CHILDHOOD DYNAMICS IN A CHANGING CULTURE. EXAMPLES FROM THE XAVANTE PEOPLE OF CENTRAL BRAZIL

Angela Nunes

The ethnographic data and reflections presented in this paper[1] are not about a people living through a migration process, but about a group of people in Central Brazil who were prevented from continuing their migrant way of life and had to settle down. They still suffer from the consequences of the sudden and violent change in all aspects of their social lives caused by having to give up a semi-nomadic existence that had determined their way of life for centuries. With a great deal of effort, however, they are finding ways to mend what was almost destroyed. Their hopes lie in the children. They say children can better bridge the past with the future. They say children have a wisdom that adults do not know much about.

Indigenous children and the Anthropology of Childhood

Despite efforts during the last 15 years to acknowledge the child as a social agent and childhood as a social phenomenon in the social and educational sciences, there is still a need to intensify and diversify the research that reveals the participation of children in the (re-)construction of social life, in any society. Expanded ethnographic research on childhood as such may not be the solution in and of itself, but theoretical and methodological consolidation of this new field of study will not be possible without it. Within this new theoretical framework, childhood is not considered a unique and closed concept but varied dependent on the social particularities of a given group. Thus, it must be understood from an intercultural perspective.[2] Findings resulting from research pursued within the framework of this approach are aimed to go beyond

---

1   I am grateful to Lynda Seeley and Helena Briosa e Mota for reviewing this paper, and to Rosário Carvalho for the discussions on the intercultural education programme for indigenous peoples in Brazil.

2   See, i.e., Caputo 1995; Hardman 1973; Hirschfeld 2002; James, Jenks & Prout 1997; James & Prout 1990, 1995; Jenks 1996; Mead 1975; Qvortrup 1994; Toren 1993.

theoretical contributions; they also aim at shaping the direction of childhood policies world wide.[3]

Indigenous children, however, have received less attention than any other group of children both by scientists and by the different organizations engaged in improving children's living conditions and ensuring their rights. The last UNICEF report specially dedicated to indigenous children, published in October 2003, states that:

Around the world in rural and urban areas alike, indigenous children frequently constitute one of the most disadvantaged groups, and their rights – including those to survival and development to the highest standard of health, to education that respects their cultural identity, and to protection from abuse, violence and exploitation – are often compromised. At the same time, however, indigenous children possess very special resources: they are the custodians of a multitude of cultures, languages, beliefs and heritage. As this Digest discusses, the most effective initiatives to promote the rights of indigenous children build upon these very elements. Such initiatives recognize the inherent strength of indigenous communities, families and children, respect their dignity and give them full voice in all matters that affect them.[4]

This paper is based on long-term anthropological field research on indigenous childhood I conducted in Brazil. It tries to shed some light on a subject that is still struggling to find its place in the field of recent international childhood studies, but also in the field of more general ethnological studies of indigenous societies in Brazil.[5]

Institutional support of childhood issues in Brazil has mostly concentrated on poor children who abound in the streets of big cities and who have been considered a serious social problem for decades.[6] As a consequence, these "problematic children" increasingly became the focus of attention among Brazilian educators, psychologists, jurists, and social workers. Sociologists did

---

3   Stephens 1995.
4   Innocenti Digest/Unicef 2003: 34.
5   Presently there are 216 different indigenous peoples living in Brazil in varied contact situations with the non-Indian Brazilian population, also termed the national society. Brazilian indigenous people speak around 180 different languages and the last census estimated a population of 350,000 persons (Ricardo 2000). According to Law 6.001 from December 19th 1973, "Indian [...] is defined as any individual with pre-Colombian descent or origin, who identifies him/herself, or is identified as belonging to an ethnic group, whose cultural characteristics are different from the ones of the national society," and an "indigenous community or tribal group is the set of families or Indian communities, either living in total isolation from other national community sectors or maintaining permanent or intermittent contact with the national society without being integrated into it." This Law is currently under revision. In the meantime, the statements above are considered to be valid. Anthropological literature uses "indigenous" and "Indians" as equivalent terms. The same designations are used by indigenous people/Indians in reference to themselves.
6   Alvim & Valadares 1988; Del Priore 1991, 2000; Martins 1993; Rizzini 1997a, 1997b, 2002; Rizinni 2000.

not get involved in the debate until the 1970s[7] and anthropologists have become engaged in the field only recently.

Dealing with so-called "street-children" or "street-kids" is certainly indispensable as long as there are children living on the streets. Nevertheless, considering that to date only "problematic children" have been at the centre of social science concerns, and in view of the lack of studies dealing with indigenous children, one may get the impression that the latter might not have received attention because they simply have no problems – at least not the type of problems that disturb the public order like those of "street-kids." Taking into consideration how distant Indian children are from the non-Indian society in ethnic, geographic, and social terms, the question arises of what we really know about them. Do they have problems or not? Do they give rise to problems or not? And as we do not have any answers so far that could appease our minds, we may ask whether – besides the potential "problems" that might be prevalent among indigenous children – there is anything else worthy of anthropological interest concerning childhood in indigenous societies.

An evaluation of Brazilian anthropological literature since the beginning of the 20th century reveals that its contribution to the knowledge about indigenous childhood are isolated and discontinuous. The information given is only of peripheral importance in the framework of the respective general research area.[8] Identification, systematization, and evaluation of this disperse data, which was largely obtained in the context of ascertaining data on the social organization of the different indigenous peoples, has shown how valuable it in fact is. It opens up research questions that have not been considered in Brazilian anthropology so far, research questions, from which one can proceed to study indigenous childhood.[9]

Recent ethnological research on indigenous childhood in Brazil is situated in the theoretical framework of the emerging anthropology of childhood, which points out that childhood studies also serve as instruments of reflection upon present social – particularly educational, economic, juridical, health, and gender – questions that affect not just children but all others with whom they share their social world.[10]

These studies have, indeed, revealed that indigenous childhood – like childhood in any society – must be studied as a topic in its own right, and that childhood in Brazilian indigenous societies is profoundly embedded in the

---

7   The first systematic and continuous studies by Brazilian sociologists about childhood took place at the beginning of the 1970s. One such study was ordered by the Court of São Paulo/Juvenile Court; the objective was to collect information about the juveniles who were provoking so many social problems (CEBRAP 1972). The other was carried out in Rio de Janeiro and had the same aims (Misse et al. 1973).

