

Colonial or not colonial, that's the question: Curt Nimuendajú as collector for Brazilian and European Museums

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ABSTRACT: The Brazilian anthropologist of German origin, Curt Nimuendajú, is considered a central figure in the history of Brazilian anthropology. His biography is marked by multiple roles: a brilliant ethnographer, an indefatigable recorder of indigenous language materials, a pioneer in Amazonian archaeology, and an unyielding defender of indigenous rights to life and land; but he also became known for his collecting activities for Brazilian and European museums. The central question of this paper is: how should Nimuendajú's collecting activities be characterised? Can they be interpreted as a typical colonial enterprise undertaken by a White heterosexual male? The answers can only be found via a study of the detailed documentation of his activities, archived in various Brazilian, German, and Swedish museums and partially published. A careful reconstruction of the circumstances and itineraries of Nimuendajú's expeditions and field trips shows that his case is not suitable to confirm certain stereotypes about collectors' practices for European museums. Unlike in other cases, Nimuendajú did not compile collections for museums by robbery, looting, or trickery. Instead, he often relied on wearisome negotiations, payments, barter, and incentives to reproduce objects no longer fabricated, always establishing symmetrical relationships with his indigenous hosts. This reinforces my main argument that the study of historical collecting practices for ethnological museums must be based on careful evaluation of collectors' biographies in order to avoid the risk of repeating clichés and stereotypes.

KEYWORDS: Collecting Practices. History of Anthropology. German Ethnology. Ethnographic Collections.

RESUMO: O antropólogo brasileiro de origem alemã Curt Nimuendajú é considerado um personagem central na história da antropologia brasileira. Sua biografia é caracterizada por múltiplos papéis como um etnógrafo brilhante, um incansável documentarista de línguas indígenas, um pioneiro na arqueologia amazônica e um obstinado defensor de direitos indígenas às suas terras e a sua sobrevivência física, mas ele também ficou conhecido por suas atividades colecionistas para museus brasileiros e europeus. A principal questão deste artigo é: Como caracterizar as atividades colecionistas de Nimuendajú? Elas podem ser interpretadas como típicos empreendimentos coloniais realizados por um homem branco hetero? As respostas só podem ser encontradas ao estudar a documentação detalhada de suas atividades, a qual foi arquivada em vários museus brasileiros, alemães e suecos e foi publicada em partes. Uma reconstrução cuidadosa das circunstâncias e dos itinerários das expedições e pesquisas de campo de Nimuendajú mostra que seu caso não é adequado para confirmar determinados estereótipos sobre práticas colecionistas para museus europeus. Ao contrário de outros casos, Nimuendajú não organizou suas coleções por roubo, pilhagem ou trapacas. Em vez disso, ele preferiu negociações, às vezes bastante demoradas, pagamentos, escambos e estímulos para reproduzir objetos não mais confeccionados, sempre estabelecendo relações simétricas com seus anfitriões indígenas. Isto reforça a posição defendida neste trabalho de que o estudo das práticas históricas de organizar coleções para museus etnológicos precisa ser baseado numa avaliação cuidadosa das biografias dos colecionadores para evitar o risco de repetir uma série de clichés e estereótipos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Colecionismo. História da antropologia. Etnologia alemã. Coleções etnográficas.

INTRODUCTION¹

This paper offers a compelling example of a well-known collector and ethnologist, with the aim of provoking a rethinking: not only about anthropology's past, but also about current clichés and stereotypes concerning the collection of ethnographic objects for museums.

Critical voices of the last decades have often considered ethnological museums, and sometimes museums as a whole, as the last great fortresses of a colonial and imperialist past, characterised by pillage, looting, and robbery of valuable objects from source societies, which must be compensated for past losses and traumas. Most papers presented at the conference cited in note 1 illustrate these critiques well. Much criticism of this kind, however, disregards that many museums have no colonial origin and may represent local efforts to preserve cultural heritage.

Discussions about the colonial past of ethnological museums are not new but began in the 1960s and 1970s, at the same time that prominent and influential critiques of anthropology's colonial past — such as the books by Gérard Leclerc and Talal Asad — were published.² The first requests for the restitution of ethnographic objects stored in European museums came from governments of various African countries that had recently achieved political independence. One of the first advocates of restitution politics within the anthropological establishment was Herbert Ganslmayr (1937-1991),³ director of the Überseemuseum in Bremen (Germany), who at the time was frequently criticised by his peers for his ideas. These early initiatives, however, were rather timid and often fizzled out due to political resistance from museum administrations and governments in the northern hemisphere.

A deep shift in the discussions about the colonial past of many museums, and the different forms of reaction to it, has taken place since the 2000s in the context of postcolonial theory,⁴ both among academics and non-academic activists. Alongside increasing political pressure in favour of extensive restitutions of almost all kinds of collections suspected of colonial origins, other proposals include radical transformations of museums' displays and their politics of representation.⁵ The case of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin is quite illustrative, as the exhibition of its collections in the centre of the city, in the reconstructed imperial palace, ignited discussions about their origins and destinations. The historian and journalist Götz Aly, for example, wrote a denunciatory bestseller about Melanesian and Micronesian ethnographic objects from the former German colonies in Oceania, now stored in the Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin and other German museums, exemplified by a magnificent boat from Luf Island.⁶

Although most Brazilian museums do not share the histories of their European and North American counterparts, the discussions about the origins of

1. A short version of this paper was presented during the Imperial Lives Conference, organised by the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne, on March 30, 2023 (Panel "Science and Violence") (Imperial Lives..., 2023; regarding the conference see <https://imperiallives.com/>; accessed on June, 29, 2025).

2. Asad (1973), Leclerc (1972).

3. Paczensky and Ganslmayr (1984).

4. For example, Adams (2017) or Legassick and Rassool (2000).

5. For example, Brücke-Museum *et al.* (2022), Lonetree (2012), or Onciul (2015).

6. Aly (2021). For a scathing critique of Aly's research style see Hauser-Schäublin (2021).

7. For example, Ferreira (2005), Petscheli (2023) and Souza (2021).

8. Nash (2023).

9. Kuper (2023).

10. *Id.*, p. 18.

11. Ehrlich (1970), Nimuendajú (2000), Welper (2019).

historical ethnographic collections are not silenced in Brazil, especially regarding the collecting practices of some prominent figures such as Hermann von Ihering (1850-1930)⁷, former director of the Museu Paulista. In Brazil, current debates on ethnographic collections in national or regional museums are generally focused on decolonising displays and new forms of representation, while restitution demands tend to be directed towards museums in the northern hemisphere.

In a recent article, Stephen Nash⁸ stresses the educational functions of museums and the possibilities they offer visitors to gain a differentiated access to the world via objects. At the same time, he does not deny the shameful past and present of many museums but warns his readers that there is a serious risk of throwing “the civic and scientific baby out with the bathwater.”

The generalizing and increasingly angry critiques against all kinds of museums, especially ethnological museums, demanding their closure, would also put at risk the countless community museums — indigenous or not — established during the last decades across Latin America. Or, as Kuper points out, “the focus on the colonial period is arguably misleading.”⁹

The need to differentiate what is said about museums’ past and present also applies to collectors and their activities. Or, to cite Kuper once more, “blanket condemnation of all transactions in the age of empire downplays local agency.”¹⁰ With this paper I want to present a case that does not fit well — or even does not fit at all — into the anthropology’s past perspective that characterises collectors’ activities exclusively as robbery, looting, or trickery.

