

Spreading Faith, and Disease

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Opinion

This article is part of the Opinion series [The Amazon Has Seen Our Future](#), about how the people of the region are living through the most extreme versions of our planet's problems.

As the coronavirus spread across the Amazon in March, the evangelical organization New Tribes Mission of Brazil was preparing for a mission to the Javari Valley — a remote region near the border with Peru that is home to one of the world's [largest](#) concentration of Indigenous peoples.



With a newly acquired helicopter, the group [reportedly planned](#) to contact and convert the [Korubo](#) tribe that lives in the valley in voluntary isolation. The operation risked spreading the coronavirus and other dangerous infections to people highly vulnerable to diseases transmitted by outsiders.

The missionaries organized flights into the Javari Valley until [late March](#). In April, a Brazilian judge [banned](#) them and other missionary groups from entering the area. (In response to criticism, the [group denied](#) that it planned to contact isolated tribes, and has said that it does not work with isolated peoples.)

There is an evangelical conquista happening across Latin America and, in the struggle for religious hegemony, Amazonia is a sought-after prize. According to one survey, evangelicals now [outnumber](#) Catholics in the region. Evangelical missionaries [are also entering](#) politics,

where they are trying to shape policy to make it easier to reach the last tribes.

In February, President Jair Bolsonaro appointed Ricardo Lopes Dias, an evangelical missionary at New Tribes Mission turned anthropologist, to Brazil's National Indian Foundation, or FUNAI. Mr. Lopes Dias is now in charge of the coordination of isolated and recently contacted Indians and appears positioned to turn evangelical goals into policy. His appointment has most likely empowered missionary groups to seek out uncontacted tribes.

This isn't the first time New Tribes Mission of Brazil, an offshoot of the New Tribes Mission in the United States now known as Ethnos360, has risked spreading disease alongside the word of God.

For decades, the mission has made contact with Indigenous communities and sought to convert them. For many years the Brazilian government tried to protect tribes that chose to live in isolation from these incursions. Now the government is essentially backing the missionaries.

In the 1980s, after the New Tribes Mission of Brazil established contact with the Zo'é people in the country's northern Amazon, about a quarter of the Zo'é were wiped out by disease. The missionaries were expelled in the early '90s, but some stayed and in 2015 were accused of enslaving Zo'é people to collect Brazil nuts.

Image



A Zo'é family. After they were contacted by missionaries, the Zo'é were nearly wiped out by disease. Credit...Fiona Watson/Survival International

In 2014, Warren Scott Kennell, a former missionary for the group, was sentenced to 58 years in federal prison for sexually abusing girls who were part of an Indigenous tribe in the Amazon, and photographing the acts.

Even the name of the magazine the New Tribes Mission founded in 1943 — Brown Gold — speaks volumes about its conquering approach.

Mr. Lopes Dias insisted that his past with the missionaries would not influence his work in government. But the anthropologist Edward Mantoanelli Luz, the son of the president of the New Tribes Mission of Brazil, has acknowledged lobbying for Mr. Lopes Dias's appointment to “formally change” the policy, established in Article 231 of the Brazilian Constitution, that guarantees Indigenous peoples’ rights to remain in isolation.

The Indigenous peoples of the Javari Valley denounced Mr. Lopes Dias’s appointment as the “spearhead” of a genocide. Their coordinator, Paulo Marubo, says that “his project is to facilitate missionary entry into Indigenous lands,” and that the Indigenous peoples fear FUNAI will become a tool of religious proselytism in Amazonia.

Image



An evangelical church in Porto Velho, a partially deforested section of the Amazon rainforest. Credit... Mario Tama/Getty Images

Image



Members of Brazil's indigenous affairs agency with a group of Korubo Indigenous people in the Javari Valley in 2015. Credit...Funai

The missions go against the National Indian Foundation's policy to respect the isolation of Indigenous people who refuse contact, against the Indigenous people's constitutional right not to be assimilated, and against the [American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). The missionaries aren't just spreading the word of their god. Their actions undo the self-determination of Indigenous peoples. In the book "[Praying and Preying](#)," the Brazilian anthropologist Aparecida Vilaça explains that the two go hand in hand: Missionaries "civilize" by forbidding ancestral medicine, spirituality and culture.

And they have found in Mr. Bolsonaro a strong ally. [A self-declared lover of mining](#), he has vowed to assimilate Indigenous peoples in Amazonia and compares them to [animals](#). He is opening protected territories to [mining](#) in a move decried by Amazon Indigenous [leaders](#) as [genocidal](#). Mr. Bolsonaro, who was [baptized](#) in 2016 in the Jordan River, relied on the evangelical [vote](#) to win the elections. Indigenous health is not on his agenda, as he demonstrated by [vetoing](#) some provisions of a law to guarantee hospital beds and basic necessities like drinking water to Indigenous communities during the pandemic.

The evangelical missions may be complementary to the Brazilian leader's goals. But they started well before him. [Evangelicals](#) have been controlling Indigenous health for decades, says [Marta Azevedo](#), an anthropologist and a former president of the National Indian Foundation.

When the government of the country's former president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, created the Special Secretariat of Indigenous Health within the Ministry of Health in 2010, labor laws made it illegal to send medical staff to remote Indigenous territories for extended amounts of time.

So the government effectively outsourced most Indigenous health care to another group of evangelicals — the Caiuá Evangelical Mission (“at the service of the Indian, for the glory of God”) that had been providing health services for years to Indigenous communities in the state of Mato Grosso, in southern Amazonia. The government provided the funds and the Caiuá Mission managed them. According to a news article in The Intercept, today the Caiuá Mission runs million-dollar contracts and its budget has increased twelvefold in five years. Only one nonprofit group receives more government funding than it does. In other words, the wolves are paid to watch over the sheep.

The system is a failure and Indigenous health is as precarious as ever. The major danger now is that Covid-19 may kill so many people that it could result in the decimation of entire ethnic and tribal groups. In April, as Covid-19 cases were increasing, a special \$2 million fund intended to protect Indigenous communities from the disease had not yet been spent. Instead, the National Indian Foundation approved a policy authorizing the occupation and sale of Indigenous lands.

Image



A funeral in June in Manaus.Credit...Michael Dantas/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The Brazilian government must cease any form of support for missionaries trying to reach isolated Indigenous peoples, and missionaries should be barred from deciding on Indigenous issues, at both local and federal levels.

The only way forward is to respect Indigenous rights to self-determination, which is easily done simply by applying the law. If the evangelical conquista continues, the losses may very well be irreparable, not only for Indigenous peoples but also for the diversity of the human species.

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