8   Nunes 1999, 2002.

9   Nunes 2004.

10 This means the child is considered a social agent. See details concerning the theory of an anthropology of childhood in the introduction to this book.

other aspects of social life.[11] To a great extent, these studies strengthen the paradigm of an anthropology of childhood as proposed by James and Prout[12] that childhood should be considered an important variable in social analysis, like any other variable. They also support a child-focused anthropology as proposed by Toren,[13] who argues that studies on childhood should not simply be multiplied but should rather be an integral part of social studies about any given society so as to be able to understand it as completely as possible.

The studies of indigenous childhood in Brazil mentioned above aim to apply these theoretical considerations. They desire to shed light on the specificity of Brazilian ethnological research and on the specificity of its empirical object – the more than 200 indigenous groups living in Brazil.[14]

Almost a decade after the beginning of the European research project *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon* (Qvortrup 1994), which led to sea change in social science studies of childhood, James, Jenks & Prout (1997: 26–33) identified four main approaches in contemporary childhood studies: (1) childhood as a social construction, (2) childhood as a world aside (3) children as a minority group, (4) childhood as a component of (all) social structures.[15] Studies about indigenous childhood can make use of all of these approaches and can contribute to their further development.

Firstly, in reference to the study of childhood as a social construction, the cultural variety and particularity of Brazilian indigenous societies constitute very diverse contexts that allow for comparative ethnographic research dealing with the question how childhood is socially constructed in different settings.

Secondly, as a world aside, what kind of "worlds aside" children construct under different social and cultural conditions and how these differences in the

---

11 Cohn 2000; Lopes da Silva, Macedo & Nunes 2002; Nunes 1999, 2004.

12 James & Prout 1990: 1–34.

13 Toren 1993: 462.

14 Cardoso de Oliveira (1986, 1998) describes Brazilian anthropology as a field of research that grew out of its particular empirical object: Indians, Africans, and Europeans. Knowledge was historically subordinated to the nature of these real objects, rather than to the nature of theory. Two traditions emerged from this specific situation: the ethnology of indigenous societies and the anthropology of the national society. Brazilian ethnology dedicated to indigenous societies started to define its particularity as scholars became aware of the fact that the classical analytical models constructed during the first half of the 20th century in Europe and based on African ethnographic data could not explain the social organisation and structure of South American indigenous societies, thus demanding the need for other explicatory models. Important contributions to this debate are the discussion on dualism in the South American lowlands, carried out between Lévi-Strauss (1960) and Maybury-Lewis (1960), and the analysis about the notion of Person undertaken by Kaplan (1977) at the XLII International Congress of Americanists, followed by Seeger et al. (1979), Lopes da Silva (1986), Carneiro da Cunha (1986), and Peirano (1991).

15 See details in the Introduction.

210

"worlds aside" relate to the larger social and cultural context can be investigated.

Thirdly, on the topic of childhood as a minority group, as a socially disadvantaged group, discriminated against and in need of political empowerment, indigenous children can serve as an excellent object of study – in fact they suffer from a double minority position: as children and as members of a minority group.

Fourthly, concerning the study of childhood as a socio-structural category present in all societies, studies dealing with specific societies in a local context can pick up the "universalist-versus-particularist-debate" and obtain new insights on the different forms and meanings social phenomena take on in relationship to the social and cultural context of the society they are part of. With regard to the latter, studies about indigenous childhood also offer an excellent framework to observe the interrelation between biological development and social conditions and structures.

Beyond the theoretical interests mentioned above, I would like to refer to the more pragmatic aspect present in my work about indigenous childhood and Brazilian anthropology in general. Scientific aims are interrelated with the social, juridical, and political issues that affect the individuals under study; research also aims at improving the latter's living conditions. Brazilian anthropologists are not merely passive observers. Instead, they have become indigenous societies' crucial allies and interlocutors. This approach keeps the needs of the people studied in mind and aims at giving them a voice in academic writing as well. Research about indigenous children could not be otherwise. Childhood topics in need of attention are many; most of them have not been addressed yet. I will concentrate on questions related to the introduction of formal school education in indigenous areas in Brazil, and – more specifically – in a village, where people with a semi-nomadic background, namely the Xavante, have settled down permanently.

Differentiated school education for Indian children

School education for indigenous people began in colonial times. According to Ferreira,[16] its first period lasted until the beginning of the 20th century. Its main objective was to deny existing indigenous diversity, to extinguish cultures and to train the indigenous population as a working force. The Church had an important role during this phase, and forcing the Indians to learn Portuguese was just one of the many practices for assimilating them into Christian civilization. The second period started in 1910, when the government created the SPI, the *Serviço de Protecção ao Índio* (Indian Protection Service), in an attempt to stop four centuries of extermination. Its objective was to integrate the remaining indigenous population into the national society. Several

---

16 Ferreira 2001: 71–111.

agendas aimed at development and at agricultural production were imposed on the indigenous population. Indians themselves had no say in any of the decisions made. However, most of these plans failed, including the plan to implement an educational programme aimed at adjusting the schools in indigenous areas to the needs of the respective people and community. Indian schools remained to be the same as the schools of the more established Brasilian society, but had to function under worse conditions and with less supplies.[17] Thus, school education alienated Indians from their cultural and social values by completely ignoring long established indigenous educational practices.

