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A Fresh Look at Amazon Indians: Karl von den Steinen and Curt Nimuendajú, Giants of Brazilian Anthropology

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This essay is about two remarkable men, Karl von den Steinen and Curt Nimuendajú, who were both entirely self-taught as anthropologists, but whose contributions were so great that they changed the discipline in Brazil. Rather than dwelling on their anthropological findings, I instead want to place them in historical context and to outline their impact on other anthropologists and on public opinion.

Steinen and Nimuendajú were both men of action, and each had exciting adventures making contact with hitherto isolated tribes. But their attitudes towards indigenous people were refreshingly new, perhaps because of their lack of formal training. Each, in a different way, dispelled the prevailing images of exoticism, romance or primitive menace about Indians.

Let us now move back 120 years to the 1880s. The tribes of the Brazilian Amazon and its tributaries had been shattered by 250 years of annihilation by imported diseases against which they had no inherited immunity, and by slavery, forced labour and abduction to fill missionary villages. The banks of the main Amazon River, which had once been lined with teeming villages, were now totally denuded of their original tribal peoples. The great southern tributaries of the Amazon had long since been ransacked by oppressors of indigenous people. Canoes and steamers now plied them. To the west they were overrun by rubber tappers, for during the 1880s the Amazon rubber boom was reaching a crescendo.

But there was one remarkable exception to this depressing picture: the Xingu River. The lower half of the Xingu had been colonised and disturbed since the seventeenth century, but the upper river remained unpenetrated by whites. The main reason for this amazing isolation was a mighty set of rapids that prevented boats from moving upriver, and also the region's remoteness and lack of rubber, gold or other tempting resources.

KARL VON DEN STEINEN

Enter the twenty-nine-year-old Karl von den Steinen. This young man had studied medicine in Berlin and the new discipline of psychiatry in Vienna. He sailed round the world on a three-year voyage of circumnavigation, during which he learned the rudiments of anthropology with Adolf Bastian in the Marquesas Islands. Steinen then went on a German expedition to South Georgia (among the penguins and whalers), and it was on his return from this in 1884 that he took a steamer up the Paraguay River into Mato Grosso in central Brazil. He visited the well-known Kadiwéu and Bororo tribes. Then, in the former mining town of Cuiabá, Steinen heard about uncontacted tribes living to the north. So he organized a team to go to have a look, consisting of three young Germans (his brother Wilhelm, Paul Ehrenreich and himself), five Brazilians, the Frenchman Perrot, and a military escort. A train of mules, oxen and dogs took the explorers across the *cerrado* savanna to the acculturated Bakairi, who offered to guide the explorers to the other half of their tribe, which was still uncontacted. The Bakairi led them for a fortnight to the headwaters of the Xingu, where they made eight bark canoes.

After almost three weeks of gliding down the idyllic, empty Batovi River, Steinen's expedition saw its first sign of an Indian presence. Steinen's men walked up a forest trail away from the river for almost an hour, in silence and increasingly apprehensive about what awaited them. The expedition suddenly entered a clearing with three thatched huts. An Indian emerged and came towards them. One of Steinen's frightened Bakairi Indians spoke in Carib and, to everyone's relief, was understood and answered. Steinen described how the two young men walked forward, leaning against one another and embracing, "both talking at once, and both trembling all over their bodies from a mixture of fear and excitement. We were all overcome with a happy feeling of relief!" (Von den Steinen 1886:158).

Karl von den Steinen spent some days in this village and then went on to contact other tribes, both then and on a second expedition three years later in 1887. We are immensely fortunate that it was *he* who had the first glimpse of the paradise of the upper Xingu, and who broke its isolation and innocence. Steinen was unquestionably a fine anthropological observer. He was also a wonderful writer and narrator. He gave good descriptions of Indian artefacts in the context of tribal culture and brought back many items for the museums in Berlin. He was interested in the origins of decorative motifs, the skill and artistry of manufacture, and the meanings of body paint. He described the invention of ceramics by the Waurá, and of twirling sticks for making fire. He also delved into the abstractions of

mythology and legend, which he told with great sympathy and understanding. He described flute ceremonies and masked shamanic rituals. During his relatively short visits, Steinen penetrated indigenous imagination and beliefs more effectively than any previous commentator had done.