The Brazilian anthropologist of German origin, Curt Nimuendajú (1883-1945), is nowadays considered one of the central figures in the history of Brazilian anthropology. Although he started out as a self-educated researcher, he became well-known as one of the principal experts on Brazil’s Indigenous population in the first half of the twentieth century. His biography is marked by multiple roles: a brilliant ethnographer, an indefatigable recorder of indigenous language materials, a pioneer in Amazonian archaeology, and an unyielding defender of indigenous rights to life and land; but he also became known for his collecting activities for Brazilian and European museums.

This paper is based on bibliographical and documentary research. There is no standard publication on Nimuendajú’s collecting activities, such as a monograph or an extensive article, but only smaller papers or scattered passages in books about his life and work. Due to this situation, the arguments presented in this paper rely on his voluminous correspondence with different academic interlocutors, which constitutes an inestimable source of information. Part of this correspondence has already been published,¹¹ while other parts could only be consulted directly in archives at Marburg University and the Grassi Museum in Leipzig (Germany), and at the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg (Sweden), between 2010 and 2024.

WHO WAS NIMUENDAJÚ?

I have studied Nimuendajú's life and work since 2009 in the context of various research projects on the relations between Brazilian and German anthropology in the twentieth century. He was born on April 17, 1883, in Jena (Thuringia), baptized as Curt Unckel. Orphaned at a young age, he was raised and educated by various relatives. After finishing secondary school (*Gymnasium*), he entered the Carl Zeiss optical instruments factory to be trained as a specialized worker. In his leisure time, Unckel read geographical, ethnological, and travel literature in the public library founded by Zeiss director Ernst Abbe. In 1903, at the age of 20, he decided to quit his employment at Carl Zeiss to emigrate to Brazil, with financial support from his half-sister Olga Richter.

His principal goal in life at that time — somehow romantic and inspired by his lectures in Jena — was to live among Indigenous people. After a period of uncertainty and adaptation to the new social and cultural environment in Santos and São Paulo, in 1905 the young Unckel was contracted as an unskilled assistant by the Geographical and Geological Commission of São Paulo (*Comissão Geográfica e Geológica de São Paulo/CGGSP*) for an expedition to explore the Feio River region in the São Paulo backlands. At one point, he managed to withdraw from the expedition and join a Guarani group.

From 1905 to 1907, he lived among the Apapokuva-Guarani, in the region of the Batalha River (São Paulo state), where he received his Indigenous name, Nimuendajú, in a baptism ritual described in detail in his first scientific publication.¹² He used this name in his publications from 1908 onward until his death, and adopted it as his family name when obtaining Brazilian citizenship in 1926. He died on December 10, 1945, in a Ticuna village (Santa Rita do Weil), São Paulo de Olivença municipality, Upper Solimões region, Amazonas state. The cause of his death has never been definitively determined, sparking speculations as to whether he died of natural causes or was murdered.¹³

Over more than four decades, Nimuendajú conducted ethnological research on Indigenous peoples in Brazil and undertook at least 34 field trips and expeditions. He had first-hand knowledge of more than 50 Indigenous peoples and produced a substantial number of publications, some appearing only posthumously. Most of his ethnographic monographs became classics in the anthropological literature on Indigenous South America, and they are still frequently cited today. In addition, he was part of an extensive transnational academic network, maintained primarily by correspondence¹⁴ (Figure 1).

12. Nimuendajú (1914).

13. Oliveira (1999). Elena Welper (2016) offers a kind of genealogy of the different versions of Nimuendajú's death.

14. Schröder (2022).

15. Viveiros de Castro (1987, p. XVIII).

16. Nimuendajú (2000), Welper (2002).

17. Menchén (1979), Pane Baruja (2014).

18. Schröder (2011, 2019a, 2019b).

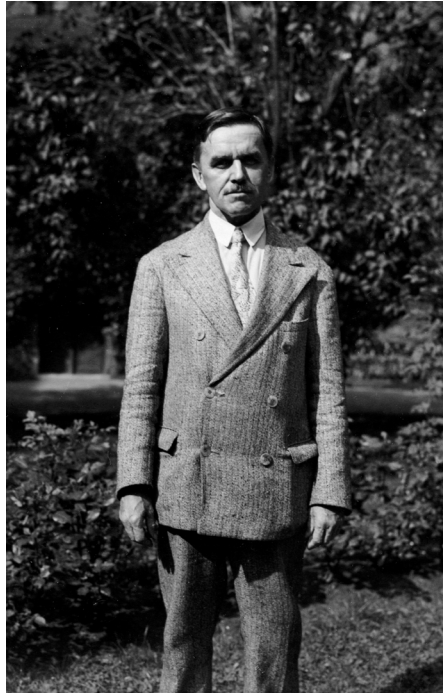


Figure 1 - Curt Nimuendajú in Gothenburg, Sweden, 1934 (unknown photographer; CELIN/Museu Nacional/UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro).

In the posthumous bibliography on Nimuendajú's life and work, two main periods can be distinguished. The first, from his death in 1945 until the mid-1960s, is characterised by short biographical synopses full of praise for his extraordinary style of research and material abnegations. Viveiros de Castro calls this type of literature a "hagiologic folklore."¹⁵ A period of renewed interest can be identified from 2000 onward, with the publication of Nimuendajú's correspondence with Carlos Estêvão de Oliveira by Thekla Hartmann, and Elena Welper's master thesis.¹⁶ The Nimuendajú that emerges in these and subsequent publications is no longer a lonely ethnographic hero in the Brazilian hinterland, but an important author and witness in the history of Brazilian anthropology and its relations with German ethnology. Studying his voluminous correspondence with numerous interlocutors worldwide was the key turning point for the renewed evaluation of Nimuendajú's life and work. It is noteworthy, however, that the only two biographies of such an important figure in the history of Brazilian anthropology were written by journalists, with all the shortcomings of non-scientific analysis, although the second one, by Pane Baruja, is evidently more accurate.¹⁷ It was also in the last decades that Nimuendajú's collecting activities for museums became more emphasized not only as a central part of his biography, but also as a common professional practice in the context of contemporary German ethnology.¹⁸

HOW DID NIMUENDAJÚ BECOME A PROFESSIONAL COLLECTOR?

The answer can be quite short and simple: by circumstance. He had never imagined becoming a professional collector for ethnographic museums during his first years in Brazil. Nimuendajú was multi-talented, which guaranteed his professional and financial survival as a migrant. His interests regarding Indigenous peoples can be identified as indigenism, ethnology, linguistics, archaeology, and the collection of ethnographic and archaeological objects. The first two were the most important in his professional biography from his immigration to Brazil until his death (indigenism since 1910 and ethnology since 1914). As he emphasised in numerous letters, his preference was engaging with *living* Indigenous peoples, rather than studying objects manufactured by them in the past or present. This becomes explicit, for example, in a letter written to Herbert Baldus (1899-1970), another German-born ethnologist and one of his principal correspondents, on November 10, 1943. Writing about his state of health, Nimuendajú comments:

Two days after having arrived in Rio, a glaucoma started to show up in my left eye, which left me almost blind within a few days. [...]

