

## KARL VON DEN STEINEN'S ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BRAZILIAN EMPIRE



I  
Karl von den Steinen

## INTRODUCTION

The Swedish ethnologist Erland Nordenskiöld (1877-1932) described his friend and professional colleague Karl von den Steinen (1855-1929) as the “doyen of ethnographic explorers of South America” in an obituary published in the *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* (Nordenskiöld, 1930: 221).<sup>1</sup> Von den Steinen undertook the first two exploratory trips to the Xingu River basin (in the Brazilian Amazon), formerly considered *terra incognita*: the first in 1884, the second between 1887 and 1888. In addition to this “extremely remarkable journey from a geographical point of view,” Karl von den Steinen, Nordenskiöld proceeded, was able to “discover a region of America, where the Indians had not yet absolutely suffered the influence of the civilization of the white men, and he was able to take full advantage of this discovery from a scientific point of view.” In short, “for his profound studies of the civilization of the Xingu tribes, Karl von den Steinen’s travels have been extraordinarily useful to exploration. If one flicks through any book on ethnography, history, religion, psychology or the history of cultivated plants, one always finds his name and often a few lines of this genius who inspired whole treatises about the other” (Nordenskiöld, 1930: 222).

In fact, the importance of Karl von den Steinen is not limited by disciplinary boundaries. The analysis of the language contained in his work *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* [Among the Aborigines of Central Brazil], published in 1894 and concerning his second exploratory trip, were widely quoted by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, both in *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923-1929) and in *An Essay on Man* (1944). In addition, through its realistic insights on indigenous mentalities and cultures (in contrast to the romantic idea of the noble savage), and his explicitly favourable statements on the ways of life of the Indians, Karl von den Steinen can be considered the first anthropologist to advocate for the Native American cause, inspiring a whole generation (Hemming, 2003: 176).

The scientific importance of von den Steinen’s work is relatively well documented and analysed, but there is one aspect of his ethnological activity that has remained almost completely ignored: the funding of his travels. Although the funding of his first expedition came from Berlin and private sources, the Brazilian Imperial government provided aid for both his first and second expeditions, contributing military staff and material assistance (Thieme, 1993: 49), as well as providing permission to carry out research in the country. This had a political impact, because the Brazilian Empire had special interests in the researches, although these interests were at times in conflict with each other.

The main goal of this article is to situate the research of Karl von den Steinen within a specific cultural and political context: on the one hand, his work was related to German ethnology and anthropology, two expanding fields that were being developed in Germany and elsewhere; on the other, the expe-

ditions took place in the context of the Indigenous policies of the Brazilian Empire in general and of the Emperor Dom Pedro II in particular. This aim will be addressed by analysing his two monographs (*Durch Central-Brasilien*, published in 1886 and *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens*), the reports he submitted to the Geographical Society of Rio de Janeiro (1887, 1888) and official documents of the Brazilian Empire, namely the provincial presidential reports. Analysing these sources and linking them to the academic and political context of the time, this article contributes to a historical analysis of the political conditions of epistemology, and particularly of ethnography.

### **THE BRAZILIAN EMPIRE AND ITS INTELLECTUAL EMPEROR**

Brazil was a Portuguese colony when the royal family settled there in 1808 to escape the Napoleonic wars, thereby transferring the metropolitan capital from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro. The transfer of the royal family and its institutional apparatus resulted not only in a significant change in the relation between colony and metropolis, but also in infrastructural changes to the Brazilian territory, such as the creation of the Bank of Brazil (1808), the Royal Library (1810), the Royal Museum (1818) and the National Museum (1808). In 1818, King João VI, Prince Regent of Portugal and Brazil, unified both crowns, creating the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves. Three years later, João VI returned to Lisbon in response to the liberal revolution that broke out in Portugal, leaving his son, Dom Pedro de Alcântara de Bragança, as Prince Regent of Brazil. In 1822, Dom Pedro proclaimed Brazil's independence from Portugal and became the first monarch of the Empire of Brazil. Due to an internal political crisis in Brazil and the death of his father João VI in Portugal, Dom Pedro I of Brazil returned to Lisbon in 1831, abdicating the Empire of Brazil. The Crown passed to his five-year-old son, Dom Pedro II. The reign of Dom Pedro II lasted from 1840, when he was just 14 years old, until 1889, when republicanism was instated through a *coup d'état*.

According to Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (1998: 125ss), Emperor Dom Pedro II began to intervene directly in the intellectual life of the country by creating cultural and research centres in order to foment a national identity and a local high culture. Of particular note is the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute (Insituto Histórico e Geográfico do Brasil, IHGB), which brought together the intellectual elite of the country and coordinated the development of literature and the humanities in Brazil. The Emperor was himself a regular visitor of the meetings, encouraging national research as well as being a patron of the Brazilian arts. Thus, from the late 1840s, Dom Pedro II embarked a project to strengthen the national monarchy. Like European monarchs, he created a Brazilian identity that was directly linked to his own cultural and political project. He forged an image of an intellectual Emperor: he spoke several languages, was well versed in many scientific disciplines – from botany to ethnography – financed

high culture and was internationally recognized as a pacifist monarch and a symbol of civility in the tropics. He became a member of the Institut Historique de Paris in 1844 and over the years joined other important institutions such as the Royal Society, the Russian Academy of Sciences, the American Geographical Society, etc. Dom Pedro II was not only a member of foreign institutions; he also encouraged research by foreign scientists in Brazil, such as the Canadian geologist Charles Frederick Hartt or the French physicist Louis Couty. He corresponded with some of the most influential men of his time, such as Charles Darwin, Graham Bell and Louis Pasteur; he met Victor Hugo and Friedrich Nietzsche, and in the context of sponsoring researches in Brazil also developed relations with German-speaking intellectuals. In 1875, for example, he became an honorary member of the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory (Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte) (Kraus, 2004: 134), supported the research of the Swiss geologist Louis Agassiz and was personally interested in the National Museum (Schwarcz, 1998: 155), which hired the German naturalist Hermann von Ihering in 1883 (Lopes, 2009: 165) and the Swiss naturalist Emílio Goeldi in 1884.

