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## Photo Essay

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# Curt Nimuendajú and the Photographs of the Rio Negro Indians

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The photographs that are the main subject of this article were exhibited during the 28<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Brazilian Anthropologists, in July 2012, in São Paulo. I put this exhibition together in collaboration with my colleagues Selda Vale da Costa and Andreas Valentin and it was entitled *Images of Amazônia* (See the text accompanying the opening night in the Appendix). The exhibition subsequently received the support of the organizers of the SALSA Conference held in Nashville, March 2013. And I have attributed all those contributed to the Carlos Estevão de Oliveira Ethnographic Collection (CECEO) to Curt Nimuendajú. There is nothing, in the documentation of this enormous collection to tell who took this set of 33 photographs of the Rio Negro Indians, for which no negatives exist, that is scattered throughout the collection and has been brought together by me.

As soon as I gained access to the collection of letters from Curt Nimuendajú, which were edited and published by Thekla Hartmann (Nimuendajú 2000), I read with great interest all those relating to his trip to the Rio Negro in 1927. In one of these letters he tells Carlos Estevão that he had taken some photographs during the trip. He remarks that he used his last rolls of film in the village of Urubuquara, on the Uaupés River (Nimuendajú 2000:112). I have always wondered where these photographs were, since there are none in his 1927 report to the SPI, edited and published by Alfred Métraux in 1950 in 1955 in the *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*.

The Carlos Estevão Ethnographic Collection (Athias 2003) is a valuable archive of ethnographic, archeological, photographic and documentary artifacts, estimated to contain more than 3,000 items acquired between 1909 and 1946 when the Pernambuco native, lawyer, poet, and naturalist Carlos Estevão de Oliveira worked in Amazon, holding important positions in the State of Pará, such as public prosecutor in Alenquer, in Belém, and, finally, Director of the Emílio Goëldi Museum of Pará, a post he held until his death in June 1946. This is a collection of various artifacts from 54 indigenous peoples that still play a part in their everyday lives. The permanent exhibitions and the various travelling shows put together by the Pernambuco State Museum show how important this collection is, giving us a glimpse of the wealth, life, traditions, and culture of the indigenous peoples of Brazil.

The photographs in the Carlos Estevão Ethnographic Collection number more than one thousand and arrived at the Pernambuco State Museum together with the collection in 1946. I have been working systematically on these photographs since 2003, when we decided to place them in a more appropriate location and provide guidance for anthropological studies of them. “To our surprise”, notes Karla Melanias (2006), “since we had practically no information on this photographic archive and, in particular, because, as yet, we know of no bibliographical source specifically relating to this

collection, we found a substantial number of photos on the shelves of the Museum library. Immediately apparent is the wealth of information on visual ethnography contained in these images of the wide diversity of indigenous cultures that has only been visible in fragments until now” (Melanias 2006:20).

Karla Melanias provides a detailed account in her Master’s Dissertation of how we found these photographs and gives us an idea of the general state of the collection in 2005. She notes that the archive had not yet been put into digital format and that the physical condition of the photographs made it impossible to handle them and perform a more detailed study. Another relevant issue is the aforementioned lack of basic information on this photographic archive. The photographs are in sepia and of various shapes and sizes and can be found in two albums and notebooks kept on the shelves of the library and in the Museum archive. The researcher notes that the state of conservation of these photographs is “precarious and they are in various stages of deterioration, at imminent risk of being completely lost” (Melanias 2006:11). Many of the photographs are in this condition today.

The collection contains various photographs taken by Curt Nimuendajú, from various periods in his career as a scholar of indigenous culture. The most impressive are those that he took of the Parintintin. For example, the photograph reproduced below of the landmark can clearly be seen to be in a state of disrepair.



**(caption written by Nimuendajú on the back of the photograph)**

We can clearly see Curt Nimuendajú’s hand-written remarks on the back of the photographs. These tell us much more than the location. A large number of photographs contain annotations by Nimuendajú himself. This is not the case with the photos of Rio Negro Indians found in various albums that have no annotations. Those which do were written by another hand. In the photo reproduced below, the caption is in fact written by the photographer himself, since Nimuendajú had a particular way of annotating his photographs.



