

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE UPPER XINGU, MATO GROSSO, BRAZIL

The archaeology of this region is still at the stage of preliminary research. After initial observations on archaeological remains by Galvão, Oberg and Simões, investigations (survey and test-pitting) were conducted by Dole (1961-62) and Simões (1967). A similar program was realized by me in 1973.

Simões excavations allowed him to define two phases (essentially based on ceramic complexes) : Diauarum (Upper Xingu proper) and Ipavu (Lower Culuene). From her descriptions and illustrations, it is clear that Dole's material pertains to the Ipavu phase. Diauarum phase was dated from the 12th century on the basis of two C 14 dates : SI-713= 1120 ± 75 A.D. and SI-716= 1120 ± 90 A.D. (Simões 1972 : 30). The presence of Ipavu phase decorated sherds in the upper levels of Diauarum phase test-pits permitted Simões (Ibid.:39) to date the Ipavu phase at 1200-1300 A.D.

Preliminary description of the ceramic material will be found in Simões 1967. The two complexes differ in temper (Diauarum has cariapé and Ipavu caixi), and Ipavu has much more plastic decoration (geometric incised patterns, biomorphic rim adorns). Non-ceramic artifacts (stone-mainly axes, shell and bone) are rare and indistinctive. Sites are supposed to be circular, averaging 125-140 m. in diameter. An Ipavu phase burial (primary extended, with two pottery vessels as offerings) is the only one known. Reported ditches ("valetas") will be discussed later.

As my excavations (1973) have not yet been published, a brief summary follows.

Four new sites were surveyed, three in the Lower Culuene area and one in the Upper Xingu area at Morena. Surface collections were made and stratigraphic trenches dug. Preliminary analysis of the ceramic material (over a thousand sherds) indicates that the Lower Culuene sites have typical Ipavu phase material, while Morena pottery is more similar to Diauarum phase, confirming Simões distinction between the two areas.

Stratigraphic trenches were dug in the ditches and moats in the immediate vicinity of the sites Morena, Tuatuari II and Kuikuru village (Lahatua). At Morena and Tuatuari II sherds and small charcoal fragments were recovered, in small quantities, inside the fill of the moats bordering the ditches, which seems to imply their artificial (i.e. man-made) origin. At Tuatuari II the moat's fill covered an ancient soil dating from the Ipavu phase. Nevertheless, the extension and sinuosity of the ditches, their lack of apparent function in most case (they rarely enclose a well delimited territory, except at Morena and at the Kuikuru lake - Dole 1961-62) and their similarity to many channel-and-levees systems of the contemporary drainage established on a tabular peneplain are arguments in favor of a natural origin. The expertise of a geomorphologist is obviously needed, as well as examination of the ditches at the time of flooding during the rainy season. If the ditches were of natural origin the process of formation would be very recent, as some of them are contemporaneous with or postdate the Ipavu phase.

These ditches were already reported and discussed by Claudio and Orlando Villas Boas, Oberg and Dole, who favour a human origin, and Simões, who argues in favor of a natural causation. Clearly more fieldwork is needed, including aerial photography, precise topographic survey and the digging of complete transversal profile trenches of selected "valetas".

During the 1973 excavations and survey, an unsuspected feature was discovered at Tuatuari II: a circular village site of the Ipavu phase, of a maximum diameter of 145 m., surrounded by moats varying in height from 1 to 1,50 m., and interrupted on three points by access roads. Excavations at this locality could reveal remains of habitation's floors and sepultures, and permit fruitful comparison with actual Indian villages in an ethnoarchaeological perspective.

Another result of the 1973 field season was a confirmation of the datation of the two phases already discussed. Charcoal from the bottom of the Morena occupation level was dated 1.030 \pm 90 A.D. (Gif -3308), in rather close correspondance to Simões 1120 A.D. datation. A partially burned log from Lagoa das Onças (to the North-East of lake Ipavu), associated with Ipavu phase ceramics, was dated 1350 \pm 80 A.D. (Gif-3307); Simões has a relative dating of 1300 for the end of this phase.