Nationalist Romanticism aimed to bring Dom Pedro II closer to European monarchs by linking him to the Old World tradition. At the same time, it sought to shape a particular figure through the establishment of a national symbolism. While European kings relied on centuries of history, the monarchy of a young country such as Brazil relied on nature to confer upon it an aura of magnificence. Therefore, the national literature intended to break with previous models and create a genuinely Brazilian genre, relying on epic novels the protagonists of which were Brazilian Amerindians in tales of battles and forbidden loves. This “noble savage” became a national symbol associated to the bravery, loyalty and heroic deeds of the Indians of Brazil before the arrival of the Portuguese invaders. Through this imagery, a distant national history was created, one in which even the primordial inhabitants of Brazil surrendered peacefully to the wise monarch and a national aesthetic, and in which autochthonous nature and culture celebrated the difference of their monarch to European kings. This artistic movement, the first stage of Brazilian Romanticism, is called “Indianism” (*indianismo*), and spanned literature, painting and the opera. Dom Pedro’s political and cultural project met the expectations of the urban middle class and their pursuit of a national identity, consolidating his image as “the Magnanimous.”

While this romantic image of the Amerindians served as a discursive pretext to consolidate the Brazilian monarchy, the Indigenous peoples who inhabited Brazil in the nineteenth century suffered from concrete policies aimed at the expropriation of their lands and their cultural and physical destruction. In the words of anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (1992d: 135), “Indianism does not speak of real Indians: it is rather an origin myth of an independent Brazil”. The good Indian “is conveniently a dead Indian”.

### INDIAN POLICY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The imperial Indian policy of nineteenth-century Brazil differed from the colonial Indian policy because it focused not only on the acquisition of indigenous labour, but also on the appropriation of their lands. However, there was not a single action from the central government aimed at removing Amerindians from their lands. Throughout the nineteenth century, a decentralized ideological and legal movement gradually endeavoured to defend the interests of the imperial agrarian elites. This means that there were several ideological oscillations in the treatment of the Indigenous peoples, from the defence of an offensive war against the Indians, as proposed by King João VI at the beginning of the nineteenth century, to the use of the “soft and persuasive” means favoured by minister Jose Bonifacio in the first half of the century (Carneiro da Cunha, 1992c: 7). Specific legislation was only published in 1845, the “Regulation about the catechetical mission and civilization of the Indians.” It is the only imperial document intended to provide guidelines for the treatment of Indigenous peoples, and seeks to establish means for assimilating the Indians through Christian catechism (Carneiro da Cunha, 1992c: 11).

During the imperial period, Brazil was divided into administrative subdivisions called provinces (*províncias*). Many of the provincial laws conflicted with imperial laws, because the presidents of the provinces had a certain freedom to enact orders and provincial assemblies legislated according to regional interests (Carneiro da Cunha, 1992c: 2). This created not only a legal vacuum, but also an area of negotiation in which the various sectors of society expressed direct interest in the acquisition of Indigenous lands. This means that not only were legal decisions taken to remove the Indians from their lands – which was in itself a legal affront to the Indians’ rights, since the Brazilian State regarded them as the rightful owners of the land (Carneiro da Cunha, 1992c: 15) – but also that laws defending the rights of Indigenous peoples were outright ignored.

The anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (1992d: 146) summarizes the imperial indigenous politics of the nineteenth century in the following way:

When apprehended in a diachronic perspective, the process of dispossession becomes transparent: first, the so-called “savage hordes” are gathered in settlements, freeing up vast areas over which property titles were uncontested in exchange for limited village land; at the same time, the establishment of strangers in the neighbourhood of these villages is encouraged; inalienable lands are granted to the settled Indian, but patches within it are excepted for the livelihood of these newcomers; villages are transferred and different groups are concentrated. Villages are then extinguished on the pretext that the Indians find themselves “mixed up with the mass of the population;” the legal device that grants Indians property over the extinct villages is ignored and only plots of lands within the villages are provided for them. The remaining areas are devolved to the Empire and then to the provinces, which pass them on to counties to be sold

through the law of emphyteusis to former tenants or to be used for the creation of new population centres. Each step is a small swindle, but the net result of these miserly measures is full expropriation.

She also states that “on the ever expanding borders of the Empire, appropriate and passable spaces need to be enlarged. From the mid-century, the oldest settlement areas are required to restrict access to land and to convert to wage labour an independent population – freed slaves, Indians, blacks and poor whites – which insisted in living on the margins of large properties which are chronically in want of labour” (Carneiro da Cunha, 1992c: 15). In short, interest in land cannot be disentangled from the need to know the country and its inhabitants, especially in areas for which there was little or no geographical or ethnographic knowledge. And this applies precisely to the case of the Xingu basin, located in a province called Mato Grosso, which was explored by Karl von den Steinen.

Provincial presidents reported to the members of the Legislative Assembly through speeches, messages, reports or presentations. Three years before the arrival of Von den Steinen in Brazil, the president of the Province of Mato Grosso, Gustavo Galvão, claimed in his 1881 report that “the wild [people] repeated their usual forays [assaults] in the months of October and November of last year, February and March of this year.”<sup>2</sup> After the alleged murder of a woman and a child by the Coroado Indians, the president enlisted a “group of 40 soldiers, under the command of a suitable officer to pursue the attackers.”<sup>3</sup> The report goes on to mention other cases of violence committed by the Indians and subsequent military retaliation, including an “aggressive expedition to the longhouses of the so-called savages.”<sup>4</sup> To leave no doubt as to the intention of his actions, the provincial president also wrote in his report:

Some assume that we should give up hope concerning the soft means, put into practice here, through me, for the first time; I, however, have found no justification for a similar view, and intend to continue to employ them alongside forceful measures, certain that one will achieve the desired goal.

The extermination of these unfortunates disgusts me and would disgust any other, when it's possible; I think however that it is necessary to repress them, using persuasive means to call them to civilization, whenever circumstances permit.<sup>5</sup>

Concerning “catechism”, the provincial president elsewhere reports on the progress that Christian indoctrination offers, and exposes the real reason for the presence of missionaries in the province: “I tried in this way call to civilization the numerous and frightful Coroado [Indians], making so many untapped arms useful for farming where before they had been harmful to it, thus compensating for the lack of immigration into this province.”<sup>6</sup> Immediately after the report on catechesis (and the transformation of Amerindians into labourers), the report includes a chapter on “land concessions,” which highlights the progress of previously donated land colonies.

