

ON DECEMBER 10, 1945 occurred the death of the great ethnologist Curt Nimuendajú. Like Theodor Koch-Grünberg, he died among the Indians to whom he was so greatly attached. No one perhaps has contributed more to the study of Brazilian aborigines than these two men of German origin. Although illnesses acquired in Amazonia placed them in great danger of their lives, neither of them faltered in what they considered their duty to science.



Curt Nimuendajú

During the last few years Nimuendajú had been working among the Tukuna Indians on the Rio Solimões. The news dispatch from Manaus stated "He died at the locality called Santa Rita among the Indians. He was buried in the region which is the territory of the tribe to which he had dedicated a great part of his life. The illustrious scholar died suddenly while he was reading a letter in his hut (tapiri) which he had built among the Indians for his study."

On February 17th, 1941, Nimuendajú wrote to me that the climate in the Tukuna region was "hideous." In another letter from Igarapé da Rita (upper Solimões) dated August 9th, 1942, he declared, however: "My health is good. I am gaining weight with this Indian life. With the Tukuna I live like God among his angels, and I am not bothered with the hatefulness of certain civilized people."

In 1943 Nimuendajú was invited by the *Conselho Nacional de Proteção aos Índios* of the Brazilian Government to lead an expedition to the State of Matto Grosso. When he came to Rio de Janeiro in order to discuss this possibility he received the bad news concerning which he wrote me on November 10th of that year. He wrote "When I had the necessary physical examinations and laboratory analyses, etc., the doctors found that my state of health was such that I should abandon once for all my life in the interior, and residence among the Indians. In fact, they prescribed a diet for me which would be impossible

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Portuguese by Charles Wagley.

to follow, except possibly very badly, outside of the great civilized centers. Such a decision made me very sad. You know well how much I love this life (in the interior) and how I feel identified with the Indians. It seems impossible to me that I may never see again the plains of the Canellas bathed in sun or the shady swamps (igapós) of the Tukuna. Besides I have many things in mind which now may never be done." The letter ended with the melancholy phrase—"I am now definitely out of the battle." But in May of 1945 Nimuendajú surprised me by writing "It looks as if I will soon have to make another trip to the Tukuna." He made this trip and it was the last of his career.

The way Nimuendajú replied to my request in 1939 for biographical data and for a photograph is significant in regard to his personality. "You want me to send the story of my life," he wrote. "It is very simple: I was born in Jena (Germany) in the year 1883. I did not have any university instruction of any kind. I came to Brazil in 1903. Until 1913 my residence was in São Paulo and later in Belém do Pará. All the rest has been, until this present date, almost an uninterrupted series of expeditions of which I enumerate in the attached list those I remember. I do not have a photograph of myself." According to his list, there was not one single year from 1905 to 1939 during which he did not live among the Indians nor undertake archeological explorations.

His first publications which appeared in 1914 and 1915 in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* were signed "Curt Nimuendajú Unkel." In his later publications the last name was omitted. His Indian name "Nimuendajú" was given to him in 1906 by the Apapócuva-Guaraní, by a complicated traditional ceremony. Under this name, now internationally famous, he became a Brazilian citizen in 1922.

One of his most important publications, *Die Sagen von der Erschaffung und Vernichtung der Welt als Grundlagen der Religion der Apapocuwa-Guarani*,<sup>2</sup> which appeared in 1914, was a result of his long residence with these same Guaraní. This study contains not only rich mythological data but also considerable linguistic, psychological and historical material regarding the Apapócuva-Guaraní. Many of his publications that followed this study were vocabularies and myths which he collected among the many tribes of northern Brazil which he visited. His studies of social organization of Ge-speaking groups, however (some of which were published in collaboration with Robert Lowie), inaugurated a new phase in the study of Brazilian ethnography. He left numerous unpublished manuscripts of tremendous value to students of South American ethnography. His ethnographic and archeological collections have enriched the museums of Germany, Sweden and Brazil.

