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**An Episode from the Beginnings of Anthropology in the  
Amazon: Curt Nimuendajú and the Xipaya Indians  
– A research in adverse circumstances**

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## **Abstract**

The German ethnologist Curt Unckel Nimuendajú (1883-1945), who had immigrated to Brazil in 1903, moved his permanent residence to Belém in 1913, where he established professional contacts with the Goeldi Museum. Between 1915 and 1919, he survived with precarious jobs, but also carried out field work among the Xipaya Indians in quite adverse circumstances. This is an illuminating episode about the beginnings of anthropology in the Amazon, which allows relativizing some stereotypes about the history of anthropology which are commonly reproduced in social sciences curricula. In addition, it allows shedding a light on an anthropology without universities where still prevailed the influences of German ethnology and where texts written by self-educated researchers were still accepted.

This paper is about a less-known episode of anthropological research in the Amazon region and about a quite uncommon history of anthropological practice. The historical reconstruction and analysis of this case, Curt Nimuendajú's field work among the Xipaya<sup>1</sup> Indians of Pará and the publication of its results, allow shedding a light on a kind of anthropology difficult to imagine nowadays. And it is also a good example for international scientific cooperation in the beginnings of anthropology in the Amazon, when there almost did not exist any institution for anthropological research in the Brazilian Amazon.

## The leading actor

Curt Nimuendajú has already been called “the father of Brazilian anthropology dedicated to the study of indigenous peoples in the last one hundred years” (Gomes 2008: 185)<sup>2</sup>. And Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, in his well-known sequential classification of Brazilian Anthropology, ascribed to Nimuendajú the role of a “culture hero” (*herói civilizador*) for the tradition of ethnological research about indigenous peoples in its “heroic” phase (Cardoso de Oliveira 1988: 109-128).

Curt Unckel was born on April 17, 1883, in Jena, Thuringia, Germany, but emigrated to Brazil in 1903, where he spent two years, 1905-1907, among a group of Guarani Indians of the Batalha river, in São Paulo state. There he was baptized, in 1906, as Nimuendajú, which means ‘who came to sit down among us’ (Dietrich 2013: 80-81). And it was this indigenous name he entered as his surname when he decided to accept the Brazilian citizenship in 1926. Nimuendajú died on December 10, 1945, in a Ticuna village, in São Paulo de Olivença municipality, in the Upper Solimões region, Amazonia, under circumstances not yet solved conclusively, although the hypothesis of murder is

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<sup>1</sup> There are different spellings of this ethnonym in the scientific literature. In this article we use the most common in Brazil nowadays. The pronunciation is [ʃi'paija], which corresponds to Šipáia used by Nimuendajú in his German texts.

<sup>2</sup> “O pai da Antropologia brasileira dedicada aos estudos dos povos indígenas nos últimos cem anos” (transl. P.S.).

by far the most common<sup>3</sup>. More than four decades dedicated to the ethnology of indigenous peoples, with at least some 34, predominantly pioneering, field researches among more than 50 different indigenous ethnic groups and a great number of publications, partially launched posthumously, about various subjects from ethnology, linguistics, and archaeology, besides an extensive correspondence with a great variety of specialists on indigenous topics from different countries, has yielded to Nimuendajú the recognition as one of the greatest authorities on the ethnology of indigenous peoples in Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century. But according to some authors, he was even the greatest during all this period<sup>4</sup>.

Nimuendajú's best known ethnographies are about the Apapokuva-Guarani, Palikur, Apinayé, Xerente, Canela-Ramkokamekrá, and Ticuna. His texts about the Xipaya, however, form part of the beginning of his career as an ethnologist. In other words, they have become known among specialists, but not so much. And this does not have anything to do with its specific qualities. But they are quite different from other texts of the author, and the objective of this article is to explain their particularities by examining their origin in the context of anthropological research in the Amazon region at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Assessing in its totality the works published by Nimuendajú and the secondary literature about his life and work, it becomes evident that the ethnology of indigenous peoples represents a kind of parenthesis for his scientific work, because it has prevailed since his first publication, the famous monograph about the Apapokuva-Guarani (Nimuendajú 1914), until his last fieldwork among the Ticuna, in 1945. However, Nimuendajú also published 18 articles about indigenous languages, which generally present vocabularies or morphological descriptions according to grammatical conventions of his time, but also some comparisons and hypotheses about the genetic relationship of the languages recorded by him. Moreover, he has become well-known as a collector of archaeological and ethnographic objects for Brazilian and European museums and also for his often uncompromising defense of indigenous

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent article Elena Welper offers a kind of genealogy of the different versions of Nimuendajú's death. See Welper (2016).

