

IN DEFENSE OF NATIVE PEOPLES

Brazilian demographer and anthropologist Marta Azevedo pioneered in identifying the phenomenon of population recovery among Brazil's indigenous peoples

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In the 1990s, when it was still widely believed that Brazil's indigenous peoples were headed toward extinction, demographer and anthropologist Marta Maria do Amaral Azevedo discovered that the indigenous of the Rio Negro region of the Amazon were, in truth, experiencing a dynamic population recovery. Her findings coincided with similar discoveries in other areas of Brazil and became a turning point in the formulation of public health and education policies regarding Indigenous peoples.

Chosen in 2012 as the first woman to preside over the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), Azevedo's career trajectory has been marked by a constant—and not always harmonious—transit between indigenism, anthropology, and demography. Within these areas, her primary focus has been the fight for the rights of Indigenous peoples, especially the Guarani-Kaiowá, with whom she has studied and developed research and indigenist activism since the 1980s.

Azevedo is now at the Elza Berquó Center for Population Study at the University of Campinas (NEPO-UNICAMP) and views the future of Brazil's Indigenous peoples with some concern but also with hope, despite having received death threats several times over the course of her long career. Amidst a resurgence of violence against Indigenous peoples, Azevedo has been working on the front lines to de-

velop new data-collection methodologies for the Brazilian Demographic Census, which she hopes will bring fresh understanding to mapping populations of traditional peoples in Brazilian territory, especially those located in more isolated areas. She has also been active in projects to safeguard the history of native peoples, seeking to return accumulated cultural knowledge to the communities with which she has worked in recent decades.

Azevedo has three children and a granddaughter and participated in this interview in her apartment, where she lives alone.

How do you see the current relations between Indigenous and white people in Brazil?

The country demonstrates an enormous amount of racism against nonwhites, including Black and Indigenous people. Racism against Indians takes two forms. One is inherited from colonial times and views natives as part of nature: they are naive, they do not need to enter universities, and if they use cell phones, they will cease being Indians. In Brazil, for a long time, it was believed that Indigenous people did not have the capacity to reason and that they lived in simple societies; they were equated with children. Therefore, they needed to be looked after by the government. The other type of prejudice is the opposite: the Indian



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FIELD OF EXPERTISE
Anthropology and
demography

INSTITUTION
University of Campinas
(UNICAMP)

**EDUCATIONAL
BACKGROUND**
Undergraduate studies
(1978) at the University of
Sao Paulo (USP) and PhD
(2003) from UNICAMP

PRODUCTION
Author of numerous
books and articles on
Indigenous women's
health, demographics,
and food security and
an advocate for the
inclusion of Indigenous
peoples in Brazil's
Demographic Census

is wild and is equated with other animals. This is all rooted in the ignorance of the populace. Article 26-A of Federal Law No. 9,394 from 1996 makes learning about Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous histories and cultures mandatory. However, this practice is not widespread. We have more textbooks on Afro-Brazilians than on Indigenous peoples.

What are the consequences of this practice?

Since 2016, violence against Indigenous leaders has increased exponentially, as has the invasion of their territories. The Indigenous people of the lands of the Kaiapó, who have always been able to oversee their territory, have been invaded. The Rio Negro, in the Amazon region, is being invaded. In the Yanomami lands, at the start of 2019, mining was legally authorized, followed by reports of rapes, murders, and massacres. In the Munduruku lands, prospectors entered with mining rafts that I never imagined even existed. They're the size of a football stadium and throw scary amounts of mercury into the environment at frightening speeds. The contamination in the Tapajós River region of influence is enormous. The "arc of deforestation" is expanding every day and has now reached the states of Acre and southern Amazonas. Racial prejudice has become mixed with economic interests, and—during the month of September of this year alone—we recorded the murder of at least 17 indigenous leaders. Not to mention the rapes of women. The 2022 Census, which is being conducted now, should give us an idea of how many people were executed as a result of mining operations. The deaths of indigenists Bruno Araújo Pereira and British journalist Dom Phillips in the Javari valley in June of this year took place within this context of intensifying violence.

You used "Indian" and "Indigenous" to talk about the current situation of these populations. What is the correct nomenclature?

