



World Directory of Minorities

Americas MRG Directory → Brazil → Awá

Print Page

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Awá

Profile

Awá are a nomadic tribe of hunter gatherers referred to by other groups as Guajá, or Wazaiara, 'the owners of the hair garments'. They live in small groups in the hilly Gurupi region of Maranhão state, which borders the Northeast Region. The Awá became nomadic in the 1800s in order to escape violent attacks by colonists from Europe. They traditionally live in small groups of less than 30. They do not fully extinguish their previous fires before they travel, instead they bring the burning embers with them in order to re-light the new hearth. The current population is spread out across three isolated villages of Awa, Guaja and Juriti. The Awá have a very young population, 48 per cent are under the age of 14 (data: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística).

Historical context

From the 1950s Awá lands were drastically reduced by government policy to an area too small to permit them to follow their traditional way of life. The sometimes violent invasions of settlers, ranchers, loggers, miners and charcoal burners, and the diseases they inevitably brought, severely affected numbers. Some Awá were resettled by the National Indian Foundation on neighbouring Guajajara land, causing inter-tribal tension. In spite of international protest Awá-Guajá continued to be the victims of violent attacks in 1993; government delay in demarcating Awá land due to lobbying of local politicians threatened this group with extinction.

Current issues

It has taken over two decades to demarcate Awá land. The government and the state-owned mining company received almost US \$1 billion in 1982 from the World Bank to improve mine transport. Improvements to the railroad system further threatened the Awá way of life as the railway divided the Awá hunting territory. In 1992 the World Bank, sponsored a land demarcation programme for this part of Maranhão, but the land still has not been registered. The railway and the increasing presence of ranchers compromise the Awá's ability to hunt. The Awá people remain on the brink of extinction.

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