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ETHNOGRAPHIES OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS; MATERIAL TRANSFORMATIONS
The aim of this chapter is to describe social interactions between an archaeological research project and the Parauá, a traditional community located one hundred kilometers south of Santarém, in Amazonia, Brazil. It focuses reflexively on how these interactions influence the production of archaeological knowledge on the one hand and the construction of local identities on the other. Even though the chapter is written from the personal point of view of an archaeologist, a kind of ethnography of archaeology emerges (Edgeworth 2003).

Aspects of the construction of archaeological knowledge, it is argued here, are made possible through the participation of local workers in fieldwork. At the same time, the interface between local people and the archaeological project has political dimensions, and the role of archaeology in the process of construction of contemporary identities is also an important topic for discussion. For this reason, contextual information about the local population and the area of research is provided.

During fieldwork, participation of workers in the research led to a better understanding of the environment, the location of resources, and the relationship of these with local cosmologies. Involvement of the community was highlighted by processes of constant negotiation of access to some research areas and appropriation of aspects of archaeological discourse by political leaderships in the construction of local identities.

Since the beginning of the research project, archaeology proved to be a source of conflict. Local people were suspicious of the archaeological work. The lack of familiarity of some members of the Parauá community with archaeological investigation in general, and archaeological surveys in particular
(which involved the opening of transects across their territory), led to the emergence of political opposition as well as to sympathizers who helped and supported the research.

As Layton (1994) suggests, the only solution to conflicts of interest between researchers and local communities is to facilitate partial control by the latter over access to their own past. This implies a reflexive archaeological practice of a sociopolitical nature (Allen et al. 2002; Ardren 2002; Clarke 2002, 250; Rodriguez 2001).

In Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, consideration of ethnic issues and the rights of indigenous and traditional populations in relation to management of their sites and cultural heritage is relatively recent. Funari (2001, 241) points out that some recent initiatives in Brazil indicate an involvement with indigenous populations and demonstrate a commitment to a more ethical archaeological practice. In Amazonia, however, there have been very few such research projects (Green et al. 2003).

Brazilian archaeologists have not previously been prepared to deal with local communities, or to face situations of conflict that might put projects at risk. For some, fieldwork in remote areas of Brazil is still seen as a romantic adventure. But I believe that this report of my own experience, giving an account of the cultural differences and political interfaces that occur between archaeologists and local communities, can stimulate other archaeologists to think about their own experiences in similar fieldwork situations.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE AREA OF STUDY

Santarém (1000–1500 A.D.) has been considered a setting for the emergence of complex societies in the lower Amazon before the arrival of Europeans. According to Roosevelt’s interpretative model (based on ethnohistorical accounts, former archaeological research, and recent excavations), there was intensive agriculture, social and political hierarchy, territorial concentration, an increase and expansion of war, large-scale organization of labor, and the presence of specialists—the latter exemplified by the development of elaborately designed ceramics (Roosevelt 1992, 1999). Recent studies of stylistic variation of ceramics in museum collections, in terms of both decoration and technology, point to the existence of a regional style, possibly shared by other communities surrounding Santarém (Gomes 2001, 2002).

As part of my PhD research, I wanted to test hypotheses about the establishment of the boundaries of Santarém society, the distribution of a regional style, and the possible inclusion of ecologically peripheral areas in the same political system. The area occupied by the Parauá community on the lower Tapajós River, one hundred kilometers south of Santarém, was chosen as a suitable location (figure 13.1). Previous research in the area, carried out in the 1920s (Nimuendajú 1949), indicated that communities belonging to the same culture
Figure 13.1. Location map of Parauá territory, Amazonia
might have occupied the right bank of the Tapajós River. The expectation, therefore, was to find Santarém settlements in this area, located on the left bank.

However, that was not what happened. The archaeological survey found ten archaeological sites within an area of forty square kilometers, corresponding to the current territory of the Parauá community. Nine of these sites were related to precolonial occupations of ancient Formative societies—their ceramics being associated with the Amazon Incised Rim tradition (Meggers and Evans 1961). This ceramic complex, dating from about 3800 to 1000 B.P., is representative of the inception of the first horticulturalists in this area and in its later phase is partly contemporary with the beginning of Santarém chiefdoms.

**CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITIES IN AMAZONIA**

Traditional riverside communities in Amazonia, also known as Amazon caboclos, are mixed-blood populations resulting from marriages between Indians and Portuguese colonizers—and, to a lesser extent, northeastern Brazilians who came to work in the area during the period of the Rubber Cycle (Parker 1989, 251). Although historically and culturally related to Indian populations that occupied the Amazon lowlands at the time of European contact, caboclos are distinct from current indigenous Amazonian societies. They represent a specific social historic formation created by Portuguese colonization between 1615 and 1800, which homogenized the existing diversity of former indigenous groups (Arenz 2000).