Bruê, chefe dos Xerente (1), perante a  
aldeia reunida, transmittindo a mim (2)  
os objectos magicos (dentro da caixinha  
na minha mão direita), a cantiga e a pin-  
tura que elle ha annos recebeu do planeta  
Jupiter e que possuem a força de impedir  
que uma eclipse solar se prolonga infini-  
tamente.  
A camera foi collocada por mim e dispara-  
da por um menino indio.  
Aldeia da Providencia, 30. V. 1937.  
*Curt Nimuendajú.*

Front and back of Nimuendajú photograph of the Xerente, 1937

In 2008 I commenced a research project, with the indispensable support of Margot Monteiro, director of the Museum, funded by the Pernambuco Research Support Foundation (FACEPE), whose aim was to work on the conservation, cataloguing, and dissemination of the collection as a whole. From that time on, the collection began to be digitalized, and now most of it is available for researchers. Some scholarly work has been done on the collection by the Social Sciences and Museum Studies Departments, as well as the Post-Graduate Program in Anthropology at the Federal University of Pernambuco. On 11 November 2009, the online version of the photographic archive was launched at FACEPE head office, by Professor Diogo Ardaillon Simões and Professor Alfredo Arnóbio de Souza Gama, President and Scientific Director of FACEPE, respectively. The documents are still not available in their entirety online and when they are, broader research can be conducted.

Different from other 19th and 20th century photographic archives of indigenous peoples, this set of photos steers well clear of exoticism, as is noted by Stephen Nugent (2007), Fernando de Tacca (2011), and Marc Piatl (2002), who studied the photographic archive of the Rondon Commission. The set of photographs in question appears to have been put together by Carlos Estevão in person as a private undertaking. Many of these photographs show objects in the foreground. There is another set of photographs in this collection, also by Nimuendajú, of the Kaiapó/Gorotire and the Ramkokamekrá people<sup>1</sup>, which shows, for example, a kind of step-by-step guide to the use of head-dresses and other objects of general use. As with the 33 photographs of the Rio Negro Indians found in this archive, the everyday life of the indigenous peoples is registered for ethnographic reasons, showing their culture. There are also some photographs showing only objects, which reveal how they were used. This photo set contains two photographs of domestic objects, shown in the foreground, inside a kitchen at the back of a hut. These photographs appear to have been used along with the ethnographic archive to answer practical questions regarding how these objects were used by the indigenous peoples. They therefore reveal real life rather than exoticism. This shows Nimuendajú's overriding concern to record the real lives of these peoples.

In conversations with Gertrudes Gomes Lins, Icléia Braga Mascarenhas, and Mariza Varella, of the MEPE archives, who worked with Lígia Estevão de Oliveira, who was curator the collection for many years, we learned that she used these photographs a lot to accompany exhibitions of objects from the Museum she staged during the years she was working at the Pernambuco State Museum.

Between 1920 and 1946, when Carlos Estevão was director of the Emílio Goëldi Museum of Pará, he had the chance to meet with the various researchers and ethnologists passing through. During this time, he had a special relationship<sup>2</sup> with Curt Nimuendajú, the researcher and ethnologist from the Indian Protection Service (SPI), whom he listened to and whose main ethnographic reports he read. He also had the pioneering idea of mapping the languages of the indigenous peoples of Brazil, the original version of which, using Canson paper, China ink, and watercolors, numbers among the objects found in the MEPE Ethnographic Collection. It is based on the famous ethnolinguistic map produced by Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius in 1867<sup>3</sup>. This ethnolinguistic map is still the gold standard for all scholars of indigenous peoples in Brazil (IBGE 1981). Carlos Estevão certainly, in my opinion, was for many years a part of the “restlessness” Michael Kraus aptly describes in his homage to Curt Nimuendajú, published in the Goethe Institute’s Humboldt Review (Kraus 2009). It is interesting to note that John Hemming found Curt Nimuendajú to be a somewhat sensitive individual and he could thus detect in his writings a certain “rage” at the difficult conditions in which indigenous peoples lived. I personally agree with John Hemming, when I read, for example, Nimuendajú writing about his trip up a stretch of the Uaupés River, in 1927, (Hemming 2003:174), in which he is disgusted by the final Jurupari festival staged by the Tariana de Urubuquara, which Darcy Ribeiro, reproduces in full in “The Indians and Civilization”.

