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A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE NAMBIQUARA PROJECT

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The Nambiquara are an indigenous people who inhabit the northwestern part of the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. While they have been known since the early Eighteenth Century, they only began to enter into permanent contact with Brazilian society some 65 years ago, when a telegraph line was built across their region, and many villages managed to retain complete autonomy until less than ten years ago.

I did anthropological fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in 1967-70, among the Nambiquara who were then accessable.[1] In 1974, while I was teaching at the University of Brasília, I was invited by the National Indian Foundation to elaborate and execute a project of assistence to these Indians. This Foundation, which is generally known as the FUNAI, is subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior, and is the agency responsible for the welfare of all of Brazil's Indians. I was rather surprised by the invitation, as relations between the FUNAI and professional anthropologists had not been notably cordial, but as various high-ranking officials confessed the Nambiquara situation to be the worst in Brazil, I came to understand their interest in attempting a new departure.

A highway built in the early 1960s had opened up the entire Nambiquara region to national expansion. In 1968, a very large reserve was created for the Nambiquara, but unfortunately it was located in the most arid and agriculturally worthless part of their traditional region. At the time of its creation, less than a sixth of the Nambiquara were living in it, and of those left out, many had still not entered into permanent contact with the national society. These uncontacted Indians inhabited the most fertile part of the Nambiquara region, the broad

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valley of the Guaporé River. Taking advantage of a federal program that offered fiscal incentives to companies willing to develop interior regions of Brazil, large commercial and financial enterprises acquired vast tracts of land in this valley, and began to develop it at a whirlwind pace. This development consisted in cutting down the forest, planting pasturage, and converting it into a cattle-raising region. All but the strongest Indians died of new diseases to which they had no resistance, and the few remaining villages rapidly became tiny, ineffectual enclaves surrounded by multimillion-dollar ranches.

In comparison with the desperate plight of the Indians in the Guaporé Valley, the Nambiquara who lived in the arid Reserve found themselves in a slightly more tenable situation. They were participating in a system of trading artifacts, albeit with a somewhat inconsistent and sporadic market, and they received occasional medical assistence from missionaries as well as FUNAI personnel. Still other Nambiquara, farther to the north, near the town of Vilhena, having been in contact with Brazilian society for the longest time, were reduced to wholly demoralized remnants of their former groups, and were well on their way to amalgamation with the itinerant population of unskilled laborers.

This, then, was the situation which the FUNAI hired me to resolve. I was given a two-year contract, from August 1974 through July 1976, couched in rather vague terms, and went to Mato Grosso to see what could be done. I got off to a rather slow start, owing to a lack of funds, a lack of administrative experience, and a lack of all-around clarity as to my place in the bureaucratic hierarchy of the FUNAI. However, as of April, 1975, I had working with me three young Chiefs of Post, trained in indigenism courses given by the FUNAI, and an administrative assistant, whose help with the paper work and sound advice were indispensable.[2]

The basic philosophy of the Nambiquara Project was one of simple pragmatic humanism. I do not believe that "social engineering" is possible; one cannot manipulate the members of a society as if they were components of a machine. In this respect, it was our good luck that the FUNAI made no attempt to tell us what to do. The official indigenist policy in Brazil is one of "integration," but this concept is subject to a wide range of interpretation, and in any case, the Nambiquara situa-

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tion hardly lent itself to idealistic, long-range planning. What we wanted to do was to keep the Indians alive, to try to attend to the necessities which they themselves perceived, and to try to equip them to look out for their own interests. Our work was not, could not, and I think, should not be an attempt to impose our interests upon the Indians, but rather, an attempt to attend to their interests, and to ameliorate the damages that Western society has caused them.

As the Nambiquara are distributed in 24 small villages, scattered over a region of some 50,000 square kilometers (roughly comparable to the combined area of Vermont and New Hampshire), our program of assistance was necessarily mobile. This was a radical break with the traditional FUNAI practice of establishing fixed Posts, on which the Indians are expected to settle. However, our researches showed that this policy had consistently led to failure in indigenist efforts oriented towards the Nambiquara (Price 1975), and although it proved difficult to secure formal bureaucratic acceptance, we were fortunate enough to acquire three four-wheel-drive vehicles, that enabled us to set up a program of all-year _de facto_ mobile assistance. Each Chief of Post had his own car, and each was responsible for the villages in one part of the Nambiquara region. The three districts thus created corresponded to the social realities of the Nambiquara, and included approximately equal segments of the overall population. These three districts were the Guaporé Valley, the Savannah (where the Reserve is located), and the Northern region.

While most of our activities were simply contingency oriented--attending to illness, settling disputes with the intrusive population, etc.--for descriptive purposes they may be subsumed under four headings: health, education, economic development, and land problems.