During the 1960s and 1970s, when Brazilian anthropology focused on indigenous societies acquired a certain standing, Indian leaders and anthropologists became aware of the fact that school education was a double-edged sword. It helped the Indians interact with the non-Indian Brazilian society by teaching them to read and write; however, it also provoked cleavages within the indigenous populations and had a negative impact on their social equilibrium. In establishing a solid partnership between Indians, anthropologists, and non-government organizations, Indian political resistance against social discrimination was strengthened considerably and provided a foundation for their struggle for a more appropriate school education system. As a result, Indians were to receive school education, which ensured respect for their cultural and linguistic particularities. Indian teachers were to receive special training and be in charge of directing their schools, teaching the Indian school children, and producing their own teaching aids and methods. Under the designation "differentiated school education for indigenous peoples," these rights were laid down in the new Constitution of the Republic proclaimed in 1988. These steps were followed by a period of active co-operation among anthropologists, linguists, historians, and NGOs, who – together with indigenous leaders and government representatives – further developed desirable educational practices and policies.[18]

Many significant institutional initiatives followed. Indigenous communities are now involved in developing projects and producing educational materials to be used for teaching purposes. The number of anthropological studies dedicated to education matters has increased as well, focusing especially on linguistic and cognitive aspects, as well as on ethno-science and ethno-knowledge.[19]

However – and paradoxically – this academic engagement did not significantly increase our knowledge about the children in the indigenous societies under study. The latter still do not have a voice or a say when it comes to de-

---

17 On the history of Indians in Brazil, including the period of SPI administration, see Carneiro da Cunha 1992.

18 The different contributions to indigenous education are dealt with in: Capacla 1995; Lopes da Silva 1981, 1987; Lopes da Silva & Ferreira 2001a, 2001b; Lopes da Silva & Grupioni 1995.

19 I.e. Carrara 1997; Emiri & Monserrat 1989; Ferreira 1992, 2002; Giannini 1991, 1994; Monte 1996; Tassinari 2001.

veloping educational methods and programmes. Indigenous children, understood as an ontological category in their own right,[20] and as social agents having a mind to develop and express thoughts and a voice to speak,[21] are just now beginning to become involved in Brazilian anthropological research.[22] Some old concepts of childhood socialization are seemingly difficult to overcome. One example is the International Labour Convention[23] concerning "Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries," which was ratified by the President of Brazil in April 2004. Children are mentioned only twice and only when education issues are concerned.

Art. 28.1: Children belonging to the peoples concerned shall, wherever practicable, be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language or in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong. When this is not practicable, the competent authorities shall undertake consultations with these peoples with a view to the adoption of measures to achieve this objective.

Art. 29: The imparting of general knowledge and skills that will help children belonging to the peoples concerned to participate fully and on an equal footing in their own community and in the national community shall be an aim of education for these peoples.

Respect for indigenous languages is an official policy aim, as are consultations with the indigenous peoples when difficulties arise – however, it remains unsaid, whether the latter are meant to include consulting the children. Equal social participation in both the local and the national community is aimed at as well, and this is to be supported by adequate teaching. However, what children for their part can give to their communities and how they influence social life, is not mentioned. The rights of children to be heard, the comprehension and consideration of their understandings of their environment are matters, which are to date largely ignored. The International Labour Convention has considerable political importance world wide; it is regrettable that it does not consider social science findings about childhood in its statutes. One could argue that the latter were formulated in 1991, at a time when research only started to bring about major changes in the approach and understanding of childhood and childhood policies. But one could also argue, on the other hand, that in the meantime the new findings could have been included gradually, adjusting them to new and current demands. Thus, despite all positive achievements, to date, scientific as well as children's knowledge about the societies concerned are not included in the design and implementation of educational policies.

---

20 Jenks 1996: 10.
21 James & Prout 1990: 8–9.
22 Nunes 1999, 2004; Cohn 2000; Lopes da Silva, Macedo & Nunes 2002.
23 International Labour Convention No. 169, dated 1991.

The school as an ideal locus for the meeting of cultures

In order to convey a more vivid impression of the issues at stake and in an attempt to bridge theory and practice, I invite the reader to enter the daily life of a small Xavante village called Idzö'uhu, located in the Indigenous Area Sangradouro, Mato Grosso, in Central Brazil. Here people are involved in the challenging endeavour of planning an educational project.

The Xavante are identified in ethnological literature as one of the indigenous or Indian peoples of the South American lowlands.[24] First written sources about the Xavante – a semi-nomadic people of hunters and gatherers – date from the 18th century. According to these documents,[25] they were constantly moving from one area to another. As they lived in temporary settlements for only three to four years, surviving by undertaking seasonal excursions in search of resources, the Xavante could not inscribe their domination upon a certain territory. There is evidence, however, that since the beginning of the 19th century they were forced to migrate westward as a result of the occupation of their territory by the state and due to agricultural expansion. Options for gathering and hunting were reduced dramatically, and survival became difficult. Several documents testify that the Xavante did not want to make contact with non-Indians.[26] At the end of the 1950s, after centuries of fighting, the Xavante were tired of fleeing, suffering from hunger and of not being able to cure the many diseases that had befallen them. They took refuge in the missions that had been established nearby and the missionaries provided them with food and medical care. The Xavante built settlements in their neighbourhood, but did not have in mind to settle there permanently at first. However, due to the new territorial order that had been established in the meantime, it was not possible to return to the semi-nomadic lifesytle they were used to. Thus, the Xavante ended up being dependent on the missions for quite some time with no other chance than to accept whatever was imposed upon them by the outside world.