<sup>4</sup> For recent a bibliographical survey of Nimuendajú's life and work see Schröder (2013).

people's rights to their lands and cultures or even to their mere physical survival. This became illustrated by several articles and reports regarding indigenist politics, but also by a great many of private letters addressed to colleagues and friends in different countries.

## The articles about the Xipaya and its antecedents

Between 1919 and 1929, Nimuendajú published five articles about the culture and language of the Xipaya in *Anthropos*:

- 1) Bruchstücke aus Religion und Überlieferung der Šipáia-Indianer: Beiträge zur Kenntnis der Indianerstämme des Xingú-Gebietes, Zentralbrasilien (part I, 1919/20)<sup>5</sup>;
- 2) Bruchstücke aus Religion und Überlieferung der Šipáia-Indianer: Beiträge zur Kenntnis der Indianerstämme des Xingú-Gebietes, Zentralbrasilien (part II, 1921/22);
- 3) Zur Sprache der Šipáia-Indianer (1923/24)<sup>6</sup>;
- 4) Wortliste der Šipáia-Sprache (part I, 1928)<sup>7</sup>;
- 5) Wortliste der Šipáia-Sprache (Schluss) (part II, 1929).<sup>8</sup>

The first two articles contain almost exclusively indigenous mythical and historical narratives, reproduced in direct speech in German and organized by Nimuendajú according to general topics as “Heaven and earth”, “Souls of the dead and spirits”, “Animal legends” or “Historical and semi-historical traditions”. The anthropologist's informants ‘speak’ indirectly to the reader by means of texts composed on the basis of field notes and their translations. The one and only larger part where the anthropologist's voice prevails is a detailed description of a ritual of several days' duration called The Ghost Dance. The third article is a detailed grammatical description of the Xipaya language, while the last two are vocabulary lists organized by subjects and grammatical categories.

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<sup>5</sup> Transl.: Fragments of the Religion and Tradition of the Xipaya Indians: Contributions to the Knowledge of the Indian Tribes of the Xingu Region, Central Brazil.

<sup>6</sup> About the Language of the Xipaya Indians.

<sup>7</sup> Vocabulary of the Xipaya Language.

<sup>8</sup> See detailed references at the end of the article.

The publication of these articles comprises the whole period Nimuendajú maintained contacts with the periodical, from 1920 to 1929, and by this way they became part of its history.

The history of the texts about the Xipaya coincides with a period in Nimuendajú's biography when his reputation as ethnographer began to consolidate, but information about his life in the 1910s e 1920ies is still superficial in comparison with subsequent periods. It seems that Nimuendajú joined the Service for the Protection of Indians and the Localization of National Workers (Serviço de Proteção aos Índios e Localização dos Trabalhadores Nacionais/ SPILTN) immediately at the end of 1910, when it was created<sup>9</sup>. In 1913, he was transferred to Belém, his place of residence until his death. It was in Belém where Curt Unckel, already signing with his indigenous name during that time, got to know the Goeldi Museum (nowadays, Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi/ MPEG) and its director, the ornithologist Emilie Snethlage (1868-1929), who also had German citizenship.

Nimuendajú had written an extensive monograph based on his deep and long-standing experiences among the Apocucua, but he was a self-educated researcher and never had received any academic instruction. So, his access to academic circles, with their differentiating rituals and hierarchies, became quite difficult. One of the most narrated hypotheses about the publication of his first scientific text in the reputable *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (Berlin), in 1914 (Nimuendajú 1914), is that it had been mediated by Emilie Snethlage. This hypothesis could recently be confirmed by the discovery of Snethlage's letters to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin<sup>10</sup>.

On the occasion of the centenary of Nimuendajú's first ethnographic text, the periodical *Tellus* published in 2013 a "Nimuendajú Dossier"<sup>11</sup>. In this context, two articles of the dossier are particularly interesting: Barbosa (2013) and Pierri (2013). Although Nimuendajú had not written a text about a little-known ethnic group, considering the Brazilian and international bibliography about the

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<sup>9</sup> SPILTN was the first official name of the Indian Protection Service (Serviço de Proteção aos Índios/SPI), created on 20 June 1910 by Decree no. 8.072. The SPI was Brazil's first federal agency charged with protecting indigenous peoples against all kinds of violence and was the predecessor of the current National Indian Foundation (Fundação Nacional do Índio/FUNAI), created on 5 December 1967.

<sup>10</sup> Personal information by Nelson Sanjad (MPEG), 22 February 2013. See also Sanjad et al. (2013).

<sup>11</sup> *Tellus*, Campo Grande: Universidade Católica Dom Bosco (UCDB), "Dossiê Nimuendajú" (ano 13, vol. 24, 2013), edited by Pablo Barbosa, Graciela Chamorro, Elena Welper, and Nádia Heusi.

