

## *Ethnography as mediation*

*Public categories and the anthropological study of a land “traditionally occupied by  
Indians” (Brazil)*

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In this paper I follow Bruno Latour’s (2002) inspiring proposal that to assume a common denominator prior to social and cultural relations has never been helpful in finding satisfying solutions for mediating agendas based on difference and inequalities. It is preferable to accept that perspectives, attitudes and conceptions of the world are intrinsically conflicting. They are, in Latour’s words, “at war”. From this point of view, “seeking peace” becomes an arduous and constant endeavor, rather than an epiphenomenal moment. Moreover, working for “peace” will no longer imply restoring a supposed previous order, but a process of mediation, sustained by what Latour calls “diplomatic work”: “Diplomats know that there exists no superior referee, no arbiter. (...) If a solution is to be found, it is there, among them, with them here and now and nowhere else”. (Latour 2002: 37-38)

In this paper I explore the usefulness of this argument for debating one of the topics of this year’s Ethnographeast: how we deal, as researchers, with the study of “categories pre-constructed in the public arena”. To begin with, I find that this issue arises on two interlinking levels: firstly, pertaining the discrepancies between public categories and the debate in social sciences; secondly, concerning approximations between our analytic

categories and the “agendas” of our different interlocutors throughout research. I propose to debate this issue from a perspective that brings out with crystal-like clarity how these two levels are interlinked. This perspective is given by the experience of doing an anthropological study which must deal with a category pre-constructed in the public arena, namely, “indigenous land” (*terra indígena*), understood as “land traditionally occupied by Indians” (*terra tradicionalmente ocupada pelos indios*).<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the above-mentioned first level, we should start by reminding that, as social scientists, we are not distant observers of public categories. That is why a strictly critical or deconstructionist position is no longer suitable for us. At the same time, I will argue that, as in so many other situations where we deal with different agendas, when we have to do research on a subject pre-constructed in public arena we cannot be aiming for consensus. Rather, we must be looking for the possibility of creating *compatible relationships*, and we must be prepared to make compatible what at first sight seem misunderstandings (Pina Cabral 1999, Viveiros de Castro 2002, Viegas in press, Viveiros de Castro in press).

The legal rights derived from the definition of “indigenous land” rely on cultural diversity, articulating original, immemorial, but mostly consuetudinary rights.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1988 Federal Constitution of Brazil, anthropological expertise has been considered indispensable for the Brazilian State to declare a particular area “indigenous land”. This is a very different position from that adopted in other countries, such as in Canada for

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noticed that indigenous movements in Brazil empowered the term *Índio* (Indian) in such a way that nowadays it is white people who sometimes feel uncomfortable to use it. Differently from what happened in the United States of America or in British Columbia, expressions such as “native people” or “first nations” have never been used in any instance in Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> We should emphasise that indigenous land only includes the rights of use and not ownership, which will be given to the Federal State.

instance, where it is jurists and lawyers who have to deal with land rights for indigenous people. In Brazil, it is the anthropologist who is asked to carry out an extensive and detailed research, which must focus very directly on the four principles that define a land as “traditionally occupied by Indians”:

- a) The first principle says that a land traditionally occupied by Indians corresponds to the “areas inhabited by the indigenous group on a permanent basis;
- b) The second takes into consideration “areas used by them for productive activities”;
- c) The third “Areas that are essential for the preservation of environmental resources necessary to their well-being”;
- d) Lastly, the fourth principle contemplates “Areas needed for their physical and cultural reproduction, according to their usages, customs and traditions”.

