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Curt Nimuendajú

and the New Brazilian Ethnology

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Anyone who takes the slightest interest in Brazilian ethnology has heard of the work of Curt Nimuendajú. He not only altered the ethnographic map of Brazil, but in some sense he could be said to have created it. Not that Brazilian ethnology began with him - far from it. It dates right back to the classic sixteenth century works of writers like Jose de Anchieta, Fernão Cardim, Gabriel Soares de Souza, Hans Staden and Jean de Léry. In the nineteenth century, when the sciences were institutionalized throughout the western world and anthropology emerged as a distinct and separate discipline, Brazilian Ethnology aspired to scientific status through the programs of such institutions as the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro. Even so it is not much of an exaggeration to say that the work of Curt Nimuendajú at the beginning of this century established the basis of a modern ethnology both of Brazil and in Brazil.

At the turn of the century South American ethnology, especially the ethnography of the lowland non-Andean regions, was a puzzle in which small islands of knowledge formed an archipelago in a sea of ignorance. Nimuendaju dedicated himself to the task of trying to connect these islands. His early works might give the impression of dealing with disparate minutiae, of making up a sort of scientific rag bag in an era when science, especially the science of mankind, was often seen as being closer to natural history than to a work of synthesis. But this impression is misleading. His reports on his travels, his linguistic studies of unknown or little known tongues, his cartographic work were all contributions to a more ambitious undertaking. Nimuendajú's grand design was to demonstrate the historic and contemporary connections between the myriad Indian cultures of Brazil. This enormous effort, part geographical, part historical, part

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linguistic, part ethnological, was a turning point in the study of Brazilian Indians. Its results are not fully outdated, even to-day.

There is no doubt however that, seen from the point of view of modern students of Brazilian Indians, Nimuendajú's crowning achievement was the series of papers and monographs which he published on the Gê speaking peoples (1937, 1938, 1939a, 1939b, 1942, 1946). These were not only his latest works; they were also his most detailed, ambitious and mature studies. Nimuendajú had, by the 1920s, developed a friendship and a remarkable working relationship with Robert Lowie of the University of California at Berkeley. He corresponded with Lowie as he did his field work among the Gê and it was Lowie who edited his manuscripts and had them published in English in the United States. This enabled Nimuendaju's work to become internationally known.[1]

Nimuendaju established that peoples such as the Apinaye, the Sherente and the Eastern Timbira had social systems of a complexity that was reminiscent of the Australians, whose societies had proved so difficult to understand that they had perplexed not only the students of them but, occasionally, even the natives themselves.[2] The Gê speakers offered a similar challenge to contemporary anthropological theory. In fact, Nimuendaju's data were so problematic that they gave rise to a Central Brazilian anomaly.

Originally the Indians of Central Brazil had fitted easily enough into the systems of classificiation that were used by anthropologists and other outsiders. They were held to be the descendents of the Tapuya - a blanket term used to designate the Indians of the interior. These Tapuya were little known to the early bandeirantes and colonists, who tended to accept

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the unflattering reports of them which they gleaned from the Indians who lived nearer the coast. The Tapuya, and therefore presumably their modern descendents too, were held to be fierce and warlike nomads who wandered across the vast savannahs of Central Brazil and lived by hunting and gathering. They were tall and fleet and known for their curious custom of running races with logs (actually lengths of tree trunk) on their shoulders. Their material culture was rudimentary. They were thought to practice no agriculture, to lack boats, pottery and hammocks, to be ignorant of alcohol and tobacco. In short, they could safely be classed as primitive, as peoples lower on the social evolutionary scale than the sophisticated Indians of the forests, to say nothing of the others who had created the major pre-contact civilizations of the continent.

When Nimuendajú demonstrated that the peoples of Central Brazil has a considerable amount of agriculture, that their mixed mode of subsistence supported large villages - certainly larger than those of their forest neighbors - and that their social systems were highly complex, the scientific reaction was at first one of fascination, followed by a quite understandable attempt to make these new facts fit the old theoretical schemes.

If the Gê practised agriculture, then it was pointed out that they did rather little of it compared with the tropical forest peoples. Was it perhaps a recent introduction? If so, from whom had these peoples learned it and when?

If the Gê were shown to have an intricate type of dual organization, then there was learned speculation as to where they might have got it from. After all, it was such a complex thing to have fallen into the hands of such primitive peoples! Perhaps indeed the Gê did not really understand these sophisticated systems too well themselves or at least they did not

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operate them very well, and this could account for the difficulty in analysing them. If the Ge had obtained the system from the Inca empire or if they themselves were degenerate remnants of some Incaic civilization, then it was understandable that they might have a dual organization and equally understandable if they made rather a mess of it.[3]

The Gê passion for hunting is undeniable. They had no similar passion for gathering which was seen as largely a feminine occupation but was nevertheless their most important subsistence activity in pre-contact times. Their material culture is also relatively simple. Scholars seized on these characteristics in order to protect the old systems of classification. Thus it was that the Gê were classified with the marginal tribes of South America in the first volume of Julian Steward's famous Handbook of South American Indians (1946).