His classic books—*Durch Central Brasilien* about the first expedition, and *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* about the second—had none of the pomposity that one would expect from a nineteenth-century German academic. Luckily, he was young and inexperienced enough to write with great naturalness. So he broke the mould of Brazilian anthropology. Up to then, the relatively small amount written about Indians was full of abstract theory and generalization. Steinen was the first to write about Indians as real people, individuals with distinct characters, even foibles. Although fully aware of the handsomeness of the Indians and the beauty of their world (which he described as “wandering in an enchanted garden...of dense vegetation and narrow devouring pathways ... the endless exuberant world of the tropics” [1886:187]) he was not a romantic, beguiled by the myth of the noble savage. His Indians were intelligent and resourceful, some with a sense of humour, others bad tempered, capable of being callous or timorous, quick witted, spiritual or concerned only with the present.

In one passage he described the rapture of an Indian with his first metal cutting blade, running through the forest slicing saplings with wild abandon. Steinen told how a Bakairi mimed the effort that went into felling a tree with a blunt stone axe, under an equatorial sun, chopping away, bent double, hungry and exhausted. The tree did not fall until the sun had almost set. The Indian actor then changed his manner to show the contrast with the white man’s efficiency, and raised his imaginary metal axe with devastating strength and vigour (Steinen 1894).

Steinen vividly described another Indian telling about the geography of the river that lay ahead. The river was drawn in the sand, and the rapids and tribes along it were marked with grains of corn. But Steinen’s informant described and mimed the journey far more vividly than any baedeker: “First you get into your canoe, *pepi*, and paddle, *pepi, pepi, pepi*. You paddle to the left and right, changing sides. You reach a rapids, *bububu* ... How high it falls: his hand goes down the steps with each *bu* ... There the *pepi* must plunge between rocks—a hard stamp on the ground with his foot. With what groans it is pushed through, and the baskets of baggage are wearily carried overland ...” —and so the narration continued, describing a wonderfully realistic day’s journey (Steinen 1886).

In another passage, Steinen described hard bargaining with a young couple of the Custenaú tribe, trying to acquire a hammock in exchange for some knives: “The owner of the hammock was a young lad whose crafty and impudent expression reminded me of shoplifters in the Berlin police

files. He was newly married. His wife was about twenty-five, with large shining eyes. Sitting there in her youthful happiness, she swung in her hammock and talked to me with animation” (Steinen 1886:181; Hemming 1995 [1987]:403).

He was struck by the beauty of another young mother, who had

... a finely cut European face with full lips, lightly reddened cheeks framed by thick waving hair, and the most beautiful eyes I had seen in all Brazil which is saying a great deal. They were large eyes whose lovely look contained no coquetry, but whose piercing fire blazed with a full, naively tender impact and a spark of innocent lasciviousness ... With a body that had never been laced up or mishandled, she really looked like a young mother Eve. But, sadly, she scratched her head too often. This may sometimes have been done from embarrassment; but lice contributed to cause it (1894:58).

I like the way in which he told his nineteenth-century German readers what it was like to be in a village full of naked people: “After a quarter of an hour a visitor is no longer aware of this wicked nudity. But if you do deliberately remember it, and ask yourself whether these naked people—fathers, mothers and children who stand around or walk about so innocently—should be condemned or pitied for their nakedness, you must either laugh at your question as utterly absurd or protest against it as unworthy. From an aesthetic point of view, lack of clothing like truth itself has its pros and cons. Young, healthy people may look enchanting in their unconstrained movements, but the old and sick are often dreadful in their decay” (Steinen 1894:64). Steinen also described the candour and total lack of prurience with which Indians referred to sexual activity: “Our natives have no secret parts of their bodies. They joke about them in words and gestures with complete frankness that it would be idiotic to regard as indecent” (1886:190–91).

