "You shall be our *paí*!" Since I wasn't sure of what "being a *paí*" meant, I asked him.

"*Paí* is our big chief. He must separate two who are fighting. He must see that no one fights in the village. We choose our *paí* from another village, because then he can separate fighters much better."

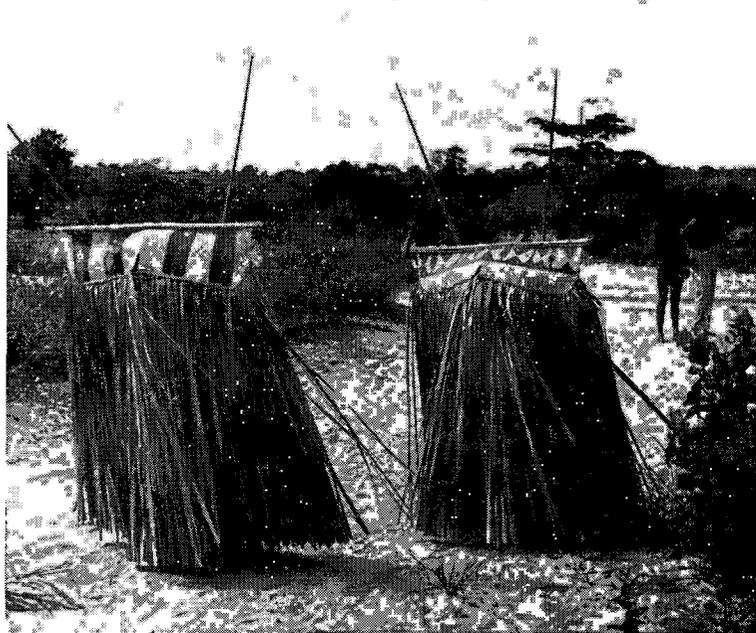
I began to understand. "But when will that be?" I

asked. "As soon as the children's ceremony is over," he said.

I thought at first that he was joking, but when I returned to the "governor's" house he told me: "The council of elders has unanimously decided that you shall be the village *paí*."

The next day the initiation rites were over, and in the afternoon a group of men approached me and explained that they needed powder for their guns. "What for?" I said. "For the *paí* celebration," was all they said.

I gave them what they wanted, and they left. In the small hours of the morning, while I still slept soundly



In summer ritual called Kukrit, masked dancers circle the village, begging food by whistling

—I like my forty winks, and could never keep up with the Indians—someone shook my hammock: "Vuvú, wake up! The time has come!" I fell from the hammock, and realized that the whole village had gathered in front of the chief's house. They led me in silence to the river and told me to wade right in. The water was cold. Four young fellows bathed me ritually, sprinkling my body and head; then they told me to wait in the water while they all bathed.

One approached and told me to get on his back. I weigh at least 190 pounds, but he lifted me with no effort, for he was used to carrying fifty- to two-hundred-pound logs while running a race. With me on his shoulders, he walked up the steep ravine and went on to the village plaza, some three hundred yards away. All the others trotted along. In the plaza they put me down on a straw mat, and four men bent over me, two holding in their hands long cylinders of rolled-up palm leaves filled with liquid latex. This they proceeded to rub over most of my body. The other two fellows dug into some folded leaves and came out with bird feathers, which they stuck to my body. Next, they coated me with another layer of liquid rubber. It took ten minutes or more in all, but it was so startling that I had no chance to get my bearings.

Once that was over, four women came along with gourds and while three of them started to dye my hands, forearms, face, and neck a bright red, the other spread coconut oil over my head.

Meanwhile, everybody had gathered around the plaza, holding their weapons—the more prosperous had “guns you feed by the mouth,” more useful today than bows and arrows—and watching silently.

“Now you’re ready,” they announced. “Wait a minute.” One of the husky Indians bent down and bade me climb on his shoulders. He lifted me easily and walked down to the wide, clean avenue that circles the village. The whole population followed, shouting gleefully, the men shooting into the air. When one carrier tired, another crouched, and together they moved me to a third man’s shoulders. The triumphant march picked up again where it had left off, with shouts and shots as before. I had been told to raise my arms up high but I felt less than safe, for one of my arms still bothered me as a result of injuries suffered at the hands of another tribe in northern Mato Grosso State years earlier. But these boys were thoughtful and helped me keep my balance. All around the village we went—more than half a mile. Meanwhile a kind of relay race was taking place, with me for the baton. My carriers walked steadily and fast, but suddenly I was aware of a new softness, gentler steps. I looked down and saw full breasts below me. Somewhat disconcerted, I realized one of the women was carrying me now, a marked sign that they liked the new village chief.