Guarani at that time, his monograph had a large and lasting impact on the interpretations of its historical migratory movements witnessed by many observers during the last centuries. The focus on the eschatological motif of the “Land without Evil” as the driving force for migrations not only introduced a new explanation for an old, well-known phenomenon, and was accepted by many ethnologist specialized in South American indigenous cultures (and not only specialists in Guarani Indians; Villar and Combès 2013). But Nimuendajú also decided on an innovative approach for that period by preferring the indigenous point of view for explaining their migrations, instead of emphasizing the social and economic environment of the colonization of Guarani lands. In terms of historical comparison, Nimuendajú privileged to some extent “the native point of view” even before Malinowski announced this noble objective for anthropology. And it is exactly this preference given to the explanatory significance of indigenous culture which will also help us to understand the format and the contents of the “Fragments ...”.

## **The history of the field research and its circumstances**

For coming to know the history of the texts about Xipaya culture and language, especially the motifs and circumstances of their preparation and composition, it is necessary to have recourse to ... fragments. Nimuendajú only mentioned his sojourn at a place called Boca do Baú, on the upper Curuá River, in 1918/19, at the beginning of his first article. So he summarized in two paragraphs the precariousness of the field circumstances and the difficulties to communicate with his informants. But the abundance and diversity of details in his texts, especially the long series of mythical narratives seem to point to the contrary. At least, they suggest that he had an extraordinary talent for fieldwork.

For joining more fragments and carrying out a partial reconstruction of Nimuendajú’s ethnological practice during those years it is necessary to go to two cities: Rio de Janeiro and Marburg, in Germany. At the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro is deposited Nimuendajú’s personal academic heritage, above all manuscripts and letters but also photographs and drawings, purchased by



the museum from his widow after prolonged negotiations between 1946 and 1951. Only two documents regarding his research among the Xipaya still can be found, besides copies of the *Anthropos* articles: a translation into Portuguese of the first two articles by C.W. Lommel<sup>12</sup> and a small sketchbook containing a kind of field diary and some cartographic sketches<sup>13</sup>, but in a very bad state of conservation. Lommel's translation was finally published in 1981 by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Charlotte Emmerich (Nimuendajú 1981)<sup>14</sup>.

As for Marburg, there are old connections between that city and Brazil, initiated in 1557 with the first edition of the famous story of the German mercenary Hans Staden (1557) about his captivity among the Tupinambá. But it is in the Area (*Fachgebiet*) Social and Cultural Anthropology of the Institute of Comparative Cultural Research of the Philipps-Universität Marburg where can be found the academic heritage of the German ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg (1872-1924)<sup>15</sup> who has maintained correspondence with Nimuendajú for nine years since 1915<sup>16</sup>. The author of this article was in Marburg in January 2011 and October/November 2015 for examining the documentation about the contacts between the two ethnologists<sup>17</sup>.

In the totality of 34 letters of this correspondence archived in Marburg, there are ten containing passages which allow a partial reconstruction of the history of the Xipaya articles. The correspondence was initiated during the First World War, but was immediately interrupted in late 1915. Only in April 1920 Nimuendajú

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<sup>12</sup> **Lommel, C.W.** n/d. Fragmentos de religião e tradição dos índios Sipaias: contribuições ao conhecimento das tribus de índios da região do Xingu, Brasil Central. Typed manuscript. Museu Nacional (MN)/ Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)/ Centro de Documentação de Línguas Indígenas (CELIN), 712-G2-0008-1.

<sup>13</sup> **Nimuendajú, Curt.** Feldtagebuch. n/d [1918]. Field diary written with pencil. MN/UFRJ/CELIN, 712-G3-00010-3.

<sup>14</sup> In 2015 was published a new translation of the two ethnographic articles together with a first translation of the three linguistic articles in one edited volume (see Schröder 2015).

<sup>15</sup> See <[www.uni-marburg.de/fb03/ivk/vk/forschung/vkprojekte/koch](http://www.uni-marburg.de/fb03/ivk/vk/forschung/vkprojekte/koch)>; accessed on 19/10/2017.

<sup>16</sup> The correspondence between Nimuendajú and Koch-Grünberg will be published in 2017/18 in a bilingual edition, in co-authorship with Michael Kraus (Göttingen University), Ernst Halbmayer (Philipps-Universität Marburg) and Nelson Sanjad (MPEG). The translation of all the letters was made by Miriam Junghans.