In brief, the national trajectory of the imperial Indian policy highlighted by Carneiro da Cunha (1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1992d) is also valid for the specific case of the Mato Grosso Province. This province, one of the largest provinces of the Brazilian Empire, was located in a border region, inhabited by many “wild Indians” that needed to be civilized (for better or worse). Its little-known geography called for ethnological and cartographic knowledge.

The context in which the pioneering research of Karl von den Steinen was carried out was therefore one of political negotiation and strategic interests. The figure of the Indian converged at the intersection of conflictive ideologies: on the one hand, the Romantic Indian was a national symbol, represented by an Emperor more interested in science and ethnography than politics. This is evidenced by Dom Pedro’s drawings of Botocudo Indians, made during a trip to Northeastern Brazil (Carneiro da Cunha, 1992d: 140), a visit to the ethnographic collections at Berlin in 1877 (Kraus, 2004: 134), his interest in Indigenous languages and his incentive to produce a romantic genre with Indigenous themes. He opposed violence against indigenous peoples, as evident in his 1850 and 1863 notes (Carneiro da Cunha, 1992c: 7), but never did more than affirm his position in defence of Indigenous rights. On the other hand, the “wild” Indians who assaulted farmers and whose lands should be expropriated were represented in the legislative assemblies with strong regional power and local elites involved in the appropriation of Indigenous lands. It was in this context that Karl von den Steinen conducted his pioneering research, adding to this mix his own personal background and his relation to German ethnology.

### **KARL VON DEN STEINEN’S FIRST EXPEDITION TO THE XINGU RIVER**

Inspired by the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), Karl von den Steinen, a physician and psychiatrist from Strasburg and Berlin, left the city of Bremen in September 1878 for a tour around the world to study the treatment of people with psychiatric disorders. The following year, while in Hawaii, he read the name of “Dr. Adolf Bastian” on the guest list of a hotel in Honolulu. Bastian (1826-1905) was a well-known German ethnologist, physician and traveller, as well as a collector and the founding director of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Bastian convinced the young Karl von den Steinen, only 25 years old at the time, of the importance of his ethnological project, thus changing the epistemological orientation of von den Steinen’s trip. Bastian urged him to “join in his project to unveil the total history of humanity in all its many variations” (Penny, 2003: 20).

After his world tour of 1879-81, von den Steinen participated as a physician and zoologist in the first International Polar Year expedition (1882-83), reaching the Island of South Georgia in the southern Atlantic Ocean (von den Steinen, U., 2010: 9). In 1883, the crew returned to Germany, but left von den Steinen and Clauss in La Plata (Argentina) where they met Wilhelm von den Steinen (von den Steinen, 1886: VII). Like his new mentor Bastian, von den Steinen had made a world trip.



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Christmas in the German Polar Commission station on South Georgia Island, 1882; Karl von den Steinen is the third from the left; Otto Clauss is the first on the right<sup>7</sup>

Bastian was the most influential German ethnologist of his time. He transformed the Greek idea of *logos spermatikoi* (thought seeds) into one of his most important concepts: *Elementargedanken* (Bastian, 1893-1894: 171). These “elementary thoughts” are abstract, universal, timeless and cross-cultural mental essences. They are the most elementary thoughts, inherent to the human mind, and hence they are present in all cultures of all ages. His idea of the “psychic unity of humankind” is a theoretical remodelling of Alexander von Humboldt’s idea of “cosmic harmony”. The elementary thoughts develop into “ethnical” ones, the *Völkergedanken*, by two means: through internal cause (but only in a limited form) or through external cause (through historical factors, such as cultural contacts and migrations, or through geographical factors, that is, as a consequence of isolation or natural conditions). According to Bastian, *Elementargedanken* would necessarily become *Völkergedanken* when a certain people are situated in a “geographical province,” i.e., a cultural area in which the social arrangement would facilitate the transformation of thought (Bastian, 1871: 165). *Elementargedanken* and *Völkergedanken* unite the psychic and physical domains of the human species. The task of ethnology should therefore be the study of the *Elementargedanken*. Inspired by Alexander von Humboldt’s total apprehension of the natural world through an inductive method based on empirical investigation, Bastian called for the gathering of all *Elementargedanken* – coming from all peoples and all eras – in a *Gedankenstatistik*, a statistics of thoughts (Köpping, 1983: 84-88).

The *Gedankenstatistik* would provide empirical material for analysis, which was to be carried out through scientific psychology. For Bastian, this discipline, based on the methods of the natural sciences, would promote “the marriage of anthropology and philosophy” (Bastian, 1881: 163). This means that ethnological data (*Völkergedanken*), obtained through empirical and inductive investigation, would be analysed through scientific psychology, which would deduce the *Elementargedanken* in order to answer to philosophical matters, such as the functioning of the human mind or the demonstration of the unity of humankind.

The concept of *Völkergedanken* was inspired by that of *Volksgeist*, developed by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). According to Herder, every people or nation has its own mental characteristics, which are constructed through historical and cultural relations. Bastian thus advocated for the unity of mankind, despite the multiplicity of cultures. In the empirical documentation of cultural differences he saw a way to inductively set up the ideal of humanity, since the elementary thoughts could be accessed through certain cultural aspects.

The process of transforming elementary thoughts into ethnic thoughts occurred when the *Elementargedanken* “of the savage tribe come into contact with external stimuli,” developing “their inherent potential through a growth process in historical forms of cultural development” (Bastian, 1893-1894: 172). The choice of non-European peoples (“savages”) was therefore a methodological consequence: access to elementary thoughts among them was easier – an idea also present in Lévi-Strauss (Köpping, 1983: 149). Moreover, Bastian considered that European civilization had a harmful effect on the societies studied, not only demographically but also in relation to the cultural transformations to which these societies were subjected. Therefore, ethnologists interested in the *Gedankenstatistik* searched for the most isolated peoples possible.

According to Bastian, access to *Elementargedanken* was possible through the interpretation of native languages, mythology and religious symbols, numbers, categories of human understanding (time and space), and material culture (Bastian, 1860: 179-182). In this way, the parameters of South American ethnological research were outlined: to search for isolated people in order to study their languages, mythology and material culture.