Why "Indian?" Because Cabral arrived here in 1500 and thought he had arrived in India. Afterward, the term Indian ceased to be politically correct, and it was established that it was better to use Indigenous. The word Indigenous means that you are originally from that place. Using the word "Indian" today is a gaffe,

but it is not weighted with prejudice, despite its colonial origin. Currently, the term considered most correct is "povos originários" [original peoples], but I do not usually use it.

Can we step back in time and talk about your childhood?

We lived in the middle of São Paulo State, in São Carlos. Then, we moved to the capital. My father was a public prosecutor, and my mother had a degree in Letters. She spoke several languages, but she was a housewife. One very important influence on me was my maternal grandfather, Afrânio Amaral, who was an outstanding person. He was a doctor and then became director of the Butantan Institute. He taught me Greek and Latin when I spent time at his house. On one of those trips, I found a magazine, which I still have today, with drawings of North American Indians. I was approximately 14 years old then, and I became interested in the subject. Years later, when I went to live with the Guarani, within a year, my grandfather learned to speak their language so he could speak it with me. I also studied at Escola Livre Superior de Música, in Higienópolis: I played the recorder and clarinet, and I sang. My father did not approve, so I started working when I was 15, and my grandfather paid the tuition. I recently got back into playing and singing.

What was university like?

I studied Social Sciences at the University of São Paulo [USP] from 1974 to 1978. In our very first class, I remember that one of the professors, who is now famous, said: "If anyone came here to work in anthropology, forget it, because the Indians are dying out."

Did that discourage you?

No, I do not get discouraged easily.

And then what happened?

During my undergraduate years, I always said I wanted to work with Indians, but there had been a big breakup between academia and indigenists. The phrase "work with Indians" made no sense. What was accepted was to study the Indians. In 1976, while I was in college, I watched a documentary about the Guarani in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. The film was made by the anthropologist Rubem Fer-

reira Thomaz de Almeida [1950–2018]. At the end of the screening, he invited interested students to learn more about an ongoing initiative with the Guarani. It was a project conducted in connection with Paraguayan anthropologists and funded by the German institution *Brot für die Welt* [Bread for the World], which to this day supports activities with Indigenous peoples around the world. I was finishing my third year of college when I joined the project and then went to the village in January during the following a vacation. I completed the last year of my undergraduate program while going back and forth between Mato Grosso do Sul and São Paulo. As part of this initiative, Almeida and a friend of mine from college, Celso Aoki, were designing a community garden project and traveling from village to village. However, I wanted to stay in one place, learn the language, and work with the local women. When I got to the village, there was a whole day of meetings, which is how the Guarani work things out. Speaking only in Guarani, they pointed at me and laughed. Only later did I understand that they were discussing who would adopt the white girl because the family that adopted me would have to feed, house, and educate me. I was a total ignoramus; I did not speak their language. A couple accepted me and that same night, I slept at their house. I began to realize our immense ignorance. The only book that existed about the Guarani in Brazil, in anthropology, was *Aspectos fundamentais da cultura guarani* [Fundamental aspects of Guarani culture], written by Egon Schaden [1913–1991].

Did you make a lot of gaffes?

It was one gaffe after another. There was one lady, who was my grandmother, so to speak, who avoided me when I went to the fields or to the little river to take a bath. She said my eyes were full of fire, and they burned a lot. For a whole year, she hid in the bush when she saw me on the trails so we would not make eye contact. Little by little, the Guarani educated me. They put a child—7 years old at the time, now a grandmother—in charge of teaching me the basics of behavior. As the months went by, I learned the language and read all the ethnological material about them available in Paraguay.

Did you get married and have kids?

In 1978, I got married and had Laura and Francisco. I already lived with the Guarani and took my children, as babies, and later as older children, with me to the village. Their father thought it was absurd; he thought that after becoming a mother, I would stop working. My second marriage was to someone I met during a course I taught at the Indigenous Missionary Council [CIMI]. Then, I had my third son, João Pedro, who did not go with me to Guarani territory but did frequently come with me to the Amazon. My only granddaughter, Luzia, is Francisco's daughter.