Nimuendajú was also a cartographer of considerable merit. The Dominican Father, Pedro Secondy, told me that when they travelled together in 1940 on the Araguaya River on a launch Nimuendajú sat the whole day studying

<sup>2</sup> *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 46, Berlin, 1914, pp. 284-403.

the river with his compass. He hardly spoke, and the other passengers found him strange. After the launch had tied up for the night to allow the passengers to make camp on the beach, Nimuendajú would inquire as to what time the launch would leave next morning, and retire from the others to sleep on the beach. The Dominican told me that he always appeared punctually next morning already shaven. The Dominican mentioned this last fact several times, for it seems that Nimuendajú never neglected for one day to shave during his many years travelling in the woods of Brazil. This habitual neatness and orderliness were part of his whole personality and could be seen in his handwriting, in the packages of printed matter he sent, and in the maps he drew.

Nimuendajú was a scrupulous scientist and an incorruptible fighter for his high ideals of justice and charity. During his whole life he fought for the Indians against the representatives of our civilization who invaded their territory with superior arms. For these efforts he was loved by the persecuted, becoming one of them, and with them he suffered the hate of the colonizer for whom "Indians are not people."

Nimuendajú not only defended humble and disarmed tribesmen living at peace with the colonizers, but he also subjected himself to danger and to long tiresome journeys in order to enter into contact with unpacified tribes in an effort to bring an end to the slaughter of both their own valiant warriors and their white neighbors. The pacification of the Parintintin of the Rio Madeira which he accomplished in 1922 was a notable case in point and well worth mention here. Nimuendajú placed gifts at places where there were evidences that bands of this great Tupí tribe passed frequently. Shelters covered with zinc were made to protect the beads, clothes, bush knives, axes, and other articles left as presents. After a few days, these objects disappeared and arrows stuck upright into ground were found in their place.

The Indians had accepted the presents, but their reply signified that they did not trust the donor. Nimuendajú, however, repeated his offers and the Parintintin answered by setting up spikes of arrow points in the trail. Later, the Parintintin attacked Nimuendajú and his party, but he had prepared for the attack by constructing a solid hut protected by sheets of zinc to protect his party. The hut was solid and placed at a strategic point with a good view of the immediate area. The Indians shot arrows and shouted but there was no hostile reaction from the hut and after a time they left. During a second similar attack, Nimuendajú called to them in "Lingua geral" of the Amazon<sup>3</sup> offering them axes and bush knives which were shown to the Indians. They did not accept and disappeared. During the third attack, the Indians forced the barbed-wire fence around the house, and Nimuendajú ordered his men to fire in the air. Most of the Indians fled but a few retired only a few paces outside the fence and stood watching the house. Nimuendajú came out of the

<sup>3</sup> A modified form of Tupi-Guaraní.

house speaking to them and, not being attacked, placed a pail of various presents near the fence. The Indians took up the presents and moved on.

Then Indians on the other side of the river (Rio Maici-mirim) began to shout, asking for presents. Nimuendajú gave orders to float a basin filled with presents across the river. Two Indians plunged into the river to get the presents while a third shot arrows at the basin, attempting to sink it. Then Nimuendajú floated another basin with presents across the river and the Indians entered the river to get them, and when he offered a third, one Indian came across the river to get it and returned to his companion. In this manner, little by little they became accustomed to Nimuendajú and his party, and he soon learned that he could make himself better understood in Southern Guaraní which was closer to their dialect of Tupi than "lingua geral." Finally one Parintintin showed by gestures that his stomach was empty and that he was hungry, and the party brought out cassava flour, first eating some of it themselves and then offering it to the Indian. The Indian approached, and Nimuendajú placed the cassava flour directly into his hands—closing, in a sense, the first chapter in the pacification of the Parintintin.

