

## **Anthropological Reports and Findings: applied research or a professional exercise in Anthropology?**

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Outside the academic sphere, anthropological expert reports and findings are a form of social intervention that is often associated with the production of a “lesser knowledge”. Conceived as an “exercise in applied anthropology, marginal in relation to proper scientific work” (L’Estoile, Neiburg and Sigaud 2000: 237)<sup>1</sup>, this type of “juridical expertise” ( ibid) has taken on a greater importance in the professional practice of anthropology in Brazil. Before the increasing mobilization of civil society and the formation of social movements that advocated for the rights of indigenous peoples, *quilombos*<sup>2</sup> and of other interest groups, the demand for specialists in anthropology has emerged in institutions slated to defend the rights of minorities and Brazilian citizens at large. Brazil’s Solicitor General’s Office (*Ministério Público Federal - MPF*) and other administrative agencies stand foremost in handling state policies that legitimate their status and administer this due recognition in exercising their constitutional rights. Thus, from this perspective, many assume that anthropology is “the discipline consecrated to explore the differences between peoples” (ibid). However, in Brazil there is no firm consensus regarding this

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<sup>1</sup> Far from agreeing with this statement, which helps build our argument, these authors intended to “analyze the relationship between the construction of an anthropological knowledge about specific peoples and the formulation and application by States of policies intended to administer them” (L’Estoile, Neiburg e Sigaud 2000: 233).

<sup>2</sup> This term refers to the descendents of runaway slave communities in Brazil.

definition or, for that matter, on the formal training suited to prepare a person for the professional practice of anthropology. Many times, an undergraduate degree may suffice to qualify candidates to apply for jobs as experts to opine on matters for the MPF and other governmental institutions.<sup>3</sup> Invariably, the role of an expert analyst, or witness, will frequently go unquestioned by State institutions that hire anthropologists to guide and accompany administrative procedures or legal cases. Yet when it comes to elaborating anthropological expert reports there has been an emphasis on hiring fully educated professionals of the discipline. As such, Brazil's Attorney General's Office and the Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA) recently signed an agreement requiring that anthropological findings be conducted by professionals holding Masters or Doctoral degrees in anthropology from recognized research and learning institutions. With the stepped-up participation of these anthropologists, the borders between the activities conducted inside and outside of academia will become more clear, creating a constant interplay between the academic world and applied situations, necessary in the political engagement of each citizen's constitutional rights.

Nonetheless, the label *action anthropology*, frequently used by the anthropological community in Brazil, has often been confused as a type of "social work". In this manner, it shifts away from a "pure" science and is viewed as a simple application of anthropological knowledge to a "practical social problem"(Tax 1975). Sol Tax admitted that the term *action anthropology*, initially used by him in 1951, was aimed at describing research conducted by a group of anthropologists working together at the University of Chicago. However, in certain circles their work took on negative connotations. Nevertheless, Tax intended to clarify the implicit significance in this self-

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<sup>3</sup> Recall that in Brazil one must have a Masters degree in anthropology to be considered a full-fledged anthropologist by professional peers; undergraduate degrees are offered in the broad area of Social Sciences, where students then specialize in Sociology or Anthropology after their second year of coursework (see Ribeiro this volume).

attribution and demonstrate how these anthropologists came into the fold of “practicing anthropological action”. This term was used by him to describe the work of anthropologists in contact situations between peoples and “communities of people” that were culturally different, particularly when these situations involved power relations; namely, where change was almost exclusively unidirectional, as in the experience of North America’s indigenous groups. It was within this restricted context, termed “situation of acculturation”, that an interest developed in an anthropological theory. And confronted with such situations, Tax noted that researchers should stay within the anthropological tradition of studying them first hand. Thus, indeed, fieldwork is the mainstay of anthropological research.

In Brazil, the term “action anthropology”, put forth by Sol Tax, was first used in interethnic contact studies, primarily in situations involving “friction” between indigenous groups and mainstream society (Cardoso de Oliveira 1978: 197-222). In this context, anthropological research should equally learn and comprehend the aspirations of indigenous groups, among which *indigenous territory* stood as a prime concern since it often represents “the locale upon which tribal identity is based” (ibid: 213, 216). In light of this reflection, the possibility of an action-oriented anthropology was contemplated, by “creating a new form of knowledge as a basis for practical work” (ibid: 220). In this manner, anthropological fieldwork was considered a must in “light of new empirical findings that continually renovate themselves, making it possible to tie theory with facts, and avoiding, when possible, aprioristic models elaborated in government planning offices situated in mainstream society” (ibid: 220 & 221).

