

## **Antonio Colbacchini and salesian ethnography\***

### **Antonio Colbacchini e a etnografia salesiana**

### **Antonio Colbacchini et l'ethnographie salesienne**

Paula Montero

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper studies the ethnographies of Salesian priests, particularly the ones of Father Antonio Colbacchini, produced between the years of 1920 and 1930 in Brazil, about the Bororo Indians in Mato Grosso. It is an examination of this literature to understand the specificity of its textual construction as well as to reveal its intrinsic interlocutors. Our analysis will favor both symbolic and political mechanisms which are used at a given moment to produce a certain image of the Indian and construct – for the Brazilian society – a convincing and absorbing view on their way of life and on what could be understood as their "culture."

**Keywords:** Mission; Identity; Culture.

---

\* This paper is part of a larger research Project in progress where we intend to analyze the Salesian ethnographies on the Bororo, Xavante and people of the Uaupés. Its general theoretical framework were constructed by the research group on missions that I coordinate in Cebrap and USP. Our aim was to understand the missionary work in the context of political and symbolic mediation processes. Its major results were published under the title *Deus na Aldeia: Missionaries, Indians and Cultural Mediation* (Globo, 2006).

## **RESUMO**

Este trabalho tem como objeto as etnografias dos padres salesianos, em particular a do Padre Antonio Colbacchini, produzida entre os anos de 1920 e 1930 no Brasil, sobre os índios Bororo do Mato Grosso. Trata-se de examinar esta literatura para compreender a especificidade de sua construção textual e revelar seus interlocutores intrínsecos. Nossa análise privilegiará os mecanismos simbólicos e políticos que são postos em ação em um determinado momento para produzir uma determinada imagem do índio e construir – para a sociedade brasileira – uma visão convincente e assimilável sobre seu modo de vida e sobre o que poderia ser entendido como sua "cultura".

**Palavras-chave:** Missão; Identidade; Cultura

## **RÉSUMÉ**

L'objet de ce travail sont les ethnographies des prêtres salésiens, en particulier celle de Père Antonio Colbacchini, produite entre les années 1920 et 1930 au Brésil, sur les indiens Bororo du Mato Grosso. Il s'agit d'examiner cette littérature pour comprendre la spécificité de sa construction textuelle et révéler ses interlocuteurs intrinsèques. Notre analyse privilégiera les mécanismes symboliques et politiques qui sont mis en action à un moment déterminé pour produire une certaine image de l'indien et construire – pour la société brésilienne – un point de vue convainquant et assimilable sur leur mode de vie et sur ce qui pourra être compris comme leur "culture".

**Mots-clés:** Mission; Identité; Culture.

The huge problem of the political historical relations between Indians and Christian missionaries has, as a background, an important anthropological question – the material and symbolic production of cultural otherness. If all cultures formulate a way of thinking about the other – be it as an enemy, savage, barbarian, or even as

an equal – to think about missionary activity is to understand how it constructed historically a particular anthropological perspective on cultural diversity. In effect, in all continents where it developed, and at all times, this activity was constantly attracted by the goal of producing material and symbolic paths between an “other” irreducible in its differences and an “other” who could be thought of and universalized. Such an effort resulted in a considerable ethnographic work, a source of inspiration for historians, linguists and anthropologists.

In this paper, I will study the missionary ethnographies by Salesian priests, particularly those by Father Antonio Colbacchini, written between 1920 and 1930 on the Bororo Indians in Mato Grosso, Brazil.<sup>1</sup> The main question behind this work consists in understanding the specificity and particularity of its textual construction. In order to do this, we need to reveal with whom it intrinsically dialogues in the particular historical context where it was produced. If we succeed, we will understand the symbolic and political mechanisms that are moved at some moment to result in some image of the Indian and to construct – for Brazilian society – a convincing view on their way of life and on what could be understood as their ‘culture’.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic Salesian literature on indigenous cultures, while voluminous in number of pages and very rich in detailed observations, is neither huge nor varied in approach. As a whole, such production, which extends for over a century – from 1919, when the first edition of Antonio Colbacchini on the Bororo appears, up to the recent publication of Bartolomeu Giaccaria and Cosmo Salvatore on the Xavante in 2001 – is the work of few authors and comprehends the publication of one or at most two titles of an often encyclopedic character. In effect, we may say that the missionary ‘style’ of Salesian writing is characterized by the fact that the translation and inscription labor that moves it is the product of a single work woven along a whole life. *Os Bororo Orientais*, by Colbacchini and Albisetti (1942 [1925]), *Os Xavante*, by Giaccaria and Heide (1952) and *Os Índigenas do Uaupés*, by Alcionilio Bruzzi (1977) are three major titles, three people and three distinct moments that sum up the path of decades of observation, acquaintance, translation and recording by the Salesian priests in the points of encounter with the people they were out to civilize. On the Bororo in particular it is worth adding the pioneering work by A. Tonelli in 1927 and the biographic notes and testimonies by Dom Balzola, collected by A. Cojazzi, *Fra gli indi Del Brasile-Matto Grosso*, and published in 1932, the summary by Colbacchini of the above cited work, when he received the ‘Cruzeiro do Sul’ medal in 1938 and obviously the *Encyclopaedia Bororo*, the major work whose first volume was published in 1962. Although not large in titles, the work as a whole is very rich and complex in its narrative construction.

Based on this analysis I will first offer a description of the social and political context of the times when the Salesian missionary activity begins in Brazil.

### ***The Salesian Project in Brazil***

The Salesian priests arrived in Brazil at the end of D. Pedro II's Empire, in 1883, with the emperor's consent.<sup>2</sup> While Brazil still had slave labor, progressive ideas were beginning to move around great coffee growers. The impact of the First Industrial exhibition of 1881 in the press indicates that the ideas of progress and modernity, that were associated to the introduction of industrial machinery in textile and coffee manufactures began to impress the elites. Liberal and republican ideas weakened the regime; even so, some of the goals the emperor had in mind when he asked the Vatican for the Salesian priests went on into de Republic: 1) offering a good education to the modernizing elite's children and a good profession for the new urban migrants; 2) guaranteeing, with the help of the missionaries, the 'pacifying' of the 'savages' in order do allow for the introduction of productive economic activities in the country's hinterland.