Moving down the Xingu’s headwaters, the expedition was camped on a sandbank when it was suddenly visited by a flotilla from the uncontacted and potentially hostile Trumai tribe. A long line of fourteen canoes glided silently into view: “Two Indians stood motionless in each canoe with their bows ready, while a third sat in the middle and scarcely seemed to move his paddle. In perfect order, as if performing a carefully rehearsed theatrical production, the long narrow vessels glided noiselessly towards the forested far bank.” The Trumai warriors were painted for battle and wearing white feather headdresses. Then, equally suddenly, the Trumai started shouting fanatically, beating their chests and swaying their bodies and legs. Steinen commented that such movements while standing in a canoe would have pitched the Germans helplessly into the water: “But we were on solid ground and the example was infectious. So we also howled and roared and

beat our chests” (Steinen 1886:192). The tension was then broken by some nervous trading, with Steinen himself bravely wading into the river offering a piece of clothing.

The most exciting contact occurred farther downriver, with the very belligerent Suyá (Suiá) tribe: “Some forty men had assembled there, all naked, their bodies streaked unartistically with black and red dyes, some with white or orange feather headdresses, some with loose, tangled hair hanging down to their shoulders.” All were armed with bows-and-arrows and clubs, and they wore frightening lip-discs: “None kept his mouth still for an instant, shouting ‘Suyá! Suyá! Tahahá Suyá!’ The roaring of the frenzied pack always finished with these words repeated in every key. They brandished their weapons and leaped about with their eyes fixed on us” (Steinen 1886:201). Steinen again bravely went in the lead canoe, with his dogs barking wildly and adding greatly to the danger—since these animals were unknown to the Suyá—so that for a time the Germans had to withdraw.

After more adventures, there was finally contact and trading with the fearsome Suyá. Steinen’s description of this Jê-speaking tribe was particularly valuable, because it later became hostile again. When I first visited the Xingu seventy-five years later everyone was still frightened of the Suyá; but they have since been contacted again.

On one occasion, Steinen introduced the Suyá to the concept of drawing on paper, and they portrayed the visiting expedition. They showed the five leaders with full bushy beards, but they chose to ignore their clothing altogether. The only feature drawn on their matchstick bodies was their genitalia.

At another time, three women and their men came to the expedition camp: “The women came in the simplicity of paradise and no less innocence. They wanted to have intimate relations with us—something that did not conform to our rigorous discipline! Their male companions demonstrated this desire by sign language that could easily be understood by all peoples at all times ... The women then landed from the canoes and washed themselves in the most open manner, thus demonstrating a naïve innocence that prudish critics deny to the Medici Venus” (Steinen 1886:204).

Karl von den Steinen was an explorer as well as a ground-breaking anthropologist. His team were the first whites to descend the entire 1500-kilometre length of the Xingu River. When they shot the great rapids that had previously protected the upper river, Steinen’s canoe capsized. This adventure was illustrated in vivid before-and-after engravings in Steinen’s book—and it showed that his first priority after the shipwreck was to recover a pet macaw. He named the rapids after his compatriot Carl von Martius who had visited Brazilian Indians in 1818–1820.

Steinen went on to be a distinguished professor in Berlin, where in 2002 the Ethnologisches Museum exhibited his collections from the Xingu. One of his greatest legacies was to inspire a galaxy of German anthropologists to work in Brazil, notably the admirable Theodor Koch Grünberg and Paul Ehrenreich.

CURT NIMUENDAJÚ

Karl von den Steinen died in 1929. Long before that, a young German immigrant called Curt Unkel arrived in Brazil. Different in every way from the distinguished and patrician Karl von den Steinen, the humble, self-taught Unkel was destined to make an even greater impact on Brazilian anthropology. Towards the end of his life, he was asked for autobiographical notes and a picture of himself, and he answered with typical modesty: “My life is very simple: I was born in Jena in 1883, had no university education of any sort, and I came to Brazil in 1903. Until 1913 my permanent residence was in São Paulo and after that in Belém; but all the rest until now was an almost uninterrupted series of explorations ... I have no photograph of myself” (Baldus 1945:92). Slight and slim, reserved and precise, with a neat moustache shaved every day of his life, he came to look like a stern bank manager. But his affinity with Indians was innate and lifelong.

Two years after arrival, Unkel chose to live among the Guarani Indians of western São Paulo state. The tribe loved the quiet German and he developed an empathy for indigenous thinking that has never been matched by any other anthropologist. In 1907 the Nandeva Guarani formally admitted him to their tribe in an elaborate ceremony. They gave him the title Nimuendajú (“He who resides with us”) that he adopted with pride. In 1922 he took up Brazilian citizenship with Nimuendajú as his surname.