Only during the 1970s, when Indian political awareness rose and political action set in on a wider scale did things started changing. The Xavante today live in permanent settlements in seven protected areas in the State of Mato

---

24 The Xavante identify themselves as A'uwẽ, which is also their linguistic identification. It means "people" or "us." The designation Xavante is of Portuguese origin, the meaning of which is not known (Nimuendaju 1942). Although they are sometimes referred to as A'uwẽ-Xavante in the ethnological literature, the latter term is the one used more often, and is assumed to be their correct identification. The American anthropologist Maybury-Lewis was the first to pursue research among the Xavante people at the end of the 1960s (1967, 1979). Other important studies were undertaken by Graham (1990, 1995), and Lopes da Silva (1982, 1986, 1992).

25 See Lopes da Silva 1992.

26 On Xavante resistance to contact see Lopes 1988; Lopes da Silva 1992; Menezes 1982.

Grosso, Central Brazil. Almost 10,000 Xavante live in more than fifty villages of 100 to 1,000 inhabitants each.[27]

Things have changed since the times of the first closer contacts between the Indians and the non-Indian missionaries. This becomes apparent in the words of the education project's leader in Idzö'uhu when reflecting upon 19 years of experience in the mission school – the experience of studying to become a primary school teacher, of working as a teacher under the guidance of the missionaries and of now being engaged in the educational programme for the indigenous population:

I thought that what I learned at the occidental school was something that would work out, would help us to see and solve our political problems, among ourselves and also with the non-Indian society. But this was an illusion. I say this because we, ourselves, we have a different view. For us, learning how to read and write means that we are prepared to defend ourselves. Not individually, but together. Learning how to read and write means having a minimum knowledge about life in the cities and [...] about relating socially with the surrounding societies, and vice-versa. However, from what I can see, this occidental school, instead of helping us, is confounding us more. I am sure it is. The school took a big space away from the children. Before, children were free to play, to learn about our culture, how to do things with their parents, to listen to the older ones. But school took this part [of education] away from us. Children do not have any time for that because they are always busy with school tasks and activities.[28]

Despite all the institutional and scientific support with regard to indigenous education, there is obviously a high degree of disappointment – the major reason being that it has been very difficult to put into practice what papers and documents state, or to see actual improvement. At the time we came to an agreement about my stay in the Xavante village concerned, the teacher leading the project said that until then, nobody – Indians, pedagogues, anthropologists or technicians from the Ministry of Education – knew exactly what the so-called "differentiated school education for indigenous peoples" actually was all about, nor did anyone know how to develop or apply appropriate new educational programmes. One of the obstacles was that the Indian teachers had not been asked to contribute their experience and knowledge in the process, another that suggestions coming from the villages were rarely accepted or even considered at the institutional level. The teacher I talked to was well aware that local projects needed professional support as well and, knowing I was an anthropologist with an interest in education issues, he invited me to observe the establishment of the differentiated school project in progress in his village. Of all the challenges that ethnographic field work in indigenous areas poses, what made this invitation particularly challenging was that he was

---

27 Ricardo 2000.
28 Testimony from Lucas Ruri'ð. Quoted with permission. Note his usage of the term "occidental school;" he is clearly familiar with social science terminology, which implicitly opposes western and non-western societies.

looking for support to objectify what he called "giving value to children's participation." He considered this aspect to be absent in the government's educational programmes. Both of us were in agreement: children's thoughts about the world around them, their ways of acting within and of changing it need to be known to design and implement any educational programme that would serve children's interests. If ethnology does not provide adequate information about Indian childhood, how could the education experts, sitting in their offices in Brasília, consider its particularities?

The Xavante village where this project took place had around 100 inhabitants, living in 12 houses made of wood and palm leaves. Each was occupied by an extended nuclear family.[29] There was no electricity supply and no running water. The village was founded by an old Xavante man, together with his sons and daughters and some other families, who had decided to separate from the main Xavante village located near the mission area. This main village was established at the end of the 1950s, when the first contact between Xavante people and missionaries took place. At the time the new settlement was founded, the main village had more than 1,000 inhabitants. The teacher I was working with told me that initiating an Indian education project would not have been possible in the main village because of the dominance of the mission school that was attended by all children, and because of internal disagreements among some of the Xavante political factions. It is common practice among the Xavante for a group to split for demographic or political reasons – a practice that has become more frequent since the semi-nomadic existence came to an end. In the village where I collected my data, the separation from the old village was a decisive step towards autonomy, and it was started by developing an educational project. The main objectives of this project were to:

- rescue the traditional Xavante knowledge developed as semi-nomads and to re-activate social and cultural practices already in a process of erosion – partly by adjusting them to the changes caused by ending their semi-nomadic lifestyle and becoming permanently settled.
- reflect upon the new knowledge gathered in the years of contact with non-Indian people – like the Portuguese language, school education, access to media, new technologies and different behaviours.

---

29 Xavante social organisation is based on two exogamous moieties that correspond to two clans. They follow a patrilineal rule of descent and an uxorilocal rule of residence. This dual social organisation is crossed by a complex system of age- and class-sets that, according to Maybury-Lewis (1967), are crucial for the understanding of the social structure of the Xavante. Cf. Graham 1990, 1995; Lopes da Silva 1983, 1986 and Maybury-Lewis 1979.

- combine both forms of knowledge in a way that takes into account whatever is advantageous in order to be prepared for dealing with the outside world while at the same time not losing one's own cultural heritage. The school as an open place for the whole community was meant to serve as an ideal locus for this meeting and mixing of cultures.
- create one's own didactic materials and to serve as an example for other Xavante communities in order to contribute to the development of differentiated school education for indigenous peoples in general, and to communicate Xavante culture and knowledge to wider Brazilian society.

