

The Invention *of Brazilian Indians*

An analysis of the ethnographies produced by Salesian missionaries dismantles the notion of anthropologists as translators

Carlos Haag and Mariluce Moura

An instigating and certainly opportune debate about what, in the final analysis, is the role of anthropologists, and the nature of their research work, may be one of the results of the book *Selvagens, civilizados, autênticos: a produção das diferenças nas monografias salesianas no Brasil* (Savage, civilized, authentic: production of differences in Salesian monographs in Brazil) (1920-1970), if scholars in this area receive the provoking proposals that Paula Montero presents in it with an open spirit. The most recent result of a decade of research that was institutionally supported by FAPESP, through the thematic project *Christian missionaries in the Brazilian Amazon: a study of cultural mediation* and the regular project *Missionary textuality: Salesian ethnographies in Brazil*, this new book clearly sets out to dismantle the old view of the anthropologist as a type of translator. Montero's empirically and theoretically sharp eye entirely melts away the outdated figure of the specialist who goes to a world that no one knows anything about: the "other," the incomprehensible alterity, and who there, through interaction with a privileged informant that he never presents, captures something that until then nobody knew about, classifies it, organizes

it, and finally, transforms it into a difference, is able to translate it into terms that are accessible to the symbolic universe from where he began his journey.

In place of this somewhat encyclopedistic translation, invention appears as the subject and form of the anthropologist's work. And this means invention in a very precise meaning of the term, because "there was nothing there before" ready to be captured. The agents of two universes of heterogeneous knowledge – in this case study, priests and Indians—are both moved by interests. One moves towards the other, and in fact, "they must reach a certain agreement for invention to exist, an invention that will always be different, depending on who is there," according to the anthropologist, who is a full professor at the University of São Paulo (USP) and the president of the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (Cebrap). It was precisely to understand these agreements, in other words, what exactly happens when these agents interact, that Montero chose the Salesian Missions as the topic for reflection and research. And firmly anchored in the notion that ideas move through subjects, and therefore, that we must understand agents to understand how their interaction is constructed, it was at this point that Montero saw that priests intended to



Civil-religious ceremony at the lauretê mission, with a group of Tucano children and the portrait of then-President Getúlio Vargas in the background

convert “the Indian, who could be the shaman or chief in this situation, who wanted to take the priest’s power to increase his own power in the group and even to gain power over the priest.”

Therefore, she affirms that this is not a simple process of imposition, of destruction of culture. Nor is it all about cultural resistance. “It is a political process, but it is also symbolic, of construction of interaction between two universes of heterogeneous knowledge.” A game of language begins, in which both sides would establish a convention about what they should do to live together in those situations in which they are involved.

Thus, it is clear why the concept of cultural mediation is key in Paula Montero’s work, and how much the missions became an excellent pretext for her to explore it in greater depth. Also clear is the reason why she worked so hard to not limit this analysis to their discourse, going to the biographies and presenting the sources of the information used to analyze the ethnographies, including through the methodological use of photographs taken by the Salesians to give “flesh to the ambience” of the missionary villages, as she said. “Ideas do not impose through their own power, without agents positioned in strategic places, with the capacities they obtained over

the course of their actions to work on categories, build relations, etc.,” she said. And her critical eye focused on the production of an older generation of Brazilian anthropologists who, in the wake of the work by Roger Bastide with African culture, examined syncretism without considering the problem of mediators. She focused as well on more recent anthropological analyses, which established the problem of relations between Indians and Whites in Brazil by reducing the agency to cultural resistance. However, it should be noted that Bastide examined a transplanted culture in which the subjects had been moved from their place of origin, while the problem of the indigenous cultures referred to subjects who were generally found in their original territory.