Yet Nimuendajú's work, which provided much of the material on which the Central Brazilian chapters of the handbook were based, had already made this classification untenable. This in not to say that his ethnography was perfect or definitive. Indeed I know of few ethnographies that are. Certain aspects of Nimuendajú's work were notably weak. Preoccupied as he was with reconstructing the "true" aboriginal culture of the peoples he studied, Nimuendajú paid less attention to the contemporary workings of their societies. His treatment of their social systems was thus strong on ritual and weak on politics. Yet his scrupulously careful ethnography provided a solid base for further work. Above all it showed that a new theoretical approach was needed. His work established that highly complex societies had existed for a relatively long time on the uplands of Central Brazil. These societies did indeed have a realitively simple material culture (though not always quite as

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rudimentary as some had thought). They lived a semi-nomadic life, based on hunting, gathering and agriculture, but with the agriculture playing a supporting role. Subsequent research has supported the conculsions indicated by Nimuendajú's work, that the peoples of Central Brazil need not be considered either as refugees or as degenerates. Their societies show a remarkable vigor right down to our own times and they are based on a very interesting ecological adaptation, made possible by the special circumstances of the plateau.[4]

Furthermore the anomalies and contradictions which appeared in Nimuendajú's discussions of the social systems of these peoples have subsequently been elucidated by investigators who took Nimuendajú's work as a point of departure. They have been shown to be part and parcel of the complexity of these societies - complexity which was difficult to deal with because it could not be analysed by the theories current in Nimuendaju's time. In fact the Central Brazilian societies were hard to analyse in terms of much later theories. They are now being elucidated as a result of a revision of current anthropological theory in the areas of kinship, social structure and cultural categories. This process of revision was given a remarkable impetus within Brazilian ethnology by the later works of Nimuendajú. It was they who showed that the traditional neo-evolutionary viewpoint was inadequate and necessitated a new approach.

Finally, no appreciation of Nimuendaju would be complete without a mention of another aspect of his life which has great significance for us to-day. Nimuendajú loved the Indians. It was perhaps a romantic Rousseauesque affection that he had for them, but he clearly preferred Indian societies and their collective values to this own. He was

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cynically dissatisfied with Brazilian society and indeed with all the so-called developed societies of the West. He himself became a Brazilian citizen and spent most of his life working for the Indian Service of the Brazilian government. Yet in his books he insisted on referring to the citizens of modern Brazil as neo-Brazilians, reserving the term Brazilians (which, incidentally, he hardly ever used) for the original inhabitants of the country, the Indians.

Is is interesting that Nimuendajú succeeded in maintaining this vision of the Indians - view which many people would think was an idealised one - throughout a lifetime of fieldwork. Unlike Rousseau, Nimuendajú had not only lived with the Indians but he went on and on doing so. He adopted an Indian name, spent more time among Indians than any other student of Indians whom I know and eventually died among them. The moral of this story for us has little to do with whether or not he romanticised Indian life. The point is that he knew the Indians very well. He dedicated his own life to the twin tasks of studying the Indians and working for them, defending their interests within the Indian service and before the Brazilian (or neo-Brazilian) authorities.

For me, and I think for all of us, the life and work of Curt Nimuendajú serves as a demonstration that there is no necessary antimony between the dispassionate study required of an ethnologist and a coherent and consistent dedication to the Indian cause. It is in recognition of these qualities that the members of the Harvard-Central Brazil project have dedicated their forthcoming book Dialectical Societies to Nimuendajú. I can do no better than to end by quoting that epigraph:

> This book is dedicated to Curt Nimuendajú, in honor of his pioneering studies in ethnology and his deep affection for the Indians of Brazil.

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NOTES

1) Not only Lowie, but also scholars such as Kroeber (1942), Murdock (1949) and Lévi-Strauss (1949, 1952 and 1956) took up the implications of Nimuendajú's Central Brazilian material for general theories of social organization.

2) See, for example, Berndt (1962:75) who quotes an Australian as saying: "We want to get these marriage rules straight. That is why I ask you for a book, so that we can set the pattern from that."

3) See, for example, Haeckel (1952, 1953) and Lévi-Strauss(1944, 1952).

4) See Maybury-Lewis (1965) and Maybury-Lewis et al. (1971, 1979).

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