But who where the Salesian priests and why was that congregation chosen by the Brazilian government for that enterprise at that moment?

The Salesian congregation had, at that time, a recent history. Created in 1859 by Dom Bosco, in an European context of increasing secularization, they chose a form of laic piety and specialized in the education of young manual workers of rural origin and in the assistance of the ill. In that period, the industrial city of Torino stood the social pressure of recent rural immigrants, poor people attracted by its industrial dynamics. These masses of urban unemployed that lived in horrible situations were seen as a threat to the social order. As many other experiences of the

---

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Dom Bosco in 1882, Dom Lasagna writes: "The emperor D. Pedro II himself, a wise and very active monarch, consented to receive me in a particular audience in his Petropolis' Palace, in Pentecost's day, and entertained me for some time in a familiar conversation [...]. After well informed [...], very satisfied, expressed his desire to see our institution shortly transplanted to his vast Empire, pledging his august protection and bidding me good bye with benevolence and courtesy (*Apud* Marcigaglia, 1955: 18).

kind along the nineteenth century, both Protestants and Catholics contributed to develop a humanitarian interest that, in cases as that of the Methodists studied by John Comaroff (1991), concurred for the construction of a non-conformist view of the relations deriving from industrialism. In the particular case of the salesian reformist calling, it turned its philanthropic efforts towards the care of youths, especially those who were poorer, viewed as in a dangerous situation. Their major goal was to integrate them to the new forms of urban civility. Working with a method which promoted varied diversions to youngsters of all ages in sanctified days and Sundays, the priests tried to rescue them from the streets, guiding their social relationships. Dom Bosco called this kind of pedagogic style, fully turned to the managing of the daily routine through continued activities – recreation, music, gymnastics, theater – “preventive system”. Thus, along internships and professional schools, oratories intended to manage, in a whole fashion, the pupils’ time, making them leave vagrancy and the danger of evil companies. With the children’s schools, they elided the domestic promiscuousness of the poor; with the arts and crafts schools they guaranteed them a profession; with the festive oratories they offered the young activities for their free time.

It was then with this model of modern urban civility and integral formation that the congregation arrived in Brazil. Here, they found an affluent liberal bourgeois class, to which high schools appeared as an important instrument in order to abolish the still rough habits of the young, teaching them good manners and urban values. To deal with the young, the Salesian priests developed a cordial style away from the pulpits, confessionary and church, leaving aside the standards of the traditional clergy. Thus, in spite of the initial resistance of the liberals, which viewed the arrival of the Salesian Order – characterized as a new version of Jesuits – a strengthening of the clergy in the country, schools and institutes proliferated in major political and economic sites. In the same year they arrived, 1883, they founded the Santa Rosa School in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, and in the next four years four new Highschools in the State of São Paulo. In 1895, President Prudente de Morais, in a letter to Dom Lasagna, then head of the order in Brazil, expresses his

gratification with the institutes as an instrument for the transformation of the children of the poor “in useful citizens of the land,” for the “school of labor is an important civic virtue” (*Apud Azzi, 2000*).

The Salesian purpose of an integral education of the young shared a then current mentality that saw as self-evident the universality of *civilization* as a human condition. In this sense, to extend the same pedagogic method from the urban experience to people still “savage”, that is, living in the forest and so deprived of culture and of civility did not seem to offer special difficulties, at least as an idea. As we know, the classic foundation of missions is the construction of a *Civitas Dei* in this world. The “jungle” is, in the modern Christian imagery, the counterpoint to the Christian city/civilization (Gasbarro 2006). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this reading is still operative in missionary work: Salesians describe their missions as “luxurious cities [...] a definitive work that does not shame future constructions [...] a work of coziness and well-being for the people to be attracted and catechized” (*Nas Fronteiras do Brasil, 1950*). The new element in this grammar is the introduction of scientism at the level of the relations man/nature that, through the value given to technique and to human labor, extended the plan of history (that is, the human relations themselves) to the natural world. Thus, that period’s missionary work faced a new dilemma: contrary to positivism, it should rediscover the sacred character of nature (and that of reason), revealing in the savage the “natural reason” that understands the natural world as a divine creation; against the Indian’s “natural religion”, which consists in the adoration of nature, they should civilize it, absorbing it as a part of the social order.

The rapid growth of the Salesian congregation in Europe and its good results in the Argentine Patagonia show that in the eyes of some Latin American authorities, in countries like Brazil, Ecuador, Chile and Argentine itself, it appeared as having adequately solved that dilemma, by associating the Catholic principles to the advantages of scientism then represented in “vapor and electricity” (Botasso, 1991: 82).

For political circumstances, the missionary work with indigenous peoples in Brazilian lands took still one decade. At the level of world geopolitics and under the influence of Pope Pio IX, the Catholic Church emphasized the centralization of the Church command in Rome. In Brazil, a significant part of the bishops saw in that affirmation of authority a reaction against the previous regime that submitted the rule of the church to the Emperor's intentions. Brazilian bishops begin to ask for the collaboration of religious congregations faithful to Rome. Such is the case of bishop Dom Macedo Costa, from Pará,<sup>3</sup> that demanded from Dom Bosco the collaboration of Salesians fit to prepare the local clergy for the remaining "forty empty parishes and hundreds of savage tribes to be converted" and of the bishop of Cuiabá, Dom Carlos D'Amour, interested in changes in the local clergy (Azzi, 2000: 69).

While complying with the Pope that, in 1882, authorizes their coming to Brazil, Salesians had their own calculus regarding their expansion project. Already installed in Argentine and Uruguay, they preferred creating in Brazil a basis less isolated than the dioceses of Pará and Cuiabá that, while submitted to the bishops' authority, as exacted by Leão XIII, warranted them autonomy in action and political and economic support. They began then with the Santa Rosa School in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro.