I saw these photographs for the first time in 2003, scattered throughout various albums in the Carlos Estevão Ethnographic Collection, without making the connections I do today. And in 2006, while supervising Karla Melanias’s dissertation, I got the chance to look at them again, and then began to make the first associations with Curt Nimuendajú’s 1927 trip to the indigenous parts of the Rio Negro, and, in particular, to make them form a more geographically plausible whole, since I had done a trip in 1996 following the same itinerary as Nimuendajú in 1927 (Nimuendajú 1950). It was not difficult for me, since I am very familiar with the whole Upper Rio Negro region, to put these photos in a single album, as they can be found today, as I had a good idea of where they were taken and information about the people in the photos in captions (sometimes written in pencil) on the back. The handwriting suggests that it was not Curt Nimuendajú who wrote these captions. I imagine that he dictated them to Lígia Estevão, daughter of Carlos Estevão, who was his student on the Goëldi Museum Ethnology Course, and who dedicated practically her whole life to looking after this archive to preserve her father’s memory. By bringing all these photographs together and establishing the locations where they were taken, we can agree that they were produced by Curt Nimuendajú during his famous 1927 trip, as reported in “Reconnoitering the Rivers Içana, Ayari and Uaupés.” In recent years, I have been trying to understand these photographs, and, in particular, to find out who really took the 33 photographs of Rio Negro Indians in the Pernambuco State Museum archive.

This photographic archive, as we have noted on other occasions (Athias 2003), is not accompanied by negatives, and, as I mentioned above, is in a poor state of repair. It portrays important situations, people, places, and monuments in the indigenous mythology of the Rio Negro peoples. As João M. Braga de Mendonça puts it (2009), Nimuendajú used the photographs as an *aide-memoire* when writing about his work. This is why I am so convinced that these photographs were taken by Nimuendajú, since, when we read “Reconnoitering the Rivers Içana, Ayari and Uaupés”, we find details from these photographs, as if the text were a commentary on them. We also find out why

Nimuendajú took these photographs and others, whose whereabouts are as yet unknown.

“Reconnoitering the Rivers Içana, Ayari and Uaupés” was first published in the form of an article by Alfred Métraux, in the *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, in 1950, Volume 39, pages 125-182, and a second time, in 1982, in a collection entitled: “Curt Nimuendajú – Indigenous Studies,” edited by Carlos Moreira Neto and Paulo Suess for Edições Loyola. There are a number of minor discrepancies between the two publications, which will be addressed in another article. This text was in fact a report by Curt Nimuendajú to the Indian Protection Service (SPI) of Amazonas and Acre. The second part was published in 1955<sup>4</sup> under the title “Reconnoitering the Rivers Icána, Ayari, and Uaupés, March-July 1927. Linguistic Notes,” and also in the *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, Volume 44, pages 149-178. It provides a body of ethnographic and linguistic information gathered during the famed 1927 journey. It would be interesting to examine how these two texts ended up in the archives of the Indian Museum, which received the archive of the old SPI. Another section of these linguistic notes were published in 1932 in the Tucuman Ethnographical Review.

More photographic records of the Rio Negro Indians, from the same period, can be found in Bento de Lemos’s 1931 report, for the 1st SPI Inspection in Manaus, which I saw when I was editor of the *Jornal Porantim*, in Manaus in 1979. Some of the photos published in this report may, I think, be attributed to Nimuendajú, but Bento de Lemos must have received them from Nimuendajú himself, when he put him up, in Manaus, during the journey to and from São Gabriel. I believe that the photos in the Bento de Lemos Report were not taken by Curt Nimuendajú, but by Philip Von Luetzelburg, since the Report contains photos taken on the Rivers Papuri and Tiquié, which Nimuendajú never visited.