<sup>17</sup> The first visit was part of a post-doctoral research about "The Relations of Curt Nimuendajú with Ethnological Museums in Germany: A Contribution to the History of Anthropology in Brazil", made possible by a scholarship from Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) (Process n. 200455/2010-9, PDE modality). The second stay was financed by a joint scholarship from DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) and CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior).

succeeded in resuming it. In a letter from April 23, 1920<sup>18</sup>, he summarizes for Koch-Grünberg various research activities undertaken by him between 1915 and 1920, generally in quite adverse circumstances. He does not point out details of the calumny which led to his dismissal from SPI in 1915, but his descriptions make it quite plain that he has survived by temporary services offered by local and regional potentates:

[...] I returned sick from the Aparai [where he had spent some months in 1915], and only in January 1916 I recovered my health among the Temb  of the S. Antonio do Prata Mission, near the railway from Bel m to Bragan a. [...] Then I had to look for a job immediately, as I was face to face with ruin. I offered my services to the famous Senator Jos  Porfirio, and he ordered to prepare a road for motor traffic at the great Xingu river curve. My expectation to meet Indians on that occasion only came true on a quite modest scale. Nevertheless, I finally met in Altamira some thirteen Juruna from Pedra Secca who all died off with the exception of two before I had the time to start something with them. But there I also could interview the first Xipaya and Kuruaya, and one day even appeared two blue-striped Arara. [...] (transl. P.S.)

Jos  Porph rio de Miranda J nior (1863-1932) was one of the principal political chiefs of Par  during that period. Born in Bahia, he was engineer, rubber baron, congressman and senator. He started to settle down his business in the Xingu area from the 1890ies on, where he finally succeeded in controlling the whole region by his commercial posts. In various sources he is described as a “domineering and imperious boss” and as “feudal lord of the region” (Alarcon and Torres 2014: 23) and as having brutal and unscrupulous character<sup>19</sup>.

Nimuendaj  continued<sup>20</sup>:

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<sup>18</sup> Nachlass Theodor Koch-Gr nberg, V lkerkundliche Sammlung der Philipps-Universit t Marburg, VK MR G.II.1.

<sup>19</sup> For a portrait of Miranda J nior see Umbuzeiro and Umbuzeiro (2012: 113).

<sup>20</sup> Letter Nimuendaj  to Koch-Gr nberg, 23/04/1920. Estate Theodor Koch-Gr nberg, V lkerkundliche Sammlung der Philipps-Universit t Marburg, VK MR G.II.1. (transl. P.S.)

In February 1917, when I had just finished my road, Coronel Ernesto Accioly<sup>21</sup>, a friend of Miss Dr. Snethlage, invited me to go with him to the Curuá do Iriri [river] where he wanted to show me an unknown, wild Indian who had come up there and had joined a rubber tapper. We went upstream the Iriri and Curuá rivers and met in a *barraca*<sup>22</sup>, about 7°30' southern parallel, a long-haired, wild looking guy with a lip stone and a penis sheath who did not speak or understand any word in Portuguese and who declared having come from the south-west. I questioned him closely— he was a quite ordinary Kayapó! Then, all the rest of the year Ernesto kept me waiting in Santa Júlia with the promise to organize an expedition to the backlands and to visit these Kayapó.

Santa Júlia was a rubber tree area controlled by Accioly. It seems that Nimuendajú did not have the means to simply go away or did not want to oppose the order of a rubber baron, which could be quite dangerous. Accioly was a kind of sponsor of the Goeldi Museum and, above all, of Snethlage's studies. His sponsorship certainly was not motivated by scientific interests, but by political pragmatism, because the Goeldi Museum belonged to the Pará state. So, supporting the museum's research activities was an opportunity to establish good relations with the government of Pará.

The involuntary period spent at Santa Júlia was not the first time that Accioly abandoned Nimuendajú, and it would not be the last:

Finally, in January 1918, he sent me in advance with the boat of a rubber tapper and promised that he would come behind later. At the first overnight camp after Santa Júlia, I was arrested by the sub-mayor [*subprefeito*] of the Iriri river being imputed to be engaged in espionage, and my baggage was confiscated. My confinement lasted right into March. Coronel Ernesto abandoned me completely. Then they let me go, but sent my baggage to Belém. I had no choice but to accompany it,

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<sup>21</sup> Ernesto Accioly de Souza, one of the most important rubber barons and landlords of the region at that time. *Coronel* was a common title of great landowners in Brazil's backlands until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. For a picture of Accioly see Alarcon and Torres (2014: 21).

<sup>22</sup> In the Brazilian Amazon, *barracas* or *barracões* is a common expression for wooden shacks generally built on riverbanks for selling goods not produced in the same region for very excessive prices.

otherwise all my notes would have been lost. In Belém I got back all my belongings without further ado, but Coronel Ernesto simply had thrown away a small ethnological collection as well as a series of photographs I had left with him to give the suitcase which contained them to one of his Indian housemates<sup>23</sup>.

Accioly's indifference as the powerful 'lord' of the Iriri river points to the possibility that Nimuendajú's arrest was an ambush organized by the rubber baron to get rid of the German expatriate who did not have any economic or political importance for him. But one can get an idea of Nimuendajú's character, especially his persistence, reading this passage of the letter: "With the intention of showing to those at the Iriri that they had made hash of my confinement I returned to that river".

