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Author(s): Alcida Rita Ramos

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ADVOCACY RHYMES WITH ANTHROPOLOGY

Alcida Rita Ramos

Anthropological Inflections

The last ten years have witnessed a significant transformation in the manner in which Brazilian ethnographers conduct research among indigenous peoples. The pattern previously described as fieldwork in spurts, repeated for years on end, contrasting sharply with much of the research carried out by foreigners (Ramos 1990), is gradually subsiding. In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, while anthropologists coming from abroad stayed for a year or two and hardly ever returned to the field, for a number of reasons that included shortage of funds and job commitments, Brazilian anthropologists very rarely succeeded in spending a whole calendar year in their research sites. Now the pattern is changing. Doctoral programs that began in the 1980s in a few Brazilian universities have created the material conditions that are required for prolonged pre-doctoral field trips. A younger generation of ethnographers can now stay in the field for about a year, unlike most of their elders who could hardly complete two or three months a year. Thus, regarding the first field experience, Brazilian doctoral students differ little from their foreign counterparts.

There is, however, another factor to consider. Since the late 1980s, Brazilian Indians have been through a very dynamic organizing process. In the Amazon alone, there are now over two hundred indigenous associations, most of them demanding reciprocity from their ethnographers, be it in writing up proposals, assisting leaders in their appointments with government officials, or coordinating education, health or legal actions. In this new context, the ethnographer's initial commitment to research is of necessity, enlarged to comply with the people's demands. What began as a seemingly standard "Malinowskian" type of research (Albert 1997), very frequently develops into a long term partnership of researcher and research subjects. Curiously enough, the increase in the field span of Brazilian pre-doctoral researchers coincides with a drastic drop in foreign fieldworkers among indigenous peoples. Whether due to severe cuts in funding, bureaucratic hassles or possibly too onerous indigenous demands, the fact is that pre-doctoral researchers coming from abroad are nowadays few and far between.

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It is in the mode of a continuous and close association between ethnographers and their hosts that one finds the locus of anthropology *cum* advocacy. Although advocacy at a distance is not unheard of, without proximity and availability on the part of the ethnographer, it is impossible to take the required actions at the required time. On the other hand, it is almost inevitable that sustained contact with a given people will involve the ethnographer in disputes emerging from the contradictions between ethnic, regional, national, and international interests (Ramos 1998: 89–118). It is, in short, an exercise in participatory anthropology (Albert 2001: 96), a term that more aptly expresses the intense commitment of Brazilian anthropologists than the debatable notion of applied anthropology.

Engagement

The public side of anthropology, that is, the profession's commitment to the non-academic world, is especially evident in the context of indigenous human rights, and most conspicuous where the anthropologist's role as a political actor is publicly acknowledged. Countries such as Australia, Canada, Brazil, and most of Hispanic America have conferred a great deal of weight on the work of ethnographers. Both the State and the public at large, credit these professionals for their anthropological knowledge but, perhaps more explicitly, for the kind of complicity bred between researchers and research subjects, a complicity that comes from sharing the vicissitudes met by indigenous peoples in their interethnic lives. Like a double-edged sword, this public recognition puts the ethnographer in a potentially key position to influence public policies, but at the same time, in the uncomfortable role of Indian surrogate (Ramos 1994, 1999–2000). While the skills acquired in the anthropological training continue to serve the indigenous cause well, the outmoded notion of the anthropologist as the Indians' spokesperson awaits a deserved and honest burial. Paternalism is dead, long live partnership.

By way of demonstration, let me outline one experience of this sort of partnership involving anthropologists and Yanomami Indians in Brazil. In 1995, after insistent requests by the Yanomami, a literacy program was launched in a cluster of villages where virtually no one spoke Portuguese or Spanish. From the modest start with one non-indigenous instructor working with a few students in one village with one hundred and fifteen people, five years later, literacy had reached five communities with a total of one thousand one hundred and seventy people. The number of non-indigenous instructors went up to four, but the enormous increase in students was primarily due to the spontaneous effort of the Yanomami who, having learned to read and write in their own language, passed on their knowledge to other villages. In 2002, there were thirty-four schools in seven village clusters, with one thousand four hundred and eighty people, of which three hundred and thirty-one were students. There were forty Yanomami instructors and six non-indigenous teachers turned into

supervisors. Unlike the standard missionary and government methods, at no point were the Yanomami passive clients of education policies drawn up by external agents. Following the quest for a symmetrical anthropology, the teaching procedures adopted by the staff of the Pro-Yanomami Commission (CCPY), the non-governmental organization created in 1978 that manages the project of which I have the honor to serve as current president, emphasize the direct participation of the Yanomami in the selection and writing up of texts for classroom use. It is a clear case of what has been called symmetrical anthropology (Albert, informal discussions), according to which the Indians expect us to transmit to them the kind of knowledge about our own world, just as we expect them to teach us about theirs. There is, however, a difference: their knowledge of our world has become a matter of survival.