When you started taking your children to the Guarani village, did your acceptance within the community change?

It did. When I took little Laura to Antonina, my Indigenous mother-sister, she said: "Leave her here; I'll educate her much better than you." Laura was on all fours when she went to the village for the second time and went places she was not supposed to go. Toward the fire, for example. They dug a hole in the courtyard so she could stay in it and learn how to get out of it and then how to walk. In this context of children, a world of conversation opened up to me that I would not otherwise have had access to. By taking my children with me, I learned a lot about how they educate their own children.

You did pioneering work on school education with the Guarani.

After six months in the village, I already spoke a little Guarani. One day, I met with some women who showed me a notebook—one that children practice writing in when learning to read and write—which was used in the school they had there at the FUNAI post. Only they showed me the notebook held upside down! It had figures of grapes, an airplane... The women told me, "Our children are learning this, but we don't know what it means in Guarani." I realized that even the drawings had no meaning. The mothers and their children did not understand the content. They asked me to teach them to read and write, just like their children. First in Guarani, then in Portuguese.

So it was because of their demands that education became a theme of your work?

Yes. I worked on school education for the rest of my career. This FUNAI post had

a small wooden house with a simple cement floor, a small window, a blackboard, and a bunch of half-broken desks eaten by cockroaches. This was the school that made absolutely no sense to them. I took everything out, opened the windows, and we sat on the floor. However, the ground was ice-cold. We started breaking up the cement to make a dirt floor and to light fires because it was very cold. However, I realized that I was too ignorant to teach the children. They asked me things that I did not know how to answer. The Guarani-Kaiowá are familiar with invisible beings, for example, and I did not know how to deal with that.

Is Guarani an oral language?

They used graphic symbology. For example, when they drew a certain type of star, it meant that there was firewood in that place. They relied on symbols for trees and beings. On the Paraguayan side of the border, linguists had already transcribed the Guarani language into the Western alphabet. I spent a month and a half there to learn the written language and realized that we needed to train Guarani-Kaiowá teachers in Brazil who would then teach the children. In 1979, we held the first national meeting on Indigenous school education in São Paulo, funded by the Ford Foundation,

with the participation of the Pro-Indian Commission and the Department of Social Sciences at USP, among other institutions, such as CIMI and FUNAI.

How long did you stay in the village?

Until 1991. I would stay for six months, then return to São Paulo for a few months, and that is how it went during those years. At that time, in Mato Grosso do Sul, deforestation and the opening of large, commercial farming were taking place. Opening farmland means using two massive tractors with a chain between them that passes through, knocking everything down. When ranchers encountered Indigenous communities, they called FUNAI to expel them from the land. The mission was to remove the people and place them in reserves that Marshal Rondon [1865–1958] had demarcated at the beginning of the twentieth century. One of them was in Taquaperi, where I lived. Entire extended families arrived from other places. This started to generate much conflict in the area, and many of these families fled. Since I spoke Guarani, FUNAI asked me to find the displaced people. They were expelled, staying in roadside camps or overcrowded reservations. The Guarani way of being involves etiquette. You never speak angrily with anyone; you never shout. Because of this etiquette, they did not react violently to the expulsions, especially since they had been told they could come back later. Their houses were burned, and the people were loaded onto trucks. There were many suicides during this time, even among young people.

How did your academic life proceed after that experience?

I entered the master's program at USP in 1982, when I was still living with the Guarani. I wanted to study what I was actually living through, but the postgraduate anthropologists wanted me to do a theoretical thesis, something that did not interest me. Therefore, I went back to the village. When I got back to São Paulo, I found out that my advisor had dropped me from the program. I did not care much because, at that point, I did not think that academic life was for me.

When did the academy's view of Indigenous peoples begin to change?

In 1988, with the Constituent Assembly, a new line of theory began to develop in

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anthropology. According to this current of thinking, the Indians were not going to disappear, as previous intellectuals had predicted. Anthropologists such as Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro played a leading role in this process. They began to support the idea that culture involves the mechanisms through which one person comes into contact with others and changes. However, even with this contact, they do not cease to be those people.

How did you get connected to UNICAMP?