During the decade of 1990, there was a major ongoing debate in Brazil regarding the type of expertise that should be required of anthropology in these studies. Some believed that the technical experience gained by a professional was more important, while others argued that the ethnographic knowledge of the anthropologist, based on his long-term fieldwork experience with that particular people and in that particular region (where the indigenous land was being claimed), should be considered more valuable. In the end, it was the latter persuasion that gained greater public support.<sup>3</sup> My involvement, in 2003, in a research project for the “identification” of an “indigenous land” is, in a way, a consequence of this result. The study was carried out in the same region where I had

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<sup>3</sup> The outcome of this debate on the credentials of the coordinators of indigenous land identification studies, is established by the Decree n° 1.775 of January 8<sup>th</sup> of 1996, Art. 2º: “The demarcation of lands traditionally occupied by indians will be supported by research carried out by a properly accredited anthropologist, who will put together an anthropological identification report within a deadline determined by the responsible entity of the federal organism in charge of the Department of Indigenous Affairs”.

previously done a continuous year of fieldwork (1997-98) for my doctoral thesis, among the Tupinambá inhabiting the area of Atlantic Forest in the south of Bahia.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore based on my experience of doing research involving this particular pre-constructed category of indigenous land, that I will develop my argument in this paper.

### *The Tupinambá and Public Opinion*

Let me now summarize the situation of the Tupinambá. When I first began to do fieldwork in 1997, the Tupinambá of Olivença were not known as Tupinambá, but as assimilated Indians or *caboclos* – a term used in Brazil to describe mixed blood indigenous people, or those who have been assimilated and “civilized”. In 1997, when I began fieldwork, only a certain faction of anthropologists actually believed that we could nowadays speak of Tupi people on the Atlantic Coast. On this point they would more easily agree to the hegemonic racial theory in Brazil that would considered these assimilated people as peasants.

In fact, the case of the Tupinambá is particularly quarrelsome for the Brazilian public opinion. In many ways, these Tupi of the coast became the intellectual inspiration for nation-building nineteenth-century theories in Brazil, made on the assumption of their extinction. In a way, they sustained what Rosaldo would call a sense of “imperialist nostalgia” (Rosaldo 1989, Monteiro 2000:710). Obviously, if we look at the famous

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<sup>4</sup> The anthropologist who is selected through an international competition, partly financed by UNESCO, will also lead a multidisciplinary team and be responsible for the final results and the outline of the border of indigenous land. The anthropologist directs the work of a topographer – who maps the pathways, rivers and above all places where Indians live – and an “environmentalist” who has to gather information on Indian knowledge on the use of natural resources as well as to reach a technical opinion as to the necessary natural resources for the group’s future “physical and cultural reproduction”.

engraving by Theodor Galle (1589) entitled “Discovery”, in which America is depicted as a Tupinambá woman who Amerigo Vespucci elegantly raises up from a hammock as a sign of the awakening of America, the symbolic meaning of the name Tupinambá could no doubt be subject to even further interpretation (cf. Carneiro da Cunha 1998: 9). In any case, the “extinction” of the Tupinambá has as its referent the massacres that took place during the colonial period both in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia. But aside from this referent, the idea also spread like a rash in the construction of a national imaginary.<sup>5</sup>

The suspicions surrounding the “authenticity” of the Tupinambá of Olivença is in fact an example of the widespread scepticism among Brazilian public opinion as a reaction to the exponential increase, since 1988, of demands for official recognition of “indigenous people” and “indigenous land”. Between 1988 and 2003, the government subsequently developed special mechanisms (seen by many jurists and anthropologists as anti-constitutional) to do something which was to become one of the worst nightmares of anthropologists in Brazil: to be asked to write an anthropological report on ethnic identification (Ramos 2003:414).<sup>6</sup>

A famous case originated a great deal of controversy in Brazil. In the 1990s, an ethnic identity study was carried out on the Kaxixó Indians who were considered

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<sup>5</sup> See also Carneiro da Cunha 1998a: 136. At the start of the twentieth century, a modernist Brazilian movement, the most representative figure of which was Oswald de Andrade (1990 [1924-1928]), advanced an influential current of thought for which the Tupi (and particularly the Tupinambá) constituted a utopic Brazilian nationalism. In the field of anthropology, important works by Métraux (1927) and Florestan Fernandes (1989 [1948]) on the Tupinambá based on historical sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources lent further force to the importance of the Tupinambá in Brazilian history and social sciences history (cf. Monteiro 2000: 718).