However, effecting the indispensable general exams, analyses, etc., the physicians drew the conclusion that my state of health is such a way that I should abandon once and for all my life in the backlands and with the Indians.¹⁹ Indeed, they put me on such a diet that I can observe only in the great centres of civilisation.

For me, such a solution brought about a big sadness. You know how I loved this life and how I identified myself with the Indians. It seems incredible for me that I will never see again the sun-bathed savannas of the Canela or the dark flooded forests (igapós) of the Ticuna. Besides the fact that I was thinking about doing other things that maybe will not be done anymore now.²⁰

This excerpt does not read like the visiting card of a typical colonial explorer, but that may be only a superficial impression, which must be corroborated by further evidence.

Regardless of his passion “to live among the Indians,” Nimuendajú was always in financial difficulties, from his early days until his death — not because of personal incapacity to save money, but because of the precarious conditions and poorly paid contracts of his work. Tambascia analysed this theme in detail in his paper on Nimuendajú’s “institutional fragility,” based on his correspondence with the Brazilian ethnographer and photographer Harald Schultz (1909-1966) and other interlocutors.²¹ This was the heavy price he paid for his wish for professional autonomy and his self-abnegating resistance against numerous offers

19. Although being a *verbum non gratum* nowadays also in Brazil, Nimuendajú used the word, quite common during his lifetime, without any negative connotations. The current official nomenclature is *povos indígenas* (indigenous people) or *povos originários* (original people), which were not available for Nimuendajú and have their origins in globalized contexts after WWII, as Halbmayr (2018) points out. In the twentieth century, there existed many other, generally meaner, words for discriminating and humiliating indigenous people.

20. Published in Welper (2019, p. 149-150). Orig.: “Dois dias depois da minha chagada no Rio, começou a se manifestar um glaucoma no olho esquerdo que, dentro de alguns poucos dias, me deixou quase cego. Combati o mal imediatamente e assim consegui reter a sua marcha, de maneira que hoje posso considerá-lo um caso vencido.

Fazendo, porém, os indispensáveis exames gerais, análises etc., os médicos chegaram à conclusão de que o meu estado sanitário era tal que eu devia abandonar de uma vez por todas a minha vida de sertão e de vivência com os índios. De fato, impuseram-me uma tal dieta que eu jamais poderia cumprir senão realmente nos grandes centros de civilização.

A mim, semelhante solução causou uma grande tristeza. O Sr. sabe bem como eu amava esta vida e como eu estava identificado com os índios. Parece-me incrível que eu nunca mais hei de ver os campos dos Canela banhados em sol nem os igapós sombrios dos Ticuna. Além do que, eu pensava ainda em fazer algumas coisas que agora talvez nunca mais serão feitas.”

(transl. P.S.; current Brazilian orthography corresponding to the letter published in Welper (2019); the original document cannot be consulted anymore because it became ashes when the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro burnt to the ground on September 2, 2018)

21. Tambascia (2020).

22. Penny (2002).

23. Kraus (2004).

24. Petschelis (2022).

25. Guggeis (2009).

26. The first official name of the Indian Protection Service (Serviço de Proteção aos Índios/SPDI), created on 20 June 1910 by Decree no. 8.072, was SPILTN (Serviço de Proteção aos Índios e Localização dos Trabalhadores Nacionais/Service for the Protection of Indians and the Localization of National Workers). The SPI was Brazil's first federal agency charged with protecting indigenous peoples against all kinds of violence and was the predecessor of the current National Indigenous People Foundation (*Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas/FUNAI*), created on December 5, 1967. Prior to 2023, its official name was National Indian Foundation (*Fundação Nacional do Índio*), with the same acronym.

of public service employment. In other words, he never became well-off, neither as a collector nor by any other activities. For Nimuendajú, compiling ethnographic collections for Brazilian and foreign museums was only one of the means to guarantee his survival, but he did it with zeal and competence much appreciated by the museums that purchased the objects. He started collecting in 1915 and continued until his death, although from the mid-1930s until the end of his life, collecting ethnographic objects became less important compared to his ethnographic work and legacy.

Nimuendajú's collecting activities did not begin in a kind of institutional vacuum. Quite the contrary: the objects he collected entered a consolidated and well-structured market of ethnographica dominated by European and North American museums, as well as private collectors. The collection of ethnographic objects reached its climax in the mid-nineteenth century with the creation of numerous ethnological (or partially ethnological) museums in the northern hemisphere, frequently, but not always, related directly to the colonialist and imperialist ambitions and politics of their countries. As shown by Penny,²² the beginnings of institutionalised anthropology in Germany must be located in ethnological museums rather than in university departments. Ethnological museums in various German cities were the financial backers of a series of famous ethnographic expeditions undertaken by German ethnologists in different South American regions between 1880 and the beginning of the First World War.²³ Although some of these expeditions were financed by the ethnographers' own resources or those of their families, they ultimately managed to receive at least partial reimbursement by selling ethnographic collections compiled during their expeditions.²⁴ In addition to the museums, there were also trading companies specialized in ethnographic objects, such as the Umlauff house in Hamburg.²⁵ One of the impacts of the First World War was a considerable decline in the demand of many European museums for ethnographic objects due to successive budget crises, especially among German museums, while at the same time American museums were on the rise. In this war and postwar scenario Nimuendajú's main challenge as a collector was to have access to these networks and gain a reputation as a competent and reliable collector.

Nimuendajú's first contact with ethnographic museums occurred in 1909 in São Paulo, after his return from the Apapokuva-Guarani, when he was employed by the Museu Paulista as a "naturalist," owing to his intimate knowledge of Indigenous groups in São Paulo state. In 1910, however, when the Indian Protection Service (SPI)²⁶ was established by the Brazilian government, he immediately quit this position to enter the new service.

From 1910 to 1913, he worked for the SPI among various Indigenous groups in Southern Brazil. In 1913, he was transferred to Belém, in the Amazon region, where he would reside permanently until the end of his life in December

1945. From 1913 to 1914, before being assigned to a SPI outpost in the neighbouring Maranhão state, Nimuendajú spent his time almost inactively in the SPI bureaucracy in Belém. It was during this period that he initiated contact with the staff of the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi in Belém, one of Brazil's most prestigious research institutions.²⁷

Owing to the mediation of the museum's director, the German ornithologist Emilie Snethlage (1868-1929)²⁸, in 1914, he succeeded in publishing his first scientific work: a voluminous and very detailed ethnographic article, "Legends about the Creation and Destruction of the World as Foundations of the Religion of the Apapokuva-Guarani," in the then renowned *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* in Berlin.²⁹ This ethnographic monograph became a milestone for Americanist ethnology, especially the ethnology of lowland South America, because of its vivid ethnographic account of an Indigenous people's cosmology and religion — eight years before Malinowski's Argonauts,³⁰ though without its scientific ambitions. Snethlage decided to mediate this contact with the Berlin journal because she recognised Nimuendajú's ethnographic talent when reading the manuscript. Later, Nimuendajú and Snethlage became loyal and staunch allies during the museum's extremely difficult period from 1914 to 1922, the year Snethlage finally obtained a transfer to the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro.