IDEAL MISSIONARIES

Montero noted that the arrival of the Salesian Fathers in Brazil at the end of the 19th century resulted from the connection of many and important interests. Within the context of global geopolitics, it should be remembered that Italy lost out during the partition of Africa, and the Catholic Church desperately needed a new area for expansion. The Jesuits had been expelled from Brazil since 1759; Italy was unified in 1870. Within this context, the congregation founded in 1859



Day-to-day life of Indians at the school in lauretê, a post card depicting Tucano children at recess at the Salesian mission boarding school

by the Italian João Bosco seemed to be a group which, in the eyes of the Empire, did not offer too big of a risk to the sovereignty of the State. This is so because they were obedient to the Pope and persecuted in Restoration-era Italy and would be unlikely to fall prey to the temptation to establish a parallel State here, as other orders had. In addition, this served the interests of a papacy that needed to guarantee its recently won temporal power, enabling the Vatican State to establish diplomatic alliances with the new national States in America.

In Italy, the Salesian specialization was to educate young rural workers, and in Brazil, they were also originally called on to educate the children of rural elites and to train urban migrants in new professions, since they understood modern educational technologies. “At that time, there was a non-conformist vision of the relations created by industrialism. The Salesians focused on caring for the poorer young people, who were seen as being abandoned and in an at-risk situation, in order to integrate them into the new forms of urban civility,” Montero noted.

It was with these same ideals and the blessing of Emperor Pedro II that they arrived in Brazil in 1883, at a time in which progressive ideas had begun to arise among coffee growers. And it should be noted that they had no relations with the Indians before 1910. However, at the turn of the last century, the Brazilian state had begun its “project

In the expansion process that began in the 1960s, Indians began to be a problem for the State

to push back the frontiers, which under President Getúlio Vargas would be greatly strengthened and would incorporate all of the state of Mato Grosso, for example. Later the project would also successfully involve the Amazon, and the establishment of cities by the 1960s.”

In this expansion process, Indians began to be a problem for the State in these regions, while the Salesians could represent the solution. In other words, “the political and historical conditions that defined the expansionist project of the Salesian congregation for the Americas were linked to the economic and political strategies to increase national sovereignty over new territories,” Montero said. The Salesian missions would make it possible to ensure the “pacification” of the savages, which would allow the introduction of productive economic activities in the heart of Brazil. Of course the positivists, who

always feared an advance by the clergy in Brazil, did not like the Salesian project, “but this project shared the then current mentality for which the universality of civilization as a human condition was self-evident. The proposal was to associate the principles of Catholicism with the benefits of scientificism,” noted Montero. So, extending the same pedagogical method employed in the urban experience to those who were still “savages” seemed not to be a problem for the Salesians. “After

all, the ‘jungle’ was, in the modern Christian imagination, the counterpoint to Christian cities or civilization.” The new element, the introduction of scientificism in the field of relations between man and nature, brought with it a new dilemma. In the text of the book, the researcher indicates that “by assuming that civilization, progress and homeland are synonyms, the Salesians, in opposition to positivism, wanted to reconsecrate nature, recovering in savages the ‘natural reasoning’ that understands the natural world to be a divine work. Also, in opposition to the ‘natural religion’ of the Indians, who adore nature, they should civilize it, to make it part of the social and rational order of the nation.”

Although the problem of the “wild Indian” was often solved using violence and brutality, according to Montero, Brazil actually never favored the implementation of a systematic and declared policy of genocide. “What prevailed in

the Republic was ‘pacification,’ which in practice meant not encouraging conflicts with the Indians.” And its secular model was Rondon, the great military representative of the positivist “pacification” that was to give rise to the Indian Protection Service (SPI), created in the same year of 1910. By creating legal restrictions against violence by colonists, this pacifying program produced a legal framework for indigenous territorial rights, created protection agencies like the SPI, and more important, allowed the investiture of the Salesians as privileged agents of catechism and civilization on the national frontiers under expansion, throughout the first half of the 20th century.