We originally requested a nursing attendant to accompany each of the three Chiefs of Post, but the FUNAI informed us that such personnel were not available, and suggested that the Project hire its own medical experts. Unfortunately, owing to the limited salary that we were able to offer and the difficult living conditions, we were never able to find a nurse to accompany our work. However, through mobilizing the Traveling Health Team of the regional district of the FUNAI, we were able to have more than 75% of the Nambiquara vaccinated against measles and tuberculosis.[3] Moreover, the Chiefs of Post themselves were

able to attend to many bronchial and intestinal ailments, which have been the chief causes of death among the Nambiquara. The results of those activities, after only one year of the Project's operation, are most satisfying. The Nambiquara population had been declining at an alarming rate; in 1938 Lévi-Strauss estimated that there were between 2,000 and 3,000 (1948:6), which I take as about a third of the population at the beginning of this century. When we began the Project, there were only some 530 Nambiquara, and the population was still declining. Indeed, reasonable estimates based on genealogical work conducted in the Guaporé Valley would indicate that at least two thirds of the population of that region has died in the last ten to fifteen years. However, in the first year of the Project's operation, the birth rate slightly exceeded the death rate. Most impressive, in fact, was the Guaporé Valley, where there were 24 births and only eleven deaths.

The Indians themselves were anxious to learn to read and write, and so we set up a school, structured insofar as possible to conform to their way of life. This school has now convened twice, in the dry season of 1975, and again this year. We attempted to locate the school in a neutral zone, to eliminate the visitor-host problems that would occur were it located in a traditional village, and students arrived with their entire families. Personnel of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who had been studying the Nambiquara language since 1959, served as teachers, and separate classes were set up for children and adults, to eliminate inter-generational competition. There are now more than 30 Indians who read and write to some degree; a few of them very well indeed. They have written short stories which are being used as reading materials among the less advanced, and there is a constant flow of letters between villages.

Our efforts at economic development have had to be tailored to the individual needs of the Indians in the different districts. The Indians in the Savannah and in the North produce a varied and appealing variety of artifacts, which are readily acquired by tourists (see Aspelin, in press). Since, however, few tourists pass through the Nambiquara region, the major problem is to get these artifacts to market. The FUNAI has established stores to sell Indian artifacts in various parts of Brazil, but the problem of transport remains. To aid in this matter, the members of the Nambiquara Project bring loads of artifacts to the store in Cuiabá,

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and also accompany the Indians when they decide to sell their goods to the owners of small hotels that are springing up along the highway, to insure that they are not taken advantage of. However, the prices paid for the artifacts do not reflect the labor involved in their manufacture, and owing to inflation, the real value of the prices paid by the FUNAI stores is only about 50% of what it was five years ago (see Price, in press). In any event, the trading of artifacts cannot be, in the long run, a successful means of articulation with the national economy, and so the Project is actively looking for alternatives. One possibility may be the raising of cattle, in which some of the Indians have expressed interest. The Project is currently trying to furnish these Indians with a small herd, as well as the equipment and the training necessary for the experiment.

The economic possibilities of the Nambiquara in the Guaporé Valley are necessarily different, as these Indians have an extremely rudimentary material culture. They neither make necklaces nor do feather work, and the only artifacts that they have to exploit are their bows and their baskets. Owing to the steady destruction of the forest by the ranches, it is even becoming difficult for them to acquire the raw materials necessary for these items. However, a plan evolved by the Project's administrative assistant, Alba Lucy Giraldo, together with the Chief of Post Sílbene de Almeida, seems likely to have considerable success. Because of the great distance from the nearest towns, the employees of the ranches have had to do without such food items as fresh vegetables, and the cost of transport adds greatly to the price of even such staples as beans. Under Sílbene's guidance, one of the villages planted these kinds of produce this year, and is beginning to establish a very successful trading relationship with a near-by ranch.

Land problems have been more difficult for the Project to handle. We did manage to stop a very large financial concern from invading the most fertile part of the Reserve, and it seems probable that a settler in another part of the Reserve will finally leave, with adequate indemnification. But the Indians of the Guaporé Valley do not want to live in the arid Reserve, and efforts to move them there before the beginning of the Project failed dismally. However, they are becoming extremely conscious of their plight, and various, formerly hostile groups would now be willing to move to a new reserve of reasonable

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size, to be created in the Guaporé Valley itself. Unfortunately, owing to the rapid development of the ranches in the region, there is only one area that would still serve this purpose. We have suggested this alternative to the FUNAI and defended it with all the documentation at our disposal. The FUNAI has sent out three separate missions from Brasília to evaluate the situation, and all have agreed, in essence, that our plan is the only feasable alternative. However, as of this writing, no positive action has been taken.

The difficulty, of course, is owing to pressure from powerful financial interests who would be harmed by the creation of such a reserve. In fact, interests who imagine that the very survival of the Indians might be prejudicial to them have come close to rendering the FUNAI impotent in the Nambiquara region, and they may well succeed in destroying the Nambiquara Project completely. I was informed in February of this year that for reasons that could not be divulged, my contract would not be renewed. Thus, I have made a necessary return to academia, but I have left my heart with the Nambiquara.

I am still trying to understand what happened; many of the political details remain obscure, and perhaps will never be fully known. A few general conclusions, however, are beginning to emerge. The most important concern the nature of the FUNAI, and its place in the Brazilian political arena.