In the process of construction of caboclo identities, their subsistence strategies, residential patterns, technologies, perception of resources, and forms of management of environmental resources (Adams 1994; Balée 1989, 1998; Roosevelt 1989) are clear evidence of an indigenous heritage. So too are their religious practices and their cosmological beliefs about the forest and spirits of the river; these were incorporated and combined into Iberian traditions (Arenz 2000; Vaz 1996; Wagley 1957). A partial explanation of observed patterns arises from the persistence of a regional economy, based on the extraction of natural resources (Parker 1989, 255). An important point, however, is that although some of the Parauá recognize their indigenous cultural heritage, they do not consider themselves to be Indians and vehemently refuse to be classified as Indians.

The Parauá are a community of five hundred inhabitants, who live off manioc subsistence farming, collecting, and fishing. Most families are directly involved in these activities, either for their own consumption or for commercial enterprise. Local commerce is restricted to three small stores. Other paid activities are related to occupations in the two schools. There is a health center, a church, and an ambulance launch that transports urgent medical cases to Santarém, but there is no electric light and no sanitation. Generally speaking, monetary circulation is low and is supplemented by more traditional forms of exchange.
Houses of the community are situated along two streets, creating two neighborhoods separated by the Mangal igerape (stream), which serves as a meeting point as well as a landmark. Most homes house nuclear families, though some have extended families with couples, children, old-age people, and newlywed sons and daughters. Traditional structures called flour houses, used for the making of flour and other subproducts of manioc, are present in the majority of homes, which also have modern radios and an occasional television set, powered by a community generator.

As well as an elected president, there are community leaders who gain power by virtue of their prestige among the inhabitants. However, the constitution of political groups is not homogenous, being directly related to clashes of interest associated with distinct political tendencies based in Santarém. The configuration of these groups greatly influenced the conflict that arose in relation to the development of my archaeological research.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH: CONFLICT, COOPERATION, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES

Friendly contact with the president of the community and with one of the political leaders, established months before the beginning of fieldwork in 2001, was not enough to prevent one of the divergent factions from filing a report to IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of the Environment)—linking the archaeological research to biopiracy activities. This led to an initial standstill in research and resulted in my physical removal from the location by agents of the institution until the situation was cleared up with the help of IPHAN (National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage).

The motive behind the accusation of biopiracy derived firstly from the general insecurity felt by riverside communities regarding ownership of their lands, which in turn resulted from the transformation of the area into an Extractivist Reserve (an area of nature conservation managed by IBAMA). Secondly, it derived from the lack of familiarity with archaeological investigation and the general suspicion of archaeological fieldwork this gives rise to. Some Amazonian riverside communities perceive the archaeologist to be someone who seeks mineral riches, who will sell the artifacts and take financial advantage of any excavations. This is quite similar to views of archaeologists held by Canadian Inuits, as reported by Bielawski (1994, 231). It is also close to the view of Mayan populations in the Yucatán area of Mexico, some of whom consider archaeologists to be invaders of their land (Rodriguez 2001).

Here I must acknowledge my own naïveté in conceiving of research in Amazonia to be nonproblematic with regard to access to land, sites, and artifacts, and also with regard to the implications of archaeological research on the identities of the local inhabitants. But the troubled beginning I have outlined marked the start of a relationship built on dialogue and based on constant ne-
egotiation, close cooperation, friendship, and reciprocity during three years of working together.

From the very beginning of the project, the decision was made to establish the research team's base in the community in order to achieve a greater closeness with the inhabitants and their way of life. During fieldwork, the team (made up of me and occasional archaeologist colleagues willing to collaborate) was based mainly in a small house that remained empty most of the rest of the time, being used by the priest only when he came from Santarém to hold his services in the community. Sometimes we stayed in the house of a local inhabitant. Here we put up our hammocks in the open air, protected by a straw covering. The team's meals were prepared by a cook and at the end of the afternoon baths were taken in the Mangal stream, together with a crowd of children and young people.