In 1990, I participated in a meeting of Indigenous teachers in Manaus at which I was invited to go to the upper Rio Negro. They already knew how to read and write and wanted to learn how to develop projects and obtain funding to conduct a demographic census. They were in the process of demarcating their lands, and the governor of Amazonas at the time was saying that there were only 3,000 Indians in the region. CIMI was saying there were more like 30,000. Anthropologists working in the region claimed that it was not possible to conduct a census, but I thought it was perfectly feasible. I did not know anything about demography, but I went to UNICAMP and talked to Maria Coleta de Oliveira, who later became my doctoral advisor. She is a demographic anthropologist, and although she'd never worked with Indigenous people, she was visionary and agreed that it would be possible to conduct a census. In 1992, we put together a simple questionnaire, mimeographed it, and performed the census in partnership with the Indigenous teachers in the region. We visited 300 villages and counted more than 20,000 people living in the upper Rio Negro.

Is that how you became a demographer?

Yes. When we finished the census, we were even able to create a digital database. We took the first computer to Rio Negro. That region is a frontier. When we arrived, several institutions appeared, such as NGOs and the military, asking for access to our database. The Army wanted to know the locations of all the villages in the region. I said, "The database belongs to the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Rio Negro." After that, I started working on a doctorate in demography at UNICAMP. To do my dis-

sertation, I started traveling throughout the communities of the Rio Negro.

Was that when you discovered the growth in the Indigenous population?

My PhD defense was difficult. I had discovered that the average number of children per woman in the Rio Negro was seven. At that time, the average number of children per woman in Brazil was two. Now it is 1.1. In other words, I was claiming that the average number of children per woman among Indigenous peoples was much higher than the average for the rest of the country and, therefore, they were undergoing population recovery. I was the first to make this claim. The demographers did not believe it and I received a lot of criticism. Luckily, there were two anthropologists present on the panel who were observing the same phenomenon on the Rio Negro and the Xingu River who supported me. Until then, the prevailing view was that they would dwindle in numbers until they became extinct.

How did your findings affect the formulation of public policy?

After I showed that Indigenous peoples were experiencing a population recovery, other researchers began to identify the same phenomenon in regions, such



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as Xingu. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC, invited me to several meetings and seminars, where we analyzed data and discussed the profiles and demographic dynamics of Indigenous peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean. We concluded that this phenomenon of population recovery occurred throughout the region. Based on these findings, in 2001, together with the Brazilian Association of Population Studies [ABEP], we created an Indigenous demography committee. The demographic dynamics of Indigenous peoples in Brazil were completely the opposite of the rest of the population. While Brazilian fertility was falling, Indigenous fertility was rising. We began shining a light on the situation with public policy in mind. These data need to be taken into account to calculate the demand for medicines, nurses, health centers, and schools.

In 2012, you became the first president of FUNAI.

Since the early 1990s, I have been a consultant to the Ministries of Education and Health on issues involving indigenous education and health care. In 2012, I was invited to assume the presidency of FUNAI. When they called me, I asked: "But how many people have you already invited?" I determined I was the seventh. Nobody wanted to be president of FUNAI because nobody knew what to do with the Indians. I took it on because I'm an indigenist, and I would feel right at home. When I took over, I talked to all the employees. That was the first year that FUNAI implemented its entire budget. It was a lot of work. Just because someone is an anthropologist or indigenist does not mean they will be good at implementing public policy. These are different qualities. Work needs to be done to get workers engaged with projects. For example, Indigenous schools cannot be made of cement. It makes no sense to carry cement 500 kilometers upriver from the town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, which makes it too expensive. Therefore, it is better to build schools using good-quality wood and ecological tile or straw, materials that we can find in communities or nearby. In other words, if you do not know Brazil and public administration, even if you're a good anthropologist or indigenist, there is no way you could be a good FUNAI president. I spent just over

a year in the presidency. I had a lot of difficulties with the anthropologists and with the government, which would not make the authorizations I thought were necessary. My health was also affected.

Do you think that the presence of Indigenous people on the board of FUNAI would be a way of guaranteeing good management?