She got an even better hand than the men. She started to run ahead of the others. Then she would stop, turn around suddenly, and stroll among the people, who applauded frantically. Another girl took over, and this kept up for a while until the men were again entrusted with the honor of carrying me. Once more in the plaza, they gingerly placed me for the second time on the straw mat.

Then a socially and politically significant event happened for which I was unprepared. The chief of rituals approached and began to speak in this vein: “Vuvú! We have made you our *paí* because we like you. You have lived with us in this village for many moons, followed us on our hunts, joined our daily log races, danced and sung with us at night in the plaza. You have shared our joys and our sorrows. Now you know we are peaceful people who earn our living from the land and by difficult hunting. But not everyone knows we are peaceful Indians who do not want war. Years ago they accused us of stealing cattle; they attacked our villages while our men were away; and they killed our women, young girls, and children. And we ask you: did you see any signs that we are cattle thieves? You know we are good, hard-working people, and we know you are our friend. Tomorrow you will return to your people, and we have a request to make. Do not forget you are our *paí*, we have made you our *paí* because we want you to defend us when you are with your people who attacked us years ago. If you hear of a plan to attack our villages again, you must try to prevent it.

“Now you may try your power here in the village to

prove that you are indeed our *paí*, and every time you return, you will be respected as a *paí*.”

They were all standing quite still, some with their faces and bodies colorfully painted. I answered the moving speech as best I could and promised I would never forget them. But then, how could I ever forget this weird, touching tribute from people we dare call “primitive”?

After the ceremonies, some disappeared, and I thought that was the end of it. I wanted to wash, for all that liquid rubber and feathers had dried and my skin felt itchy. But the order was to wait. A minute later some Indians came bearing many gifts, which they placed at my feet. They were all things they had made with their own hands—bows and arrows, clubs, mats, and lovely feather ornaments and cloth ribbons. Finally a woman brought two beautiful tame parrots. Gifts of welcome for the new Krahó chief!

The ritual was over, and I went bathing with the others. I had thought the feathers would fall off, but they stuck to my body, matted and ugly. The rubber held them fast, and when I tried plucking them off, I had to give up. It was too painful. I had to sleep as I was, and dreamed that I was a plumed bird. It was ten days before I got rid of all the feathers, and even so, it took help.

The next day I had to return to civilization. About fifty Indian men and women followed me for miles to the Protection Service’s cattle farm, where I was allowed to present the Krahós with a hefty bull. Back to the village they went, each carrying a fresh cut of beef.

I shall never forget the Krahós. I consider them my friends, just as I do all the Indians in America. My only regret is that I have neither the wealth nor the political power to help them. Their chief problem is hunger, the result of the white man’s killing off their game. They need a good herd of cattle, belonging to and controlled by the tribe. It is not true that Indians are unable to look after their possessions. The few Krahós I saw who owned some cattle refused to kill them even when hunger was at its worst. They rightly thought they should be kept alive for breeding and to provide milk for the children. A pitiful gesture, considering that there were only two or three head. A shortage of game has already forced them to turn to agriculture, and they eat virtually nothing but vegetables and fruit. However, they are natural hunters and semi-nomadic, and cattle-raising under their own management would logically be the next step. Of course, this does not mean that the Protection Service isn’t doing all it can for the Indians.

Surely there must be owners of large herds who would gladly give some cattle to the Krahós and thus rescue this humble, kind, and interesting people from disaster. Why do I single out the Krahós? Simply because I have an obligation to them and I must do my best to answer their appeal.

It is unbelievable that the original owners of this Hemisphere will find no friends to give them back what is rightfully theirs. If not large tracts of land and the freedom they once enjoyed, then at least a livelihood, a place in the sun. ♦ ♦ ♦