Accordingly, von den Steinen’s first expedition was organised along two axes: first, from a geographical point of view, to map the Xingu basin, seeking out river transportation, and to make geographic measurements and draw up maps; second, from an ethnological point of view, to look for unknown Indigenous peoples inhabiting the basin and, additionally, to collect material culture for the Berlin Museum (von den Steinen, U., 2010: 10-12)

Von den Steinen’s research in an area previously considered *terra incognita* is an extension of Bastian’s project to South America. Interest in the Xingu

emerged because it was “the largest still unknown river, which promised important information especially in what concerns anthropology” (von den Steinen, 1886: VI). Karl von den Steinen set up a research team consisting of his cousin, the designer Wilhelm von den Steinen (1859-1934), and the physicist and cartographer Otto Clauss (1858-1891).

Part of the original funding for von den Steinen's first exploratory trip to Brazil came from private means and his parents. Upon arriving in Belém do Pará, in northern Brazil, the sum of 1,500 Mark was transferred from the Ethnological Aid Committee (*Ethnologisches Hilfskomitee*) through the German consul Mr. Sesselberg (Kraus, 2004: 116). But before even arriving in Belém, the German ambassador in Buenos Aires (Argentina), Baron Theodor von Holleben, helped them: through the mediation of the chargé d'affaires of the Brazilian diplomatic corps, Mr. Cavalcanti Lacerda, the contact with the Brazilian Ministry of Empire was made. Karl von den Steinen's group did not just receive aid from the Brazilian Ministry of Empire and the diplomatic corps in Amazonas and Rio de Janeiro, but also from the president of Mato Grosso Province himself, the Baron of Batovy (von den Steinen, 1886: VII). During the stay of the expeditionary group in Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso Province, Karl von den Steinen visited the Baron of Batovy several times. In his monograph *Durch Central-Brasilien*, in which the events and results of this expedition are described, the Baron is portrayed flatteringly as a “gentleman” (von den Steinen, 1886: 57), and there is even a drawing of him.

At a meeting on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1884, President Baron of Batovy reported the arrival of the small group of explorers:

With a note from January 28<sup>th</sup> this year, the Ministry of Empire entrusted to me the Xingu River exploratory committee – composed of Doctors K. von den Steinen and Otto Clauss and W. von den Steinen, who were traveling to the province, by determining that I should give them all the information and assistance that this Ministry can dispose of.

The illustrious explorers arrived here in April, and after a stay of nearly two months, they left on May 23<sup>th</sup> in demand of their goal, taking 25 soldiers, which I provided them by order from the Ministry of War, provisions, tools, a small ambulance, in short all they deemed necessary for their travels.<sup>8</sup>

Altogether the imperial government provided von den Steinen with two servants, several strong men, 30 armed soldiers, 24 oxen and several mules, tools and food supply. Baron of Batovy transferred these resources from the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Empire to the explorers. Von den Steinen later wrote that “through his aid our enterprise was infinitely facilitated, or even made possible” (von den Steinen, 1886: 57). The interests of the imperial government were quite evident, as the Baron clarified in the Assembly:

[The explorers] were also accompanied by two officers, the infantry captains Francisco Paula Castro and Antonio Tupy Ferreira Caldas, the former as force

commander, the latter as his substitute and also as the provincial government emissary to gather information about nature, property and land covered, with the obligation to submit in writing the results of his observations.<sup>9</sup>

Among the officers who accompanied von den Steinen's group, one thus had the specific function of carrying out geographical observation. Nevertheless, all of the researches were of great interest to the Empire:

Through the note published in the government gazette, you [the assembly members] are already aware of the traveller's intentions, which is to undertake the discovery of the river mentioned, at present known only in a small extension close to its mouth in the Amazon.

It is an experiment which, if successful, as can be expected from the recent news I received from them by letter, will be of an incalculable benefit to the province and the country in general.

The geography, anthropology and ethnological science [*a geografia, a anthropologia e a sciencia ethnologica*] have the most immediate and sudden interest in this experiment.<sup>10</sup>

The expedition began in Buenos Aires. From there, the group travelled along the Paraná River to the Paraguay River, which took them to Asunción (Paraguay). From Asunción they travelled along the same river to Cuiabá, where they began their journey along the Xingu River to the Amazon River all the way to the Atlantic Ocean (see Figure 3). For about six months, Karl von den Steinen's group explored the Xingu River, mapping, measuring, drawing, contacting local indigenous groups and collecting material culture. However, the group faced logistic, climatic and other difficulties that limited the expected results.

The main results were geographical and linguistic. In a way, the geographical results formed the bridge between the German academics at the turn of the nineteenth century, who considered ethnology and geography as related disciplines, and the Brazilian imperial government, which allowed foreign scientists to map unknown lands with the clear political motivation of seeking future territorial expropriation and control of indigenous populations. The linguistic results deriving from the fieldwork included the classification of the languages of the Indigenous populations that were visited. At the second Bakairi village they visited, Karl von den Steinen met Antonio, a young Bakairi man who was polyglot and accepted to travel with the explorers and work as translator (von den Steinen, 1886: 120).

Karl von den Steinen contacted eighteen Indigenous groups from the Arawak, Jê, Carib and Tupi families, including the Bakairi, the Kustenau, the Suyá, the Manitsuí, the Bororo, the Mehinaku, the Yuruna and the linguistic isolate Trumai, always through the intermediary of the translator Antonio. In addition to establishing the linguistic affiliation of various groups and developing comparative studies of Amerindian languages, von den Steinen made the important discovery that the Bakairi were Carib-speaking and were not a subset of Paresí,

an Arawak-speaking people, as Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius had suggested (von den Steinen, 1886: 101). According to von den Steinen's student Max Schmidt, "von den Steinen must be considered the true founder of the collective name Arawak" (Schmidt, 1917: 9).

Back in Rio de Janeiro, Otto Clauss, Karl von den Steinen and Wilhelm von den Steinen received the title of "explorer" from Dom Pedro II and presented their results, including a map of the Xingu River basin, to the local Geographical Society. In January 1885 they were back in Germany, where the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin bought their ethnographic collection for 4,500 Mark (Kraus, 2004: 116), allowing Karl von den Steinen to complete the funding of his expedition.