At the suggestion of Accioly, Nimuendajú arranged a small team with whom he tried to explore the region between the Xingu and Tapajós rivers, starting from the headwaters of the Curuá, with the aim to find Kayapó villages, but the group had to return without results because of the obstacles placed by an environment apparently uninhabited, insufficient supplies and diseases contracted during the expedition. One might think that the suggestion to explore the passage between the Xingu and Tapajós river basins had to do with Snethlage's preceding expedition in 1909 (Snethlage 1910 [1913]), but this possibility is not referred to with only one word in the letter to Koch-Grünberg. So Nimuendajú explicitly saddled the responsibility for the unsuccessful expedition exclusively on Accioly. The rubber baron certainly had an idea about the impenetrability of the region, which represented no economic interest for him because of its impassibility. Maybe the small expedition was another good opportunity for him to get rid of the German immigrant with his insignificant social status. And if he died during the exploration, this would be no problem.

In Boca do Baú, Coronel Ernesto let me in a lurch again until March 1919, and I could not even quit, as impoverished and shabby as I was. I used the time for studying the Xipaya who live there in a small band as

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<sup>23</sup> See footnote 28.

slaves of the landlord of Boca do Baú. There I also assisted at ghost dances and became a good friend of the medicine man<sup>24</sup> Māwaré to whom I owe my best information. I have tried in vain to find an opportunity for visiting the village of the Kuruaya, which is located not very far away. My lack of means made it impossible, and I had to content myself with making linguistic recordings with some Kuruaya who arrived there. When I finally went downstream again to Santa Júlia, in March 1919, at least I had learnt fairly well to fumble around in Xipaya. In Santa Júlia I remained again until June 1919 and saw a great deal of my old acquaintances, the Xipaya living upstream and downstream the place under the “protection” of Coronel Ernesto. Then I have again rendered services for the Senator José Porfírio and for some months I have been supervisor of the steamboat stop Victoria on the Tucuruí river. In October 1919 I finally succeeded in getting away to Belém. Well, Miss Dr. Snethlage would have liked to offer me employment at the local museum, but however much the job would be alright with me, I had to renounce it because undoubtedly I would never receive my salary from the government and so I could simply starve. For fighting my way through, I went together with an engineer to the area between the Bragança railway and the sea for surveying a colonization project – not just fun during the rainy season – and with this useful work I have been occupied to date and likewise have not received my salary! If only I had the time to prepare my notes ready for press!<sup>25</sup>

While this letter to Koch-Grünberg only furnishes a kind of summary of the general circumstances regarding the research with the Xipaya, one could think that the sketchbook deposited at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro<sup>26</sup> might contain more detailed information. Unfortunately, that sketchbook is no Malinowskian “diary in the strict sense of the term” (Malinowski 1967), but more

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout his ethnographic texts about the Xipaya, it becomes clear that Nimuendajú has used the terms “medicine man” (*Medizinmann*) and “sorcerer” (*Zauberer*) as synonyms of ‘shaman’ and has made no clear distinction between them. It is open to question if this can be interpreted as an indication of ethnological amateurism at that time or of an insufficiency of the German language to comprehend in one word the different facets of Amazonian shamanism.

<sup>25</sup> See footnote 28.

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 19.

a field log<sup>27</sup> than a field diary, because it contains only very brief notes about the main activities per day. It only contains notes from January to May 1918, some geographical sketches, a small list of Xipaya words and three Xipaya myths. For giving an idea of the kind of notes, two passages are reproduced here:

[January]

[...]

Wednesday 16. In the afternoon, making carry baggage to Dodô's barge.

Thursday 17. At 8:15, departure in Dodô's barge "Cecy" together with João Quirino. At the mouth of the Furo do Breu, mending the boat until 11:45. At 14:00 at Chico Porto. At 19:00 in Curambê.

Friday 18. Early in the morning Lopes arrests me, menaces me with handcuffs. After departure of the boat, long conversation with him, he's becoming tame. Pedro Lopes comes.

Saturday 19. Lopes interrogates me. I'm arrested as "suspicious". Pedro Lopes acts as secretary. Lopes treats me well.

Sunday 20. Files closed on my arrest, Pedro Lopes leaves with them.

Saturday 26. Coronel Ernesto arrives with two barges at 10 pm.

Sunday 27. Coronel Ernesto takes me with him at 7 am without saying any word to me.

[...]

[February]

[...]

Monday 11. Negotiation with Ernesto who does not want to do anything for me. At 2:40 pm in barge [illegible] with Lopes leaving S. Julia. At 1:25 [illegible] docked & passed the night at Souza.