Our colleague Joaquim Melo, who wrote an important Master’s dissertation (2007) on the work of the SPI at this time, was kind enough to send me a copy of the Bento de Lemos Report. As the text of this report is a photocopy of a microfilm and the photographs are not identified in the report, it is very difficult to say who took them. Many people clearly travelled through the region, especially after the publication of Theodor Koch-Grünberg’s path-breaking book (1906) that detailed the ethnography of the region and was translated into Portuguese one hundred years later.<sup>5</sup> In this case, the most interesting point is that Curt Nimuendajú not only travelled the same route as Koch-Grünberg, but also followed the same logistics outlined in his book of 1906. Here we also find out that he corresponded with Koch-Grünberg, since in “Letters from the Sertão” (2000)<sup>6</sup> Nimuendajú clearly mentions the support he received from Germano Garrido de São Filipe from the Rio Negro as his main collaborator on this trip (2000:108), as did Koch-Grünberg. Michael Kraus (2009) stresses the deep friendship between the two men, citing a passage from a letter from Koch-Grünberg to Nimuendajú: “What we had in common had already been outlined by Koch-Grünberg signing off a letter of 1915: “Take care and write soon. Your highly informative letters always bring me great joy, not the least because we share such affection for these poor colored people!””

Between 2011 and 2012, I engaged in various conversations and exchanges of e-mails with researchers regarding this set of photos, in an attempt to identify the photographer behind this rich photographic and ethnographic record in the Carlos Estevão Collection, which is one of the most important in the Pernambuco State Museum.

Denise Portugal Lasmar (2000) was an important researcher at the Indian Museum and possessed an enormous wealth of knowledge regarding the Rondon Commission photographic archive. She suggested that I compare the photographs found in the Pernambuco State Museum with those from the photographic album in the archive of the Indian Museum, containing photos from this same period taken by Philip Von

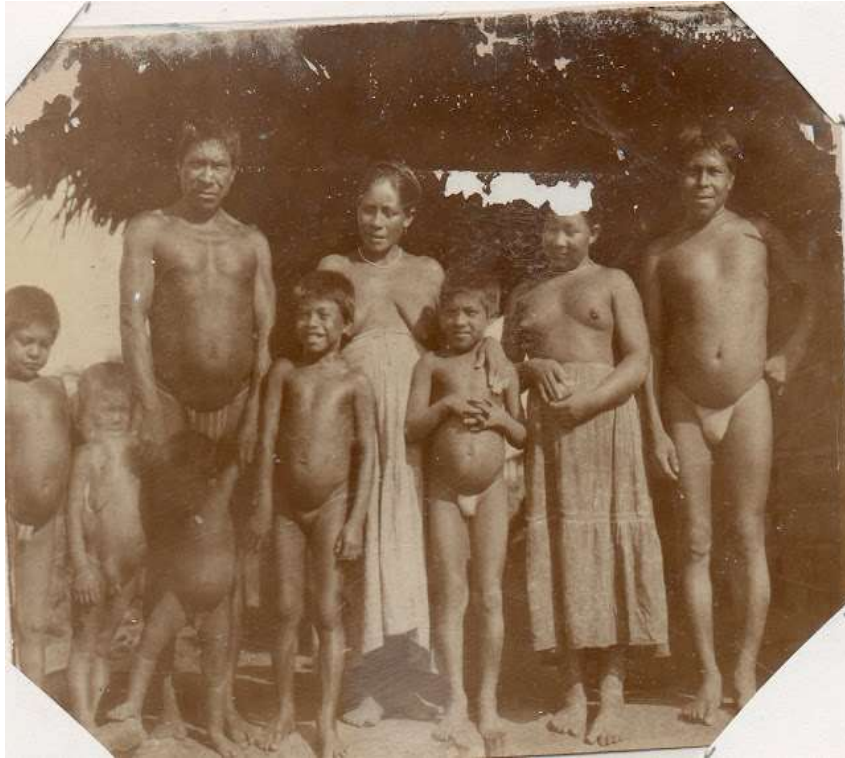
Luetzelburg. This proved an extremely interesting comparison. In fact, the photos in this album are from 1928, one year after Curt Nimuendajú's journey. And Luetzelburg did follow the same course along the Rio Negro as Koch-Grunberg and Curt Nimuendajú, and may have had the same logistical support as Germano Garrido de São Filipe, as did Koch-Grünberg and Curt Nimuendajú himself. This must have been the source of the canoes and indigenous oarsmen for the trip to the Rivers Içana and Aiari. Luetzelburg's photographs include two of Maloca de Pari Cachoeira and images of Papuri, locations that Nimuendajú does not mention in his report, which I find strange, given the route taken. This means that Luetzelburg must have stayed much longer in the region than Nimuendajú, to have been able to travel along the Rivers Papuri and Tiquié.