Nimuendajú understood Indian philosophy and society profoundly and intimately because he spent so much time with indigenous people. He explained that he lived among Indians because “it is necessary to feel in your own flesh the problems of the group as if they were your own—to fear the same threats, raise the same hopes, grow angry at the same injustices and oppressions” (Schaden 1968:16).

Nimuendajú, however, was no romantic who “went native.” Life in an Indian village was no picnic. In one depressed moment, Nimuendajú wrote that “the life of south-Brazilian forest Indians is so incredibly miserable, so full of penury and privations, of persecutions and danger. Prolonged habitation with the puerile, fearful and obstinate savages is so insufferable that even a fugitive criminal would be mad to submit to all this”

(Nimuendajú 1910b:54-55). But there were of course delightful times in the beautiful and bountiful forests, enveloped in the communal fellowship of a tribe. He ended his description of his night-long naming ceremony: “When the sun rose behind the forest, its rays illuminated a new companion of the Guarani tribe who, despite his pale skin, faithfully shared with them for two years the misery of a moribund people” (Nimuendajú 1910a:34).

Nimuendajú particularly enjoyed living with the Canela (Ramko-kamekra). Its women used to spend hours painting him from head to foot and covering him in feathers like a Christmas tree. The Canela also held a ceremony to bestow on Nimuendajú the name of a paramount chief who had just died. He also loved living among the related Apinayé. This tribe formally married him to a young girl and he enjoyed the company of women in various tribes. In another village, Nimuendajú became desperately ill from malnutrition, fever and dysentery, and he was saved by indigenous medicine. Writing about it in an academic German journal, he leaves the reader in no doubt that it was the magical incantations of the shaman that cured him (Nimuendajú 1914:284-285).

During the four decades from 1905 to his death in 1945, Curt Nimuendajú was on an expedition to a tribe, or living with Indians, or on an archaeological excavation almost every single year (see Table 1). Having visited many tribes and obscure parts of Amazonia, I am in awe of the sheer physical stamina required in this staggering forty years of visits. For Nimuendajú was travelling before there were roads and motor vehicles in the Brazilian interior, or outboard motors, or planes. Every expedition involved weeks or months of punishing travel even before sharing the tough life of his Indian friends. Apart from occasional hunger, Nimuendajú often caught malaria—which is debilitating, to say the least—although he scarcely bothers to mention it. Without question, no anthropologist before or since Nimuendajú spent so much of his life living as an Indian, immersed in the world he was studying.

Although self-taught, Curt Nimuendajú was a natural scholar and meticulous observer. His accounts of *forty-five* different tribes in all parts of Brazil are classics of anthropological writing. He wrote the first major books about the Nandeva Guarani, Apinayé, Xerente, Canela and Ticuna, as well as over twenty chapters in the Smithsonian Institution’s *Handbook of South American Indians*. He always covers the anthropological field fully: kinship, mythology, daily life, hunting, warfare, social structure, artefacts, ornamentation, ceremonial and spirituality. Nimuendajú was an admirably thorough observer, and he wrote jargon-free prose. In this respect, I think that we gain from his lack of formal education. From his very first book, a contemporary praised his simple and pure language: “Far from being academic, Nimuendajú’s form of expression is full of the spirit of indigenous

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**Table 1: Fieldwork by Curt Nimuendajú
(compiled by Carlos Moreira Neto, 1982)**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Location (Sponsor, if any)</i>	<i>Tribes</i>
1905–08	Western São Paulo	Guarani, Kaingang
1910	Western São Paulo, southern Mato Grosso (Museu Paulista)	Guarani, Kaingang, Ofaié, Oti
1911–12	West and coastal São Paulo (SPI)	Guarani, Kaingang
1912	Rios Tibaji, Ivaí, in Santa Catarina (SPI)	Kaingang
1913	Southern Mato Grosso (SPI)	Ofaié, Kaiowá
1914–15	Rio Gurupi, in Pará and Maranhão (SPI)	Tembé, Timbira, Ka'apor
1915	Rios Paru, Jari, and Maracá island, in northern Pará and Amapá	Aparai
1915–16	Pará	Tembé
1916–919	Lower Rio Xingu, and Rios Iriri, Curuá, in Pará	Juruna, Arara, Kayapó
1920	Pará coast	Tembé, Ka'apor
1921	Rio Oiapoque, Amapá	Galibi, Palikur
1921–1923	Rio Madeira, Amazonas (SPI)	Parintintin (TupiKawahib) contact, Mura, Tora, Pirahã
1922	Marajó Island (Göteborg Museum)	Archaeological Excavations
1923	Tapajós, Marajó, Caviana (Göteborg Museum)	Excavations. Mawé
1924–25	Tapajós, Trombetas (Göteborg Museum)	Excavations
1925	Rio Oiapoque, in Amapá (Göteborg Museum)	Excavations. Palikur, Galibi, Karipuna