When Dom Lasagna was made bishop in 1893, with the characteristic of a missionary prelate, the indigenous issue began to be very important for the congregation in Brazil. With a decade of work in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, it establishes itself also in Cuiabá, capital city of the State of Mato Grosso, to constitute a point of support for the mission activities with the Indians in the backlands. Taking as a model the schools of arts and crafts, the mission intended to offer the Indians a well equipped agricultural school that made the labor with land

---

<sup>3</sup> From his designation as Bishop of Pará in 1886, Dom Macedo Costa was an intransigent fighter for the alignment of the Church to Rome. In 1872 he provoked, with Dom Vital de Oliveira, a political crisis vis a vis the ongoing regime, that was to be named the "Religious Question."

the center of their autonomy and prosperity, as well as a means of training the natives' bodies and minds.

With this project in mind, in 1902, the institute obtained from the provincial government 4 thousand hectares of land for the establishment of a settlement in Tachos; they also obtained a yearly grant. Thus, from the outset, the catechetic work was conceived in terms of "agricultural settlements" (name given to the missions) turned to a modern, rationalized agriculture, founded on scientific principles of productivity and in the most sophisticated technology available. We can then clearly see that the inter-cultural relation then begun has, as a sociological condition, a complex system of production and circulation of goods and food, where the native is an integral part, both as apprentice and producer, and that he establishes relations of conflict and alliance with systems founded on hunting and collection. What is at stake in this production of reciprocal bounds is an understanding of the form of the appropriation of goods and of the use of time and territory. The account of a Sister in this settlement, in 1903, gives a good idea of what was at stake. The Sister writes in her chronicle:

The chief and the *Bari* Emanuel, with their seven people family, and some Indians they led, left the settlement. Protected by the dark night, they took with them the tools they received to work. They also stole from the Salesian priests, great volume of corn (*Apud Azzi*, p. 278).

It is here obvious that the Sister accepts the authority relations of the chief over his family and that she treats their "desertion" as decision to be consented with. To describe it she prefers the verb "to leave" over "to flee." Her criticisms are directed toward the understanding of the property over tools and corn. She uses the image of the "darkness of the night" to mark what she sees as the illicit attitudes indicated by verbs of an increasing negative character: "to take" and, afterwards, "to steal." The tools belong partly to the Indian – therefore they were not stolen – but they are his as he accepts to work: they were given him only under that condition, and what happened was a break-up of an agreement. But the individual appropriation of collective labor was clearly seen as a theft – the corn belongs to the



Salesians, who are responsible for the distribution and exchange rules. The question is more serious in this case for it implies in a confusion of codes: the Indian treated as an object of collection, a divine gift, what had been produced by human labor.

But let us see the wider political context, within which the missionary project is developed.

### *The Salesian Mission in the Governmental Political Context*

With the war against Paraguay (1865-1870) the vulnerability of Mato Grosso's borders became obvious. In 1888, the imperial government created the "Telegraphic Lines Construction Commission" in order to connect, through telegraph, the nation's political center to the borders with Paraguay and Bolivia. Two years later, a Commission led by Major Antonio Ernesto Gomes Carneiro, whose deputy commander was the then ensign Candido Mariano da Silva Rondon, began the construction of a line who went across 600 kilometers in the backlands where the Bororo lived. For two years, the Commission did its work closely observed by the Indians. The later conservation and expansion works were in charge of Rondon who, in ten years of activity, established a friendly and collaborative relation to the Indians, learning their language and becoming their ally (Gagliardi 1989: 140-148). We will see below that Rondon ended up representing a military model of secular and positivistic pacifying that, to some extent ran against the Salesian project.

On the part of Mato Grosso's provincial government, the urgency was to integrate in a stable economic system the vast region that separates the provincial capital, Cuiabá, from the capital city of the next region, Goiania (Vangelista, 1996). To this end, it had to free the lands of the São Lourenço Valley of the presence of the Bororo Indians that, still in the eighties had a permanent conflict with the farmers and colonials. In 1887, captain Antonio Jose Duarte succeeded in establishing peaceful relations with some chiefs of various Bororo groups along the São Lourenço river, which, conducted by the famous chief Muguio Kuri, entered the city of Cuiabá giving their arms to the captain (Bordignon, 1986).

Inspired by Jose Bonifacio's ideal of the integration of the Indians to the national economic system, the government founds, then, two military settlements: Teresa Cristina, at the confluence of rivers Prata and São Lourenço, and Santa Isabel, between São Lourenço and Piqueri (Viertler, 1972, 1982). The experiment did not succeed. From a total population of near 3 thousand Indians, the military settlement Teresa Cristina sheltered in 1888 a village of 3 hundred Bororo that lived in a semi-independent way (Castilho, 2000: 44). Thirty settlements were established around it. The only principle to prevail was that of military pacifying, that in practical terms resulted in avoiding conflicts with the Indians (Viertler, 1982: 64). Military action lacked an integrative model. Because of this, life in the settlement was increasingly impossible to stand: soldiers should provide the Indians with food, what meant that all agricultural effort was in their charge. *Cachaça* (a strong alcoholic beverage) was distributed for free (while soldiers had to pay for it), and "theft," fights and "murders" by the Indians were not punished. Life in the settlement degenerated rapidly to drunkenness, sex and violence between Indians and soldiers.<sup>4</sup> In order to control the situation, the government gave the settlement to the Salesians in 1895. But, when they tried to adequate it to their model of agricultural settlement, they met Bororo resistance, who were neither willing to surrender their alcoholic habits nor to work the fields nor to leave their rituals. In less than four years the Bororo left the settlement. The new President of the province, Antonio Correa da Costa, forewent the Salesians' services and attributed the settlement's administration to his political allies (Marcigaglia, 1955).