<sup>6</sup> The president of FUNAI who was dismissed on February 2007, actually endorsed this kind of position publicly. One of his most controversial positions has been his reaction to public reports that the number of deaths among Indians due to delays in settling of indigenous land had increased since he was in charge of the Presidency of FUNAI. His reply, as quoted by the press agency *Reuters* was that the indigenous people in Brazil ‘have too much land’, arguing, and I quote: “Until now, there have been no limits to [the indigenous] claims for land, but we are reaching a point where the Supreme Court will have to define a limit.”

“assimilated”. When an anthropologist “failed” their ethnic identification test, the case exploded like a bomb in public opinion. The government asked for a second anthropological study, which concluded that the Kaxixó’s claims were legitimate, and then a third anthropologist (a very distinguished one in Brazil) was called upon to give an opinion on both these studies (cf. Oliveira and Santos 2003). However, by then, public opinion had already been “contaminated” by the idea that there were people who were misleading the state by asking to be identified as Indians in order to claim indigenous land rights while they were actually absolutely assimilated as Brazilian citizens.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, assimilation is central to the history of indigenous policies in Brazil. We can strongly argue that the major, and perhaps only, revolutionary anti-assimilationist legislation in its entire history came about with the Constitution of 1988. Furthermore, the process of legislation for the 1988 Constitution was very innovative in that it involved the participation of several social and intellectual forces. The terms of the Constitution were debated with huge success by national organizations of Indigenous people, together with Brazilian anthropologists and jurists (cf. Ramos 1988). Thus, “Indigenous land”, meaning “land traditionally occupied by Indians” is on the most part a category coined by those intervening elements.

From 1988 onwards, indigenous social movements attracted international financial support, which permitted several projects connected with the demarcation of indigenous land in the Amazonia in the 1990s to be carried out.<sup>8</sup> But, by mid nineteen

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<sup>7</sup> The situation only improved in 2003. Brazil finally accepted Convention No. 169 (one six nine) (14 years after it had been adopted by the International Labour Organization), thereby bringing to an end this anthropological nightmare of ethnic identity studies by accepting the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples.

<sup>8</sup> Especially with a cooperation programme financed by the World Bank and several European countries in 1994 (PPTAL - a G7 funded initiative to demarcate indigenous lands in the Brazilian Amazon).

ninety the demarcation processes became more complex. Many voices were raised against the indigenous cause, well summarized by the slogan: “Too much land for very few Indians”. Consecutive governments on one hand, and the media on the other, have helped to reinforce this idea. They use the reference to European countries as a measure of any indigenous land that is to be demarcated. So, instead of revealing the extension of the area, the Brazilian government announces that it has “given” indigenous people the equivalent to “another Germany” or “one England and two Switzerlands”.

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Bearing in mind the situation I have just depicted, it is easy to blame the public and political scepticism on the fact that since the mid 1990’ the exigencies of the state towards anthropologists’ studies of indigenous land grew considerably. In 1996 (in the government of the President Fernando Henrique Cardoso), the four principles of the 231 Constitution article that I mentioned before were multiplied into fourteen exhaustive conditions. In 1997 FUNAI published an eighteen-page long “Guide for Anthropologists” (*Manual do Antropólogo*), in which those fourteen “conditions” were further detailed. Subsequently, the coordinator of the research has to follow that guide and has to draw up a plan for extensive research that is more resembling of fieldwork in the form of “expeditions”.

The fieldwork consists in justifying if the area required by indigenous people (in my case by the Tupinambá) is actually “indigenous land”. I will thus sum up two of the arguments I developed in order to discuss what this experience can tell us about how to deal with categories pre-constructed in the public arena.