The project was to be carried out by its leader, acting as mentor and co-ordinator, and by two other Xavante teachers: a woman working with children aged four to ten and a man working with children aged eleven to fourteen. They told me that their hope to keep Xavante culture alive depended on what the old men and women could pass on to the children. The teachers, as the intermediate generation that grew up under the influence of the missionaries and the missionary school, would merely be the ones preparing the ground for this endeavour.[30] They hoped that the children would stimulate their families to recall Xavante values and practices already abandoned or forgotten and – at the same time – to become aware of and prepare to deal with the changes and demands that had occurred with time. They believed that children were more open-minded and adjustable to what was new or unknown in general – whether it derive from without or from within their own culture and society. Thus, children could re-activate abandoned and almost forgotten Xavante knowledge and link it to the knowledge of modern life. Children were to give life to the traditional Xavante past by incorporating it into the present and thereby preparing it for the future.

What made this ambitious project innovative and different from the others I knew was the central and strategic position of the children in it – as receptors, conductors and creators of culture and knowledge. The Xavante teachers' perception of culture as a process was in line with Carneiro da Cunha, who said: "What we must guarantee for future generations is not the preservation of cultural products, but the preservation of the capacity for cultural produc-

---

30 For several decades, missionary boarding-schools existed in some of Xavante areas, where Indian children were brought up and kept apart from their families during the school year, and, obviously, from their own Xavante culture. This caused significant cultural and social alienation between the different generations. Gradually, with pressure from Xavante leaders and scholars rising, these boarding-schools were closed (Menezes 1985). School education in the Xavante areas, however, largely remained under missionary control.

tion" (Carneiro da Cunha 1995: 290).[31] The teachers seemed convinced that children were those most able to guarantee this would actually happen.

Blackened faces at the break of dawn

Soon after I arrived in the village and started my fieldwork, the teachers told me with considerable enthusiasm about something called "coal dust game," referring to it as one of the school activities the children enjoyed a lot. The game had been inspired by a Xavante practice recently recalled by the old people and re-arranged to serve a new purpose in school education. According to the elder Xavante people, in times past, when the Xavante were still living a semi-nomadic life, everyone woke up before sunrise and took a bath in a nearby river. This was supposed to maintain one's health and prepare a person for the daily tasks. The older generation still stick to this habit today, but the younger ones have given it up or limited its frequency. The "coal dust game" was intended to recollect this practice and adapt it to new educational purposes. It was carried out as follows:

The children (five to 12 years old) who managed to wake up at daybreak gathered in front of the teacher's house and went along with him from house to house, awakening the other children. To do so they were given little pieces of coal from the fire the night before, which they crumbled into dust, to rub on the faces of their sleeping mates. The latter, caught by surprise, would protest, but – now fully awake – would join the group in their activities. When all children were awake, the game transformed into a mock fight – including a lot of laughter, shouting, and sometimes some tears as well – with all of them rubbing each other's bodies with coal dust. Then they and their teacher all went to take a bath in the nearby river.

This practice of rubbing faces with coal dust has its origin in the gendered division of labour with women in charge of all domestic tasks. They collected fruits and seeds and worked in the small seasonal manioc gardens. Men for their part had to defend the territory and the people. They were in charge of opening clearings in the woods to establish new settlements and engaged in hunting and fishing. In case a man stayed at home for too long, not fulfilling his duty to provide for the family with fresh meat and fish, his wife would protest by rubbing coal dust in his face. To wash himself he needed to go to the river. It was likely for him to be seen by someone who would then spread the embarrassing news that he had not brought home any food for a long time. Through the "coal dust game" the teachers wanted to revive a cultural practice almost forgotten among the younger generation. They managed to do so by furnishing it with new dynamics. At the same time they caused the same kind of shameful feeling among those not able to fulfil their responsibilities – arriv-

---

31 See Clifford (1988) and Sahlins (2000) on the topic of "culture" as anthropology's "disappearing object."

ing at school on time, clean and fresh. What the teachers were not expecting, however, was the children taking the lesson so seriously and becoming so enthusiastic about it that they decided to wake up all sorts of people by rubbing their faces with coal dust. This caused a lot of fun and laughter initially – as well as some protest by the young men – but most of all it initiated a general discussion about the present gendered distribution of work in the village. I will try to explain why.

After settling permanently, the need to clear woods for new settlements decreased substantially. Having to defend one's territory became a thing of the past and the surrounding farms hardly made hunting activities possible. Thus, traditional male tasks became largely obsolete. Apart from their involvement in local politics, which takes up some time, men these days have a lot of spare time.

On the other hand, the increased number of children that need to be taken care of and fed, increased the need to raise crops and collect wood for fires. Furthermore, once clothing had been introduced into their culture by the missionaries, these also had to be washed. As all these activities are traditional female tasks, women – as opposed to the men – had to work more and more. As one result, most women stick to the tradition of waking up before sunrise so as to complete their many tasks. Most men on the other hand – especially the younger ones – do not. It was these younger men who were forced to wake up through the "coal dust effect."

The children's awakening action thus uncovered several social problems in the community at large. It caused the villagers to reflect upon traditional Xavante practices and new practices introduced by school education. For example, people started to talk about the fact that women were gradually withdrawing from participation in dances and rituals, simply because they were too tired from work. People felt this was a serious loss, especially in a society where the older generation need to serve as examples to maintain its cultural heritage. Furthermore, girls stopped going to school at a very early age to help their mothers in their domestic tasks and to look after their younger siblings. People gathered that such an uneven distribution of knowledge would increase problems between the sexes. Women would largely remain illiterate, they would not know Portuguese and thus would have little chance outside the world of the Xavante. They realized that if they let things continue in this way, the Xavante would never manage to establish school education as a means to prepare all of their members – girls and boys, women and men – to interact as equals with one another and with the more widely established Brazilian society and its culture.

Another important discussion the "coal dust game" evoked concerned the question of parents' and teachers' responsibilities for children's education. Being at school on time, for example, was a problem. The teachers did not want to ring the bell to call the children to class, like the missionaries used to do and like city schools still do today. They preferred to rely on their own cultural heritage, inventing the "coal dust game." They succeeded too. I noticed

that on the days the "coal dust game" did not take place, some children were late for school, were not clean and had left their school materials at home. Sometimes the teacher had to send them to the school lavatory to wash themselves or back home to get their things. The teachers did not feel at ease doing so because they were afraid to hurt the parent's feelings, who, in their opinion, were the ones who should feel responsible, but some of whom obviously did not.