In the 1930s, the Salesians had already received half of all the subsidies allocated by the Brazilian government to Catholic missionary institutions, and the format of their institutionalization, inspired by the model of the Jesuit reductions, was not modified until the Vatican Council II, when it began to lose strength,” said Montero. It was only after the impact of the ideological crisis in the 1970s, which put in check the mission model formatted on the Council of Trent, that the Salesians were forced to rethink their relations with Brazilian politics and the Indians.

Nevertheless, Salesian adhesion to the request by the Brazilian state to participate in the

front lines of the “pacification” was not easy, but slow and problematic. “Dom Bosco defended the creation of an Italian colony in America, and it was only after not being able to successfully carry out his project to expand the congregation in Argentina that he redirected it to the Brazilian natives,” Montero said.

The model for the mission were the schools of arts and crafts: they were supposed to be used to gather the Indians around an “agricultural colony” using modern agriculture, supported by scientific principles of productivity and sophisticated technology. The work on the land was at the center of the autonomy and prosperity of the missions to train the bodies and spirits of the natives. Montero noted that, unlike the military colony or sporadic relations of Rondon with some indigenous groups, missionary agricultural colonies were a new arrangement of relations

that articulated units of the indigenous system with units of the colonial system in an ongoing and productive exchange of new relations. “But the two policies began from different principles: while the indigenous policy, conducted by the State up to the 1950s, was based on the idea of assimilation through contact with non-Indians, the missionary strategies were guided by an idea of civilization that presupposed relative isolation of the indigenous groups.”

ETHNOGRAPHIES COMPARED

All this becomes clearer as Paula Montero uses a comparative methodology of three separate moments of the encounters between missionaries and Indians to show how their interaction changes as a result of the political context, the culture of different groups and even the particularities of each author of the narratives of these processes. These conditions clearly produce different constructions of what it means to be an Indian.

The principle object of her research is a set of three ethnographies written by Salesian missionaries about the Bororo and Xavante indigenous groups from Mato Grosso state, and the so-called Tucano, from the state of Amazonas. The first of these ethnographies is *Os Bororo orientais* (The Eastern Bororo) from 1925, by Antonio Colbacchini and César Albisetti, the second is *A civilização indígena do Uaupés* (The

“What prevailed in the Republic was ‘pacification,’ which meant not encouraging conflict with the Indians”



Village of Sacred Heart in an image made for a commemorative report on the progress of construction of a space designed to attract Bororo chiefs and families

indigenous civilization of the Uaupés), from 1958, written by Alcionílio Bruzzi da Silva, and the third is *Xavante, Auwe Uptabi, povo autêntico* (Xavante, Auwe Uptabi, an authentic people), from 1972, written by Bartolomeu Giaccaria and Adalberto Heide.

Colbacchini had degrees in philosophy and theology and beginning in 1906 became a pioneer and explorer of the state of Mato Grosso. In the following year, he assumed the direction of the agricultural colony of Tachos. He was concerned with transforming the savages, who were natural men, into social men, with law, order and religion. “Unlike republican military indigenism, based on the idea of ‘pacification,’ for which civilizing principally meant controlling the territory and population, Colbacchini supposes the existence of a ‘clandestine nation’ that could only be known from the point of view of the *sertão*. This proto-nation is identified with the values of freedom, fraternity and primordial innocence.” According to Montero, to understand the ethnological work of Colbacchini is to analyze how his description mobilizes the imagination to respond to apparently unsolvable contradictions that incorporation of the Indians, with their differences, imposes on the conscience of man and of his time. Thus, in a textual language that is still very close to the encyclopedists of the 19th century, he invented Bororo totemism when he sought a natural religion.