Tuesday 12. Early at 5:40 Xingu downriver. At Itapoama waiting a long time for Bacuráo. At 1:30 pm in Altamira. Taken lodgings in Camanho's house. Rumors at João Brazil & José Accioly: It is said that I had been murdered with a new big *terçado* [ax] by order of Ernesto. My head had fallen on one side, the body on the other. After my arrest in Curambê I

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<sup>27</sup> About the technique of writing field logs see Bernard (2006: 392-394).

had fled, but I had been caught up again by rubber tappers. My suitcase had been broken open & had been burnt.

[...]

Being a sketchbook not intended to be published, it is small wonder that names of places and persons are not explained. Summing up, it may be said that the field log may be useful for reconstructing a part of Nimuendajú's itineraries in the Xingu region in 1918 and even some of his personal contacts, but his notes are so telegraphically short that they do not help much for understanding the concrete fieldwork circumstances.

## **Contextualizing and interpreting the fragments**

All the periods mentioned in the letter from April 23, 1920 indicate that Nimuendajú spent more than twelve months with small Xipaya groups between 1916 and 1919, above all in a continuous period from July 1918 to June 1919. Besides, it becomes clear by the passages of the mythical texts published in the indigenous language and by the linguistic material that he was successful in learning the Xipaya language, at least on a level which allowed some reasonable communication. Thus, Nimuendajú has put into practice two basic principles of anthropological fieldwork as they were idealized, in 1922, by Bronislaw Malinowski in his famous introduction of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922): to spend at least a whole year among the natives and to learn to communicate with them in their own language. I do not want to say with these words that Nimuendajú was a disregarded and forgotten precursor of Malinowski, but that he, even being a self-educated researcher without any academic instruction, had ideas about the necessary conditions for producing ethnographies of good quality.

Certainly, his previous experience with the Apapokuva-Guanani and the writing and publication of *Die Sagen von der Erschaffung und Vernichtung der Welt ...* allowed him to draw these conclusions by himself, neither being necessary nor possible to have recourse to a specialized literature, which could have

introduced him to fieldwork methods. This kind of literature, by the way, was practically inexistent during that period, with the exception of some dispersed suggestions in ethnological publications and various indications in the famous *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, first published in 1874.

But one should not expect to find in publications of anthropologists of that generation any systematic reflections on the inevitable subjectivities of fieldwork. In this respect, Nimuendajú did not have at his disposal any contemporary model of fieldwork methods, and such kinds of reflections did not even fall under the scientific standards of the humanities at that time. So the difficulties of the field situation are only mentioned in a quite comprised and superficial way in the articles about the Xipaya.

This does not mean either that the anthropologists of that generation did not have any notions about subjectivities related to fieldwork, or that they were insensible to these circumstances. Quite on the contrary, numerous, often private correspondence indicate a different situation, as was demonstrated in a brilliant way by Michael Kraus (2004) in his comprehensive study about the German ethnological research activities in the Amazon region from 1884 to 1929. Herewith, various categorical statements about professional anthropology in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as they are often retailed after reading Clifford (1988), become more than questionable. From a current point of view, it seems that postmodern anthropology of the 1980ies often enacted, in a sophisticated way, a reinvention of the wheel in the historicity of anthropological epistemology. But this reinvention could only have its success guaranteed by a strong marketing strategy of its proponents.

In 1918/19, Nimuendajú was neither a professional anthropologist nor did he belong to any anthropological research institution. His contacts with professional anthropology were based on the lecture of monographs and correspondence with ethnologists. But it calls attention that he managed to win recognition by contemporary professional ethnologists as Koch-Grünberg or Max Schmidt (1874-1950) who considered him an estimable interlocutor and a talented ethnographer. In other words, the fact of being a self-educated researcher did not constitute any handicap for professional recognition in anthropological circles at that time. In a very interesting article about life and



work of Nimuendajú in the context of the development of Brazilian anthropology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, João Pacheco de Oliveira (2006) shows that the status of self-educated researcher was transformed into a kind of stigma in some posthumous interpretations of his work and field methods, being Florestan Fernandes's fundamental critique about the lack of theory in Nimuendajú's studies one of the most notorious and influential (Fernandes 1975: 119-120).

Contemporary anthropologists, however, did not have such a haughty view of his works. On the contrary, they appreciated and esteemed his empirical soundness and trustworthiness. Nimuendajú by himself did not have any theoretical pretensions, as was noticed by several authors (Welper 2002). His ethnographic practice had much more to do with contemporary ideals of cultural salvage in German ethnology than with any predominant theoretical concerns. From his point of view, it was urgent to record indigenous cultural manifestations before they were abandoned and forgotten. So, we can perceive in Nimuendajú more affinities with some ideas of Adolf Bastian and Franz Boas than with other orientations in anthropology of his time (Fischer et al. 2007; Stocking Jr. 1996).