The first issue I wish to address here has to do with the outline of the borders of the territory, mainly the coastal border, related to the water resources of rivers, as well as coastal areas of mangroves. The area claimed by the Tupinambá covers approximately 50,000 hectares, between a strip of coastline and a mountainous region. It is inhabited by roughly 3,000 Tupinambá, 50 tradesmen, ranchers and tourist-resort owners and about 10,000 peasants. Since the Tupinambá are spread out in the 50,000 hectares, in each of the localities they resort to specific water and forest resources that are part of their social meaning of space: some small rivers are mainly used to provide water for dwellings and occasionally for fishing outside the area of each compound. Other particularly large rivers flow between rocky margins and indigenous people there very often fish by trapping fish in baskets made of finely woven *cipo* (vine) that they wedge between rocks in a method known as *tapagem* or fish trap. Since the Acuipe river spreads through a major traditional area of settlements, and throughout its course presents these two types of flow, I argued in favour of including this river, from its source to its mouth, as indigenous land. I also developed a concept of “territorialized rivers” in order to argue in favour of including rivers of greater flow, in which the fish trap technique could be used.

The justification of the border by the seacoast was a much harder issue. Not only because the seacoast is an attractive tourist area, but mainly because the Atlantic is a geographical border of Brazil, under the jurisdiction of the seacoast military policy. In this case I sustained my argument on the social and cultural meaning of collecting crabs in the mangrove not only as a “costume” but as an effective way of constructing solidarity among the Tupinambá. I explained that among the Tupinambá of Olivença the only food that is shared by a wider circle of neighbours is crabs. Crabs are caught no



more than four times a year in the mangrove, which is next to the sea and far away from most of the areas where the Tupinambá of Olivença live. Each year, they only make these four seasonal journeys to the mangrove, and when they manage to catch a large amount of crabs, (I heard people mention numbers rounding one hundred and even five hundred caught by a single extended family, of say 20 individuals), the crabs are shared not only between relatives of the dwelling unit, but also between relatives in other neighbouring dwelling areas. In sum, eating crabs is a way of establishing solidarity ties and is also related to abundance and excess. I heard reports of people eating crabs for five days running while watching the crabs die in front of them, unable to survive five days out of the mangrove. The Tupinambá do not seem to have, and more importantly do not seem to be motivated to find, a way of keeping the crabs alive or fresh. This is exactly because crab eating is marked by excess and even by waste.

In sum, this makes the mangroves a special resource for the Tupinambá sociality, otherwise strongly marked by the autonomy of the house, the dwelling units and local groups. Moreover, the social meaning of an activity that binds people through eating habits is easily contextualized within Amerindian debates (Viegas 2003, 2006).

A second argument I wish to make here is related to the first principle defining an indigenous land as “areas inhabited by the indigenous group *on a permanent basis*”. I argued extensively about how the Tupinambá who live in this region have for centuries led a lifestyle that includes the cultivation of manioc, piassava gathering in areas of the forest by the coast and lately doing paid work in activities related to these two skills. In this manner, their lives were tied to that specific Atlantic Forest and seacoast area. Based on the ethnography of everyday life sustained in my 1997-1998 long-term fieldwork

(Viegas 2003, in press) I also argued that the Tupinambá make residential arrangements differently from their neighbours, living in small dwelling units which consist of several houses belonging to an extended family, and spread out across the whole region. Each compound is located close to a stream, used on a communal basis by all of its inhabitants. In order to objectify this, I determined that a major aim of the 2003-2004 fieldwork was to get to know and to register with the GPS as many units of such indigenous dwellings as possible.