A number of questions arise: What are the teachers' and the families' obligations in such a differentiated school project that wants to include the whole community? Where are the boundaries between parents' and teachers' duties? Where do these boundaries overlap? Children who have to help their parents while they should be at school have a problem. How is this problem to be solved by those personally and institutionally involved – children, parents, teachers, and the school system? How can the rights guaranteed by the Constitution be put into practice?

Such problems were often discussed at the evening meetings in the *warã*, the central area of the village. Although this is traditionally a male space, it was also frequented by women and children on such occasions. The children used to stay quiet and listen to what was said, playing around a bit. Obviously, finding solutions that satisfied everyone was not easy since there were contradictory opinions and viewpoints, but the teachers tried anyhow. "We are just at the beginning. We still do not understand fully what this differentiated school education is," one of them told me. Another one said: "We have lived under the influence of the missionary school system for 40 years. That is quite a long time. [...] We have to accept that sometimes the community does not understand, does not approve. It is part of it. But I am not going to give up trying other ways. I cannot remain within old patterns forever."

The children's positive response to the "coal dust game" as well as the discussions that ensued confirmed the teachers' conviction that they should go ahead in searching for appropriate new solutions to the developing problems. Besides, the "coal dust game" had many – intended and unintended – positive effects on social life in the community. I could observe not only the discovery of the gender problem through the "coal dust game," but also some attempts to find solutions. For example, the village's truck was made available for women at least once a week to go collect wood. Before, women as well as some of the girls had to walk several kilometres carrying heavy burdens on their backs. I also heard the older men in the village stating that men should help their wives with the work in the fields, which caused some confusion with regard to gender roles and obligations at first. They said, men's help would make it less necessary for girls to help their mothers, which would enable them to attend school. So the old men set an example for the younger ones, an initiative much appreciated by the teachers in charge of the project.

How to value children's participation?

I do not know what the project has achieved since my fieldwork, but I think that the unfolding of the "coal dust game" in this small community serves as a good example of what the Xavante teacher described as giving value to children's participation. In theorical terms: children's experience is perceived as having an impact on social life which is acknowledged as agency. Later, the same teacher explained to me that this to him means paying attention to the signs children give and to gradually completing an educational process taking place both at school and in daily life elsewhere.

This educational process has been affecting the whole community of Idzö'uhu. For example, children took home Portuguese words, but they also showed increasing interest in Xavante mythology. In ethno-science lessons, children learned how to make use of their natural environment in order to improve their own and their families' nutrition, they learned how to find healing herbs and roots and to produce useful tools as well as arts and crafts. As children were learning about almost forgotten cultural practices from the older men and women, who had still experienced a semi-nomadic lifestyle, the intermediate generation eventually recalled them as well, giving them new meanings and using them for new purposes.

As we have seen, combining different forms of knowledge and different ways of communicating knowledge is not an easy task and involves many problems. One needs to combine children's need for regular school education with their family's need for children to partake in domestic activities. Tasks with regard to school education need to be distributed. Xavante women, for instance, do not traditionally have any role in their children's formal education. Therefore it is difficult for people to accept female teachers, difficult to understand that such a female teacher might leave the village for long periods of time to attend courses while her husband takes care of the children. This very woman and teacher with all her expertise and influence will – as a result of the latter – also play an important role in politics concerning indigenous education, a major field of indigenous politics. This fact will likely also encounter resistance in a society, where traditionally politics and public affairs were once the exclusive domain of men.

The project, the implementation of which I observed among the Xavante, needs to be understood as an intercultural process. To do so, one needs to acknowledge that the acquisition and mediation of knowledge in indigenous cultures differs from how this process takes place in non-indigenous cultures. The former is based on specific oral traditions, which differ from one group of people to another, whereas the latter has a written tradition, which is influenced by mass communication resulting in a higher degree of standardization and mutual intelligibility. Nevertheless, it is possible to communicate between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures and their respective traditions. Such an intercultural process would ideally involve communication, exchange and reciprocity on an equal footing between the societies involved. However, my

observations show that this is not (yet) the case. Teachers mentioned more than once that school education occupies the space of Indian culture, keeping children away from Xavante culture and its ways of learning about the world. This suggests competition rather than dialogue between the cultures concerned – with the Xavante culture on the losing side. The Indians' search for solutions to such problems – solutions which make sense within their own culture – is of crucial importance here, also because it is a way to identify differences and peculiarities, thus making it easier to deal with them.

An important step in the direction of intercultural education on the part of the non-indigenous society would be the institutional acknowledgement of indigenous schools and teachers by the government as well as that proposals coming from the villages be treated with respect and given support. Here is where anthropologists can give a hand.

The question remains, however, whether those planning differentiated school education for the Indian peoples of Brazil are able to accept and understand what the Xavante teacher from Idzö'uhu said: "Not everyone can bow their head and recognize a child's experience. But it is important to give attention to the wisdom that children have and which we do not know anything about. Instead of going there, where the child has more freedom to be creative, we do not care and say: 'it is just childish.' And that is why we are unable to value what children feel."

The perception of childhood that this Xavante teacher expressed is usually not perceived by the professionals dealing with education questions. It also escapes most social scientists' minds, anthropologists included. When we talk about intercultural dialogue we need to keep in mind that even a single culture is not experienced the same way by all those identifying with it. There are several interacting sub-cultures within any given culture, as well as many cultural identities, one of them being those of children. Within the programmes of indigenous school education, it might be clear and generally accepted that the cultural particularities of each of the indigenous peoples be taken into consideration. What is not so clear and not accepted is that children as members of these indigenous groups of people have an identity of their own, which might be congruent in parts with the rest of the community, but might very well differ from it in others. Such particularities and differences in children's identity within a given culture and society are still not considered in the differentiated school education programmes and curricula. It is still only adults who officially define them. Children's perception of such cultural particularities of the society they live in is still ignored, as is their (sub-)cultural identity.