Facing the failure of this first missionary attempt supported by the government, Dom Antonio Malan charged Father Balzola to search a new

---

<sup>4</sup> In 1888, Steinen so describes the situation: "drunken parties assembling soldiers and Bororo women and chiefs who received gifts of clothes and blankets; strong youngsters petted with cachaça and clothes by the people of Cuiabá; Bororo men who refused to sow, while having the tools given them by the settlement administration; the consumption of sugar cane and manioc collected out of season from the settlement plantations; [...] sexual relations of the settlement's administration and some Bororo women; fights between Bororos drunken with the cachaça freely distributed to them, while it had to be bought by the soldiers, additionally irritated by having to work for the Bororo and risking arrest in situations where the Bororo were not punished" (*Apud* Viertler, 1990: 66).

independent labor field. In 1901, the priest goes in expedition through the north of Mato Grosso, between the Araguaia river and the Rio das Mortes, a region often visited by the Indians, and founded his first settlement in the following year: Sagrado Coração. In 1905, Father Malan established a new settlement in the Rio das Garças, Colonia Imaculada (closed in 1918), and, in the following year, a third settlement, Sangadouro, conceived as the support of communications between the capital Cuiabá and Sagrado Coração. In 1907, in order to train novices, including Indians, he also founded the Casa de Palmeira that, in the beginning counted with 80 Indians<sup>5</sup> (Turuzzi, 1985). In general terms, we can say that the establishment of the Salesian Missionary System in Mato Grosso, in spite of a serious crisis with regard to means and personnel from 1918 to 1932, was consolidated by 1950 (Corazza, n/d). In the thirties, they already received from the Brazilian government half of all the resources that were destined to missionary Catholic institutions. Their form of institutionalization, inspired in the model of the old Jesuit reductions remained unchanged until the Second Vatican Concilium, when its vigor and influence begins to dwindle. The impact of the 1970's ideological crisis, which check mated the mission paradigm, forced them to entirely rethink their relations with Brazilian politics and with the Indians. But, in that process, that was called "theology of inculturation", the ethnological knowledge accumulated in the past was important, even strategic, for the construction of the Indians' political and territorial rights in this recent period.

We saw, then, that the encounter of the Salesian missionaries and the Bororo Indians had a context determined, on the one hand, by the State's project of politically and economically occupying the territory in its sovereignty's name and, on the other, by the missionary project of converting the indigenous youth through the virtue of labor,<sup>6</sup> and through the control of time and of the bodies in a work that

---

<sup>5</sup> The novice course was closed in 1920 as a result of the murder of its director Jose Thanuber by the Bororo (Turuzzi, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> "Missionaries work hard and pray little, for they see in work the best prayer they can direct to God" (*Nas Fronteiras do Brasil*, 1950: 40).

goes beyond the purely economical exploitation. But, how did the Bororo Indians enter this equation? What were their possible strategies in this context? Let us see if it is possible, with the few data we have, to go a little ahead in the understanding of the stratagems they used to respond to these determinations.

### *The Bororo Strategies*

A good part of the literature on contacts, as it does not include in its perspective the meaning structures that mediate the relations and their role in the construction of the indigenous world, tends to evaluate missionary action on the basis of ideological parameters constructed in the second half of the twentieth century. Such a reading is unable to learn the historical density of the anthropological categories “barbarian” and “savage”, giving them the depreciative meaning they have in contemporary commonsense. By not taking into account the constructivist character of intercultural codes, like the daemon – which as Gasbarro (2006) shows is an instrument of reflection on the difference and of construction of new civilizations – attributes to the Salesians the use of such images with the sole reductionist intent of legitimizing their domination and tutelage of the Indians. By not understanding the heuristic value of the opposition Civilization vs. Barbary, it sees the mission’s civilizing landscape as an arbitrary imposition and as an illusion, for it *in fact* only effaces indigenous culture.

In a paraphrase of Octavio Paz, we could say that the term evangelization became, in these cases, a bullet. Now, “with bullets one can hurt enemies, we cannot understand a historical situation” (Paz, 1989: 26). Thus, the analysis of the meaning structures that mediate relations depends on the historicity of the theological-anthropological categories used by the missionaries and cannot do without a particular attention to the way “the Bororo culture” was constructed in that relation through almost half a century. We will see below that Salesian ethnographies were a powerful instrument in that construction. But, keeping in mind that it was made *in relation*, we must at least realize *with whom* it was produced and from *what kinds* of bounds.

We can assert, in general terms, that the various indigenous groups in their relations to the colonial world had historically three possibilities: try for an independent life as far as possible from any contact; try for either a military alliance or an alliance with the colonials; try for a settlement in the missionary system. Different Bororo domestic groups essayed, in different moments, each of these alternatives. It is important to emphasize also that, taking into account the data available in the literature, while very fragmented and often contradictory, the various indigenous groups did not keep stable and recurring social relations; most of the time they lived independent lives according to the ecological niches they occupied, and presented differential characteristics in what refers to body painting, the use of raw materials and the settlement and burial patterns (Viertler, 1982: 20). Besides, a good part of the Bororo – that part that after decades of armed conflict chose an independent life, away from contacts with colonials and crossed still in the eighteenth century the Paraguay River in the direction of what is Bolivia today – seems to have disappeared, blending itself to other tribal people. The recognizable part of the Bororo was that part that, in one way or another, established a *modus vivendi* with the nineteenth century's colonial world. That part was also divided in many groups independent from each other.<sup>7</sup>

The colonization of this huge territory of near 350 thousand kilometers was conducted in two stages:

a) Through the nineteenth century large cattle estates expand along the west of the Bororo lands north of the São Lourenço Pantanal, between rivers Paraguay and São Lourenço, south of the São Luiz de Cáceres village. After years of conflict, the remaining Bororo groups incorporated to them had with landowners semi-independent exchange relations: they lived in their settlements, hunting during

---

<sup>7</sup> For this part, Albisetti and Venturelli suggest the existence of at least six different groups: those living in the savannah (*Boku mogorege*); those living in the forest (*Itura mogorege*); those living at the margins of painted fish (*Orari mogorege*), those living in the lower basin of São Lourenço River; those living in the mountains (*Tori Okwa mogorege*); those that use long arrows (*Utugo kuridoge*), living in the middle course of the Taquari River (*Enciclopédia Bororo* 1962: 281-283).

the rainy season, received either *cachaça* or money for their work and gifts in exchange for their women. By the end of the century they were dispersed and blended to the local population (Viertler, 1982: 48-55).