The articles about Xipaya culture and language are excellent examples of the salvage visions which guided the kind of anthropology practiced by Nimuendajú. The Xipaya are described with few words as a miserable remnant of an indigenous people harassed and exploited by the regional non indigenous population, ironically called "Christians" by Nimuendajú. These 'whites' denominated "neo-Brazilians" by him in later publications were so 'Christians' that they molested the Xipaya women and girls at all opportunities they had. The Ghost Dance, for example, an elaborated ritual of several days' duration, could only be realized without perturbations after a formal request made to the "master" of the Xipaya:

The first *íanãĩ karia* [Ghost Dance] I assisted took place from September 18 to 30, 1918 at the mouth of the Igarapé do Baú in the Curuá river. Some 14 days before, an attempt of the local Xipaya to celebrate a ghost dance had already failed because of the interference of the Christians who thought that the dance offers a good opportunity to play nuisance at will with the Xipaya women. They ran with a guitar to the dancing-ground,

sat down beside the Indian women, speechifying obscenities, and while they were mixing *kaširí* with sugar in beer-glasses, they menaced to kill every Indian who would disapprove of their presence. As a result, the Xipaya gave up the dance.

[...]

So, I went myself to the master of the Indians and asked him to bring his influence to bear so that the dance could take place, if not for the Indians, then because of me. He promised me that he would do it and so the dance could be resumed on September 18. (Nimuendajú 1921/22: 376)

The ethnographic description of the Xipaya culture by Nimuendajú is not all-embracing as in many classic ethnographic monographs, which generally tried to represent what was considered the entirety of a culture in all its aspects, although often focusing some characteristic manifestations or institutions. Nimuendajú noted down those domains of the indigenous culture he called “religion and tradition”, but which we would currently denominate religion, shamanism, mythology and indigenous interethnic relations; in other words, what he could still save before falling in oblivion. They are “fragments” because there is no narrative guide which structures the ethnography as in the case of Malinowski’s *Argonauts*. The parts of the text were organized as if they were potsherds, for creating a reasonable order.

Looking at the entirety of the ethnographic part of the texts about the Xipaya, what calls attention is the high percentage of passages with indigenous voices (although indirectly reproduced in German). These passages, generally extended to several pages and always identified by quotation marks, form the major of the “Fragments ...”. Although Nimuendajú frequently does not inform the names of the speakers it is impossible to ignore the fact that indigenous voices predominate in the ethnographic texts, and not the ethnographer’s voice. It is very interesting to note that Nimuendajú somehow seems to anticipate some of the experimental proposals for new kinds of ethnography summarized in Clifford’s well-known text about ethnographic authority (1983).

Giving voice to anthropologists’ interlocutors in the field nowadays is a standard concern in ethnographies, but not at Nimuendajú’s time. This allows to remember the innovative approach of “Die Sagen von der Erschaffung und

Vernichtung der Welt ...". While the author in his first important monograph gives preference to the indigenous point of view for offering a new vision about a familiar historical phenomenon, in the "Fragments ..." he does not demonstrate any intention to explain something, for example, by propounding any hypothesis about Xipaya culture. But notwithstanding that, indigenous voices predominate. And this distinguishes the "Fragments ..." from Nimuendajú's later monographs of the 1930ies and 1940ies, already based on contemporary formal principles and partly oriented by Robert Lowie's (1883-1957) editorial suggestions.

In the "Fragments ..." we can indirectly become aware of a problem generally discussed in current anthropology in the context of experimental collaborative ethnographies: When the voices of anthropologists' interlocutors not only are highly esteemed so that they are faithfully reproduced, but also comprise the majority of an ethnographic text, who, after all, organizes and structures the presentation of the voices in its published format?

Of course, this was no epistemological or methodological problem neither for Nimuendajú nor for other anthropologists of his period, and it would be quite banal to disqualify their texts only by applying criteria of current anthropological practices. I think that it is a more constructive attitude to appreciate and evaluate Nimuendajú's texts by the principles of good quality of his time. For the anthropologists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was no doubt that the responsibility for composing ethnographic texts was exclusively theirs. And as for Nimuendajú's research about the Xipaya, everything points to the fact that the social environment of his fieldwork had nothing to do with what one might imagine to be a favorable situation for a socially balanced anthropological practice.

The summarized description of the fieldwork in the letter from April 23, 1920 makes it possible to conclude that it was realized in endocolonial circumstances, since the small Xipaya groups lived in a situation analogous to slavery. According to current ethical parameters in anthropology, such a kind of research environment would not be justifiable. But Nimuendajú was no insensible observer. On the contrary, since the period he lived in São Paulo until his death he used to be a relentless and severe critic of the ways indigenous peoples in Brazil were treated by government agencies and by the

different parts of the non-indigenous population. Thus it becomes practically unimaginable that he did not reflect upon his fieldwork conditions, but his thinking did not become explicit in the letter.