References

Alvim, Rosilene & Lícia Valadares 1988: Infância e sociedade no Brasil: Uma análise da literatura. *Anpocs/BIB* 26: 3–37.

Capacla, Marta 1995: O *Debate Sobre a Educação Indígena no Brasil (1975–1995)*. Cadernos de Educação Indígena, Vol I. São Paulo: MARI, MEC.

Caputo, Virginia 1995: Anthropology's silent 'others:' a consideration of some conceptual and methodological issues for the study of youth and children's cultures. In: Amit-Talai, Vered & Helena Wulff (ed.): *Youth Culture*. London & New York: Routledge: 19–41.

Cardoso de Oliveira, Roberto 1986: O que é isso que chamamos de antropologia Brasileira. *Anuário Antropológico* 85: 227–246.

Cardoso de Oliveira, Roberto 1998: O *Trabalho do Antropólogo*. Brasília: Paralelo 15. São Paulo: Editora Unesp.

Carrara, Eduardo 1997: *Tsi Tewara: Um Vôo Sobre o Cerrado Xavante*. Dissertação de Mestrado. Universidade de São Paulo: Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Departamento de Antropologia.

Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (ed.) 1972: *A Criança, o Adolescente e a Cidade*. São Paulo: Relatório de Pesquisa.

Cohn, Clarice 2000: *A Criança Indígena: A Concepção Xikrin de Infância e Aprendizado*. Dissertação de Mestrado. Universidade de São Paulo.

Carneiro da Cunha, Manuela 1992: *História dos Índios no Brasil*. São Paulo: USP, Cia das Letras, SMC e Fapesp.

Carneiro da Cunha, Manuela 1995: Children, politics and culture: the case of Brazilian Indians. In: Stephens, Sharon (ed.): *Children and the Politics of Culture*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press: 282–291.

Clifford, James 1988: *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Del Priore, Mary (ed.) 1991: *História da Criança no Brasil*. Col. Caminhos da História. São Paulo: Contexto.

Del Priore, Mary (ed.) 2000: *História das Crianças no Brasil*. São Paulo: Contexto.

Emiri, Loretta & Ruth Monserrat (eds.) 1989: *A Conquista da Escrita – Encontros de Educação Indígena*. São Paulo: OPAN/Iluminuras.

Ferreira, Mariana 1992: *Da Origem dos Homens à Conquista da Escrita: Um Estudo Sobre Povos Indígenas e Educação Escolar Indígena*. Dissertação de Mestrado. Universidade de São Paulo: Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Departamento de Antropologia.

Ferreira, Mariana 2001: A educação escolar indígena: um diagnóstico crítico da situação no Brasil. In: Lopes da Silva, Aracy & Mariana Ferreira (eds.): *Antropologia, História e Educação: A Questão Indígena e a Escola*. Série Antropologia e Educação. São Paulo: Editora Global, Mari e Fapesp: 71–111.

Ferreira, Mariana (ed.) 2002: *Ideias Matemáticas – de Povos Culturalmente Distintos*. Série Antropologia e Educação. São Paulo: Editora Global, Mari e Fapesp.

Giannini, Isabelle 1991: *A Ave Resgatada: A Impossibilidade da Leveza do Ser*. Dissertação de Mestrado. Universidade de São Paulo: Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Departamento de Antropologia.

Giannini, Isabelle 1994: Educação indígena e o manejo socioeconômico dos recursos Florestais: a experiência Xikrin. *Em Aberto* 14 (63): 117–121.

Graham, Laura 1990: *The Always Living: Discourse and the Male Life Cycle of the Xavante Indians of Central Brazil*. 2 Vols. PhD thesis. Austin: The University of Texas.

Graham, Laura 1995: *Performing Dreams: Discourses of Immortality Among the Xavante of Central Brasil*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Hardman, Charlotte 1973: Can there be an anthropology of children? *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 4 (2): 85–99.

Hirschfeld, Laurence 2002: Why don't anthropologists like children? *American Anthropologist* 104 (2): 611–627.

James, Allison & Alan Prout (eds.) 1990: *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press.

James, Allison & Alan Prout 1995: Hierarchy, boundary and agency: toward a theoretical perspective on childhood. *Sociological Studies of Children* 7: 77–99.

James, Allison, Chris Jenks & Alan Prout 1997: *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Jenks, Chris 1996: *Childhood*. London & New York: Routledge.

Kaplan, Joanna 1977: Orientation for paper topics and comments to Simpósio Social Time and Social Space in Lowland South American Societies. *Actes du XLIIe Congrès International des Américanistes*, Vol II. Paris.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude 1960: On manipulated sociological models. *Bijdragen* 116: 45–54.