The explorers expressed their gratitude by paying homage: a tributary of the Xingu River was named *Rio Batovy* and the book *Durch Central-Brasilien*, the first monograph on indigenous peoples of the South American Lowlands written by an ethnologist, was dedicated to Emperor Dom Pedro II. Although the book followed a chronological sequence, like a diary, including a detailed description of the excursion, it had scientific ambitions, expressed mainly in the linguistic analyses.

Despite the relatively successful trip to the *terra incognita* of the Xingu and its many pioneering features, the book *Durch Central-Brasilien* (1886) received a negative critique from Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), who, along with Adolf Bastian and Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), was one of the most important anthropologists in Germany before the beginning of the twentieth century. To Virchow, the book contained a lack of anthropological and ethnological data (Virchow, 1886). The ethnologist and physical anthropologist Paul Ehrenreich (1855-1914) criticised the lack of anthropological pictures of the newly discovered groups (Hempel, 2015: 209). Karl von den Steinen therefore began to prepare a second expedition to the Xingu, this time focusing on anthropology and ethnography, and specifically on the study of myths and rituals, material culture and languages as well as body measurements. In addition, he intended to acquire another ethnographic collection to sell to the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin (von den Steinen, U., 2010: 29).

In 1886 Karl von den Steinen applied for a post as general secretary of the Geographical Society (*Gesellschaft für Erdkunde*) in Berlin, hoping to raise funds for his second expedition to Brazil (Kraus, 2004: 57). He did not get the job, which worsened his financial situation. Unlike the circumstances of his first expedition, this time he had neither financial support from his parents nor private donors. In a melancholic letter, von den Steinen explained his situation to Wilhelm Reiß, president of the Berlin Geographical Society. He received 7,000 Mark from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (*Alexander-von-Humboldt-Stiftung*), through Emil du Bois-Reymond and Rudolf Virchow, and the Carl Ritter Foundation of the Berlin Geographical Society (*Carl-Ritter-Stiftung der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*). Von den Steinen's budget for his second expedition was thus much tighter than for his first.



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Rio Xingu basin<sup>11</sup>

### SECOND EXPEDITION TO THE XINGU RIVER BASIN

Karl von den Steinen left Berlin in January of 1887 and arrived in Rio de Janeiro at the end of February. His research team now included mathematician Peter Vogel, also his cousin, the designer Wilhelm von den Steinen and Paul Ehrenreich. Ehrenreich went on an expedition to the Botocudos in the Rio Doce basin between 1884 and 1885 (Ehrenreich, 1887), and he would play a very important role in South American ethnology (von den Steinen, 1894: V). Like Bastian and von den Steinen, Paul Ehrenreich also was a physician. It seems that, having enjoyed a broad education in medicine, natural history and sciences, physicians had all of the intellectual requirements to dedicate themselves to ethnography. Ehrenreich was to be responsible for the anthropological measurements and for taking photographs (Hempel, 2015: 212-213).

On the first days of the expedition, von den Steinen and his group met with Brazilian imperial authorities and intellectuals in Rio de Janeiro. In the Imperial City of Petrópolis, von den Steinen (1894: 2) was received by the Emperor himself in his palace:

The train held on the landing stage. There stood also the Emperor with the Marquis of Paranagua, the president of the Geographical Society, and waved us nearer when we intended to walk past. He commanded us to the palace at noon. We reported on time and the best of all Brazilians appeared on time as well. He kindly thanked me for the dedication of the book about the first Xingu expedition, inquired in his lively penetrating manner about the new plans, and dismissed us with the best wishes, the realization of which the authorities should be instructed to support.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, von den Steinen also met the Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Prado, the Senator Taunay and the German Ambassador, count Dönhoff (von den Steinen, 1894: 2). Dom Pedro II and several “commercial companies followed the expedition planning with great kindness and donated supplies in abundance” (von den Steinen, U., 2010: 32). From Rio de Janeiro, Karl von den Steinen travelled to southern Brazil to study *sambaquis* (shell middens) and visit German colonies (von den Steinen, 1894: 3-5). It is meaningful that at the end of the Imperial era and the end of the slavery, when the Brazilian government was recruiting European labour, a German scientist had visited German colonies. Herrmann Meyer, who was in charge of developing von den Steinen's research and undertook two expeditions to the Xingu basin, in 1884 and 1887, even founded a colony in southern Brazil: Neu-Württemberg.<sup>13</sup>

Von den Steinen's explorations attracted such an interest from the Brazilian imperial government that he was invited to proffer speeches at the head office of the Geographical Society in Rio de Janeiro. The first in February 1887, before starting the fieldwork (von den Steinen, 1894: 3), the second in July 1888 at the end of his research. On the latter occasion, the Princess of Brazil, Dona Isabel, represented the Emperor in his absence (von de Steinen, 1894: 521).

The group now accompanying von den Steinen was composed of two officers, four soldiers, two *camaradas* of German origin, a cook and, once again, the Bakairi Indian Antonio as translator. Along with animals and utensils, the group took with them 75 kg of objects to exchange with Amerindians (beads and axes, for example).

As on the first expedition, Karl von den Steinen imposed a hierarchy within the group: on the one side were the *Herren*, the European scientists; on the other, the *camaradas*, the staff hired as the operating force for the expedition. This is the division used to label the pictures in the book that chronicles the journey, *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* [Among the Aborigines of Central Brazil]. Antonio is on the side of the *Herren*, those who perform the intellectual work.

There were more differences in relation to the first expedition than the size of the group. This time, von den Steinen also explored the Rio Coliseu, a tributary of the Xingu. This change in trajectory, and the idea of a need to extend the research into a region that had previously only been visited, allowed the explorers to contact the Bakairi, Nahukuá, Mehinako, Auetó, Yawalapíti, Kamaiurá, Trumai, Paresí and the Bororo. Each visit to an Indigenous village lasted only a few days and fieldwork consisted in acquiring material culture, writing down vocabularies, collecting drawings that adults made, attending parties, taking body measurements of men, women, and children, and photographing the Indians.