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<i>Year</i>	<i>Location (Sponsor, if any)</i>	<i>Tribes</i>
1926	Lower Rio Madeira, Rio Autaz (Göteborg Museum)	Mura, Mundurukú
1926	Tocantins	Excavations
1927	Upper Rio Negro, Rios Içana, Uaupés (Göteborg Museum)	Baniwa, Wanana, Tukano, Tariana
1928	Tapajós	Excavations
1928–29	Maranhão, Goiás (Hamburg, Dresden, Leipzig Museums)	Apinayé, Canela (Ramkokamekra), Krikati, Guajajara
1929	Rio Solimões, in Amazonas	Ticuna
1930	Tocantins, Maranhão (Dresden, Leipzig Museums)	Apinayé, Xerente, Krahó, Canela
1931, 1932	Tocantins	Apinayé. Canela (Ramkokamekra)
1933	Maranhão (Carnegie Institute)	Canela
1934	Pernambuco (Carnegie Institute)	Fulniô, Xukuru
1935, 1936	Maranhão (Univ. of California)	Canela, Gamella (Ramkokamekra)
1937	Tocantins (Univ. of California)	Apinayé, Xerente
1938–39	Bahia, Minas Gerais	Pataxó, Kamakā, Maxakali, Botocudo
1940	Rios Xingu, Araguaia	Gorotire Kayapó
1941–42	Rio Solimões (Museu Goeldi)	Ticuna
1945 (death)	Rio Solimões (Museu Nacional)	Ticuna

thinking” (Jürgen Reister as quoted in Moreira 1982:8).

Although most of his work is dispassionate reporting, he could be almost as delightful a storyteller as Steinen. He entertained the Xerente by telling them anecdotes about the hunting and love life of the Apinayé. Girls from this latter tribe “very early develop ideas of their own in love affairs and know exactly what they want. If they like a man, they yield to him without much ado; otherwise they demonstrate their aversion clearly enough, and then he had better look elsewhere for a mate” (Nimuendajú 1939:84). He illustrated every facet of these tribes’ way of life through a series of fascinating stories, told with as much verve and sympathy as he used in recording their rich legends and myths. He even describes children’s games such as “hunter and quarry,” in which one set of boys running around on all-fours imitating animals while others enact the hunt, even down to killing, flailing and carrying back the game animal.

This reticent, shy, tidy scholar was also a man of action who showed extraordinary courage. In 1922 the Indian Protection Service asked Nimuendajú to try to contact Brazil’s most belligerent tribe, the Parintintin (Tupi-Kawahib) of the Madeira basin in the heart of the Amazon rain forests. For decades, the Parintintin had waged a ferocious and implacable war against rubber tappers and other invaders, pitting their arrows and hunting skills against Winchester rifles. The German anthropologist built an outpost in the midst of Parintintin territory and settled down to await their reaction, defended only by corrugated-iron walls to his house and a wire-fenced clearing around it. There were several skirmishes and incursions during the coming months. But whenever the Indians fired arrows at his men, they were ordered to make no response. Then came the decisive encounter. In Nimuendajú’s words, one morning:

... the Parintintin ran in through the gate to attack me, amid their war cries and a hail of arrows ... At the instant that I shielded my body behind a corner of the house, arrows struck beside me. The veranda was immediately riddled with them and the yard was strewn with others that fragmented when they hit the walls. Over the top of the wall I could see a group of attackers advancing against the house, continually shouting and shooting ... I called to them, but they shouted so frenetically that I could hardly hear my own voice ... I then ordered the men to prepare to fire a volley above their heads. But while I was hesitating to give the order “fire” for fear of putting the Indians to flight, they suddenly yielded and started to retreat towards the gate. I immediately exchanged my gun for an axe and a machete, which I showed and offered to them ... I then quickly jumped down to the yard and, showing them some strands of beads, approached them. However, they were very excited and suspicious and recoiled before me, so that I had to follow them outside the perimeter where, at their request, I laid the beads on the ground

and then withdrew a little so that they could come to pick them up (Nimuendajú 1924:215-216).