Recently, during the 54th International Congress of Americanists, in Vienna, I met Prof. Ernst Halbmayer from the University of Marburg, and in the course of a conversation about these photographs, he suggested I follow up sources in Berlin. Shortly thereafter I contacted Prof. Michael Kraus of the Berlin Museum of Ethnology. He told me that there is an article, published by Luetzelburg in 1941, entitled "Amazonien als organischer Lebensraum" [Amazônia as an Organic Habitat], that provides details of his trip up the Rio Negro in 1928. The appendix contains six photographs taken by Luetzelburg himself, one of them showing the Maloca Tukano of Pari Cachoeira on the River Tiquié. The photographs were kindly provided by Prof. Kraus. He had no knowledge of the photographs I had found in the MEPE archive. When I told him about them, he agreed with my observations. And, according to his knowledge of other photos, he also believes that those from the Carlos Estevão Ethnographic Collection can be attributed to Curt Nimuendajú. I am almost certain of this, since, as noted above, the places cited in Curt Nimuendajú's 1927 report, are also mentioned in annotations made in pencil on the CECEO photos.

When I investigated, at the suggestion of Denise Portugal, I found a set of 45 photographs by Luetzelburg in the Indian Museum Archive, in Rio de Janeiro, in a photo album entitled *Im Stromgebiet des Rio Negro* [In the Rio Negro Basin]. After my recent first viewing of this material, I can say that the photographs do not correspond to one another, although some of the places mentioned that were visited by Nimuendajú in 1927 do, with the exception of Pari-Cachoeira and the photographs of the River Papuri, as stated above. In this set of photos, there is one of Tuxaua Mandu, who would seem to be the same individual who appears in the Permabuco State Museum's CECEO archive, with a caption saying, "Tuxaua Mandú, Waliperi-Dakenay, Maloca Cururu, in Ayari," which is a different caption from the one in Von Luetzelburg's album. I am certain that it is the same person, although it is apparently not the same photograph. See below some photos from the CECEO and that were included in the exhibition that opened the 28th RBA, in July 2012 in São Paulo that will be on show in São Gabriel da Cachoeira in October. There are six photographs kept in the Pernambuco State Museum. They have written captions and their current state of repair is evident. Our project, funded by the Pernambuco State Foundation for the Support of Science and Technology (FACEPE), is enabling some of these photos to be put in digital format, and to be enhanced, thus recovering the general context.



See the set of photos below showing the state of repair before being digitally enhanced:



**Rio Uaupés Tariana Indians Yauareté Maloca**



**Walipere-dakenai Indians, the old Tuxaua (chief) and family**





**River Içana. Mapanaí people. Yandu hut**

Curt Nimuendajú, in one of the letters to Carlos Estevão carefully selected by Thekla Hartmann in *Letters from the Sertão*, clearly informs us that he had made the trip in 1927, when reconnoitering the Rivers Içana, Ayari, and Uaupés, with a camera. I thus believe that these unpublished photographs found in the Carlos Estevão de Oliveira Ethnographic Collection archive were in fact taken by Curt Nimuendajú, since he writes in this letter that he used his last rolls of film at a Jurupari festival among the Urubuquara Tariana. He refers to this occasion as follows:

I used my last rolls of film with these supremely beautiful sturdily naked people, in the full splendor of their savage regalia. There were more than 120 Indians, and I never tired of watching the whole night dancing in the fire clearing around the sturdy supports of the enormous communal hut and almost wept with frustration and impotent rage when I remembered that this festival might in fact be the last. Because I was leaving and João Padre was staying behind (Nimuendajú 2000:112).