b) The eastern region, between Cuiabá and Goiás, begins to be occupied by mid-century, and remains a scene of continuous battles, prosecutions and ambushes with a great loss of lives in both sides until the 1880s, when, in 1885, a Bororo settlement with four hundred people at the São Lourenço River surrenders to ensign Antonio Jose Duarte. Soon after, a second settlement with 68 people adhered to the alliance too. The intention was to keep with them a state of abundance of means of subsistence in order to establish friendly and enduring relations that allowed for a progress in the labor of the colonials. But the main problem then was to keep regular the provision of goods to a “savage” population estimated in 10 thousand people with the scarce means sent by the government (*Idem*: 62-63). In fact, the military colony was not able to prevent the explosion of new conflicts: in 1890, the Bororo murdered Manuel Inacio’s family avenging the poisoning of two hundred of their people; the following year, they killed three soldiers of the detachment of the recently inaugurated telegraphic line; in 1897 the Bororo chief Clemente Jirie Ekureu<sup>8</sup> attacked the Tatu estate, killing the kin of the estate owner Clarismundo as a vengeance for the death of a hundred Indians. The telegraph constantly woke the village with news of new and fiery attacks and terrible vengeancees (Viertler, 1982: 67; Bordignon, 1986: 28; Albisetti, 1962: 14).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the population decrease, the increasing occupational pressure on the land and the imbalance in weapons led some chiefs to risk new attempts at an alliance. It was endeavored by the initiative of chief of

---

<sup>8</sup> Although reluctant, Jirie Ekureu went with chief Meriri Otoduia that decided to enter the Tachos Salesian Mission in 1902. He was always treated by the missionaries as an enemy, for he maintained through his life a hostile attitude. Even so, he lived for many years in the mission as a protection against the vengeance of Clarismundo. His death August 13, 1913 was said to be caused by a sorcery of one of the major Bororo sorcerers, Kiege Etoe (Albisetti and Venturelli, 1969: 1221).

clans that, in that kind of society, have a great degree of decision autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Some of them lived in military settlements, experience that, as we saw, was rapidly aborted. From 1892 to 1898, other Bororo had sporadic contacts with Lieutenant Candido Mariano da Silva Rondon in charge of the Mato Grosso telegraphic district. In 1901, great chief Cadete begins visits with small groups to Rondon's camps. By Cadete's orders, other clan chiefs, with their domestic groups, enter the Commission, felling trees and cleansing the area in exchange for food for over a year. This kind of relation, which required the Exchange of work for gifts and the recognition of Indian rights over land, created the bases of a positivistic humanism, which was very influent in the republican civilizing ideology, but was also the foundation of the Indian Protection System (SPI, as it reads in Portuguese), created by the federal government in 1910.

When the first group of 140 Bororo, headed by seven clan chiefs and two *Bari* (shamans) established itself at the Salesian Settlement in Tachos, the settlement was fragmented:<sup>10</sup> only one half (Tugarege), but without adhesion of one of its clans (Paiove), accepted to live in the mission. The other half (Ecerae) joined a settlement in the Araguaia. The Tugarege half established itself in the mission as if in a clan territory, using the same code used in the occupation of its hunting spaces, where it constructed a provisional settlement. Thus, in the Salesian case, their relation to the

---

<sup>9</sup> According to Viertler, the settlement is the minimum unit for grouping individuals. In order for it to function, it must warrant a minimum population required for the fulfillment of the charges connected to initiation rituals and burials (1990: 5 and 206). According to Chiara Vangelista, the settlement is "an open structure than may, for internal or external reasons, disaggregate, when its parts may join others" (1996: 171).

<sup>10</sup> Although the Salesians themselves redefined frequently their schemes of the Bororo settlement, it is traditionally described as circle divided in two halves along the east West axis: the Tugarege, in the North, and the Ecerae, in the South. Each half is in turn divided in four clans, each clan owning a set of chants, dances, ornaments, weapons, personal names and having a priority relative to some raw materials (Viertler, 1972: 8). Croker emphasizes the internal hierarchy of each clan, determined by the ascendant groups over the inter-clan relations, whose arrangements would have been more fluid and flexible (*Idem*: 17). According to Viertler, the empirical settlement often does not follow the model, for it depends of the group of residents in a given moment, of the remainder of the transformations caused by fights, deaths and births (*Idem*: 208).

Bororo was with a small fraction of the whole people. Most of the groups lived outside the missions and established with it political and strategic relations that the missionaries were unable to entirely control. In his letters to the minister of the congregation in Rome, Father Balzola, first Tachos' director, complained that the Bororo, when visited by other Indians, gave away all that had received from the missionaries only to ask again insistently for new goods, leaving the mission in a state of permanent scarcity (Castilho, 2000: 78).

This rapid snapshot of the different strategies of approximation of the Bororo chiefs to colonial agents allows us to see that the history of contact, if possible to be told, is made up of small partial and fragmentary histories that depend on the encounters of particular clans, or even domestic groups with particular colonial sectors. Such datum is determinant of the implicit observations in the Salesian ethnographic descriptions. Even if they travelled to know other settlements, the Bororo with whom the Salesian missionaries lived, and those they described, were those domestic groups that, as a result of different strategic calculations, decided to establish with them alliance relations. And, most of the time that "reduction" referred to groups numerically small of the general population, that varied from fifty to four hundred people, although this is a high number for a Bororo settlement. It is likely that the urban nucleus of the missions, with its equipment – children's home, infirmaries, fields and church – was never able to reproduce the functioning of the social unit the settlement represented in the indigenous world, for it often sheltered parts of many different groups.

Thus, we can say that this economic, social and symbolic artifact that was the missionary agricultural settlement represented, from the outset, a new arrangement of relations that, different from the military settlement and from the sporadic relations of domestic groups with Rondon, articulated units of the indigenous system to units of the colonial system in a continuing conviviality producing still new relations. The settlement as basic unit of the Bororo social organization is feasible, according to Viertler, as a function of the means of hunting; now, the constant production and storage of food at the mission introduce a new



datum in the equation: to regularly benefit from the missionary supply allows for, on the one hand, the material reproduction of units smaller than the settlement, without necessarily disrupt, on the other hand, its functional unity, which may always make use of a wider relations network, external to the mission's physical universe. In other words, the productive organization of the agricultural settlement allowed for a dissociation between the settlement's economic function and its social and symbolic function, introducing chiefs and shamans to a new relational system.