There were more arrows, war cries and attacks; but Nimuendajú's tact and knowledge of the Tupi-Guarani language ultimately achieved a dialogue and all-important *physical* contact. As Nimuendajú commented: "The great miracle had happened. The 'indomitable wild beasts, the man-eaters with whom one could talk only through the mouth of a rifle' had conversed peacefully with me and exchanged presents during almost three hours!" (Nimuendajú 1924:217). But tragically, in ensuing months the Parintintin suffered terribly from this surrender, decimated by diseases and with their lands invaded. Nimuendajú's friend Herbert Baldus wrote that he soon "deplored his own heroic act, realising that the happiest Indians are those who keep themselves independent by their fighting valour and by intransigent hostility to any usurper of their lands" (Baldus 1945:29).

Curt Nimuendajú was more proud of his role in restoring morale among indigenous people. He wrote that on his second visit to the Apinayé, their village "presented a sorry picture, with five wretched huts ranged round a plaza overgrown with rank weeds. The boisterous vivacity typical of [their] settlements had disappeared, but I was welcomed with the utmost cordiality like an old and long-awaited friend" (Nimuendajú 1939:14). He gently tried to encourage this demoralized people. So "I was proportionately pleased and astonished to note improvement in all respects when I came back in 1930. There were two more huts, helping to complete a true village circle; the plaza was neatly kept; and numerous logs demonstrated the revival of their old sport [of log racing]" (Nimuendajú 1939:15). Farming was revived, and infant mortality caused by malnutrition had fallen dramatically. He writes that "In 1931 the Apinayé quite spontaneously celebrated a whole series of old-style festivals during my sojourn...The tenacity with which this miserable remnant of a once-numerous tribe cling to their traditions is truly amazing" (Nimuendajú 1939:15).

Because Curt Nimuendajú studied so many tribes, he saw them at all stages of what was then known as "acculturation." Some were, at the moment of contact, in pristine conditions with their tribal culture intact. But Nimuendajú was more concerned with less glamorous indigenous peoples, those who were struggling at the base of frontier society. He was the first anthropologist to take the tribes of Northeast Brazil seriously. These were remnants of peoples who had borne the full brunt of European colonization in the sixteenth century and who were now abjectly poor and clinging to a few vestiges of their Indian heritage and language. The tribes he studied in northern Amapá, living on coastal mudflats and mangrove swamps near the frontier with French Guiana, were in similar condition.

The sensitive Nimuendajú was often moved to anger by the oppression of these poor people.

In 1927 he travelled far up the Rio Negro in the northwestern corner of Brazil, and was profoundly depressed by what he saw. He found these Indians fearful, truculent and deeply suspicious of all whites. Many ran off as soon as they saw him. He knew, of course, that such behaviour by normally hospitable Indians was the direct result of decades of cruelty and forced labour by white bosses. He even wished that the Indians would take up arms and use their blowguns and poisoned darts to kill their evil masters.

Some respite had come from Italian Salesian missionaries, who were converting the upper Rio Negro into a vast and regimented theocracy. But protection by intolerant missionaries came at a price. Nimuendajú watched in horror as the Salesians demolished all the large and very beautiful collective houses or *malocas* of the Tucano and Desana. He praised these architectural masterpieces as protection against the strongest tropical rains. *Malocas* were dry and spotlessly clean, shady and agreeable cool—unlike the hot little boxes that replaced them. The anthropologist knew that “the principal reason for the missionaries’ aversion to collective habitations is ... that they see in them ... the symbol, the veritable bulwark of the former ... social order that is so contrary to their plans for conversion, for spiritual and social domination ... The Indians’ own culture is condensed in the *malocas*: everything in them breathes tradition and independence. This is why they have to fall” (Nimuendajú 1925:190).