Lopes, Marta 1988: *A Resistência do Índio ao Extermínio: O Caso dos A'uwẽ-Xavante , 1967–1980*. Dissertação de Mestrado em História. São Paulo: Universidade Estadual Paulista.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy (ed.) 1981: *A Questão da Educação Indígena. Comissão Pró-Índio de São Paulo*. São Paulo: Brasiliense.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy 1982: A expressão mítica da Vivência histórica: Tempo e espaço na construção da identidade Xavante. *Anuário Antropológico* 82: 200–214.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy 1983: Xavante: Casa-Aldeia-Chão-Terra-Vida. In: Novaes, Sylvia Caiuby (ed.): *Habitações Indígenas*. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo: 33–56.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy 1986: *Nomes e Amigos: Da Prática Xavante a Uma Reflexão Sobre Os Jê*. Coleção Antropologia, Vol. 6. São Paulo: Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas/Universidade de São Paulo.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy (ed.) 1987: *A Questão Indígena na Sala de Aula*. São Paulo: Ed. Brasiliense.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy 1992: Dois séculos e meio de história Xavante. In: Carneiro da Cunha, Manuela (ed.): *História dos Índios no Brasil*. São Paulo: USP, Cia das Letras, SMC e FAPESP: 357–378.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy & Mariana Ferreira (eds.) 2001a: *Antropologia, História e Educação: A Questão Indígena e a Escola. Série Antropologia e Educação*. São Paulo: Editora Global, Mari e Fapesp.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy & Mariana Ferreira (eds.) 2001b: *Práticas Pedagógicas na Escola Indígena*. Série Antropologia e Educação. São Paulo: Editora Global, Mari e Fapesp.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy & Luis Grupioni (eds.) 1995: *A Temática Indígena na Escola*. Brasília: MEC, Mari, Unesco.

Lopes da Silva, Aracy, Ana Vera Macedo & Angela Nunes (eds.) 2002: *Crianças Indígenas: Ensaios Antropológicos*. Série Antropologia e Educação. São Paulo: Editora Global, Mari e Fapesp.

Martins, José de Souza (ed.) 1993 [1991[1]]: *O Massacre dos Inocentes: A Criança Sem Infância no Brasil*. São Paulo: Ed. Hucitec.

Maybury-Lewis, David 1960: The analysis of dual organizations: a methodological critique. *Bijdragen* 116: 2–43.

Maybury-Lewis, David 1967: *Akwẽ-Shavante Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Maybury-Lewis, David 1979: *Dialectical Societies. The Gê and Bororo of Central Brazil*. Cambridge. MA.

Mead, Margaret 1975: Children's play style: potentialities and limitations of its use as a cultural indicator. *Anthropological Quarterly* 48 (3): 157–181.

Menezes, Cláudia 1982: Os Xavante e o movimento de fronteira no Leste mato-grossense. *Revista de Antropologia* 25: 63–87.

Menezes, Cláudia 1985: *Missionários e Índios em Mato Grosso (Os Xavante de São Marcos)*. Tese de Doutorado. Universidade de São Paulo: Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Departamento de Ciência Política.

Miller, Michael 2004: *Ensuring the Rights of Indigenous Children*. Innocenti Research Center Digest 11. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Center.

Misse, Michel et al. 1973: *Delinquência Juvenil na Guanabara*. Rio de Janeiro, Tribunal de Justiça do Estado da Guanabara, Juizado de Menores.

Monte, Nietta 1996: *Escolas da Floresta: Entre o Passado Oral e o Presente Letrado*. Rio de Janeiro: Multiletra.

Ninuendajú, Curt 1942: *The Sherente*. Los Angeles: Frederick Webb Hodge Anniversary Publication Fund.

Nunes, Angela 1999: *A Sociedade das Crianças A'uwe-Xavante: Por Uma Antropologia da Criança*. Colecção Temas de Investigação 8, Ministério da Educação. Lisboa: Instituto de Inovação Educacional.

Nunes, Angela 2002: O lugar da crianças nos textos sobre sociedades indígenas Brasileiras. In: Lopes da Silva, Aracy, Ana Vera Macedo & Angela Nunes (eds.): *Crianças Indígenas: Ensaios Antropológicos*, Coleção Antropologia e Educação, São Paulo: Ed. Global, Mari e Fapesp: 236–277.

Nunes, Angela 2004: *Brincando de Ser Criança: Contribuições da Etnologia Indígena Brasileira à Antropologia da Infância*. Tese de Doutoramento. Lisboa: Instituto Superior de Ciêncas do Trabalho e Empresa, Departamento de Antropologia.

Peirano, Mariza 1991: *The Anthropology of Anthropology: the Brazilian Case*. Série Antropologia 110, Brasília: Editora da UnB.

Qvortrup, Jens et al. 1994: *Childhood Matters*. Aldershot: Avebury.

Ricardo, Carlos Alberto (ed.) 2000: *Povos Indígenas no Brasil 1996–2000*. São Paulo: Instituto Socioambiental.

Rizzini, Irene 1997a: *O Século Perdido: Raízes Históricas das Políticas Públicas Para a Infância no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Universitária Santa Úrsula.

Rizzini, Irene (ed.) 1997b: *Olhares Sobre a Criança no Brasil – Séculos XIX e XX*. Série Banco de Dados 5, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Universitária Santa Úrsula.

Rizzini, Irene 2000: *Crianças Desvalidas, Indígenas e Negras no Brasil: Cenas da Colônia, do Império e da República*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Universitária Santa Úrsula.

Rizzini, Irene (ed.) 2002: *Pesquisa em Acção: Crianças, Adolescentes, Famílias e Comunidades*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Universitária Santa Úrsula.

Sahlins, Marshall 2000: Ethnographic experience and sentimental pessimism: why culture is not a disappearing object. In: Daston, Lorraine (ed.): *Biographies of Scientific Objects*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 158–293.

Seeger, Anthony, Roberto Da Matta & Eduardo Viveiros de Castro 1979: A construção da pessoa nas sociedades indígenas Brasileiras. *Boletim do Museu Nacional, Nova Série Antropologia*, 32.

Stephens, Sharon (ed.) 1995: *Childhood and the Politics of Culture*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Tassinari, Antonella 2001: Da civilização à tradição: Os projectos de escola entre os índios do Uaçá. In: Lopes da Silva, Aracy & Mariana Ferreira (eds.): *Antropologia, História e Educação: A Questão Indígena e a Escola. Série Antropologia e Educação*. São Paulo: Editora Global, Mari e Fapesp: 157–195.

Toren, Christina 1993: Making history: the significance of childhood cognition for a comparative anthropology of mind. *Man* (N.S.) 28: 461–478.