In hindsight, we have seen much change since the 1970s, when Oliveira wrote these words, both in the conceptual realm as well as a steady involvement of anthropologists in the political arena. The concepts and definitions of “ethnic groups” and “ethnicity” became new analytical tools that substituted previous approaches regarding “situations of acculturation”, and have guided studies of

interethnic contact in Brazil. During Brazil's Military Regime, particularly during the 1970s, political questions involving indigenous societies and other groups studied by anthropologists were debated between "specialists", in opposition to the development posture of State technocrats. This process represented another type of knowledge produced by the academy, where researchers became outspoken in favor of indigenous peoples and rural peasants, in a scenario that saw these players' political rights curtailed. As of the 1980s, indigenous organizations multiplied and rural social movements resumed their activities, both of these counting on the active participation of anthropologists, thus yielding to them a greater autonomy in the political arena. With the unfolding of these events an intellectual "division of labor" arose between academic work and the responsibilities anthropologists embraced as advisors to social movements and their representative associations, including NGOs, not to mention active participation in consulting services and government programs. In light of these developments, anthropological work has been conducted on behalf of the interests and specific demands of the groups they worked with, thus legitimating their entry into the political domain.

The juridical and administrative demands in elaborating anthropological reports steadily increased after the drafting of Brazil's Constitution in 1988, where the State was required to guarantee the territorial and cultural rights of indigenous peoples, quilombo groups, and other social formations that comprise Brazilian society" (article 216 of the Constitution). As one legal jurist commented on this article, "the notion of cultural heritage embraces an ethnographic meaning of culture", such as "the forms of expression" and "other methods of creating, doing and living" (Bulos 2001: 1244 & 1245).

In this intersection between anthropology, law and administrative demands and procedures, the absence of clear professional boundaries in implementing action suggests a stronger link to the indigenist field than to the proper exercise of anthropology, per se – and seemingly harks us back to the

classical division between “practical anthropologists’ (linked to the *Colonial Office*) and ‘theorists’ (linked to the universities)” (Oliveira 1998: 271).<sup>4</sup> According to this author, in the Brazilian context, a revision of this distinction would not be fitting as the purpose of his article is to “contemplate the interplay between Anthropology and Law”. In this sense, he also emphasizes that the “preparation of the expert findings that touch on [special] themes require an attention that only well-trained anthropologists would be capable of fulfilling with the necessary competency” (ibid). Faced with the gamut of “applied anthropology”, the alternative for some would be to take refuge in the academic world, a prospect considered difficult for a “field anthropologist” whose job it is to “walk through places and with people”, as stated by Geertz (2001:10), thus interacting with associations, unions, and other groups motivated by their constitutional rights.

Despite the changes which anthropology has experienced in Brazil, the term “action anthropology”, proposed by Tax, and reinstated by Oliveira, has been used in opposition to “applied anthropology”, which is often considered “practical, schematic, and less committed to communities, than it is to governmental institutions, private groups, religious and secular organizations, and funding agencies” (Cardoso de Oliveira 1978: 212 & 213). To the contrary, the “possibility of an action oriented anthropology “ is becoming more linked to the social responsibility of anthropologists working jointly with the communities they study.

Yet it is also pointless to reiterate the distinction between “applied anthropology” and “action-oriented anthropology” given that, during the course of their work anthropologists are frequently observed by their professional peers

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<sup>4</sup> For a critical approach to this type of “indigenusness of the State” and the characterization of the “identification reports” for the recognition of indigenous lands in Brazil’s Indian Service (FUNAI) see Lima 1998: 221-268; Oliveira & Almeida 1998: 69-123.

who evaluate their competency.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is necessary that researchers implicated in these situations, namely those elaborating expert reports, reflect on these circumstances while doing anthropology.<sup>6</sup>

At this juncture, these reflections can better be understood by briefly looking at our own ethnographic experience, based on three recent case studies, demonstrating the interplay between the academic world and action-oriented anthropology. This “mixing” of academic work with the direct application of anthropological knowledge may come as a surprise to some readers, yet one must be mindful that both areas have a common denominator, namely, fieldwork, which Clifford aptly reckons as a “central characteristic in self-defining the discipline” (Clifford 1997:53).