We can affirm, however, that the ethnographer himself was not in a situation which could have permitted any solidarity manifestation against the Xipaya's fate. Although he was not directly subjected to the exploitive regime of the rubber extraction system, his position was subaltern to the local despots and completely dependent on them. And those rubber bosses were the lords of life and death in the regions controlled by them. The histories about the brutality of Senator Miranda Júnior (Alarcon and Torres 2014: 23-24) were well-known in the whole region. A more adequate interpretation is that Nimuendajú realized his field research about Xipaya culture and language in a quite ticklish situation where ethnological curiosity was tolerated as long as it not hampered the rubber exploitation.

## **Conclusions**

So, what kind of anthropology was practiced by Nimuendajú studying Xipaya culture and language? It became evident that it was improvised and occasional, realized without any planning. But Nimuendajú was not the first to write something about the Xipaya. They have been mentioned by missionaries, travelers and scientists in various reports since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and Nimuendajú cites, for example, Karl von den Steinen (1855-1929), Prince Adalbert of Prussia (1811-1873), and Henri Coudreau (1859-1899). Moreover, his ally and protector, Emilie Snethlage, had also published three articles with ethnographic information about the Xipaya (Snethlage 1910, 1910 [1913], 1920/21) and a small text about the Xipaya language (1912). But Nimuendajú's texts not only are different because Snethlage was an ornithologist and had received a formal scientific education. He realized his research in quite different – more unfavorable – circumstances, focusing indigenous oral traditions not yet registered by his predecessors. His research grew out of chance, but did not originate in a kind of scientific vacuum, because Nimuendajú chose

ethnographic topics not dealt with by other authors, probably because he spent more time with the Xipaya and really managed to learn their language, at least to some extent.

Was it German anthropology in the Amazon, the initial stage of Brazilian, or even Amazonian, anthropology, or something else? Brazilian anthropology or what we still would consider anthropology nowadays, at that time was generally practiced by curious persons with academic backgrounds, but without any formal anthropological instruction or training, and there was no intellectual school or tradition which could be followed. Researchers like Edgar Roquette-Pinto (1884-1954) or Capistrano de Abreu (1853-1927) were exceptions to the rule. The kind of anthropology practiced by Amazonian academics, on its part, often was a grotesque mixture of dilettantism and speculative spirit, as can best be illustrated by Bernardo Ramos' voluminous study about the alleged Phoenician origins of Amazonian indigenous petroglyphs (1930, 1939), generously ignoring Koch-Grünberg's (2010) scrupulous work originally published in 1907. Ramos was a wealthy merchant of the Manaus elite and at the same time an amateur archaeologist and linguist. In two letters to Koch-Grünberg, Nimuendajú scoffed thoroughly about authors like Ramos and their provincial scientific amateurishness: "That's the brilliant triumvirate in the dark sky of Amazonian Americanism!"<sup>28</sup>. So, contemporary Amazonian anthropology certainly did not offer any standards for him.

As a self-educated researcher, but an enthusiastic and studious reader of ethnographies published by German ethnologists, he has repeatedly deplored in his letters that sometimes he had only had access to popular (reduced and simplified) versions of the German publications about indigenous cultures of South American lowlands. Notwithstanding that, German ethnology was his main anthropological reference at the time he knew the Xipaya, while his epistolary contacts with German academic ethnologists only started hesitatingly about 1914/15. So, between 1914 (the year his first ethnographic work was published) and 1929 (the year he terminated his contacts with *Anthropos*), Nimuendajú has been above all a German expatriate living in Brazil and practicing Americanist ethnology without being part of any national academic

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<sup>28</sup> Nachlass Theodor Koch-Grünberg, Völkerkundliche Sammlung der Philipps-Universität Marburg, VK MR A.31, letters from October 28, 1920, and April 8, 1921.

establishment, whereas in current Brazilian anthropology his work is generally interpreted as fundamental for the establishment of a national anthropological tradition. Gradually, however, he has become part of an international transatlantic network of knowledge interchanged by academic and non-academic anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists.

Hence, it seems more reasonable to interpret Nimuendajú's research about Xipaya culture and language neither as an episode in the formative period of an autochthonous anthropological tradition in Brazil nor as a result of diffusion of German ethnology in South America. On the contrary, it can better be understood as a manifestation of a scientific transnationalism (Clavin 2005) where even national or regional histories of science must be situated in a global context (McCook 2013), which allow to evaluate adequately such uncommon research episodes as the one depicted in this article.

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