

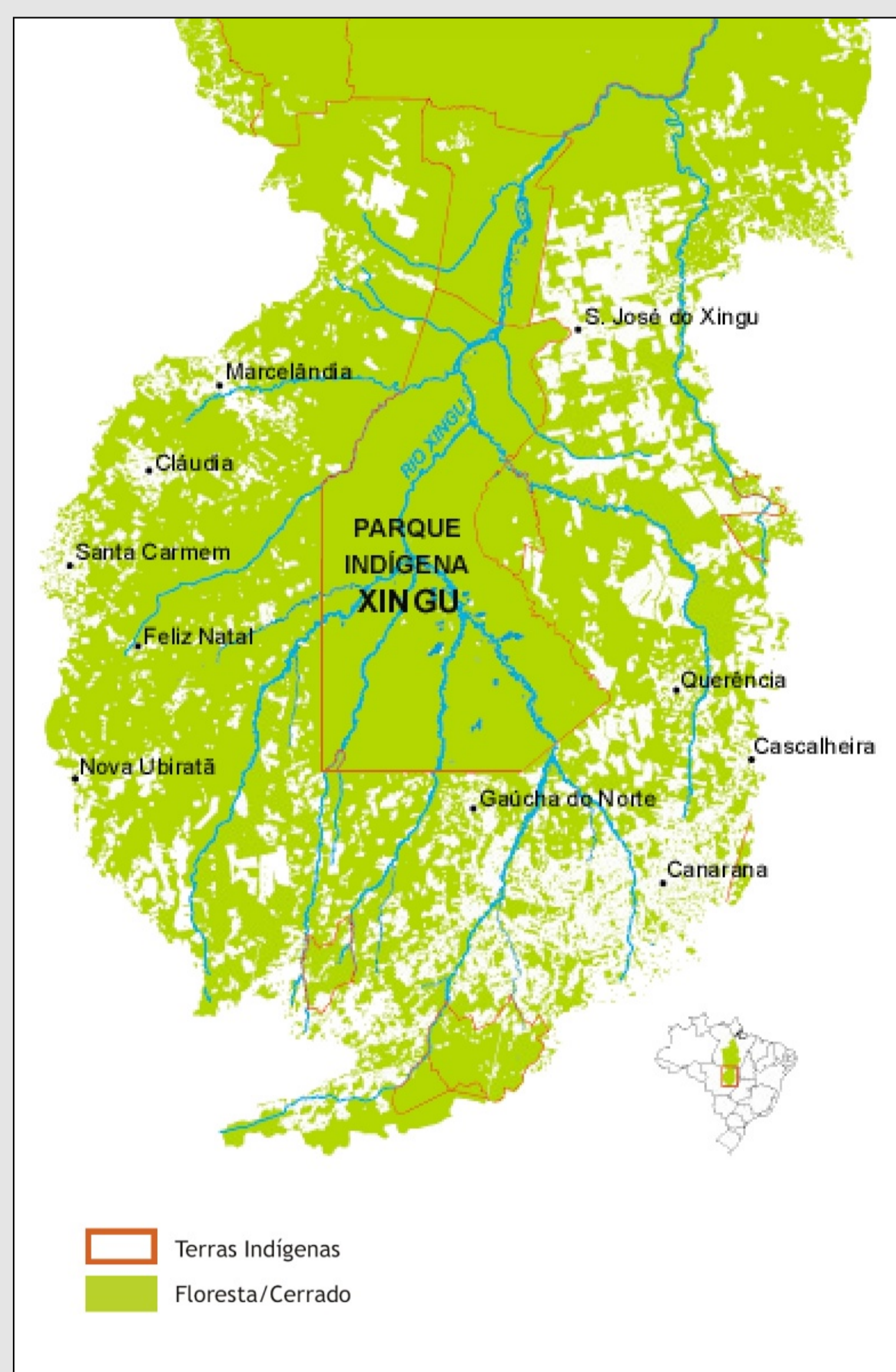


Documentation of a Brazilian isolate language

Background Information

The Trumai people live in the Xingu reserve (Brazil), where several indigenous groups also inhabit. The four major stocks of Brazilian languages are represented there. Trumai, however, does not belong to any of these stocks nor to other small Brazilian linguistic families; genetically speaking, this is an isolate language.

The Trumai villages are located in the medial region of the reserve, but in terms of tradition the group belongs to the Upper Xingu, a fascinating area that has attracted the interest of many researchers, given that the tribes living there share a common cultural system. The Trumai people arrived in the area in the first half of the 19th century, and almost disappeared because of wars and diseases. The group eventually recovered through marriages with people from other tribes and high numbers of births. However, these events had consequences for the future of the language.



The Trumai villages are located in the Xingu reserve, in the central region of Brazil.

Although the Trumai population is more than 100 individuals, the number of people who effectively speak the language is smaller. The other members of the community speak one of the indigenous languages of the region (Kamayurá, Suyá, Aweti, Waurá) and/or Portuguese, the national language of Brazil. There are several historical explanations for the decreasing number of speakers, but nowadays it is the combination of two major factors that explains why Trumai is disappearing: the dispersion of the group in small local units, and the strong presence of Portuguese. The majority of the young members of the community can still understand Trumai but use Portuguese in their communicative interactions.

The Trumai people are aware of the critical situation of their language and are taking several actions in order to protect their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Among these actions was the documentation project described here.



The project targeted the documentation of aspects of the Trumai language, culture, and its oral and ceremonial traditions.

The Project

The general aim of the project was to organize a multimedia archive of Trumai, containing not only linguistic data but also materials about the cultural and social-historical context in which the language is embedded. The intention was to produce an archive which could be a source of information for different kinds of public: the Trumai people themselves, researchers (linguists, anthropologists, historians, etc), and the general public.

The project was realized in the period of 2002-2004, and it involved researchers of the Netherlands (S. Levinson - coordinator), Brazil (R. Guirardello-Damian - linguistic aspects of the project), and France (A. Monod Becquelin and E. de Vienne - historical/anthropological aspects of the project).



The Trumai speakers - especially the young people - participated actively in the documentation, doing recordings, transcriptions, and producing illustrations for the multimedia archive.

The Trumai community participated actively in the organization of the archive, helping in the tasks of selecting topics and recording texts with the equipment acquired for them. They also helped the researchers in the transcription and analysis of texts, and in the elaboration of comments about cultural facts.

Results

Through the documentation work, we obtained a variety of materials: audio and video recordings of texts of several linguistic genres, songs and instrumental music, word lists, field notes, photos, drawings, and other kinds of data which were processed following the guidelines of the DoBeS program. The multimedia archive was built and organized.

Other types of results were achieved as well: (i) linguistic and anthropological scientific research, producing presentations, articles, and a PhD thesis; (ii) publication of educational books in Trumai, as part of the

activities intended to revitalize the use of the language; (iii) training of native speakers to perform their own video recordings and to use computers, as a further support to the revitalization efforts; (iv) collaborative work with other DoBeS projects, especially the Kuikuro and Aweti teams, which also work with Xinguan indigenous groups.

Further Developments

Inspired by the various activities, some Trumai individuals decided to continue their own documentation work after the conclusion of the project. One of the most interesting initiatives was a video about the end of seclusion of a young woman, recorded and produced in 2008 by the members of the Boa Esperança village. It is narrated in Trumai, containing songs and dances, and it was submitted to a video exhibition/competition in Brazil. Such kinds of initiatives are very positive, encouraging the Trumai young generation to value their culture and to make further efforts to preserve it.



Illustration from an educational book in Trumai (published with support from the project).

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