These considerations evidence that, reconstructing the indigenous culture, Salesian ethnology did not describe indigenous life in the mission (invisible in that kind of narrative), nor founded its observation on the life of a "functioning" settlement. We will see below what were the ideological underpinnings that give form to such narrative. What is worth noting at this moment is the way in with, by suppressing the account of the fragmentation of the relations that based the knowledge of Indian life, the description projects an image of *society* on indigenous life that generalizes, to an hypothetical whole, relations with specific domestic groups. In fact, the literature on the Bororo shows the autonomy of their domestic groups, which are potentially self-sufficient, emphasizing the fact that any collective effort was only exerted in ritual contexts (Novaes, 1986: 119-129). This shows the fluidity of any encompassing social order, such as, for instance, clan solidarity, which emerges only in formal moments, such as burials. External forces had to take charge of the economic and/or political collective activities in order for supra-domestic social orders, such as "community," "tribe" or "society" to emerge in a stable manner. Thus, as protestant missionaries had already done in Africa, as Henri Junod for the Ba-ronga in Lourenço Marques, missionary ethnographies imaginarily construct a Bororo *society* whose social experience the indigenous, in fact, could not have had, but were gradually acquiring.

Firmly based the ideological and political context of the dialogue of the Salesian action, as well as the framework of relations on which it produced its point of view on the indigenous world, I will now turn to one of the essential products of

such construction: the Salesian ethnographies of the Bororo and one of its major authors, Father Antonio Colbacchini.

*Antonio Colbacchini and Salesian Ethnography*

In 1938, President Getulio Vargas conferred Colbacchini the highest national medal given a foreigner acknowledging his pacifying work. The priest was then 57 years old. Graduated in philosophy and theology, he became, from 1906 on a pioneer an explorer of Mato Grosso. His first work on the Bororo was published in Torino in 1925. He was director of the Tachos agricultural settlement from 1907 on.

Missionary and ethnographer, Colbacchini was a character in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century – simultaneously explorer and a man of science, at a moment when anthropology was not yet consolidated as an academic discipline. He wrote for an intellectual elite and for the political men of his time.

The manner in which he presents himself as an author is also interesting: he sees himself as a result of a synthesis between savage life and a knowledge of man that is nothing but a translation to human language of the unutterable experience of paradise. Colbacchini would thus be the bridge between two worlds apparently unrelated to each other: that of the savagery, which can neither be uttered nor thought of, and the human world, which ought to be known. In his speech in response to the medal received, he thus presents himself:

Missionary of the backlands that lives for over thirty years in constant consortium with the jungle' children, which, in the coarseness of savage life, reflect the beauty and the mild charms of virgin forests, I thought that between me and you, Noble Sirs, or better still, between me and the cultivated society there was a deep abyss that perhaps I could never be able to cross (1939, n/d).

In order to express this idea of bridge-man, translator, Colbacchini appeals to historical characters available in Brazilian political imagery. As Janus, Roman god of the doors, the missionary has also two opposed faces – he presents himself as a man of the backlands (*sertanejo*) and as an explorer (*bandeirante*). Such a paradoxical combination, which associates the image of the Indian-cowboy to that

of the Indian's hunter, constitutes a double passage between opposed poles, through the production of a mediating term. Let us glance at some meanings these two images mobilize.

The *sertanejo* is the man of the rough highlands of the country's hinterland. He lives a rustic and isolated life following savage cattle. Life in the backlands from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century depended on the shotgun, a vital element in the defense against the Indian and a condition for the estates' settlement. Heroism was acknowledged in the cowboy's bravery and other qualities. In this part of the new world, each man could be his own king, gang boss, justice through revenge. In many occasions, he could form the private army for some landowner. So the man of the backlands built himself in history as the man without remission that carries with him, against the colonial, absolute pristine life: native of the land and free, knowing the landscape and integrated to it, often of Indian ascent. That character became immortal in the Brazilian imagery by mid twentieth century in the figure of the bandit and major character, *Lampião*.<sup>11</sup> "When the public order appears in the backlands," observes historian Frederico de Mello, "what one sees is the gradual condemnation of the life through arms [...] and the use of the term *cangaceiro* (bandit) to make archaic that way of life" (2005: 18-24).

The *bandeirante* is the *paulista* pioneer that, from the end of the sixteenth century until the mid eighteenth century forms expeditions to capture both Indians and riches. In such a terrible undertaking they incorporated new territories and destroyed the Jesuit reductions in Uruguay. The metropolis often resorted to these brave bands in order to defend itself of the revolted populace, to police the frontiers and to conquer new lands for the colony. He remained in the Brazilian imagery as a brave, independent conqueror that expanded the Portuguese frontiers to the

---

<sup>11</sup> Virgulino Ferreira da Silva – *Lampião* – is the major figure among the land's outlaws. Born in 1898, in Pernambuco, son of a small farmer, he fought the landowners and the military from 1919 to 1938, when He was finally defeated. He dominated over rural sections in seven states for over twenty years, forming armed groups that reached 120 men. His military talent resided in his ability to unite previously existing groups under his command, so enlarging his influence. He ended up an immortal in literature and cinema as a symbol of the northeastern backlands (Mello, 2005: 18-24).

hinterland and that, without governmental support, reconquered portions of the territory invaded by the Spanish in the southern backlands.

This character was designed anew by *paulista* intellectuals in the republican context of the nineteenth century. The Indian question was then in the center of the debate on race and nationality. While the opposition *Tupi/Tapuia*, expression of crossbred nationality during the Empire, dwindled in face of the new theories of racial purity, the *paulistas* were interested in rescuing and idealizing their *Tupi* origins – described as warriors allied to the missionary and the colonials against the fiery *Tapuias* in the hinterland. In order to tame the reputation of the cruel *bandeirante*, the crossbred hero appears. In 1923, Paulo Prado so portrays him:

[...] the cross-breeding with the Indian corrected in a fortunate way the excessive rigidity, the harshness of the sixteenth century European colonial; in this mixture, the Indian brought up the finest element, physical agility, the refined sense, the intense observation of nature, almost miraculous in the whites' eyes.