4  
*Die Herren*, picture from von den Steinens's book *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* (1894, picture II); from left to right, standing, Commander Januário, Peter Vogel, Karl von den Steinen (in the centre), Lieutenant Perrot, Antonio; sitting from left to right are Wilhelm von den Steinen and Paul Ehrenreich

Despite their short stay in each village, von den Steinen was able to make extremely interesting observations of indigenous culture and to carry out relevant analyses of myths, rituals, social structure and magic (that he labelled “science”), even with almost no ethnological literature to aide him. The translator Antonio was fundamental to this work. Much of what von den Steinen learned about the Bakairi came directly from Antonio, through a series of translations that the author made with his assistance. In fact, one may question whether, methodologically, a single individual can be taken to represent the purportedly integrated totality that is his or her group – in other words, whether there is a fundamental difference between individual thought and the thought of the people (*Völkergedanken*). For von den Steinen, such differences apparently existed. In several places, he contrasts the assertions of Antonio with those of other Bakairi, as in the case of the explanations of the Bakairi Indians about eclipses (von den Steinen, 1894: 358).

According to the terminology current in the nineteenth century, Antonio would be considered a “primitive,” but von den Steinen included him in the group of Herren, gentlemen. The book *Die Bakairi-Sprache*, published in 1892, collects phrases translated by Antonio from Portuguese, a language that von den Steinen knew, to Bakairi during the second expedition to the Xingu and includes, on the third page, a large photo of Antonio, “our translator” (von den Steinen, 1894: 3). Von den Steinen (1894: v) states in this book:

My main informant for the present work is the fearless Indian from the Parantinga village, whose image with a civilized stroke and a long and untidy moustache, is faithfully reproduced through Dr. Ehrenreich's photograph, and of course, like all such people, was called Antonio. To us he was an invaluable companion and scout on the second, as well as on the first trip.<sup>14</sup>

Thus von den Steinen reports that Antonio's “fragmented Portuguese” “had progressed in such a way during our long conviviality that I, who was making progress in Bakairi, could learn all the essential things from him” (von den Steinen, 1894: V). Von den Steinen therefore gained access to Bakairi culture through Antonio. Von den Steinen compared Antonio's statements with those of other Bakairi. Antonio's translations revealed “training” (*Dressur*) and “adaptation” (*Anpassung*) to other “trains of thoughts” (*Gedankengänge*) (von den Steinen, 1892: VII). This means that Antonio needed to understand Western (European or German) thought process in order to provide a reasonable translation. It would be possible to follow Antonio's train of thought in his attempt to adjust his sentences to European rationality. In this sense, von den Steinen had something like an archaeological approach to linguistic studies, discovering the hidden thoughts beneath translations. These “adjustments” are “elucidated” when compared to the language of the Bakairi legends (*Sagen*), in which “only the natural Bakairi [language] is transmitted” (von den Steinen, 1892: VII). One can understand “natural” as “immediate.” In other words, Antonio's sen-

tences were both immediate and mediate expressions from the *Völkergedanken* of the Bakairi. The sentences are mediate because of the “adjustments” to European thought process and are immediate insofar as they were pure expressions of a collective thought. This could be accessed through an ethnography that seeks to explore the relation between language and thought and is capable of understanding how much of individual thought corresponds to the *Völkergedanken*, and also to identify whenever there is an external interference in the immediate path between thought and speech. By stating that it is possible to derive the *Elementargedanken* from the *Völkergedanken* – the train of thought beneath the translations – von den Steinen was providing ethnographic material to sustain Bastian’s theory. But von den Steinen went further by stretching not only the differences between thought processes but also the possibility of learning and of understanding other worldviews (*Weltaanschauungen*) through cultural relations.

There is, however, a limit to this understanding: “No, Antonio and his tribesmen (*Stammesgenossen*) would not have understood our kind of symbol, not to mention, to create some [symbols]” (von den Steinen, 1894: 354). In spite of the assumption of a universal mental essence, some representations are so deeply inherent to a culture that a foreigner cannot understand them. This was, precisely, von den Steinen’s expansion of Bastian’s theory: there are universal mental essences (*Elementargedanken*) and cultural collective thoughts (*Völkergedanken*), but the development from the former to the latter also occurs through the intracultural logic. There are as many rationalities as cultures. Whether von den Steinen managed to explain a culture through its own rationalities is another matter, but he was aware that the ethnologist must interpret cultures in their own terms and that there is also a limit to this.

The existence of various rationalities is expressed again in the translations. Thus, for example, in the chapter “Wissenschaft und Sage der Bakairi” [Science and legend among the Bakairi], von den Steinen claimed that, according to the Bakairi, death is not a natural phenomenon and always a consequence of human actions, like the attacks by shamans, simply from Antonio’s translation of the phrase “Jedermann muss sterben” [everybody has to die] into “All human beings must be murdered”. He proposed that we “must think away (*wegdenken*) completely the boundary between human and animal” (von den Steinen, 1894: 351).

By far the most important case of the lack of conceptual partition between our sensibility and thought, which is at the same time the most difficult to access, concerns the relation of human beings to animals and the individual animal species to each other. We say that the native anthropomorphizes in his “fairy tales,” he lets the animals talk and act like humans. This is correct from our point of view, but if we wanted to believe that he would endow the animals with human characteristics only for the purpose of telling a beautiful story, that would be a tremendous misunderstanding, it would mean no more and no less than

dispute his beliefs and knowledge. His belief: for in the wonderful stories he tells of the animals, he places the same trust as any convinced Christian in the wonders of the Bible; his knowledge: for he could no more understand the world around him without his fairy tale animals than the physicist can understand the centres of power without the matter of atoms – *si parva licet componere magnis* (von den Steinen, 1894: 351).<sup>15</sup>

Von den Steinen's data are still useful, especially when one considers the literature on cosmologies, shamanism and Amerindian perspectivism produced more recently (Münzel, 2010: XV).

[...] animals are like humans united in families and tribes, they have different languages like human tribes[;] human, jaguar, deer, bird, fish are all only persons with a different appearance and different characteristics. All one needs to be is a medicine man who can do everything, and one can transform from one person in another[;] then one can understand all languages spoken in the forest or in the air or in the water. The deeper reason for this view is that there is no ethical humanness yet [...](von den Steinen, 1894: 351).<sup>16</sup>

In the succeeding pages, the ethnologist recounts the transformation of humans into animals and *vice versa*, the relations of humans to animals (shamanism, hunting etc.), the relations of animals among each other and something like an intergroup distinction based on the correspondence to certain animals. The use of the concept of "transformation" (*Verwandlung*) is intentional and well thought out: "a large part of the Bakairi's explanations of nature are based on the presumptions of witchcraft. They have no development, only transformation" (von den Steinen, 1894: 362). At the intersection of social distinction and bodily transformation is the famous statement: "The Bororo boast of themselves that they are red parrots" (von den Steinen, 1894: 352) – because when they die, they transform into parrots, while the neighbouring Trumai are aquatic animals.