In February 1915, Nimuendajú was unexpectedly dismissed from the SPI due to the germanophobic atmosphere during World War I, although Brazil had not yet joined the alliance against the German Empire and its allies. To justify his dismissal, he was accused without any proof of being a spy for the German *Kaiserreich*, as he later reported in a letter to the Swedish ethnologist Baron Erland Nordenskiöld (1877-1932).³¹ Suddenly, Nimuendajú was left with no prospect for a new employment. Moreover, Pará state, with its capital Belém, was undergoing severe economic decline after the end of the first rubber boom in the Amazon region. Snethlage, however, despite her own delicate position as a German citizen *and* as a woman, decided that Nimuendajú's talents should not be lost to the museum.

From June 1 to October 15, 1915, Nimuendajú undertook his first independent scientific expedition, financially supported by the Goeldi Museum, with the instruction to arrange an ethnographic collection for the museum among the Aparai in northern Pará state. With the help of local rubber tappers, he successfully travelled upstream on the Jari, Maracá, and Paru rivers, finally reaching an Aparai group on the Paru River. He returned with a substantial collection of ethnographic objects, but in very poor health conditions. Only a few days after returning to Belém, on October 23, 1915, he wrote a detailed letter to the German ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg (1872-1924), one of his main correspondents from 1915 to 1924, describing the expedition and his relations with the Aparai:

27. The Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi, also known by his short name Museu Goeldi, was founded in 1866 as the Pará Museum for Natural History and Ethnography. In 1902, the Museum was renamed in honour of his director Émil August Goeldi (1859-1917), a famous Swiss-born naturalist and zoologist. Goeldi exercised his directorship from 1894 to 1905. Since his foundation the Goeldi Museum gradually became known as one of the principal research institutions for the Amazon region. In his initial stage, its scientific and technical staff was mainly composed by German-speaking immigrants. Nowadays, the Goeldi Museum is a federal research institution maintained by the Brazilian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MCTI).

28. See Sanjad (2019).

29. Nimuendajú (2014).

30. Malinowski (1922).

31. Letter to Erland Nordenskiöld, February 7, 1925, Världskulturmuseet Göteborg, file E 1:15 (1925).

32. Nachlass Theodor Koch-Grünberg, Völkerkundliche Sammlung der Philipps-Universität Marburg, VK MR G.II.1. Translated and published by Kraus (2017, p. 71-72). Orig.: „10 oder 12 Tage lang aß ich fast nichts und kam dadurch natürlich ganz furchtbar herunter. Die Aparai sowohl Männer wie Frauen bemühten sich in einer Weise um mich der ich nicht genug Anerkennung zollen kann. Civilisierte konnten mich mit mehr Sachkenntnis, unmöglich aber mit mehr Hingabe pflegen. Das erzähle ich hier herum überall daß ich, als ich mich schließlich von den Aparai trennte, ich als ihr Schuldner ging, ja vielleicht ihnen mein Leben verdanke. Sie kochten mir jeden Morgen einen Tee aus Capim Marinho und Garapa und nötigten mich beständig, wenigstens etwas Tapiokabrei zu mir zu nehmen. Wenn ich nachts stöhnte so zündeten sie Fackeln an setzten sich neben meine Hängematte, fragten eingehend wie und wo es mir weh täte und blieben sitzen bis ich ruhiger wurde. Da ich selbst nicht mehr aufstehen konnte so verpackten sie sorgfältig meine Sammlung und machten eine besonders große Ubá damit ich mich darin hinlegen könnte. [...] Vom 23 September an besserte sich mein jammervoller Zustand etwas so daß ich am 29. Oktober [sic], genau 1 Monat nach meiner Ankunft in der Aldea, die Rückreise antreten konnte. Sie gehörte bei meiner Verfassung wahrlich nicht zu den Annehmlichkeiten dieses Lebens, ging aber in 10 Tagen (Bergfahrt 31 Tage!) glatt von statten und die Aparai behandelten mich bis zum letzten Augenblick mit der gleichen Fürsorge. In der Dampferstation trennte ich mich von ihnen und am 15 Oktober kam ich mit meiner Sammlung glücklich in Belém an, ohne daß bei der tollen

I ate almost nothing for 10 to 12 days and of course suffered terribly [from malaria]. The Aparai, both men and women, tried in their way to help me that I could not praise more. A civilised people would have cared for me with more skill, but by no means with more devotion. I repeat it here again and again that when I finally parted ways with the Aparai, I left in their debt, perhaps owing them my life. They made for me every morning a tea of capim marinho [*Spartina alterniflora*] and garapa [sugarcane juice] and obliged me constantly to have at least some manioc porridge. If I groaned at night they lit torches, sat by my hammock, asked how and where it hurt and sat with me until I found peace again. Since I could not get up by myself, they carefully packed my collection and made a particularly large ubá [dugout canoe] so I could lie down in it. [...]

My pitiful condition improved somewhat as of September 23 so that on October 29 [he meant September 29], exactly one month after my arrival in the aldea [village], I could begin the return journey. It was, considering my condition, not the most pleasant of experiences, but lasted a mere 10 days (upriver: 31 days!), the Aparai treating me all the while with the same loving care. We parted ways at the steamer station, and I arrived safely in Belém with my collection on October 15 without having lost or even damaging a single piece on the journey—all thanks to the fabulous skill of the Aparai in overcoming the caxoeiras [rapids]³².

This is hardly the account of a colonial incursion led by a powerful and omnipotent anthropologist exploiting benevolent “natives.” On the contrary, benevolence was reciprocal, and the collection was composed of objects acquired spontaneously by barter. Moreover, part of the collection remains at the Goeldi Museum up to this day and could easily have been substituted by similar or identical objects manufactured by the same persons.

In this case, the main beneficiary had another name, and somehow the exploited person was Nimuendajú himself. The other part of the collection was purchased by the American anthropologist William Curtis Farabee (1865-1925) for the Penn Museum at the University of Pennsylvania. Farabee never travelled upstream nor had contact with the Aparai, but later published an article about them, citing Nimuendajú as “Mr. C. N. Unckle, a German scientist, [...] stranded in Para.”³³ While he acknowledged Nimuendajú’s efforts and the difficulties he endured, the publication of ethnographic information about the Aparai — and the corresponding academic recognition — went exclusively to Farabee. In his representation of the expedition, Nimuendajú’s role was reduced to that of a local auxiliary, while Farabee reaped the laurels.

But this was only Nimuendajú’s first expedition as a collector.

A DIFFERENT STYLE OF COLLECTING

Although many documents, especially letters, concerning Nimuendajú's activities as a collector still need to be published, we now have a clearer picture of his collecting practices.³⁴ From 1923 to 1926, his main activity was collecting archaeological objects for the Ethnographic Museum of Gothenburg,³⁵ and from 1928 to 1930 he undertook two expeditions to the Brazilian backlands, organising ethnographic collections for the German ethnological museums in Leipzig, Dresden, and Hamburg. Even after his contractual relations with German museums ended, he continued selling ethnographic objects to European museums (especially Berlin and Gothenburg) until the beginning of World War II. Under the Vargas regime (1930-1945), however, he was legally obliged to deliver and sell at least half of the objects collected during his fieldwork to Brazilian museums, namely the Brazilian National Museum and the Goeldi Museum.