In this interested appropriation of the *paulista* Indian past there emerged the representation of the luso-indian crossbred vulgarized in the form of the *bandeirante*. In the context of the thirties' regionalisms, that looked for a way of particularizing the nation through its human types and landscapes, indigenous abilities recurrently fed the description of the crossbred. President Getulio Vargas takes anew the crossbred representation of the *bandeirante* and exalted him as a symbol of territorial sovereignty and, therefore, nationality.

Colbacchini presents himself, then, as both *sertanejo* and *bandeirante*. Approximating these opposed and mediating images, he shortens the distance that separates Indians from Colonizers. The *sertanejo* is the first mediating category: like the Indian, he belongs to the land and fights the government in his bandit life. But his counterpoint emerges in the figure of the *bandeirante*. When one takes as a reference political power, we see that the *sertanejo* is to the Indian as the *bandeirante* to the colonizer: the former has the government as his enemy, because of his unforgiveness, the later has the Indian as his prey. However, when one looks at it from the point of view of territoriality, both *sertanejos* and *bandeirantes* belong to the same species of free, independent men, knowing their land; as heirs to Indian

abilities, both are equally distant from both the brave Indian and the foreign colonizer.

They are the true men of a land that ceases to be natural and becomes historical, national, through the action of these new warriors. They are also the true children of the land, what again characterizes the nation to be. Like these crossbred men, independent from political power and autonomous for their knowledge of the land, Colbacchini presents himself as the legitimate expression of the voice of the people. Were not the Bororo themselves that gave him the name of *Boe Imegera*, chief of the Bororo?

Colbacchini's ethnographic discourse is constructed, therefore, as a form of knowledge that expresses a convergence of contradictory interests – the desire to destroy the Indian and take away their land and the need to keep him as manpower, warrior, expert on the landscape and agent of population through cross-breeding and settlement; the desire of taming the Indians and the need to keep them natural, owners of the land against metropolitan occupation. Anyway, the mobilizing images of both *sertanejo* and *bandeirante* characterize a process of construction of a society that does not see itself either as directly stemming from indigenous societies or as a historical continuity of the metropolis. Catechesis, and not the court as in the case of New Spain, represented in this political and ideological context the instrument of civilization, offering a sociability model that did not have still a laic counterpart because of the brevity of the Portuguese court and the absence of university institutions. And civilization was above all urbanity, that is, the production of social relations, *de civis*, for men thought of as natural. Missionary buildings represented the empirical model of that vision of the world or, as Octavio Paz would say, of “that vision of men *in* the world and men *as* the world (1989: 52).<sup>12</sup> Contrary to republican military pro-Indian position, based on the idea of “pacification” that

---

<sup>12</sup> Octavio Paz distinguishes *civility*, word of courtesan origin that defines the aristocrat that lives in court from *civilized*, bourgeois word that characterizes the illustrated and progressive man. According to him, the notion of *civility* had in Spain the Christian meaning of *evangelization*.

consolidates itself along the twentieth century, to whom to civilize was mainly to control the territory and the people, bases of the state's sovereignty, Colbacchini assumes the existence of a "clandestine nation" that can only be known when seen from the point of view of the backlands. That quasi-nation is built with the values of freedom, fraternity and pristine innocence.

So, to understand Colbacchini's ethnological work is to analyze how his description mobilizes imagination to respond to apparently insoluble contradictions that the inclusion of the Indians, with their differences, imposes to the consciousness of a man of his time.

\*\*\*

If, from his perspective, Colbacchini's work looks to the indigenous world in the convergence of the ideas of his time, as I tried to show, from the point of view of internal construction his ethnological narrative has a very particular style. In a paper being written, I intend to show the way in which Christian cosmology produces a reading for Colbacchini's ethnographic observation, and how that configuration is articulated in the recorded version in the *Enciclopedia Bororo*. We will then see how totemism, the deluge and souls operate as mediating codes between the Indigenous and Christian worlds. Due to constraints this kind of paper imposes, however, I will concentrate, for the time being, less in the contents of the narrative than in its structuring forms.

We have said that Colbacchini's ethnographic description was not based on the daily and systematic observation of the life in the settlements, for the social organization that was engendered by the agricultural settlement related cultural units in a new system of relations. In effect, if one observes carefully its textual construction, one sees that it is the result of privileged relations with certain indigenous characters taken as informants – shamans or chiefs – that established exchange relations with the missionaries. And more, characters that, like Akirio Bororo Kejewu, that escaped infanticide ordered by the chief and was educated in

the Mission of the Sagrado Coração, are capable of keeping some distance in relation to their own world, making it an object of communication.

Ethnographic narrative, however, makes that point of view invisible and presents an account of indigenous culture as the product of a life in common with a generalized native, abstraction clearly expressed in the captions of the supporting photographs: “Bororo Indians with the pariko”; “young Bororos”; “Bororo Indian fishing with arrow” etc. Lévi-Strauss had already noted such an effect of discourse when he says in *O Cru e o Cozido* that Salesian descriptions eliminate divergences in their informants’ accounts.

“Courteously,” says Lévi-Strauss, but decidedly, “they asked the Indians to form a council and agreed upon what should become the dogma unity” (1971: 48). Such cultural standardization in terms of *doxa* is presented as a literal translation of a native wise man’s narrative. Thus, even if the informant himself sometimes changes the myth in order to conform it to what, in his opinion, is ethnographic reality – “lamentable liberty in relation to a mythic text” according to Lévi-Strauss (*Idem*: 50) – such a discourse gains a triple truth nature: it is true because constructed outside contact relations – the native speaks directly to the reader; it is true because it is the original expression of this people’s voice, to whom the missionary is only the invisible and silent translator; and, finally, it is true because it is the transmission of traditional knowledge that runs the risk of disappearing forever – the chief or shaman narrate as if teaching. The record becomes here an initiation ritual. The time and effort these Indians dedicated to teach their language, myths and rituals to the missionary were extraordinary. Often the task cost them a whole life of loyalty and dedication. Why do they accept to do it?

We may never have a satisfactory answer to this question. What is certain, however, is that throughout a long time the Bororo refused to do it. The missionary complained that during a long period, the chiefs kept their secret and deceived them as to the language sense. But the Indians also wanted to learn the whites’ language. As the language is for them creator (and not a technique as the Salesians thought), to own a language is to own the secrets of its wealth in cultural goods; it is to tame

the white men. Thus, they reached an agreement in terms of knowledge exchange, which made accumulation, organization and distribution of knowledge the privileged *topos* of translation processes.