Where are these photos of the Urubuquara festival? This is a good question. Was it because Curt Nimuendajú was being extremely respectful of Indian culture and did not make these photos public because they showed the Jurupari flutes that women are not allowed to see? But the question remains. Where are the negatives?

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This set of photographs depicts the Kokrit festival, which was described in detail by Nimuendajú (1936) and most of them have never been published (Amorim 2013).

<sup>2</sup>On this relationship see an important publication entitled: “Letters from the Sertão” edited by Thekla. Hartmann containing Curt Nimuendajú’s letters to Carlos Estevão between 1920 and 1944.

<sup>3</sup>*Beiträge zur Ethnographie und Sprachenkunde Amerikas zumal Brasiliens [Contributions to the Ethnography and Linguistics of the Americas, with particular emphasis on Brazil]* (1867), is the classic work by Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794-1868), which is an important source of information about many languages of the indigenous peoples in Brazil.

<sup>4</sup>In this edition, Nimuendajú refers to another part of the same report published in the *Revista del Instituto de Etnologia de Tucumán*, Vol. II, 1932, pp. 590-618.

<sup>5</sup>Koch-Grünberg died tragically young in Brazil in 1924, after contracting malaria. He was at the exact point in the Amazon Region, exploring the Rio Branco (a tributary of the Rio Negro) with the physician, geographer and explorer Alexander H. Rice Jr, and the Portuguese national, living in Manaus, Silvino Santos. This expedition was recorded by Silvino himself in a film entitled “The way to Eldorado”. On this film, see Selda Vale da Costa (1987).

<sup>6</sup>On Letters from the Sertão see Amoroso, Marta Rosa 2001 Nimuendajú às voltas com a história. *Revista de Antropologia*, vol.44, n.2, USP São Paulo pp. 173-188.

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## Appendix

### Text accompanying the opening of 28th RBA São Paulo 2 - 5 July 2012:

#### Images of Amazônia

Andreas Valentin, Renato Athias, and Selda Vale da Costa

*Images of Amazônia* brings together three sets of photographs specially selected for this 28th Meeting of Brazilian Anthropologists. The first was selected by Selda Vale da Costa, of the Silvino Simões Santos Silva archive (Cernache do Bonjardim, 1886 — Manaus, 14 May 1970). Silvino was a Portuguese-Brazilian photographer and film-maker who settled in Manaus and, in collaboration with Agesilau Araújo (son of Commander J.G. Araújo), produced the classic black-and-white documentary on Amazônia entitled *No Paiz das Amazonas* [In the Land of the Amazons] (Brazil, 1921). Silvino Santos shows the exploitation of rubber in “Paiz das Amazonas”. Another set of photographs was selected by Andreas Valentin from those taken by George Huebner (Dresden, 1862 - Manaus, 1935). The German photographer Huebner settled in Manaus in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His work shows the technical and representational possibilities of photography in/about Amazônia. Drawing on botany and the emerging German science of ethnology, Huebner also pointed his camera at the indigenous peoples of Amazônia, photographing them in the field, and in his studio, “German Photography”, in downtown Manaus during the rubber boom. And the third set of photographs was put together by Renato Athias, from the Carlos Estevão de Oliveira Ethnographic Collection at the Pernambuco State Museum. These photographs have been attributed to Curt Nimuendajú and all of them portray the indigenous people of the Rio Negro in 1927.

All three photographs share relations with scientists and with Brazilian and European research institutions, in particular a friendship and working relationship with the naturalist Theodor Koch-Grünberg who gave Huebner, Curt Nimuendajú and Silvino Santos access to an international audience. In the countless letters Huebner sent to Koch-Grünberg, he sometimes mentions Nimuendajú (“...an excellent ethnographer”) and Silvino Santos (“the photographs of the Huitotos Indians on the River Putumayo ... were taken by a young man named Santos”). In the correspondence between Curt Nimuendajú and Carlos Estevão, published in “Letters from the Sertão” (edited by Thekla Hartmann), Nimuendajú refers to his travels among the indigenous peoples of the Rio Negro.