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The way of warriors: annotated narratives of the Mebengokre (Kayapo) in Brazil

The way of warriors: annotated narratives of the Mebengokre (Kayapo) in Brazil, by Gustaaf Verswijver. Turuti Books: Almeria, Spain.

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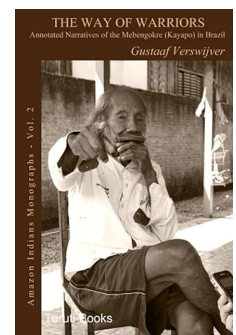
United Kingdom

Anyone writing the history or ethnography of Brazil's Indigenous peoples metaphorically has one hand tied behind their back, because all the published literature is by us—the invaders, the colonizers, conquerors, and recently by missionaries, *sertanistas*, academic historians, and anthropologists. The Indigenous peoples themselves, the original Brazilians, have almost no voice. This book triumphantly reverses this imbalance.

The Belgian Gustaaf Verswijver is one of the very few anthropologists who could have compiled a book like this. In long bursts of field research during the past forty-five years, he has gained the trust, learned the language, become embedded in, and intensely understood the societies of four groups of Mebengokre (the peoples whom their enemies and most of us refer to as Kaiapo). Verswijver (1992) started recording senior Mebengokre people talking about their history and society, and this project grew into his *The club-fighters of the Amazon: warfare among the Kayapo Indians of central Brazil*, and now this great book of no fewer than eighty narratives by twenty-four narrators. The chiefs are allowed to ramble on as long as they wish, recalling events entirely from their Indigenous perspectives with no prompting, influence, or even editing by the anthropologist—but Verswijver does include a mass of explanatory footnotes on every page. The resulting narratives are not easy to read, and are almost impossible to consult by a westerner obsessed by facts, dates, and places. But their Indigenous attitudes and speaking style are of unique value. An *Indigenous* compilation of this magnitude could never be repeated elsewhere.

This mighty 700-page book is too full of Indigenous names to be indexed. But the chapters are arranged roughly chronologically, with a brief comment by the author before each. There are eight important appendices, which include: a fifty-five-page “Glossary” that covers every aspect of Mebengokre life and society; a historical timeline of the four decades between 1928 and 1969; maps; genealogies; and full biographies and photographs of all the distinguished narrators. The most famous of these is eighty-eight-year-old Raoni, who had his arm around President Lula at his recent inauguration, who as an ambassador for all Amazonian peoples visited presidents, monarchs, popes, and celebrities all over the world, who is well known to most of us Salseros, and who regards Verswijver as his son.

For these narrators, killings and fights were understandably highly important. Their narratives are thus inordinately full of killings. (Verswijver warns that narrators may have said “killing” (*kubin*) when they meant only hitting or wounding, or they may have exaggerated their own warrior prowess.) These killings happened for different reasons: vendettas or sorcery within their own communities; quarrels with other Mebengokre groups; attacks on other ethnic peoples such as the Tapirape, Yudja (also known as Juruna), Kisedje (Suiá), Xavante,



Panará, and Xinguanos of the upper river; but above all, against “Kuben” non-Indigenous Brazilian settlers. Attacks on Kuben colonists or seringueiro rubber gatherers were undertaken to steal from them, not because they were perceived as a threat to Indigenous territories. What the Mebengokre wanted were machetes and axes, but above all guns and ammunition. The fearsome warriors, in black genipap body paint and armed with clubs and bows and arrows, became expert in the different rifles and shotguns and lovingly describe the quality and caliber of each weapon they took. There are thrilling accounts of raids, with warriors forcing their way into houses, creeping up on farmers in their *roça* clearings, ambushes, and pitched gun fights in the forest against posses organized to attack them. This raiding covered a huge expanse of central Brazil, with one long excursion as far west as the Tapajós river.

The narratives (and Verrswijver’s erudite footnotes) also contain information about social customs and each speaker’s own progression to manhood. Women often appear, as wives, desirable girlfriends, providers of food, but also as strong personalities in their own right. Movements by the Mebengokre during the mid-twentieth century are described: the migration westwards from tributaries of the Araguaia, the creation of Krinkati (Gorotire), which is still the largest village of this nation, and migrations from Gorotire in its open *campo cerrado* southwest into the forests of the middle and upper Xingu. There were then splits and movements of the villages studied by Verswijver, particularly those of the Metuktire and Mekranoti, between the Xingu, Iriri, and Curuá rivers and their forests.

There were fleeting contacts with well-intentioned outsiders during the 1930s. The Catholic missionary Father Sebastião Thomas had friendly meetings with some Kararao. But in 1935, three American Protestant missionaries, known as the Three Freds because each had that forename, fared worse when they tried to contact the Kubenkranken on the Riozinho river west of Gorotire. A returning hunting party “noticed three Kuben [whites] who were canoeing. They killed them and then took all their belongings. They took their beads, knives and axes.” (164). The Freds had made the mistake of saying that “they wanted to build a big house [church]. The people didn’t want that, so they killed them.” A few years later, the English missionary Horace Banner, of the same order as the Freds, got on quite well with this group. But after that, there was nothing but hatred and warfare on that frontier—as in the American Wild West a century earlier.

Everything changed in the 1950s. By means of presents, the explorer brothers Orlando and Cláudio Villas Boas finally achieved peaceful contact with the Metuktire on the Xingu in 1953. One of Verswijver’s narrators declared that “Cláudio is a very good man. Do you think that he gave us guns so that we would kill each other? No, he was a good man, so instead he gave us axes, glass beads, metal pots, and other things like that.” In 1954, three chiefs led their Mekranoti people far to the northwest to create Piydjam village near the Curuá. (They did this to escape alien disease, but, tragically, these migrants were harder devastated by it than their Metuktire cousins who chose to stay near the Xingu.) The other great Indigenous expert of the time, Francisco “Chico” Meirelles, contacted these migrated Mekranoti, but he had no qualms about firearms. As another narrator recalled: “Meirelles was a truly generous man. He gave me a [Winchester] gun... It was brand new and had a red stock.” The Mekranoti wickedly used their guns for a murderous surprise attack on their old enemies the Panará. But these “pacifications” and their lavish presents put a final stop to Mebengokre raids on “Kuben” Brazilian settlers.

Gustaaf Verswijver’s monumental book ends in the 1960s. I would have loved to hear his Indigenous narrators’ views of the profound changes of the past sixty years. Perhaps this will come in the third volume of his *Amazon Indians monographs*.

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