### **Rubber Tappers of Alto Juruá, Acre State**

After the assassination of Chico Mendes<sup>7</sup> in 1988 a number of rubber tappers organized themselves to counter regional violence and conflicts and proceeded to denounce transgressions against their personal liberties and other forms of illegal constraints perpetrated against them. These incidents were reported to anthropologists and did not arise during the course of anthropological fieldwork, properly speaking. While these problems were increasingly being recognized as issues of public concern, they also demanded an investigation with an expert view. Thus, investigations by anthropologists

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<sup>5</sup> In contradiction the “applied anthropology”, is consensually considered an “original sin in the discipline”, it has been used interchangeably with the term “implicated anthropology” that seems to be a modern variant from the “anthropology of action” (Lima 1998: 262,263).

<sup>6</sup> Two prior initiatives should be registered, distinct between themselves, but they raise questions and develop important arguments regarding the elaboration of anthropological findings in Silva 1994 e Oliveira 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Chico Mendes was a peasant leader from Acre State who mobilized rubber tapping communities to form cooperatives, associations, unions and extractive reserves in the face of large-scale land consolidation ventures of the region.

on slave labor and debt peonage in the *seringais* (rubber estates) arose more from joint efforts forged by ABA and this country's Attorney General's Office.

From a human rights perspective the importance of this mission seemed unquestionable. Yet our trip to Alto Juruá, at first, was anticlimatic. As it happened, our arrival was announced in Alto Juruá by the Union President of Rural Workers in Curzeiro do Sul, informing local rubber tappers that a "scientist" was going to visit them when, in fact, they thought that they were going to be visited by a dentist. Thus, local residents were expecting to take care of pressing health problems and were somewhat disappointed when we arrived. Anecdotes aside, however, our work, stemming from a collective civil suit articulated with the Attorney General's office resulted in the creation of Brazil's first Extractive Reserve.

It is important, nevertheless, to recognize the limits imposed by this type of engaged work, as many of the problems that arise in the course of investigation are defined and resolved in the area of legal jurisprudence. However, many of the rubber tappers' complaints registered in the Solicitor General's Office can be conceptualized from a sociological perspective, in terms of "who accuses whom". From this angle, we have a method of investigating the types of social relations and networks which unfold in conflicts, a valuable tool in relating cases and incidents, and in turn, clarify the connections between them (Gluckman 1975: 71). But we must also point out that theoretical questions pertaining to development and sociocultural change could not be examined as desired, as we initially hoped to achieve, since our work transformed itself into a police investigation against local "rubber bosses". Thus our return to the field would also entail risks as our own physical integrity was at stake. At this point, we could ask: what was 'anthropological' about our investigation? Rereading our report (O'Dwyer 1998: 15-20), we should point out that our arguments rested on the idea of fieldwork as a "spatial practice" (Clifford 1997: 53) or a physical relocation and temporary residence in another

place, using a methodology that engages a “distanced view” while serving as a vehicle for local stakeholders and conveying the “native point of view”.

This approach allowed us to obtain first hand testimonies from the *seringueiros* (rubber tappers), particularly in the context of their experiences and rationale. Direct interaction with local communities revealed the specificity of their logic which, although previously unknown to us, is still anticipated and acknowledged when it emerges. Thus, we sought out the testimony of those who lived alongside the victims of violence, that is, from people who lived and witnessed these transgressions. This perspective was achieved by putting a premium on testimonies which reflect the collective memory of these regional players, a special category of disenfranchised people, deprived of power and/or knowledge, who in turn are allowed to convey their day-to-day reality.

Thus, our fact-finding trip served in a special way to acquire a specific form of knowledge. While our survey was framed within the confines of legal jurisprudence, our report was realized through a native model, utilizing techniques and methods of ethnographic observation that allowed for an interpretative analysis of the social problems present in Alto Juruá.