It was never a secret that Nimuendajú was part of an international commercial network, but he was not a great dealer or negotiator. He is better described as a competent supplier. But how should his collecting activities in the field be evaluated? Answers can only be found by studying the detailed documentation of his activities archived by Brazilian, German, American, and Swedish museums and partially published. This calls for a careful reconstruction of the circumstances and itineraries of Nimuendajú's expeditions and field trips. On the one hand, collecting ethnographic and archaeological objects and selling them to museums was a way to ensure his financial survival; on the other hand, it was an essential part of his ethnological practice. This can only be understood in the historical and theoretical context of contemporaneous German ethnology.

Talfahrt auch nur ein Stück verloren gegangen oder erheblich beschädigt worden wäre, dank der fabelhaften Geschicklichkeit der Apará in der Überwindung der Caxoeiras.“ In brackets, explanations by the translator.

33. Farabee (1919, p. 105).
 34. Schröder (2011, 2019a, 2019b).
 35. Nimuendajú (2004).

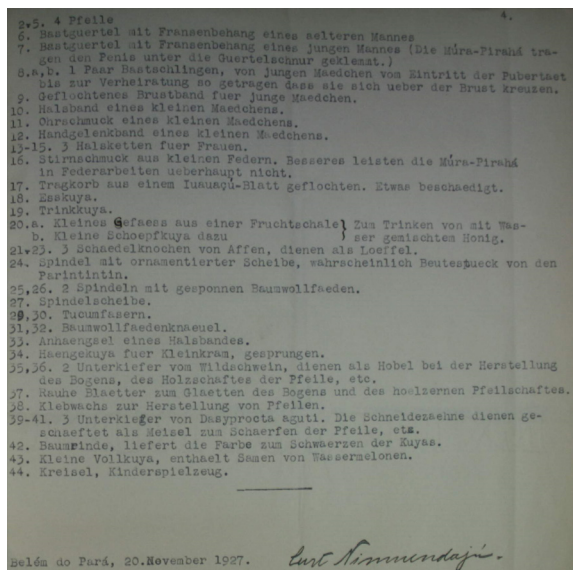


Figure 2 - Part of a list of objects accompanying a letter from Nimuendajú to Fritz Krause, November 29, 1927, offering ethnographic objects of the Mura-Pirahã to the Grassi Museum in Leipzig, Germany (CELIN/Museu Nacional/UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro; destroyed by fire in September 2018; photo P.S.)

36. Nachlass Theodor Koch-Grünberg, Völkerkundliche Sammlung der Philipps-Universität Marburg, VK MR A.33. Orig.: „Was Sie da von dem Eindruck sagen den ethnographische Sammlungen im allgemeinen auf Sie machen das habe ich im Museu Goeldi mehr als einmal auch empfunden. Auch Steinen schrieb ja: „Eine armselige Zusammenstoppelung ist doch nur im Grunde das in unsern ethnologischen Museen erhaltene Bild vergangener Zeiten. In einem Glasschrank das Leben eines Volkes!“ (transl. P.S.) The author cited is Karl von den Steinen (1855-1929), one of the most influential German ethnologists of his time and organiser of well-known anthropological expeditions to the Upper Xingu region.

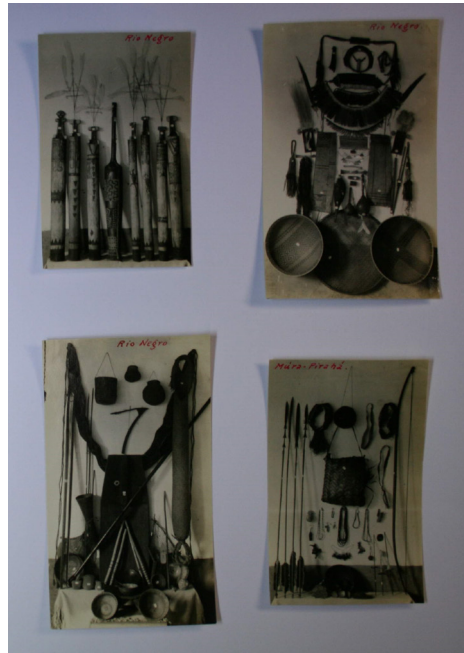


Figure 3 - Photos of ethnographic objects from the Upper Rio Negro and the Mura-Pirahã accompanying a letter from Nimuendajú to Fritz Krause, November 29, 1927, offering ethnographic objects to the Grassi Museum in Leipzig, Germany (CELIN/Museu Nacional/UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro; destroyed by fire in September 2018; photo P.S.)

His collections became particularly valuable because of the detailed ethnographic information provided along with the objects (Figures 2 and 3). Like many German-speaking ethnologists whose works he had read, Nimuendajú believed that materiality was one of the prominent expressions of culture and that objects offered privileged access to cultural understanding. At the same time, he maintained a sceptical outlook on the exhibition of ethnographic objects in museums, as he commented to Koch-Grünberg in a letter of May 10, 1922:

What you are telling about the common impression ethnographic collections make on you, I have felt more than once in the Goeldi Museum. Also, Steinen wrote: “Strictly speaking, the image of past times conserved in our ethnological museums is nothing more than a poor patchwork. The life of a people in a glass cabinet!”³⁶

Like many of his contemporary German ethnologists, Nimuendajú’s ethnographic practice was influenced by the notion of cultural salvage as an ideal. Because of his frequent contacts with Indigenous people and his experiences as an indigenist, he became convinced that the physical and cultural survival of Brazil’s Indigenous population was in constant danger and needed to be defended. Thus, ethnography and the collection of selected Indigenous objects for museums were, for him, ways to save at least the memory of numerous Indigenous peoples. This pessimism about the future of Brazil’s Indigenous population was also shared

by many Brazilian anthropologists for decades, until the 1980s, when a general reversal in demographic trends began to be perceived,³⁷ although it reappeared under the right-wing Bolsonaro government (2019-2022).

Nimuendajú's collecting practice cannot be described or analysed separately from his fieldwork style, which can best be characterised as that of a lone wolf (*Einzelgänger*), and at the same time as a crossover (*Grenzgänger*) strategy: he always refused proposals to enter the field together with other researchers and defended complete integration into Indigenous village life, which he called "conversion" or a kind of "spiritual conversion." As a result, his collecting activities had nothing to do with robbery, looting, or trickery, but instead involved wearisome negotiations, payments, and barter exchange.