Running parallel to the CCPY education program, a sister NGO (Urihi-Saúde Yanomami) that came out of CCPY and is now in charge of the Yanomami health program (see www.urihi.org.br), in 2000 launched a training program for microscope technicians and health assistants. This program includes regular classroom activities in twelve communities geared to health care, under the supervision of five non-indigenous advisers and fifteen Yanomami teachers. The result has been a gradual replacement of non-indigenous with Yanomami technicians actively working in the control of malaria, the biggest killer in the area since the 1987 gold rush. In November 2001, Urihi had in its payroll sixteen non-indigenous and twenty-six Yanomami microscope technicians. A year later, there were twenty-nine, all Yanomami technicians officially certified by the Brazilian Ministry of Health. Cases of malaria dropped dramatically, which justified the decrease in the total number of people operating microscopes. In 1998, the incidence of malaria was 61 percent with sixteen deaths. In September 2001, that percentage fell to 0.3, with no deaths at all. Associated with the virtual elimination of malaria, infant mortality dropped from 161.1 in 1999, to 38.5 in September 2001, a remarkable 70 percent. Such splendid results owe a great deal to the participation of the Yanomami themselves in the effort to improve their own health and education conditions. The enthusiasm with which they have responded to these new challenges undoubtedly endorses the conviction that partnership pays.

From the outset, both programs, education, and health, have had continuous anthropological advice, particularly on the part of the two most experienced Yanomami ethnographers in Brazil. French-born Bruce Albert began his fieldwork in Yanomami land in 1975, and has maintained a constant flow of visits to the field. I started field research as a Ph.D. candidate in 1968, and although less assiduous in my trips to the field, have kept contact with the Yanomami. Both of us have put our anthropological training at the service of the defense of Yanomami rights at all times. For the last quarter of a century, Albert and I have acted jointly or separately, on different occasions or at the same time, to protect the Yanomami and their land by drawing up demarcation proposals, joining teams to rescue the Indians from the chaos that came in the wake of road construction and a ruthless gold rush, working with medical doctors during severe malaria epidemics, and acting as go-between for the Brazilian federal police in the brutal

case of the Haximu massacre, in which sixteen Yanomami were slaughtered by a group of Brazilian gold miners on the border with Venezuela (Pro-Yanomami Commission 2001: 39–50). All these actions, apart from the Haximu testimonials, were taken without the direct participation of the Yanomami. In the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, the Yanomami had yet to be equipped by the education and health programs to cope with interethnic clashes on their own. We thus went through a phase of having to speak in the name of the Yanomami, when incapacitating diseases and lack of experience with the outside world prevented them from speaking for themselves. Once the worst emergencies were under control, the work toward Yanomami empowerment began. Now our anthropological contribution has been reduced to what I deem to be its appropriate dimension, that is, as supporting cast in a script that is of their own creation.

The Stimulus of Advocacy for Anthropological Research

This sort of engagement on the part of anthropologists clearly redirects our professional priorities. As elsewhere, anthropologists in Brazil are constantly requested by the State to provide expert reports, not only on matters of land demarcation, but increasingly on ethnic definition. Our ethical and political engagement has pushed us into situations that compel us to look for new research strategies. Involvement in the public sphere of human and ethnic rights affects the anthropologist's choice of research topics which, in turn, requires methodological means and theoretical moorings seldom found in the profession's traditional tool kit. In other words, the anthropologist's activism is not secluded from the academic interests of the profession. Quite the opposite, one nourishes the other.