The chapters which followed, however, were less satisfactory; it is true there were no more bloody battles between the Parintintin and their Brazilian neighbors, but the new contacts with the so-called "civilized" brought disorganization to Parintintin culture through new diseases and new influences. Only a few years later Nimuendajú deplored his own heroic undertaking and began to believe that those Indians who retain their freedom by war and intransigent enmity toward the usurpers of their land are the happier for it. This belief, however, did not hinder him from making plans for the pacification of other tribes when the expansion of the whites seemed irresistible and inevitable. Even in his last letter which he wrote to me on December 6th of 1945, just a few days before his death, he referred to a plan for the pacification of the Patakanã who appear now and again along the Tocantins Railroad (lower Rio Tocantins).

To the last, he was dominated by a passionate sentiment in favor of such victims of our so-called "progress" and against the barbarities committed in the name of "progress." During his entire life, such ideals and strong belief brought him sad moments but they also gave him a profound happiness and the strength which made him perhaps the greatest Indianista of all time.

*Explorations of Curt Nimuendajú*

1905-08	West of S. Paulo	Guaraní, Kaingang.
1909	West of S. Paulo, South of Matto-Grosso (Museu Paulista)	Guaraní, Kaingang, Opayé, Oti, Tereno.
1910	West of S. Paulo (Serviço de Proteção aos Índios)	Guaraní, Kaingang.
1911	West and coast of S. Paulo (S.P.I.)	Guaraní, Kaingang.
1912	West and coast of S. Paulo (S.P.I.)	Guaraní, Kaingang, Kaiguá.
1912	Tibagi, Ivaí (S.P.I.)	Kaingang.
1913	South of Matto-Grosso (S.P.I.)	Opayé, Guaraní, Kaiguá.

1914-15	Gurupí (S.P.I.)	Tembé, Timbira, Urubú.
1915	Parú, Jarí, Maracá	Apará.
1915-16	Mission S. Antonio do Prata	Tembé.
1916-19	Xingú, Iriř, Curuá	Yuruna, Šipaya, Arara, Kayapó.
1920	Litoral of Pará	
1921	Oyapock	
1921-23	Madeira (S.P.I.)	Parintintin, Mura, Pirahá, Tora.
1922	Marajó (Göteborgs Museum)	Matanawí.
1923	Tapajoz, Mariacuá (Göteborgs Museum)	Excavations.
	Guayana, Marajó, Caviana (Göteborgs Museum)	Maué, excavations.
1924-25	Tapajoz, Trombetas, Jamundá, Caviana (Götb. Mus.)	Excavations.
1925	Oyapock (Götb. Mus.)	Palikur, Indians of the Uaçá, excavations.
1926	Affluents of Amazonas, Madeiras, Autaz (Götb. Mus.)	Mura, Mundurukú, excavations.
	Tocantins (Götb. Mus.)	Excavations.
1927	Rio Negro, Içana, Uaupés (Götb. Mus.)	Baniwa, Wanana, Tariana, Tukano, Makú, etc.
1928	Rio Tapajoz	Excavations.
1928-29	State of Maranhão, Goiaz (Mus. Hamburg, Dresden, Leipzig)	Apinayé, Canela, Krikati, Krepúmkateyé, Pukobyé, Guajajara.
1929	Solimões	Tukuna.
1930	Tocantins, Maranhão (Mus. Dresden, Leipzig)	Apinayé, Cherente, Krahó, Canela.
1931	Tocantins, Maranhão	Apinayé, Canela.
1932	Tocantins	Apinaye.
	Tapajoz, Manaus	
1933	Maranhão (Carnegie Inst.)	Canela.
1934	Pernambuco (Carnegie Inst.)	Fulnió, Šukurú.
1935	Maranhão (Univ. California)	Canela.
1936	Maranhão (Univ. California)	Gamela, Canela.
1937	Tocantins (Univ. California)	Apinayé, Cherente.
1938-39	Bahia, Minas Gerais, Espřrito Santo (Univ. California)	Patachó, Kamaká, Machakarí, Botocudos
1940	Xingú, Araguaia	Górotire, Kayapó of the Arraias.
1941-42	Solimões (Mus. Paraense)	Tukuna.
1945	Solimões (Mus. Nacional do Rio de Janeiro)	Tukuna.

Where there is no indication between parentheses, expedition was financed by the explorer himself.

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