### **The Quilombos of Trombetas, Pará State**

Since the 1990s, Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) operates an extension campus in the *município* (county) of Oriximiná, Pará State, which also serves as a field school for our department of anthropology. Parting from this base, we became steadily engaged with local descendants of former runaway slave communities. In this context, it was difficult to be committed exclusively to academic work, particularly with neighboring groups of people who vied for their due recognition as distinct ethnic groups. This is the case of the ethnographic research experience we conducted among the quilombo groups, whose rights and privileges are guaranteed in the Brazilian Constitution (Article 68 of the Act of the Transitory Constitutional Orders – ADCT). We were there



for two consecutive periods, in 1992 and 1993, for five and four months, respectively, followed by three shorter visits in the following years for stays of thirty days, totaling one year of field work. A period of one year has been considered by many in the anthropological community as the necessary minimum for fieldwork (preferably uninterrupted), which helps deepen relations and makes research more extensive and interactive (ibid: 54).

Before traveling up the Trombetas river to proceed with our work, the research team waited in Oriximiná for permission to visit the quilombo communities. In the meantime, we consulted an historical bibliography of the region and read the travel logs of people who journeyed there in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Henri and Otille Coudreau. Their expedition map to Erepecuro Creek (an affluent of the Trombetas) guided us in our trip. The map was rich in detail and took us beyond navigable areas, near waterfalls, where the quilombos extracted Brazil nuts in the rainy season and fished during the dry period. This trip was decisive in terms of our accepting the project. While traveling upriver we read Otille Coudreau's accounts out loud to our field guides from the communities of Jauarí, Espírito Santo and Choeira Pancada. Her travel log was thus transposed to the ethnographic "present" and lifted it from its historical context where regional inhabitants were disqualified and their information discredited, or considered unimportant.

During the course of our trip, an unprecedented incident was instrumental in helping us arrive at a decision to proceed with our work. That is, Coudreau's log mentioned the existence of a farm belonging to a runaway slave community (*mocambeira da fuga*) named Figéna. At this site we found archaeological remains indicating a long occupation period and we crossed-checked Coudreau's account with the local knowledge of Afro-Brazilian residents about pristine forest cover and successional forests. While there, we identified potsherds, bottle remains with English inscriptions, ruins from oven walls, and an orchard with juniper, orange and cacao trees, in addition to medicinal plants.

The discovery of this anthropogenic (and ethnographic) evidence was indeed decisive in taking on the job (O'Dwyer 1999:140) of including these Afro-Brazilians from Erepecuru-Cuminá in the process of ethnic recognition and their just claims to territorial rights in the greater Trombetas region.

During this work we had no intention of finding material proof that corroborated the development of quilombo communities in the region.<sup>8</sup> The verification of archaeological remains came as a result of the relations that developed in the research itself. In this way, they constitute ethnographic evidence about the past, appropriated by the group – in the ethnographic present to construct what they refer to as the “history of origins”. These considerations serve to situate the fluidity of the frontiers that separate academic research and the applied utilization of their results, in the case of groups mobilized by the recognition of their constitutional rights.

### **The Awá-Guajá of Maranhão State**

The demarcation of an Indian Reserve for the Awá-Guajá people is worth mentioning as in this particular case anthropological expertise was solicited by Brazil's Federal Justice system. The object of judicial contention revolved around defining a definite land area for the Awá-Guajá, a recently contacted group of indigenous people situated in the eastern fringes of the Amazon region in the state of Maranhão, near the Caru, Turiaçu and Gurupi rivers.

Fieldwork for this task was conducted through a series short and repeated visits, similar to the work done by North American anthropologists on Indian Reserves (Clifford 1997: 59). Our work was done primarily face-to-face with members of the Awá-Guajá community, through the use of native interpreters. However, in our case, we needed to commence work with a clean slate and free

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<sup>8</sup> This type of ethnographic evidence does not exactly coincide with the idea of archeological proof for application of Article 68° of ADCT (O'Dwyer 2002:35,36).