Just as being a woman does not guarantee that one is a feminist, being Indigenous does not guarantee that one is a good indigenist. I do not think it is a good idea to stipulate that only Indigenous people can be FUNAI employees. This is the first lesson: it is no use knowing anthropology and ethnology if you do not know what's actually happening or who is doing what. I think it is great that the Indians want to take over FUNAI, but people need to understand that it is going to be a lot of work, and they're going to have to rely a lot on the indigenists.

How is FUNAI doing today?

The foundation has been militarized and delivered into the hands of evangelical fundamentalist missionaries who want to civilize the Indians and "take the devil out of the body" of Indigenous cultures. It is implementing very little of its budget. Despite this, it has a corps of very good technical indigenists who are recent civil service exam graduates, as was the case with Bruno, who was murdered. Before, there were 800 employees, but many have retired. Therefore, we need to open more civil service exam opportunities and train staff, especially in the areas of environmental and territorial management, in addition to creating circular economy projects. One task the foundation has done very little of is to encourage the dissemination of Indigenous culture among non-Indigenous schools.

What do you expect from the next census?

The 1991 Census did not cover the remote communities on the Rio Negro, only the cities. I was on the census's Civil Society Commission when I began fighting to include Indigenous-oriented questions for the census sectors that coincided with Indigenous lands. Based on location, in 2010, census agents began to have access to questions about language and ethnicity. In the census that is now



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underway, there is one questionnaire per Indigenous community. In the 1991 Census, 180 peoples were identified. Later, we mapped 305. I think that in the current one, we will reach 400.

What's your main activity these days?

I have been a researcher at NEPO [Elza Berquó Center for Population Study] since 2005. I passed the competitive exam after I finished my doctorate in 2003. I'm doing action research: research and social intervention. In recent years, I was on the IBGE [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] census technical committee, responsible for the quilombolas [areas settled by escaped slaves], which I had to begin studying. I organized my recordings of songs and revisited photos and will return them to the communities by organizing exhibitions and other activities. I also serve as a member of the Advisory Board for the UN Population Fund in Brazil, on the Board of Directors of the Instituto Socioambiental, and I'm the coordinator of the ABEP Demography of Indigenous Peoples work group.

How was your life during the pandemic?

I have an immunodeficiency. The doctor does not know whether it was a result of having frequently had malaria or if it has a genetic basis. Therefore, the pandemic has affected my social life because I still cannot go to places where there are a

lot of people. I cannot take any chances, and it is no use getting vaccinated because my immune system cannot build defenses. I only see my children and hug my granddaughter wearing a mask. She's going to be 6 years old soon. During the first year of the pandemic, before there was a vaccine, I lost many elderly Indigenous friends. Today, I do a lot of things via WhatsApp. We have formed an organization called União Amazônia Viva, based on the initiative of photographer Sebastião Salgado. I'm a friend of Expedicionários da Saúde, a nonprofit group of Campinas doctors that performs emergency response and is organized around working with Indigenous health care. In partnership with doctors who worked in Indigenous lands, such as the Xingu Program of UNIFESP [Federal University of São Paulo] and the Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health of the Ministry of Health, they created networks for supplying oxygen. I spent 2020 involved in this project. Lockdowns were necessary in the villages, and they did not have any food, so I also helped to organize donations of staple food baskets.

Throughout such a multifaceted career, were there ever any situations that made you fearful?

Many times. When I lived in the village of Taquaperi, in the 1980s, the project I was working on had a house in the city of Amambai, 30 kilometers away. Once every three months or so, I went into town. One day, very early in the morning, I woke up and lit the wood stove to make my mate [tea]. I heard a noise at the door, which was unlocked, and a farmer suddenly opened the front door of the house with a machete in his hand. He put the machete to my neck and said, "You anthropologists have no idea what you're getting into." I will never forget the machete mark on my neck. He removed the blade without hurting me, but I was left terrified. Before that, I'd already been threatened with rape by truck drivers while waiting for the bus on the side of the road. However, I carried pepper spray, used it on them, and managed to get away. When I was president of FUNAI, I also received many threats over the phone and was intimidated by unexpected visitors who showed up in my office. Everyone who is an indigenist in Brazil, at some point, suffers this type of violence. ■