The FUNAI has been accused of being inefficient and corrupt. During my time with the agency, I did encounter some, rather circumstancial evidence of outright corruption, but I was utterly apalled by the extent of the inefficiency. The fact is, however, that it is hard to tell the two matters apart, for it is clear that hidden in the morass of simple bureaucratic inertia, there is considerable foot-dragging by personnel whose loyalties lie, not with the Indians, but with the ranchers. The existence of such persons became clear when, less than 24 hours after I attended a supposedly secret meeting with top officials of the FUNAI, a rancher appeared at my house fully informed on what had transpired. And who, one wonders, was responsible for the systematic disappearance from the FUNAI archives of all important documents pertaining to the Nambiquara, including many of my own reports?

But the most serious problem faced by the FUNAI is a chronic shortage of financial resources, owing in part to ex-

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treme mismanagement. It is an open secret that more than half of the annual budget goes into the payroll, and that many FUNAI positions are sinecures. I was astounded to learn, earlier this year, that 88 salaried employees were waiting around for the recalcitrant Atroari-Waimari to come out of the woods and be "pacified," while the Nambiquara Project had only five people, trying to attend to over 500 Indians. To make matters worse, the use of funds left over after salaries is impeded by a set of archaic accounting procedures that make money difficult to obtain, and difficult to spend wisely. After considerable toil, the Nambiquara Project was awarded a budget of something more than US$ 30,000 in 1975, and this figure was approximately doubled in 1976. While to be really effective, the Project would need considerably more than this, by FUNAI standards, we were extremely well financed. However, in 1975 the first instalment of the annual budget only reached our hands in May, and in 1976, we had to wait until June, at which time we were required to spend money we had planned to use over a period of three months--in 30 days. Needless to say, this kind of stop-and-start financing is extremely prejudicial to any sort of constructive and consistent activity.

However, a glance at the newspapers makes one wonder if the FUNAI is any more inefficient or corrupt than other, comparable agencies. There are certainly at least a few, highly dedicated people working in the FUNAI, among whom I would include its current president, Gen. Ismarth de Araújo Oliveira, who has brought his considerable political skills to bear against overwhelming forces of opposition. It has been unfortunately easy for critics to censure the FUNAI and Brazilian indigenist policy in general on moral grounds. But the problem, as any anthropologist should perceive, is not ethical, but structural.

Brazil is committed to developing its vast interior regions, which have lain fallow for nearly five centuries. To some extent, the Indians stand in the way of this development. It is all very well to be idealistic and say that the Indians were there first, and the land is theirs by right of immemorial possession. In fact, the Brazilian Indian Statute takes exactly this position. But idealism, even when it is made law, cannot stand up to wealthy and powerful interest groups. The situation of the FUNAI, as a subdivision of the Ministry of the Interior,

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is highly peculiar, since this ministry fosters development projects that are often in direct conflict with the best interests of the Indians. But even if the FUNAI were a wholly autonomous organ of the federal government, it would still be subject to irresistable pressures.

In sum, because of the nature of its functions within the national society, the position of the FUNAI is structurally weak, and it could not be otherwise. Nor can anyone deny Brazil's right to undertake a program of national development. Depending on one's political philosophy, one might feel that it should be done differently; but no one, I think, would seriously suggest that Brazilian society should be content to remain on the coast and leave the interior of the continent entirely to the Indians. We could not ask this of Brazil, nor of any other country in a similar situation.

Thus, there is an unavoidable contradiction in expecting an agency of the national government to protect the interests of an indigenous minority that appears to impede national development. While a basic humanitarianism would indicate that such minorities should be protected, it does not make sense to expect that those with opposing interests be their protectors. Both the personnel and the financing of an effort such as the Nambiquara Project should be completely free of ties with the national power structure. I am happy to say that the people who have worked with me in the Project eminently satisfy this requirement. The world does not yet lack altruistic individuals who will devote themselves, body and soul, to the diminution of human suffering. But until and unless adequate financing is forthcoming from similarly motivated sources, we can do very little.

It is strange in this secular age that persons with highly ethnocentric religious views continue to receive adequate funds to carry on their work of proselytizing all over the world, while those who respect the right to self-determination of other cultures have not found a source of financial support. An effort such as the Nambiquara Project is strictly analogous to a mission, except that it substitutes cultural relativism for dogmatism. Since the right to religious freedom also implies the right to have no religion at all, any country which admits various religious denominations as missionaries should be obliged to admit non-religious programs of community assistance on the same basis. The only problem is

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to find adequate, private sources of financing for such programs. I submit, therefore, that it is time for those members of Western society who are sincerely interested in the welfare of indigenous minorities to stop holding strident meetings and publishing inflamatory pamphlets, and start putting their money where their mouth is.

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NOTES

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2. My co-workers in the Nambiquara Project were Sílbene de Almeida, Alba Lucy Giraldo Figueroa, Ariovaldo José dos Santos, and Judas Thadeu e Silva, who was replaced in 1976 by Marcelo dos Santos.

3. I can find no words of praise commensurate with the dedication and self-sacrifice of "Dona Cecília" Kazuko Tsumori, the nurse of the Traveling Health Team in Cuiabá.

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