ourselves from previous views constructed by lawyers, FUNAI agents, missionaries, and influential economic groups of the region. While some of these players challenged the right of the Awá-Guajá to have a land area, others defended their plight. Until they came into permanent contact with Brazilian national society in 1973, these people primarily lived as hunter-gatherers and many are still nomadic. In this vein, to restate Clifford's view, anthropological work requires that fieldworkers place themselves in a perspective that "clears" their field of activities, at least from pre-established concepts. In examining the arguments presented by both sides of this land demarcation process we ran across key terms which defined the semantic field of play. Concepts such as *settlement*, often used as marking the presence of indigenous people, *property*, *nomadism*, *migration* and *roaming* were points of contention. Indeed these concepts evoke different meanings in terms of characterizing collective and private privileges, rights and interests in occupying a land area that was formerly a Brazilian National Forest Reserve. Thus, the divergences between the different parties involved in this case implied reaching a consensus regarding these terms and other concepts. At play in this dispute over land are the patterns of indigenous settlements used as models to characterize the "immemorial" occupation of given land areas. On the one hand, the absence of a conventional model for settled village life provided an opportunity for the legal counsel of the litigant (Agropecuária Alto do Turiaçu Ltda. – a large agropastoral firm) to disqualify the Awá-Guajá's land as being "traditionally" occupied by them, a necessary condition to fulfill Article 231 of Brazil's Constitution. On the other hand, there is evidence to the contrary that indeed the Awá-Guajá led a nomadic existence in this area, proven and verified by FUNAI agents and other witnesses. Some of these reports, specifically those produced by FUNAI contact agents (*sertanistas*), seem convincing in that they describe traditional dwellings and the subsistence activities employed by the Awá-Guajá to sustain their physical and cultural reproduction. In a report prepared by a veteran FUNAI sertanista in

1985, José Carlos Meirelles Júnior, he observed vestiges of Awá activities in the Gurupi Forest Reserve, such as old campsites, and concluded that a significant part of this area, indeed, constituted part of their foraging range. In light of this work, an expectation one can have of an anthropologist engaged as an expert witness is that he/she will also break with the strict terms embraced by the academic side of the discipline. It also became necessary to mark this rupture between this type of anthropological investigation and the proof and counterevidence confronting one another in this land dispute. Thus, the terms *settlement*, *property*, *nomadism*, *migration*, and *roaming*, carry specific meanings that needed clarification. As such, *nomadism*, *migration* and *roaming* bear double meanings and intentions: they are used in opposition to the idea of indigenous settlements, or what is conceived to be a permanent place of residence, a situation which can invariably diminish the significance of a collective existence but at the same time can serve as proof of traditional occupation by the Awá. The uses of such terms, however, imply an approach referring to the ethnocentric categories and points of view of the observer. The notion of *nomadic*, associated with *migration* and *roaming*, seem to impregnate all of the semantic burden on its vocabulary significance.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, our work also demanded that we avoid both the standard archaeological definitions of *cultural remains* (cf. Heckenberger this volume) and the concept of *evidence* as understood within the legal framework. Hence,

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<sup>9</sup> The term *migration*, used to characterize land occupation by the Awá-Guajá, presumes that they are constantly mobile in pursuit of resources from forests, rivers and streams to carry out their activities of hunting, fishing and collecting fruits, principally from the babaçu palm, without establishing a fixed area of land where they could be permanently situated. Legally this definition implies the “nonexistence” of a territory of their own (Plácido e Silva 2001:809), and by extension, from a political perspective it can invariably suggest an “absence” of what would otherwise be construed as a solid organization of the Awá-Guajá people, in terms of a cohesive and collective group. For its part, *roaming* implies someone who is errant or lives by “trial and error”, bereft of a definite plan, or left to chance. These concepts reinforce the idea that the Awá-Guajá fortuitously forage in an undefined geographical area, with no sense of direction, thus diminishing the possibility of defining a territory for them.

in our case, it was necessary to hear the Awá-Guajá and comprehend these concepts in their own terms. Ethnographic observations coupled with the comparative dialogue we establish with the discipline's accumulated theory give way to new ethnographic facts that allow us to understand and translate native categories of thought and forms of sociocultural organization. Anthropological "proof" about diversity and forms of collective existence thus comprises the ethnographic evidence that is constructed from emic categories of the group and its internal values, according to their logic and the coherence in which it is presented.

To conclude, we briefly readdress questions that developed from our professional experience regarding the conditions and possibilities of doing anthropology in the course of elaborating expert reports and findings, as a new dimension in juridical knowledge and administrative mechanisms. From the arguments developed in our three cases of engaged work we can state that both from an academic and applied perspective that fieldwork is the crux of anthropological existence.

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**Discussion questions:**

- 1) What would you do to “standardize” the professional training of anthropologists so that they can both navigate in the academic world and be attuned to consulting services and other forms of applied work?
- 2) What arguments would you use to counter the following statement: *there is too much land for too few Indians in Brazil*. Recall that indigenous peoples occupy roughly 12% of Brazil’s land territory on officially demarcated reserves (or are in the process of demarcation), yet they represent less than 1% of its population.