A decisive factor in dispersing initial distrust was my participation in social events. I attended birthday parties, funerals, watched soccer tournaments, had lunch with neighbors, spent weekends at the beach, made bicycle trips to visit other communities, and accompanied processions and parties for saints, with celebrations that lasted for ten days. I learned how to dance local rhythms, to the delight of the older women and children who had a lot of fun with my lack of ability. The hiring of local workers, who played an active participatory role in the process of investigation, led to information about the project being disseminated in the community; this also contributed to the elimination of distrust.
As part of the strategy to disseminate information, meetings were held in the community school with a view to presenting results of the archaeological research. Students, parents, teachers, and political leaders attended these meetings. In my last field season, a brochure was produced and distributed among the audience especially to deal with the subject of illegal trade of archaeological antiquities in the area. Generally speaking, the people listened with interest to my statements on the archaeological work but felt too intimidated to participate more actively in the discussions (although they tended to do so on less formal occasions). A certain time seems to be necessary before information is digested and taken up again in informal conversations or teachers' meetings.

There is, then, an apparent indifference to the archaeological heritage. But even though local people see little connection with their past, some leaders have found a way of appropriating archaeological discourse in order to reinforce the community identity. The refusal of the Paraú community to self-identify as Indians is quite different from the actions of neighboring communities, who have recently chosen the alternative political option of recreating some Indian traditions, even though their connections with any indigenous group are harder to verify. This suggests a process of construction of contrastive local identities. Lack of direct historical continuity between precolonial occupations and the contemporary community, a subject that was constantly discussed during public assemblies, was considered a positive aspect in this particular context. It is an argument taken from my talks on archaeological fieldwork that is being used to help support a self-image of the population as modern Brazilian citizens.

THE FIELDWORK

Logistical difficulties encountered in carrying out fieldwork in Amazonia include lack of surface visibility and limited access to the terrain, brought about by dense vegetation. In this sense, the hiring of local workers was of great importance. Their labor made possible the opening of the transects, which served as access routes for the team to move around within the secondary forest, as well as the conducting of subsurface tests during archaeological surveys and site delimitation.

A team of six workers was initially involved with activities such as cutting down vegetation, putting up numbered stakes along the transects, and carrying out shovel tests at regular intervals. Another task they accomplished was the reconnaissance of plant species in archaeological sites. For the next stage of work, a smaller group was trained to sieve soil and dig test pits before joining archaeologists in the excavation of larger units (figure 13.3).

Those workers who could read and write were encouraged to register notes on the archaeological evidence and to draw profiles, with the help of students and archaeologists. At this point they started to feel a bit like archaeologists and to suggest interpretations of intrasite distributions, identifying different areas of
concentration of archaeological refuse and patterns of settlements that might be
represented by the sites observed during the survey. Some of their ideas were
quite appropriate, for example, the way they perceive the relationship between
larger residential sites, fish camps, and other sites of specific purpose.

Findings of highly decorated artifacts were met with surprise. But the work-
ers immediately recognized artifacts that were part of the paraphernalia for pro-
cessing manioc because these could be related to practices of subsistence,
which they themselves were familiar with. However, the excavation of a fune-
rary urn containing calcinated human bones was the discovery that caused the
greatest commotion. The urn was excavated by all with the greatest care and in-
terest. Each detail of the artifact—its form, dimensions, surface properties, and
use marks—was closely observed in the field. On the initiative of the workers
themselves, the spot was never left unattended, even during mealtimes, until
the process was concluded, as they feared that other people might disturb the
excavation.

As this was an individual PhD project not attached to a larger academic proj-
ect, the team’s composition was itinerant and varied according to each phase of
work. In fact, the only constant members were the workers and I. As a woman
and director of the project, I have come to realize that hierarchical relations ac-
quire different shades due to cultural and gender inequalities (Gero 1996) in the
context of a traditional society.

In relation to social inequalities, I tried to minimize existing differences by of-
fering democratic access to information and strengthening social ties with the
workers. This might have helped to develop the team spirit and group cohesion manifested on many different occasions, especially in situations involving conflict. Lastly, it is important to realize the extent to which the hired workers became involved with the archaeological work, their commitment not solely motivated by economic gain. There was an interest in fulfilling responsibilities and carrying out each task competently. Although most research is still carried out within the myth of objective data collection, we know that scientific practice is guided socially and politically (Shanks and Tilley 1987, 1989; Gero 1994). In this case, interaction with the Parauá community allowed access to different perspectives and interpretations, and we should recognize their active participation in the construction of archaeological knowledge.

One example of the active role of the local community in archaeological practice is connected to their cosmological beliefs and tales, especially those about supernatural beings. These cosmological schemes are part of the everyday cognition of the riverside populations in Amazonia (Vaz 1996, 59). Learning about them altered my perception of how the caboclos manage and interact with the environment through the medium of forces that act as guardians of natural resources, and which therefore are widely valued by the population. Archaeological sites are permeated by a complex relationship with beings from different cosmological levels, as are the different ecosystems crossed during the archaeological survey.