Not infrequently, we are requested to make practical decisions that our accumulated knowledge does not authorize us to do. The proliferation of demands all over the country by groups of people who now claim indigenous or African ancestry, and hence the right to a specific territory, has occupied government officials and State attorneys in the arduous task of deciding on the authenticity of these claims. In the absence of parameters to decide on such sensitive issues, anthropologists are called upon to do the job, as if we were, by definition, the natural holders of all knowledge needed to clarify all doubts. Being ethnically invisible, such groups have never been the subject of ethnography, but common sense expects anthropologists to say something intelligent about everyone everywhere. It is flattering to see all this faith in our capacities, but this flattery is also a trap. Without adequate ethnographic inquiries, we risk falling into questionable guess-work. Such was the recent case of different anthropological reports, making totally opposed judgements about the same people's claims to indigeneity: Are the people who call themselves Caxixó Indians in the central state of Minas Gerais Indians or not? One anthropologist said no, a second one said yes, and a third one was summoned to give the final word (which in this case was yes). The uneasiness that situations such as this

generate in the profession does not seem to convince State authorities that anthropologists have no magic powers of divination that could replace the lengthy and painstaking field research. They need to decide now and they can not wait for protracted field results.

The difficulties now facing Brazilian anthropologists regarding issues of ethnic resurgence reveal that the models of ethnographic research which have guided us for the last fifty years are now insufficient to generate the kind of knowledge that is required of us. Neither traditional fieldwork in villages nor the focus on interethnic friction typical of “colonial situations” (Balandier 1971), important as they still are, cannot by themselves unravel the intricacies of today’s political metaphors and ethnic realities. The continual eruption of new indigenous and black identities must be taken seriously, and not disparaged as opportunistic gambits to extract benefits from the State, particularly land rights. To dismiss the legitimacy of these claims (a not uncommon attitude) is to take the easy way out of the arduous job of finding a theoretical idiom in which to express the complexities of emergent ethnicity, and thus abdicate the privileged role that has been ascribed to us. If we are to maintain the position of consultants in these matters, how can we equip ourselves to decide for or against ethnicity claims?

Along with the meticulous synchronic inquiry we are accustomed to do among uncontested ethnic milieus, a greater emphasis on historicity and social memory is bound to give us elements to compose a picture of the tangled network of interconnected ethnicities which, for a number of historical reasons, have remained underground. Indigenous societies that went on record as having lived in region X and now surface in region Y; groups that now appear to be unrelated, but historiography reveals their common ancestry; peoples who were made to lose their recollections of a past cultural world, but who suddenly meet their version of a Proustian Madeleine, experiencing the force of involuntary memories and the desire to retrieve their identity gone astray.¹

Take the case of the nineteenth-century Amazonian uprising known as *Cabanagem*. For a short few months, the rebellion that congregated multitudes of Indians, mestizos, and former black slaves formed a separate State, until it was ruthlessly crushed by the army. A huge dispersal followed their defeat, and a thick silence shrouded the event, in a traumatic diaspora that left a gigantic trail of mutilated ethnic identities over a large portion of the Amazon. Now—and a big question is why now, if it is only now, and not before—segments of the regional population, unsuspected generic *caboclos* (indigenous mestizos), claim indigenous status, with the justification that they descend from *cabanos*, the protagonists of the *Cabanagem*. How many other manifestations of this huge network of subterranean ethnicity are still to surface is an issue that awaits both intensive and extensive ethnographic research. It is not hard to visualize a ‘Deep Amazonia’ in the spirit of what Bonfil Batalla (1990) called “Deep Mexico.” Moreover, the exhumation of unknown ethnic worlds buried under the weight of a steamrolling History, whether on the peoples’ own initiative or the result of ethnological curiosity, should strike the definitive blow on the fallacy

of the big demographic void the Amazon allegedly represents, a fallacy created to justify the looting of the region (Ramos 1995). Equally rich in research potential is the Brazilian northeast, the present hub of emergent ethnicities (Oliveira 1999) which happens to be where it all began upon the arrival of the first Portuguese ships in 1500.

Research prospects such as these are directly inspired by the engagement of anthropologists in the world of ethnic politics, and only confirm the merit of blending anthropological activism with the quest for knowledge.

NOTES

1. Very interesting and promising in methodological and theoretical terms is the work that Venezuelan anthropologist, Nelly Arvelo-Jiménez has been doing for the last two decades on the ethnic network of the Upper Orinoco River Basin (Arvelo-Jiménez 2001; Arvelo-Jiménez et al. 1989; Morales and Arvelo-Jiménez 1981).

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