The expedition left the last camp, at the Rio Coliseu, in November 1888, after six months of fieldwork. On December 31 they reached Cuiabá, made a few smaller trips and returned to Cuiabá again in April, when the partnership disbanded. Paul Ehrenreich stayed for another year in Brazil and undertook another expedition, this time to the Araguaia and Purus rivers (Ehrenreich, 1891). Two months later, Karl von den Steinen left Rio de Janeiro for Germany, but not before presenting his research results to the local Geographical Society (Von den Steinen, 1888).

Back in Germany, von den Steinen hoped to sell 1,235 objects from the Xingu and 224 from the Paresí and Bororo to the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin for 15,000 Mark. He had calculated the total costs of the second expedition to have been 36,000 Mark (Kraus, 2004: 117). In January 1899, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Halle. In the same year he defended his *Habilitation* at the University of Berlin with the *habilitation* thesis *Erfahrungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Völkergedankens* [Experiences regard-

ing the developmental history of the *Völkergedanken*] – which clearly shows the influence of Herder and Bastian. The next year he began to teach at Marburg University, where he worked only until 1892 (Kraus, 2004: 32). That same year he published *Die Bakairi-Sprache*, while he and his young family moved to Berlin. In 1893, von den Steinen became assistant director of the South American department at the Royal Museum of Ethnology and in the following year he began to teach at the University of Berlin (Scheffold-von den Steinen, 1993: 21) and published *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens*. Two years later he was on his way to the Marquesas Islands, changing his ethnographic area of focus for the next few decades. Nevertheless, he did not break with South American ethnology, since he formed a generation of students devoted to the study of Amazonia.

Karl von den Steinen's ethnographic method was based on a teleological ideal of science. As well as settling questions that plagued the Americanist field at the time (such as the establishment of the migration routes of the Arawak, the search for the "primordial home" of the Carib peoples, or the discovery of relations between the Indigenous languages), the general aim of ethnography was to gather empirical data from which elementary thoughts could be deduced. This supra-individual ideal often subjugated the individual will of the Amerindians, as the photographs taken on the trip make evident. Despite these rigorous scientific requirements, Karl von den Steinen had a sensible ethnographic eye for local matters.

His second expedition was not only important in academic fields, like anthropology, linguistics and especially ethnology, but also because it put the South American Lowlands on the map for the German ethnologists.

### **THE SPEECHES OF KARL VON DEN STEINEN IN RIO DE JANEIRO**

The Brazilian Imperial State's relation with its indigenous peoples apparently had two sides. The first was represented by the central government, in the figure of Dom Pedro II, with a lack of interest in imperial politics, a taste for scientific and ethnographic issues, and a romantic representation of Indians in Brazilian literature. The other aspect was represented by local politicians and regional elites interested in appropriating indigenous lands, with their micro-politics of the provinces.

The contradiction is only apparent, because the micro-politics of land created the real conditions for existence of the metaphorical Indian, silencing dissenting voices and seeking to monopolize images of the Indians. This means that Karl von den Steinen's fieldwork needs to be understood in the context of a political negotiation involving multiple interests, in which even the representation of Indians shifts from a symbolic order to a political issue.

It is risky to imagine that Karl von den Steinen served the political interests of the Empire in favour of his own professional interests. There is little

doubt that the research of von den Steinen had an impact on the Brazilian public policies regarding Indigenous peoples. However, at least in the imperial documents, a direct cause and effect relation is not apparent. Moreover, von den Steinen was very conscious of his role in the field of political disputes and symbolic negotiations, so that his second speech at the Geographical Society of Rio de Janeiro did not only present geographical results, but also included a true defence of the way of life of indigenous peoples. He reported that the Juru-na Indians saved his life (von den Steinen, 1888: 191), criticized the christening of the feared Bororo and said that they would never have committed so many murders if they had not been “hunted like beasts” (von den Steinen, 1888: 193). Regarding his stay among the Indians as “a paradise” (von den Steinen, 1888: 197), he stated that “the Indian not only has a good nature, but also a very cheerful mood” (von den Steinen, 1888: 209). He willingly accepted the nickname “friend of the wild” – which was given to him mockingly in Cuiabá – and concluded with a challenge that must have hit the audience like an arrow:

What will be the future of our friends from the Xingu?

There are three thousand Aboriginal people at present, primitive as if they had just left the hands of nature; they are therefore capable of intellectual and moral development if guided properly, or of brutality if *mistreated*.

An endless number of their brothers were annihilated by two sorts of barbarism, created, by the way, by our own most noble race: one is the fierce war, the other the sordid speculation.

It will not be easy to choose the right path. But it can be expected that the benign hand, which freed the descendants of Africa from slavery, has also enough power to protect the natives of this continent and has enough clemency to educate these Brazilians, who are masters of their fate and ignorant of that fact (von den Steinen, 1888: 211-212).<sup>17</sup>

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## NOTES

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- 2 Mato Grosso (Province). President (Gustavo Galvão). Report, May 3th, 1881, p. 4.
- 3 Mato Grosso (Province). President (Gustavo Galvão). Report, May 3th, 1881, p. 4.
- 4 Mato Grosso (Province). President (Gustavo Galvão). Report, May 3th, 1881, p. 5.
- 5 Mato Grosso (Province). President (Gustavo Galvão). Report, May 3th, 1881, p. 7.
- 6 Mato Grosso (Province). President (Gustavo Galvão). Report, May 3th, 1881, p. 27.
- 7 [https://wikivisually.com/lang-de/wiki/Datei:S-Georgien\\_1882\\_45.jpg](https://wikivisually.com/lang-de/wiki/Datei:S-Georgien_1882_45.jpg)
- 8 Mato Grosso (Province). President (Baron of Batovy). Report, october 1st, 1884, p. 32-33.
- 9 Mato Grosso (Province). President (Baron of Batovy). Report, october 1st, 1884, p. 33.
- 10 Mato Grosso (Province). President (Baron of Batovy). Report, october 1st, 1884, p. 33.
- 11 By Kmusser - Own work using Digital Chart of the World and GTOPO data., CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4747584>
- 12 In German: "Auf der Landungsbrücke wartete der Zug. Dort stand auch der Kaiser mit dem Marquis de Parana-gua, dem Vorsitzenden der geographischen Gesellschaft, und winkte uns heran, als wir vorbeischreiten wollten. Er befahl uns auf 12 Uhr in den Palast. Pünktlich traten wir

an und pünktlich erschien der beste aller Brasilier. Mit freundlichen Worten dankte er mir für die Widmung des Buches über die erste Schingú-Expedition, erkundigte sich in seiner lebhaft eindringenden Art nach den neuen Plänen und entliess und mit guten Wünschen, deren Verwirklichung zu unterstützen die Behörden angewiesen werden sollten.”