The result is observable in this map [MAP]. The symbols showing houses identify the areas we visited and indicate where the Tupinambá now live “on a permanent basis”. By bringing ethnography together with oral memory and documental analysis, it was possible to trace the permanent residence of the Tupinambá in these areas retrospectively from the present back to the eighteenth century. But if you look carefully at the map you may also notice that some areas are completely empty of dwelling symbols (Ribeirão Ipiranga, Canoa and Branco). The reason for this emptiness has to do with the history of land extortion in the marketing period (mainly from 1930 onwards). Nowadays this area is occupied by big landowner properties. The fact that the Tupinambá recall inhabiting that area in the past, and are even able to point out particular fruit trees in the landscape as markers of that history, is very important, but since the area is no longer inhabited, it becomes a weak argument considering the justification of “indigenous land”. This is a good example of the complex connections between the legal definition of indigenous land and our arguments as social scientists. The justification of life through memory is also recognized by the Tupinambá, but we have to validate our arguments both to them and to the judicial instances of the state.

In 2005, two months after delivering this anthropological study to the Department of Indigenous Land Affairs (FUNAI), I had to present the results to both sides. In the meetings among the Tupinambá I had to face expectations regarding the outline of the borders (the area outlined in green on this map). With people in the Acuípe region, a difficult debate ensued. They wanted me to explain very clearly why I was not considering that area of the Ribeirão (Ipiranga, Canoa, Branco) to be within the borders of the Tupinambá land. In this meeting they appealed to accounts of their history to remind me that they were forced out from that region to make room for those large farms that still occupy the area today.

Our conversation was therefore made on a double basis. First they had to feel that I knew their stories and considered their memories as valid markers of those past events, not only from their point of view but also from our understanding of memory and landscape in social sciences. But at the same time, I had to explain why the category of indigenous land did not contemplate those memories.

At the presentation to the Department of Indigenous Land Affairs in Brasília (FUNAI), the conflicting moments regarded the inverse situation: I was asked how I could account for such an extensive area in a region like the Atlantic coast in Brazil, where indigenous lands are on average less than half the size I was proposing. Before this official agency I had to rely heavily on the four principles that justify indigenous land, but again the only way of showing the technical and scientific value of my arguments was by recourse to ethnographic data. In both cases, therefore, the possibility of reaching an agreement, of “mediating agendas”, depended solely on the strength of the ethnographic argument: an argument in which anthropological and constitutional issues

had been fixed to make feasible an understanding which would help us reach a 'compatible peace'.

### *Closing remarks*

Taking this experience of doing research on indigenous land as a heuristic exercise for a broader reflection, I will now make some closing remarks. Firstly, I showed that the case of the legal definition of indigenous land in the 1988 Constitution of Brazil is paradigmatic in clarifying the idea that the construction of public categories can no longer be considered external to the debates in the social sciences. The definition of indigenous land given by the constitution was legislated upon and debated among indigenous leaders, anthropologists, jurists and the public opinion, linking issues of national and international politics to academic agendas and to the defence of equal social and human rights.

Secondly, the final outcome of doing a research requested *by* and *for* the people with whom we had previously done long-term fieldwork (in my case the Tupinambá), shows how misleading it would be to imagine that we can ever have either an uncompromised external position toward the people on whom and with whom we make our ethnographies or, on the opposite side, adopt "their" point of view. The situation regarding the area inhabited by the Tupinambá before its occupation by landowners, served as an example here. We need to know all we can about people's experiences and feelings, mainly by setting them on a larger comparative ground of discussion, and this may clash with our first-hand experience of them. In the case of doing research on indigenous land we need to use our anthropological expertise in order to put those

feelings in the perspective of the law, but we mostly need to have our own distinct position. This means that the ultimate question is knowing what our own position is.

First of all, I would like to reinforce the idea I developed: that dealing with categories pre-defined in the public arena means looking for ‘compatible agendas’, which is what Latour calls “seeking for peace”. Secondly, considering that ethnography is, on the one hand, connecting how people live in-the-world to a more abstract regional and comparative thinking; and, on the other hand, it also implies contextualizing that life within what is happening in the public sphere, I would suggest that our position is simply to keep holding onto this way of doing ethnography.

My final claim would then be that: understood as both a reflection on experience, comparative thinking, historical processes and political context, ethnography is the most accurate way for us, social scientists, to deal with public categories and assume that this is a way of working towards ‘compatible peaces’.

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