In a different intellectual and political context, marked by an emphasis on the Brazilianness of Indians, the monograph by Father Alcionílio Bruzzi on the Tu-

cano peoples shows the work of spreading the gospel on the Negro and Uaupés Rivers to be more clearly marked by the efforts at integration of Indians into the Nation. This also implies the need to build clean cities and boarding schools that appeared in his imposing architecture as a definitive civilizing work. For this religious scholar, the dynamics unleashed by the missionary centers should be understood in terms of a “civilizing” process, and no longer in terms of “catechism.” It should be noted that the arrival of the Salesians in 1920 to the Negro River, a watershed mainly inhabited by indigenous populations, was a completely different experience from what they had when they arrived in the state of Mato Grosso, where they had to mediate ongoing conflicts between landowners and Indians. Due to a lack of colonists, the “pacification” model did not predominate in the Uaupés River valley. There was also a fundamental difference between his monograph and the previous one: “The *habitus* of a scientific spirit filtered by a language that is rigorous and contained is much more present in Bruzzi than in the work by Colbacchini, which is in-

“Material and symbolic mediations always occur in interactions and produce discourse,” Paula Montero said

tuitive and passionate. The analysis of Bruzzi is guided by science and it is his wish to create an individual, although he has run into the problem of not finding subjects subjectivated enough to live in a society based on science.”

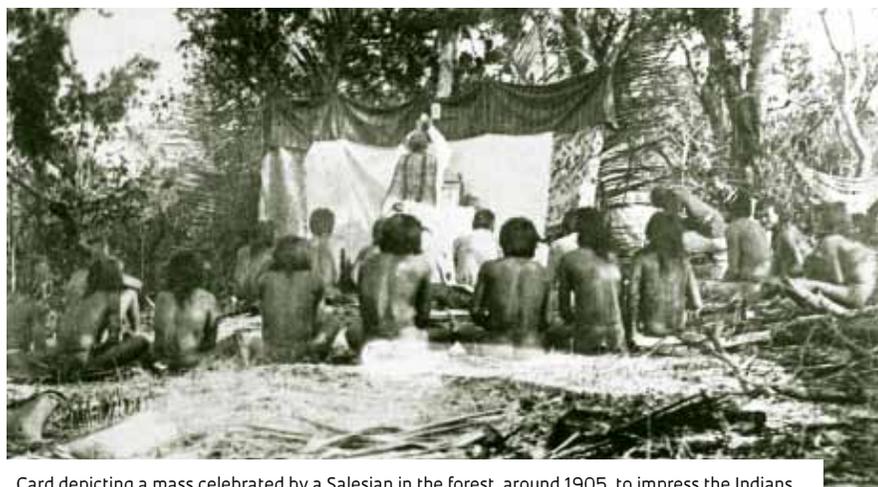
Bartolomeu Giaccaria, one of the authors of the third monograph, arrived in Brazil in 1954 and was transferred to Sangradouro at the end of 1956 to run the mission school. Montero noted that at this point, it was no longer about the savages; the key concept had become authenticity. “Everything that came from the Indians began to be authentic.” In place of the effort to convert, it was necessary to find what was original, and culture was now in the place that had been occupied by religion.

A short time after settling in Sangradouro, Giaccaria contacted Xavantes groups that had recently arrived at the mission and faced the problem of having to teach the children without knowing the language and the culture. “To be effective in the school, a rudimentary command of the language would not suffice, and he felt an

urgency to more completely understand the indigenous behavior and ways of thinking. It was then that he began his more systematic ethnographic observation work alongside Adalberto Heide in the 1960s.”

The marks of the changes that were to come in the political and ideological panorama can be seen in this work. “In the 1970s, the missionary catechism program of indigenous assistance lost credibility, the

system of boarding schools began to be harshly criticized and a consensus began to be built around the idea that the Indians should live in isolation on their own lands,” explained Montero. For this reason, the civilizing sense that was so noteworthy in the previous works began to appear in a less accentuated way in Giaccaria’s work. “The idea of civilization began to gain a more secular context of ‘cultural heritage,’ and as the title of his monograph indicates, the work is focused on reproduction of the ‘authenticity’ of being Xavante. The recording of myths and rites he made over the course of a decade is marked by a feeling of sav-



Card depicting a mass celebrated by a Salesian in the forest, around 1905, to impress the Indians

ing the greatest possible amount of information about the Xavante civilization.” Different from the examples of previous monographs, in which the idea of a Christian and urban “*civis*” was central to the civilizing argument, Giaccaria affirmed that the vitality of the Xavante culture depended on maintaining the village in its circular form, a symbol of what is fraternal and egalitarian.