13 At present it is a city called Panambi with a population of almost 45,000 people.

14 As von den Steinen wrote in German: “Mein Hauptgewährsmann für die vorliegende Arbeit ist der wackere Indianer aus dem Paranatinga-Dorf gewesen, den das Titelbild mit civilisirtem Scheite und unausgerupftem langgezupftem Schnurrbart nach Dr. Ehrenreich's Photographie getreulich wiedergiebt und der wie alle solche Leute natürlich Antonio hiess. Er war uns ein unschätzbare Begleiter und Pfadfinder auf der zweiten wie auf der ersten Reise.”

15 As in the German source: “Bei Weitem der wichtigste Fall von dem Mangel begrifflicher Scheidewände der unserm Empfinden und Denken gleichzeitig am schwersten zugänglich ist, betrifft da Verhältnis des Menschen zu den Tieren und der einzelnen Tiergattungen zu einander. Wir sagen, der Eingeborene anthropomorphisiert in seinen ‘Märchen’, er lässt die Tiere reden und handeln wie Menschen. Das ist von unserm Standpunkt aus richtig, aber wenn wir glauben wollten, er statt die Tiere nur zu dem Zweck, eine hübsche Geschichte zu erzählen, mit menschlichen Eigenschaften aus, so wäre das ein gewaltigs Missverstehen, es hiesse nicht mehr und nicht weniger, als ihm all sein Glauben und Wissen wegdisputieren. Sein Glauben: denn in die wunderbaren Geschichten, die er von den Tieren berichtet, setzt er dasselbe Vertrauen, wie jeder überzeugte Christ in die Wunder der Bibel; sein Wissen: denn er könnte die ihn umgeben Welt ohne seine Märchentiere ebenso wenig begreifen als der Physiker die Kraftzentren ohne Stoffatome – *si parva licet componere magnis*.”

“*Si parva licet componere magnis*” means “If little thing with great we may compare.” (Vergil, *Geogics*, IV, 176).

16 In German: “[...] Tiere sind wie die Menschen zu Familien und Stämmen vereinigt, sie haben verschiedene Sprachen

wie die menschlichen Stämme, allein Mensch, Jaguar, Reh, Vogel, Fisch, es sind alles nur Personen verschiedenen Aussehens und verschiedener Eigenschaften. Man braucht nur ein Medizinmann, der Alles kann, zu sein, so kann man sich von einer Person in die andern verwandeln, so versteht man auch alle Sprachen, die im Wald oder in der Luft oder im Wasser gesprochen werden. Der tiefere Grund für diese Anschauung liegt darin, dass es noch keine etische Menschlichkeit giebt [...].”

- 17 As published in Portuguese: “Qual será o futuro dos nossos amigos do Xingu? São três mil aborígenes que apresentamos, primitivos como sahiram das mãos da natureza; portanto, capazes de desenvolvimento intellectual e moral se forem guiados propriamente, ou brutos se foram *maltratados*. Um sem numero dos seus irmãos ficou aniquilado por duas espécies de barbarismos criados aliás por nossa raça de mais nobre categoria: uma a guerra feroz, a outra a especulação sordida. Não será fácil escolher o caminho mais recto. Mas é de esperar que a mão benigna que libertou da escravidão os descendentes da Africa, tenha também o poder suficiente de proteger os naturaes deste continente e bem assim bastante clemência para educar estes brasileiros que são mais senhores da sua sorte e isto mesmo ignoram.”

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### A ETNOGRAFIA DE KARL VON DEN STEINEN NO CONTEXTO DO IMPÉRIO BRASILEIRO

#### Palavras-chave

Ameríndios;  
antropologia alemã;  
etnografia;  
império brasileiro;  
Karl von den Steinen.

#### Resumo

O início da etnografia sistemática no Brasil pode ser atribuído ao psiquiatra alemão Karl von den Steinen, que em 1884 liderou a primeira expedição ao Rio Xingu. As etnografias *Durch Central-Brasilien* (1886) e a sequência *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* (1894), sobre a expedição de 1887 a 1888, o tornaram o maior especialista mundial em povos indígenas do Brasil. Este artigo busca explorar as expedições de von den Steinen e seus resultados dentro de um contexto cultural e político específico. De um lado, sua abordagem teórica fundamentava-se na incipiente antropologia alemã. Por outro, as pesquisas ocorreram no contexto da política indigenista imperial brasileira. O império brasileiro forneceu auxílio material e escolta militar, pois tinha interesses, muitas vezes conflitantes, nos seus resultados. O objetivo final deste artigo é contribuir para uma análise histórica das condições políticas da etnografia.

### KARL VON DEN STEINEN'S ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BRAZILIAN EMPIRE

#### Keywords

Brazilian Empire;  
ethnography;  
German ethnology;  
indigenous peoples;  
Karl von den Steinen.

#### Abstract

The beginnings of systematic ethnography in Brazil can be attributed to the German physician and psychiatrist Karl von den Steinen, who in 1884 led the first expedition to the Amazonian River Xingu. The ethnographies *Durch Central-Brasilien* (1886) and its sequel *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* (1894), about the expedition from 1887 to 1888, made him the world's leading expert on Brazilian indigenous peoples. This article seeks to explore von den Steinen's expeditions and their results within a specific political and cultural context. On the one hand, his theoretical approach was related to German ethnology and anthropology. On the other, the expeditions took place in the context of the indigenous policy of the Brazilian Empire. The Brazilian government provided material aid and military staff, because it had interests in the researches, although these interests at times were conflictive. This article's objective is to contribute to a historical analysis of the political conditions of ethnography.