A good testimony is a letter to Fernando de Azevedo, director of the Institute for Education at the University of São Paulo, dated October 19, 1936:

Selling those collections, I have only got to cover a part of the expenses of my voyages and long sojourns among the Indians, sometimes seeing me to be obliged to render them assistance, which makes everything more expensive than the scientific work and the collections. The rest of the money I used to arrange somehow "the way God would be served", making new debts and paying them with sacrifice.³⁸

In September 1928, Nimuendajú began his first expedition for the ethnological museums of Leipzig, Dresden, and Hamburg, which ended in May 1929. Fieldwork was conducted among the Apinayé, Křikateyé, Kreapimkateyé, Pukobyê, Guajajara, and Canela (Apanyekrã and Ramkokamekrã groups) in what are today the states of Tocantins and Maranhão. Due to a complicated financial agreement among the three museums, negotiated by Fritz Krause (1881-1963), director of the Grassi Museum in Leipzig, Nimuendajú was obliged to collect three copies of each object to be distributed among them. By virtue of these contractual commitments, he became quite apprehensive about the expedition's success and explained his concerns to Krause in a letter dated September 17, 1928:

Finally, I have arrived at a conclusion after having made purchases and having organised the exchange goods for the different tribes: Although I considerably exceeded the amount planned for this purpose, I became aware that it will not be sufficient for the complete execution of my program. Probably I am not going to reach the Apinayé and the bands located to the north-east of them. I will have to give up going ahead to the Karão and the Šerénte in the south, and the Canellas and Guajajara will probably come off somewhat scanty. If it were only a question of simply illustrating the culture of the different tribes, everything would be very fine, but in my mind, I see THREE long rows of empty shelves which I shall fill up. Notwithstanding that, I believe optimistically that I will succeed to give satisfaction to all three institutes.³⁹

37. Gomes (2017).

38. Published in Ehrlich (1970, p. 190). Orig.: "Com taes vendas de collecções eu conseguia cobrir apenas uma parte das despezas das minhas viagens e longas estadas entre os índios durante as quaes me vejo ás vezes obrigado a prestar-lhes socorros que me ficam mais caros que os trabalhos scientificos e as collecções. O resto do dinheiro eu arranjava lá "como Deus fora servido" contrahindo dividas e pagando-as com sacrificio [...]." (transl. P.S.)

39. Orig.: "Zu einer Erkenntnis bin ich uebrigens gekommen nachdem ich die Einkaeufe gemacht und die Tauschwaren fuer die verschiedenen Staemme eingeteilt hatte: Trotzdem ich die zu diesem Zweck vorgesehene Summe bedeutend ueberschritten habe bemerke ich dass sie zu einer restlosen Erledigung meines Programmes nicht ausreichen. Wahrscheinlich werde ich ueber die Apinayé und die ihnen nordoestlich vorgelagerten Horden nicht weit hinauskommen. Den Vorstoss nach Sueden zu den Karaô und Šerénte werde ich aufgeben muessen und die Canellas und Guajajára werden wohl etwas knapp wegkommen. - Wenn es sich nur darum handelte, die verschiedenen Staemme einfach kulturell zu belegen so waere alles gut und schoen, aber vor mir sehe ich im Geist DREI lange Reihen leerer Museumsschraenke stehen die ich alle fuellen soll. Trotzdem glaube ich zuversichtlich dass es mir gelingen wird, alle drei Institute zufrieden zu stellen." Staatliche Ethnographische Sammlungen Sachsen (SES), Leipzig, 1928/43, Krause, September 17, 1928. (transl. P.S.)

40. Nimuendajú (2000).

41. Neo-Brazilians is a word used by Nimuendajú which refers to the non-indigenous population of Brazil. Implicitly, the indigenous people were 'Brazilians' or, with other words, the 'real' Brazilians.

42. Orig.: "Die Apinayé empfingen mich ausserordentlich freundlich. Ihr Haeuptling José Dias hatte schon vor zwei Jahren, als ich mit ihm zuerst den Besuch verabredete, seine Leute wohl vorbereitet. Es war als waere ich zu alten Bekannten zurueckgekehrt. Trotzdem war die Aldea auch wieder fuer mich eine der Enttaeusungen wie ich sie fast stets in solchen Faellen zu erleben pflege: Das war leider schon nicht mehr das alte Dorf mit Junggesellenhaus und Maskenhuette, das mir der Haeuptling vor zwei Jahren aufs Papier gezeichnet hatte. Um einen ziemlich schlecht gereinigten, annaehrend kreisfoermigen Platz standen 5 Huetten neobrasilianischer Bauart; die Bevoelkerung zaehlt keine 50 Koepfe. Zwei Jahre hatten genuegt, um Vieles zu veraendern: Eine Grippeepidemie hatte die Kinder und jungen Leute dahingerafft. José Dias hatte eine Reise nach Goyaz und São Paulo unternommen, um gegen die Besetzung des Stammeslandes durch die Neobrasilianer zu protestieren. Man hatte ihn schon tot gesagt, und die Aldea hatte sich auf dieses Geruecht hin aufgeloeset. Schon waren die Brasilianer im Begriff, sein Erbe anzutreten, als José Dias ploetzlich zu ihrem grossen Verdruss mit Geschenken beladen zurueckkehrte. Er sammelte den Rest seiner Leute wieder und baute unweit der alten die gegenwaertige Aldea da Bacaba; aber das alte Indianertum ist dahin. Gluecklicherweise gehoert es

Nimuendajú described the complicated fieldwork circumstances in detail in letters to Krause (in German), but also in Portuguese to Carlos Estevão de Oliveira (1880-1946), director of the Goeldi Museum from 1930 to 1945 and one of his most important friends and political allies.⁴⁰

Among the Apinayé, in what is today Tocantins State, he patiently waited until old, almost forgotten or discarded objects re-emerged, but he also encouraged the Apinayé to produce them again. He tried, for example, to revive the manufacture of masks but was unsuccessful. In the end, he left the village with some 300 objects. The situation in the village was described to Krause in a letter from November 9, 1928:

The Apinayé gave me an extraordinarily friendly welcome. Their chief José Dias had prepared his people well over two years ago, when we had agreed upon a visit for the first time. It was as if I had returned to old acquaintances. Notwithstanding that, the Aldea [village] was for me another one of the deceptions I am almost always used to have in such cases: Unfortunately, the old village with its bachelors' house and mask hut that the chieftain had drawn for me on a paper two years ago was no more. 5 huts in Neo-Brazilian⁴¹ style were arranged around a very badly cleaned, almost circular place; the population numbers less than 50 heads. Two years were enough to change many things: A wave of influenza had carried off the children and the young people. José Dias had undertaken a voyage to Goiás and São Paulo in order to protest against the occupation of tribal lands by the neo-Brazilians. He had already been declared dead and the Aldea had already disintegrated according to that rumour. The Brazilians were just about to enter into his heritage when José Dias suddenly returned carrying a lot of gifts, which caused them great displeasure. He joined his people again and built, not far away from the old one, the current Aldea da Bacaba; but the old Indian way is dead and gone. Fortunately, however, it is part of a past so recent that many things can still be recovered. José Dias as well as the old medicine man Nicolau are so friendly and eager that I believe that the voyage was worth the trouble. [...] Here I cannot walk from hut to hut and buy up a magnificent collection within 2 days, as you did among the Kayapó. I will have to dispense completely with triplicate collecting and would be very glad if I can at least succeed to more or less reasonably document the old culture. In about one month I will be able to inform you about the results among the Apinayé from the museum's point of view. There is no need to be too worried: It will not be very splendid, but it won't be a fiasco. The situation now calls for waiting patiently until the old customs and objects occasionally turn up again. The chief insists that I should stay AT LEAST for a month. Then I would still get to see many interesting ceremonies. It would not be possible without further ado. It stands to reason that we also cannot celebrate Midsummer Day and Christmas within a week. The old medicine man asked intently if I also had brought along with me enough paper: I ought to have such a high pile so that he could dictate EVERYTHING to me; now he also wants to give me his younger daughter in marriage.⁴²