The major question now is to know how this inter-cultural frame determined the kind of knowledge produced by the Salesians on the Bororo.

We have said that the missionary chose as “masters” the individuals that, in their opinion, had the widest possible knowledge of the traditions, myths and rituals. For them, most of the Indians, with the exceptions of some chiefs and shamans, only had a partial knowledge of their culture. In this sense, we may see that “native culture” is not that lived and known by all Indians and that they do not all participate in these exchange relations that the ethnographic inscription inaugurates. In this process of memory organization and classification of rituals and customs, by comparison to those the missionary knew, the Bororo culture acquires system and coherence. Its monographic inscription gives it form that is crystallized in history and becomes a parameter of “being” Bororo. Thus, when the older men hesitate on the correction of certain ritual steps or gestures, ethnography, the record, is there to show the true culture. We have that, therefore, the record and reproduction of memory through ethnography construct a traditional knowledge that perpetuates itself in time and generalizes itself in form, and where a collective meaning of loss is inscribed each time that endowment so immortalized changes its course.

The implicit paradox in the production of missionary ethnography lies in the fact that, in order to create an image of the native culture, the ethnographer causes a mutation in the traditional forms of memory production. These narratives are mobilized by the simultaneous need of preserving native memory and interrupt its transmission processes. Salesian ethnographies, as an integral and founding part of the conversion process, universalize the knowledge of what it is to “be Bororo” in a way until then unknown to the natives themselves and, in the same movement, produce a kind of “conversion” of the Bororo to the Bororo culture.



## *Bibliography*

- AZZI, Riolando. (2000), *A obra de Dom Bosco no Brasil*. Barbacena, MG, Centro Salesiano de Documentação e Pesquisa.
- COMAROFF, Jean, and John COMAROFF. (1991), *Of revelation and revolution*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press. 1991.
- GAGLIARDI, José Mauro. (1989), *O índio e a República*. São Paulo, Hucitec.
- GASBARRO, Nicola. (2006), "Missões: a civilização cristã em ação", in Paula Montero (ed.), *Deus na aldeia: missionários, índios e mediação cultural*, São Paulo, Globo.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude. (1971), *O cru e o cozido*. São Paulo, Brasiliense.
- MELLO, Frederico Pernambucano de. (2005), "O guerreiro do sol". *Revista de História da Biblioteca Nacional*, 1 (3), set.
- NOVAES, Sylvia Caiuby. (1986), *Mulheres, homens e heróis: dinâmica e permanência através do cotidiano da vida Bororo*. Dissertação de mestrado, São Paulo, Usp, FFLCH.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1993), *Jogo de espelhos*. São Paulo, Edusp.
- PAZ, Octavio. (1989), *Sor Juana Inês de la Cruz, o las trampas de la fé*. Barcelona, Seix Barral.
- PRADO, Paulo. (2000), *Paulística, etc.* (ed. Carlos Augusto Calil). São Paulo, Companhia das Letras.
- VANGELISTA, Chiara. (1996), "Missões católicas e políticas tribais na frente de expansão: os Bororo entre o século XIX e XX!". *Revista de Antropologia*, 2.
- VIERTLER, Renate Brigitte. (1972), *As aldeias Bororo e alguns aspectos de sua organização social*. Tese de doutorado, São Paulo, USP, FFLCH.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1982), *A duras penas: um histórico das relações entre índios Bororo e "civilizados" no Mato Grosso*. Tese de livre-docência, São Paulo, USP, FFLCH.

## *Salesian sources*

ALBISETTI, César, and Angelo J. VENTURELLI, (1962), *Motogeba, uma flor da floresta com quadros da vida Bororo*. Niterói, Escola Industrial Dom Bosco (opúsculo).

ALBISETTI, César, and Angelo J. VENTURELLI, (1962), *Enciclopédia Bororo*. Campo Grande, Faculdade Dom Aquino de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras/Instituto de Pesquisas Etnográficas, vol 1.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1969), *Enciclopédia Bororo*. Campo Grande, Faculdade Dom Aquino de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras/Instituto de Pesquisas Etnográficas, vol 2.

BRUZZI, Alcionílio. (1977), *Os indígenas do Uaupés*. Roma, Libreria Ateneo Salesiano.

BORDIGNON, Mário. (1986), *As fronteiras do centro-oeste brasileiro: 1717-1986*. Missão Salesiana de Mato Grosso.

BOTASSO, Juan. (1991), "Les missions salésiennes et le peuple Shuar". *Recherches Amerindiennes au Québec*, XXI (4).

CASTILHO, M. Augusta de. (2000), *Os índios Bororo e os salesianos na Missão dos Tachos*. Campo Grande, Editora UCDB.

COLBACCHINI, Antonio. (1936), "A grande pátria brasileira". Homenagem salesiana à Colbacchini. São Paulo, Gráfica Salesiana.

COLBACCHINI, Antonio, and Cesar ALBISETTI. ([1925] 1942), *Os Bororo orientais*. São Paulo, Companhia Editora Nacional.

CORAZZA, José. (n. d.), *Cenas históricas*.

COJAZZI, A. (1932), *Fra gli indi del Brasile-Matto Grosso*. Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale.

GIACCARIA, Bartolomeu, and Adalberto HEIDE, ([1952] 1984), *Os Xavante*. São Paulo, Editora Salesiana Dom Bosco.

MARCIGAGLIA, Luiz. (1955), *Os salesianos no Brasil: ensaio de crônicas dos primeiros vinte anos da obra de Dom Bosco no Brasil (1883-1900)*. São Paulo, Escolas Profissionais Salesianas.

*Nas fronteiras do Brasil. Missões salesianas no Amazonas*. (1950). Rio de Janeiro, documento.

TURUZZI, Osvaldo Van. (1985), *Dom Antonio Malan*.

Translated by Plínio Dentzien.

Translation from **Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais**, São Paulo, v.22, n.64, p. 49-63.  
Jun. 2007.