These results lead us to another of the "mysteries of the Xingu": the recent discovery in Lagoa das Onças of "ceremonial" ceramics, elaborately decorated objects, in close and indisputable association with Ipavu phase pottery sherds. These objects include zoomorphs (fishes, a bird), combs, phalli, and various unidentified objects or fragments. Some of these objects bear incised geometric motifs quite similar to actual xinguano iconography (e.g. the so-called "fish-motif").

Turning now to culture-historical considerations concerning the antecedents of contemporary Xingu intertribal society, we could summarize the actual data and hypotheses (centering on the Lower Culuene area) :

1) The area was occupied during the Ipavu phase, estimated 1200-1350 A.D., by a population of Amazonian origin using a pottery of the "Incised and Punctate" tradition as defined in the Pronapa 1968 report.

2) This population inhabited various rather large villages in the area, one of them (Tuatuari II) being probably protected by a palissaded moat. The usual location is near lakes or small tributaries of the Culuene, like the contemporary villages. The large number of reported sites and the limited average depth of the occupational levels (40-50 cm) points to frequent village mobility.

3) Ceramics of the Ipavu phase have some traits in common with the contemporary Waura-produced pottery: predominance of the red-slipped, flat-bottomed, convex-sided large "panelas" with everted rims - presence of large flat manioc griddles - fire dogs - zoomorphic modeled decoration. However, contemporary decoration is less varied in techniques.

4) Lagoa das Onças contains ceremonial objects of the Ipavu phase, accidentally deposited or ritually immersed, who have no close equivalent in actual Xingu culture.

5) There exist a distinct possibility that some of the "valetas" could be artificial constructions dating from the Ipavu phase.

6) Despite some similarities between the Ipavu phase and contemporary Upper Xingu culture in form and decoration of the pottery, and in settlement patterns, we have no stratigraphic proof of continuity. Contemporary pottery appears frequently in the upper levels of Ipavu phase sites, as a consequence of modern reoccupation, but there seems to be a gap between the end of the Ipavu phase after 1350 A.D. and the Upper Xingu inter-ethnic cultural tradition as observed by Steinen in 1884.

7) If there is such a gap in the Lower Culuene area, Ipavu phase populations could have migrated nearby, then evolved into some proto-Upper Xingu cultural tradition, and reoccupied the area later. But here we are in the realm of pure fiction.

8) Hypothetical abandonment of the Lower Culuene could have been provoked by pressure of Gê-speaking groups, in a manner reminiscing the Tapirape/Kayapo situation.

These and other questions could quite easily be solved (or give way to new and better ones) by an interdisciplinary effort (by geographers, anthropologists, and archaeologists) during one or two field-seasons. Obstacles are mainly logistic ones: the problem is concentrating enough personal, and material, during the dry season to obtain maximum efficiency. The effort would be worth while, as the Upper Xingu is obviously a privileged area for reconstructing past societies in the light of legitimate ethnographic analogy.

References:

- DOLE, G.E., 1961-62: A preliminary consideration of the prehistory of the Upper Xingu . Rev. do Museu Paulista, XIII: 399-423. Sao Paulo.
- PRONAPA, 1970: Brazilian archaeology in 1968: an interim report on the National Program of Archaeological Research. American Antiquity, vol.35, n°1: 1-23.
- SIMÕES, M.F., 1967: Considerações preliminares sobre a arqueologia do Alto Xingu (Mato Grosso). In: Programa Nacional de Pesquisas Arqueológicas. Resultados preliminares do primeiro ano. 1965-66. Publ. Avulsas Mus. Par. Emilio Goeldi, Belem, n°6: 129-51.
- SIMÕES M.F., 1972: Índice das fases arqueológicas brasileiras. 1950-1971. Publ. Avulsas Mus. Par. Emilio Goeldi, Belem, n°18.

Paper presented at the 77th Annual Meeting
of the American Anthropological Association
Los Angeles 1978

Pierre Becquelin
C. N. R. S.
Musée de l'Homme, Paris