According to oral information, the community area is inhabited by spirits, good and bad, that make certain places, such as the igapó forests, Jacaré Lake, the igarapés (streams), and rocks situated on the banks of the Tapajós River dangerous to go to if certain rules are not observed. The igapó forests consist of a kind of swamp that floods periodically, having big trees with exposed roots and a great quantity of snakes. These are not only places of refuge for some species of fish during the flood season but also the home of dangerous creatures believed to be the owners of the igarapé—two great snakes with women's heads, slanted eyes, and bodies covered with yellow scales.

The rocks on the banks of the Tapajós River delimit the home of the freshwater dolphins, which are said to charm people who come too close and to carry them away to their submerged world at the bottom of the river—the enchanted land. As for Jacaré Lake, a place that contains various archaeological sites, this houses other enchanted beings besides the spirits of the ancient inhabitants. It is only through a dialogue held with these spirits and supernatural beings by one of the workers (a man who also acts as shaman for the community) that the archaeological team was allowed access to those locations and the bad spirits dissipated.

CONCLUSION

For me a significant problem in explaining caboclos identities is the idea of historical continuity between past and present populations. As an archaeologist I
should plainly state that there are no historical continuities between ancient formative societies and present caboclos in Paraúá. Various historical processes related to the European colonization, specifically religious missions, have destroyed the cultural, social, and political organization of several former indigenous groups in the Lower Amazon.

Caboclos are a new population arising from drastic changes that affected the cultural diversity of native societies (different languages, forms of social organization, rituals, etc.). That diversity was replaced by another language (first Tupiguarani and then Portuguese), another religion, and a new way of life, creating a “generic Indian” with a cultural heritage that is part Iberian and part indigenous, with additional cultural contributions from other groups (Arenz 2000; Ribeiro 1997, 319–20).

This is not particular to the people of Paraúá. It can be generalized for much of Brazilian Amazonia. Today, the historical peasants known as caboclos are considered by some scholars as the inheritors of the ecological knowledge of Amazonian natives (Murrieta and WinklerPrins 2003, 35). From an archaeological perspective, what they really have in common with formative Amazonian societies are agricultural and management practices related to the manipulation of natural resources and also food technologies associated with the preparation of manioc, their main staple food.

What is particular to Paraúá caboclos is not their history but the way they present that history in the construction of identities. As a socially marginalized population, in the context of class divisions of the national society, the caboclos want to emphasize their cultural identities. This can be done in different ways, depending on the advantages they think they could obtain. The first option is to state that they are modern citizens, denying any connection with the past. The second option is to identify with an indigenous heritage.

As an archaeologist who has worked at Paraúá for three years, I have come to understand, in practice, just how fluid the process of construction of modern identities is. Populations can do whatever they want with information provided by archaeologists. And this group from Paraúá has chosen the first alternative—that is, they have chosen to use the results of the archaeological work to help support their statement that they are modern citizens.

It would be easy to assume that the Paraúá community was being manipulated or that the results of the archaeological work would somehow undermine identities. This is not what I see in this situation. Instead, these people are actively appropriating something that at first sight they did not agree with and considered dangerous (the archaeological work) for their own benefit.

Their chosen option was to emphasize and self-identify as modern citizens, in contrast with neighboring communities that have chosen the alternative strategy of emphasizing the links with their indigenous cultural heritage. This is an example of self-empowerment of members of the community, expressing their partial control over the contents of archaeological research and incorporating it into the historical process of the construction of cultural identities.
There are clearly ethical aspects to the way the results of the archaeological research are presented to the community. Since the beginning of the project we decided to concentrate all the discussions at the local school, as a way of identifying the archaeological research as a scientific and not an economic project. As part of the same strategy, we tried to deliver information neutrally and without stressing any particular aspect. The choices made by political leaders stem from a dynamic process of formation of identities in this part of the Lower Tapajós.

It can be concluded that archaeological practices developed together with the Parauá community—and all our social interactions and engagements with them—are inevitably political in character, attached to a continual process of construction of fluid and polymorphous identities (Jones 1997), constantly negotiated in the face of different demands of local communities.

This chapter has been written from the point of view of an archaeological fieldworker and not that of an ethnographer as such. But rather than just present objective knowledge about the archaeology of the region, I have also tried to include an account of the role of local people in the production of archaeological knowledge, as well as the role of archaeology in the construction of local identities. What has emerged, I would argue, is a kind of ethnography of archaeology, which enables us to glimpse at least something of the complex social interface that can develop between archaeologists and local communities.

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