The situation described, however, was quite calm in comparison to what Nimuendajú would find during one of his field trips to the Canela in Maranhão

state. On June 25, 1935, he wrote to Walter Krickeberg (1885-1962) of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin:

I found the Indians in unforeseen adverse conditions: in April, a measles epidemic had cost the lives of some 20 children. Three days before I arrived, smallpox and influenza had broken out at the same time in the village. I returned to Barra do Corda [the nearest town in the region] and brought about that a male nurse of the local health station was sent to the village where he vaccinated the entire population. Unfortunately, the serum was so bad that only 10% of the vaccines presented positive results. As a result, soon appeared new cases of smallpox. I succeeded, however, to remove the infected families from the village and to isolate them in huts on their plantations, and it almost seems as if the plague has gone away. But then quite a lot of Indians still died from influenza and its after-effects (bronchitis and pneumonia), and a great number decayed physically in such a way that more deaths can be expected. [...]

Of course, my work suffered a lot under these unfavourable circumstances. From a moral point of view, it is simply a vexation for both sides to haggle and discuss prices where one is received as a healer and rescuer. Nevertheless, I managed to finagle some 700 pieces. After that, there was nothing more to get, and my money had come to an end. From this stock, however, I will have to deliver 500 pieces to the National Museum (I had promised 600-700), since, if I do not fulfil reasonably my agreement, I can expect that they will ensure that henceforth I cannot continue to work at all.⁴³

This eloquent letter illustrates Nimuendajú's personal and professional walk on the tight rope, as he sought to combine three roles: ethnographer, collector, and humanitarian indigenist. The latter came first, but his professional interest was never abandoned. (Figure 4)



Figure 4 - One of the famous Kokrit masks of the Canela acquired by Nimuendajú during his field trips to the Ramkokamekrã. Some of these masks can still be found in the depositories of some museums like the Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin. Photo taken by Nimuendajú, year unknown. (Acervo Museu do Estado de Pernambuco/FUNDARPE).

jedoch noch einer so nahen Vergangenheit an dass sich noch vieles wird retten lassen. [...] Von Huette zu Huette ziehen und in 2 Tagen eine Prachtsammlung zusammenkaufen, wie Sie es bei den Kayapó taten, kann ich hier nicht. Auf das Triplikatesammeln muss ich glatt verzichten und heilfroh sein wenn es mir gelingt, die alte Kultur wenigstens einmal mehr oder weniger vollstaendig zu belegen. In ungefaehr einem Monat werde ich Ihnen mitteilen welches vom Museumsstandpunkt aus das Ergebnis bei den Apinayé war. Sie brauchen sich nicht allzusehr zu aengstigen: Es wird nicht sehr glaenzend, aber auch kein Misserfolg sein. Hier heisst es geduldig warten, bis die alten Gebraeuche und Gegenstaende gelegentlich wieder zum Vorschein kommen. Der Haeuptling dringt darauf, ich solle MINDESTENS einen Monat bleiben, dann wuerde ich noch viele interessante Zeremonien zu sehen bekommen; so ohne weiteres ginge es nicht. Natuerlich koennen wir ja auch nicht Johanni und Weihnachten in einer Woche feiern. Der alte Medizinnmann erkundigte angelegentlich, ob ich auch genug Papier mitgebracht habe: so einen hohen Stoss muesse ich haben, damit er mir ALLES diktieren koenne; nun will er mich auch mit seiner juengsten Tochter verheiraten." SES, Leipzig, 1929/71, Krause, S. 736-739, December 12, 1929. (transl. P.S.)

43. Orig.: "Ich fand die Indianer in unerwartet unguenstigen Verhaeltnissen: Im April hatte eine Masernepidemie einigen 20 Kindern das Leben gekostet. Drei Tage vor meiner Ankunft waren die Pocken im Dorf ausgebrochen und gleichzeitig die Grippe. Ich kehrte nach Barra do Corda zurueck und setzte es durch

dass ein Krankenwaerter des hiesigen Sanitaetspostens nach dem Dorf geschickt wurde wo er die ganze Bevoelkerung impfte. Leider war das Material so schlecht dass kaum 10% der Impfungen ein positives Ergebnis aufwiesen. Infolgedessen kamen bald neue Pockenfaelle vor. Es gelang mir jedoch, die angesteckten Familien aus dem Dorf zu entfernen und sie in Huetten in ihren Pflanzungen zu isolieren, und es scheint fast als ob die Seuche damit erloschen sei. Dagegen starb noch eine ganze Anzahl von Indianern an der Grippe und deren Folgen (Bronchitis und Lungenentzuendung), und eine grosse Anzahl kam koerperlich dermassen herunter, dass wohl noch weitere Toedesfaelle zu erwarten sind. [...]

Meine Arbeit litt natuerlich schwer unter diesen unguenstigen Umstaenden. Moralisch ist es einfach eine Quaelerei fuer beide Teile da schachern und Preise diskutieren zu muessen wo man als Heiler und Retter aus der Not empfangen wird. 700 Nummern habe ich immerhin herausgeschunden, dann war nichts mehr in der Aldea zu haben und mein Geld war ebenfalls zu ende. Von diesem Material muss ich nun aber 500 Nummern dem Museu Nacional abliefern (600-700 hatte ich versprochen), denn wenn ich meine Abmachung mit diesem nicht einigermassen erfuelle so kann ich darauf rechnen dass sie dafuer sorgen dass ich in Zukunft ueberhaupt nicht weiterarbeiten kann." Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, E 468/35, June 25, 1935. (transl. P.S.)

44. Published in Nimuendajú (2000, p. 252-256).

45. Aquiles de Faria Lisboa (1872-1951), governor of the Maranhão State in 1935-1936.

Nimuendajú returned to the Ramkokamekrã-Canela the following year, this time with financial support from American institutions, mediated by his famous interlocutor Robert Lowie (1883-1957), and with the goal of conducting only ethnographic fieldwork. Entering the field, however, his indigenist commitment again took priority, and he decided to undertake the demarcation of the Canela territory as a first step to guarantee their right to the land, with the authorization of the governor of Maranhão. In a letter to Carlos Estevão de Oliveira dated July 3, 1936, he explained:⁴⁴

I was authorized by Dr. Achilles⁴⁵ [sic] to effect the reconnaissance of the land occupied by the Canela — without any remuneration or allowances, of course — with the aim to serve as a basis for its legalisation. Dr. João Braulino⁴⁶ offered his services for introducing to the National Congress a bill which would grant them the area I consider necessary and a small budget of 15.000\$000 annually for the demarcation of the Indians' land, too. I thought that I should take advantage of this willingness and make an expeditious topographic survey calculating the total area and the area usable for cultivation. [...]