But what was it that motivated the Salesians in their ethnographies? “To implement the project, it was necessary to make the Indians want to live in the missions, something that they would only do when they were moved by strategic calculations. Then it was necessary to organize the knowledge: for example, how would it be possible to convert them, baptize them, etc., if they did not know how the indigenous religions and families worked?” Each monograph, different from what happened in the official indigenist practice (which was not interested in knowing the object of its action), meant a process of production of knowledge destined to enable the missionary project of the Salesians. It is important to emphasize that this project was the result of intense and ongoing negotiation. “The priests used a variety of means to negotiate the legitimacy of their actions with the Indians and national society, making their ‘achievements’ and ‘sacrifices’ visible, protecting the lives of the Indians from the colonists and from other Indians, educating the children of the rural landowners or refusing to do so, teaching Indian children, disputing their religious and therapeutic authority with shamans, distributing or retaining goods, reinforcing or taking away the authority of chiefs,” explained Montero. Above all, they always lived with the phantom of instability of the villages, constantly threatened with the sudden loss of population. In addition, they dealt with issues of attracting financial resources, with finding efficient means to persuade the urban elites of the integrity of their intentions and the legitimacy of their work before the competing forces like positivist indigenism, the pressure from colonists for labor and land, and the support that the Church hierarchy in Brazil and in Europe offered or denied to the project of establishing self-sufficient agricultural colonies.



Post card with Bororo children in their school activities at the Sacred Heart mission

Producing knowledge and describing indigenous life was part of the intellectual instruments available to overcome these difficulties. “One of the more central symbolic operations of the monographs was to produce convergence between different ways of seeing and being in the world, introducing the separation of religious, social and political spheres as a common reference,” said Montero. “The grammatical indexation rules were constructed in the scope of practices as conventions destined to confront collisions and conflicts in day-to-day interactions.” However, this translation was not exempt from consequences. According to her book, “the implicit paradox in the production of a missionary ethnography is that in order to create the image of the native culture, the ethnographer causes a change in the traditional forms of production of memory. For example, the Salesian ethnographies, as an integral and founding part of the conversion project, universalized knowledge of what it is ‘to be Bororo’ in a manner that had been previously unknown to the natives themselves; in this movement, they produced a type of ‘conversion’ of the Bororo to the Bororo culture,” the author explained. “Thus, deconstruction of the missionaries’ discourse reveals how the mediators, whoever they were, construct themselves as subjects of the discourse and throw themselves into the dispute in the process of producing the legitimacy of what it is they have to say.”

It can be said that Paula Montero works in her new book towards an anthropology of mediations. “Material and symbolic mediations that always occur in interactions and produce discourse.” In other words, having shifted the idea of translation of the work of anthropologists to the discourse of the agents, she abandons the concept of alterity as a founding notion of anthropological knowledge. She thus seeks to overcome the paradox that consists of affirming the empirical evidence behind the existence of the Other, even before Alterity emerges as an anthropological question. ■

PROJECTS

1. *Christian missionaries in the Brazilian Amazon: a study of cultural mediation* – No. 2000/02718-6 (2001-2007)
2. *Missionary textuality: the Salesian ethnographies in Brazil* – No. 2007/08736-5 (2008-2010)

GRANT MECHANISMS

1. Thematic Project
2. Regular Research Project

COORDINATOR

1. and 2. Paula Montero – USP Department of Anthropology

INVESTMENT

1. R\$274,968.00
2. R\$51,841.56

FROM OUR ARCHIVES

The invention of Brazilian Indians
Issue No. 173 – July 2010

In the name of God
Issue No. 111 – May 2005