Nimuendajú was one of the first to appreciate that “What these Indians need with the greatest urgency is moral regeneration, to restore their individual and racial esteem—sentiments that were scorned by the whites until their last vestiges were extinguished. The missions’ tutelage will never produce any such effect; but rather the contrary” (Nimuendajú 1950:191).

There were times when Nimuendajú despaired of the future for many tribes. He wrote of the once warlike Xerente in central Brazil: “At the beginning of the twentieth century the Xerente became demoralized by Neobrazilian contacts, and in 1937 I found the aboriginal culture in a state of collapse. Economically and socially ruined, hemmed in by settlers, the people were on the verge of complete subjection to these influences ... I know no single Indian in even fairly satisfactory circumstances under the new regime” (Nimuendajú 1942:8).

He wrote heart-rending accounts of the extinction of three separate tribes—the Pau d’Arco Kayapó (Irã-Amraire) on the Araguaia River, the Oti in western São Paulo, and the Ofaié in southern Mato Grosso. In each case, he tracked down the final pathetic survivors of these once-proud peoples.

He described the brutality of minor rubber barons towards the Juruna and Kayapó on the lower Xingu, the part of that river that was not protected by the Von Martius rapids. His accounts of massacres of Indians and their decimation by disease reinforced the work of Brazilian champions of the Indians such as General Cândido Rondon and, later, the Villas Boas brothers who saved the tribes first seen by Von den Steinen on the upper Xingu.

Between his many expeditions to tribes, Nimuendajú undertook a series of archaeological excavations, generally for the Gothenberg Museum in Sweden. Nimuendajú was also a careful linguist, who assigned and often corrected the linguistic affiliation of every tribe he visited. He also did some superb historical research. He left a posthumously published *Ethno-Historical Map* (1987[1934]) that is a monument of scholarship. It shows the geographical movements and linguistic affiliations of every Brazilian tribe during the previous three centuries, and is accompanied by a massive index of the historical sources. I cannot imagine how he found the time or energy, between all his fieldwork, for the months of research that must have gone into this unique achievement.

Politically, Nimuendajú was a socialist who saw himself as a man of the people. Late in life, he married a woman of simple origins in Belém do Pará. He died in 1945 aged 62 among the Ticuna of the Solimões River, either from disease because he had disobeyed his doctor's orders not to return to the field, or, according to another version, killed in a dispute over a woman.

This reserved and unorthodox German scholar was acclaimed during his lifetime, with his work published by leading institutions in Germany, France and the United States. After his death one Brazilian anthropologist considered him "without any doubt the principal figure of Brazilian ethnology" in the first half of the twentieth century (Fernandes 1958:17; see also Arnaud 1983/84). The great Darcy Ribeiro wrote to the equally distinguished Roberto da Matta that Nimuendajú's "classics of anthropology ... are worth more than the entire output of all Brazilian ethnologists," an output which included their own impressive literature (Ribeiro 1979:210). Carlos Moreira, a leading historian of Brazilian Indians, concluded that "despite the volume and quality of his work which make him by far the most fecund of Brazilian ethnologists it seems reasonable to suppose ... that living with Indians was for him just as important as writing about them" (Moreira 1982:11).

To me, Nimuendajú's greatest achievement was to be the first anthropologist who became an *active champion* of indigenous rights. Herbert Baldus said that "throughout his life this honourable man fought in defence of the Indians against representatives of our civilization who were invading the wilderness with the power of superior weapons. He

thus gained the love of the persecuted, becoming one of them. And like them, he came to suffer the hatred of the colonisers” (Baldus 1945:93).

During recent decades, Brazilian and foreign anthropologists have fought most effectively for indigenous people’s rights. With their help, the Indians have recently achieved many political victories and gained control over extensive territories. I like to think that these modern anthropologists are inspired by Karl von den Steinen and Curt Nimuendajú, both of whom gave such fresh insights into the Indian mentality. These two scholars were the first to try to imagine the trauma of contact from the native point of view. Both Steinen and Nimuendajú wrote only about what they themselves saw in their ground-breaking fieldwork, and neither generalized. They amply earned the title “anthropologist,” and were among the first of their profession in Brazil to be concerned with the indigenous cause.

EDITOR’S NOTE

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