Then I started, immediately and under full secret, the survey of the lands with the help of the Indians. I bought some 20 meters of dog lead, fixed some straps and hoops to them and by this means fabricated a good measuring tape. I had to verify the cardinal points with my compass. Some alignments I measured with the tape, others I surveyed by compass and by watch. That were eleven days of hard work under the scorching sun of the Chapadões,⁴⁷ roaming through cerrados [tropical savannas], caatingas [semi-arid tropical vegetation], and mountain ranges. When our neighbours [the settlers] realised what we were doing, the work was already done — and I with my feet on request for pity!

I returned to Barra [do Corda] immediately, worked drawing for three days like I have never done before in my life and remitted two copies of the sketches and the necessary data, one to Dr. João Braulino and the other to Dr. Antônio Lopes,⁴⁸ since Dr. Achilles had already handed over the government to Carneiro de Mendonça.⁴⁹

I have calculated a total area of some 330,000 hectares, from which hardly one tenth is useful for cultivation: the narrow and often split sandbanks [restingas] along the larger watercourses.⁵⁰

In another letter to Carlos Estevão de Oliveira on September 1st, 1936, however, Nimuendajú expressed deep frustration about his unsuccessful endeavours:

Regarding the legalisation of the Canela lands, neither Antônio Lopes nor João Braulino wrote anything to me. With the turnarounds of politics in Maranhão, probably everything remained without consequences again, and I was the fool once more.⁵¹



Figure 5 - Nimuendajú sitting among Ramkokamekrã (on the lower left side) after one of his “conversions” to Indigenous life, around 1935 (unknown photographer; CELIN/Museu Nacional/UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro).

CONCLUSION: VILLAINY OR COMMITMENT?

After numerous texts published about Nimuendajú’s life and work over the decades — some more superficial and laudatory, others with a solid and distinctive empirical basis⁵² — can his life’s work still be interpreted as a typical colonial enterprise undertaken by a White heterosexual male? The careful reconstruction of his fieldwork and collecting activities, together with the accumulated evidence, suggests that his actions and stances do not fit easily within the category of villainy. After all, his name was *Nimuendajú*, not *Nimuenda-Gru*.⁵³

Of course, if one accepts unquestioningly a series of suppositions that constitute the fundamentals of what Pluckrose and Lindsay⁵⁴ call Applied and Reified Postmodernism, or if one practises what Hauschild⁵⁵ refers to as a “rhetoric of suspicion,” then it is certainly possible to find, among the thousands of letters Nimuendajú wrote during his lifetime, one or more pejorative or discriminatory words, sentences, or even entire clauses about the Brazilian non-Indigenous population — particularly when he himself had concrete experiences of xenophobia, which sometimes resulted in breaches of contract or even arrests

46. João Braulino de Carvalho, delegate of the Supervisory Board of Maranhão.

47. A landform of Central Brazil characterized by crystalline rock formations.

48. Antônio Lopes (1891-1950), an intellectual of Maranhão active in various fields, especially the popular cultures of his native state and its historical and architectural heritage.

49. Roberto Carlos Vasco Carneiro de Mendonça (1894-1946), Federal Intervenor of the Vargas regime and successor of Aquiles de Faria Lisboa.

50. Orig.: “Consegui do Dr. Achilles uma autorização para proceder ao reconhecimento das terras ocupadas pelos Canelas – sem remuneração, nem ajuda de custas, naturalmente – para servir de base à legalização das mesmas. O Dr. João Braulino propôs-se a apresentar ao Congresso uma lei concedendo-lhes a área que eu achar necessária, e mais uma verbazinha de 15.000\$000 anuais para a demarcação de terras dos índios. Achei que devia aproveitar essas boas vontades e fazer um levantamento expedito, calculando a área total e a área aproveitável para a lavoura. [...]”

Imediatamente, e debaixo de todo segredo, comecei então o levantamento das terras, auxiliado pelos índios. Não me foi possível obter em São Luiz nem uma corrente de medição, nem uma bússola prismática. Comprei 20 metros de prender cachorros, coloquei faixas e argolas nela e assim fiz uma boa corrente de medição. Os rumos tive de levantar com minha bússola de mão. Alguns alinhamentos eu medi à corrente, outros levantei à bússola e relógio. Foram 11 dias de duro

trabalho, debaixo do sol abrasador dos chapadões, varando por cerrados, caatingas e serras. Quando os nossos vizinhos se aperceberam do que estávamos fazendo, já o trabalho estava findo – e eu com os meus pés em petição de miséria!

Voltei imediatamente à Barra, trabalhei três dias desenhando como nunca na minha vida e remeti dois exemplares do croquis e os dados necessários, um ao Dr. João Braulino e o outro ao Dr. Antônio Lopes, visto como o Dr. Achilles já tinha entregue o governo ao Carneiro de Mendonça.

Calculei a área total em 330.000 hectares, dos quais malmente a décima parte prestável para a lavoura: as restingas estreitas e muitas vezes falhadas ao longo dos cursos mais volumosos de água.” Nimuendajú (2000, p. 253-256) (transl. P.S.)

51. Nimuendajú (2000, p. 259). Orig.: “Sobre a legalização das terras dos Canelas, nem Antônio Lopes, nem João Braulino me escreveu mais coisa alguma. Provavelmente, com as reviravoltas da política maranhense, tudo ficou outra vez em águas de bacalhau, e eu fui mais uma vez o besta.” (transl. P.S.)

52. A complete bibliographical survey was published in 2013 (Schröder, 2013), but it needs to be updated, preferably in English, because in the last decade some important publications appeared.

53. The villain Gru is a fictional character and protagonist of the *Despicable Me* franchise started in 2010.

54. Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020).

55. Hauschild (2002).

by local authorities. With sufficient inquisitory zeal, one can find passages that might serve to denounce the German immigrant who opted for Brazilian citizenship as a “crypto-colonialist.” For example, in his letter to Koch-Grünberg of May 10, 1922 (see note 37), there is a line in which he uses the word “redskin” (*Rotbaut*) in an unequivocal intertextual allusion to the novels of the German author Karl May (1842-1912).

It is evident that the relationships of the Brazilian state with its Indigenous populations can easily be identified as colonial (or endocolonial, an expression frequently used in Latin America,⁵⁶ as Brazil is an independent country since 1822). Only recently, in 2023, with the creation of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, headed by Sônia Guajajara, a fundamental change has begun to emerge in broad outline, albeit without any certainties. Nimuendajú’s relationships with the Indigenous groups he visited, however, differed radically from contemporary state practises. On the contrary, they can be characterised as symmetrical. For him, there was a clear hierarchy: the Indigenous peoples came first (their physical and cultural survival), followed by ethnology or linguistics (the research), and only then the museums (collecting).

The example of Nimuendajú’s life and work was not chosen with the aim of practising what some anthropologists have termed “bongo-bongoism”⁵⁷ — that is, identifying a case that does not fit into generalising schemes or explanations, with the intention of contesting and devaluing them — but rather to reinforce my main argument that studying the historical practices of organising collections for ethnological and other museums must be conducted with careful evaluation of the collectors’ biographies, so as to avoid producing and perpetuating clichés and stereotypes based on binary oppositions that admit only two categories: villains and victims. Nimuendajú is a useful example that might help to avoid such simplifications, though he is certainly only one among many.

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Research data is available in the document body.

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