

THE WORK OF THE ETHNOLOGIST: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

O TRABALHO DO ETNÓLOGO: ALGUMAS CONSIDERAÇÕES

EL TRABAJO DEL ETNÓLOGO: ALGUNAS CONSIDERACIONES



Edmundo Antonio PEGGION¹
e-mail: edmundo.peggion@unesp.br

How to reference this paper:

PEGGION, E. A. The work of the ethnologist: some considerations. **Rev. Sem Aspas**, Araraquara, v. 14, n. 00, e025016, 2025. e-ISSN: 2358-4238. DOI: 10.29373/sas.v14i00.19073.



| **Submitted:** 26/02/2024
| **Revisions required:** 16/04/2024
| **Approved:** 18/06/2024
| **Published:** 27/12/2025

Editor: Prof. Dr. Carlos Henrique Gileno
Deputy Executive Editor: Prof. Dr. José Anderson Santos Cruz

¹ São Paulo State University “Júlio de Mesquita Filho” (UNESP) – School of Sciences and Letters – Araraquara, São Paulo, Brazil. Department of Social Sciences.

ABSTRACT: This text is the synthesis of a lecture offered during the New Students Reception Week at the Faculty of Sciences and Letters at UNESP in Araraquara. On that occasion, many years ago, the invitation from the Florestan Fernandes Academic Center – CAFF, was to present questions related to the ethnologist’s work. Asked to think about this topic, I made a presentation that started from my own trajectory, as a former student of the course, and the circumstances that led me to learn about conceptual and political debates that I have always considered important. Despite the age of the text, I think there is a relevance to the proposals. If there is not, let it remain, at least, as a record of the importance of the invitations made by students to stimulate our reflections.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous peoples of South America. Indigenous ethnology. Kinship. Perspectivism.

RESUMO: *Este texto é a síntese de uma palestra que foi realizada durante a Semana de Recepção de Calouros da Faculdade de Ciências e Letras da UNESP de Araraquara. Na ocasião, há muitos anos, o convite do Centro Acadêmico Florestan Fernandes – CAFF foi para apresentar questões relacionadas ao trabalho do etnólogo. Instado a pensar sobre o tema, fiz uma apresentação que teve como ponto de partida a minha própria trajetória, como ex-aluno do curso, e as circunstâncias que me levaram a conhecer debates conceituais e políticos que sempre considerei importantes. Em que pese a idade do texto, penso que há uma atualidade nas proposições. Se não houver, que ele fique, ao menos, como um registro da importância dos convites feitos pelos estudantes para o estímulo às nossas reflexões.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Povos indígenas da América do Sul. Etnologia indígena. Parentesco. Perspectivismo.*

RESUMEN: *Este texto es un resumen de una charla que se dio durante la Semana de Recepción de Estudiantes de Primer Año en la Facultad de Ciencias y Letras de la UNESP en Araraquara. En aquella ocasión, hace muchos años, fui invitado por el Centro Académico Florestan Fernandes (CAFF) para presentar cuestiones relacionadas con el trabajo de los etnólogos. Instado a reflexionar sobre el tema, hice una presentación que tomó como punto de partida mi propia trayectoria como antiguo alumno del curso y las circunstancias que me llevaron a conocer debates conceptuales y políticos que siempre he considerado importantes. A pesar de la antigüedad del texto, creo que las proposiciones son actuales. Si no es así, que al menos quede constancia de la importancia de las invitaciones que nos hacen los alumnos para estimular nuestras reflexiones.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Pueblos indígenas de Sudamérica. Etnología indígena. Parentesco. Perspectivismo.*

Opening Note

Antipedagogical Poem

in those remote, bygone years, Biúte talks to Baravelli, his classmate at Júlio Lucante, the first school in Assombrado, where the traditionalist students still carried on the legacy of wisdoms we have already forgotten

- hey, lend me your eraser
- I don't have one, I never bring an eraser
- why, don't you usually make mistakes?
- no, man, it's because I never get anything right (Pereira, 1988, p. 4, our translation).

In virtual times, memory no longer fits into boxes and stored belongings. It is attached to an abstraction that depends on a system in order to function. Thus, certain records and objects now exist on a plane of intimacy that is gradually disappearing. They are almost archaeological findings which, in many cases, have aged so poorly that it is better to leave them where they are. In this case, however, I decided to take the risk of exposing one of these records. Apart from this opening note, which serves more as a presentation to the reader, the remainder of the text refers to a particular moment at the Faculty of Sciences and Letters of UNESP in Araraquara. More specifically, it is a presentation delivered at the inaugural lecture of the Social Sciences program, resulting from an invitation made by the Florestan Fernandes Academic Center (CAFF).

While organizing my archive in order to return it to the Tenharin Indigenous people, with whom I have maintained a relationship of both work and affection for decades, I came across the text that follows. I was surprised by a reflection I had already been developing at the time and which the invitation from CAFF allowed me to systematize and organize. In order to preserve both the spirit of the arguments and the character of a memory chest, I decided to maintain the bibliographic references in their original editions, exactly as they had been consulted at the time (some of them were later republished and/or translated). To a large extent, the text served as an introduction to certain debates taking place during that period, and the arguments closely follow the propositions advanced by the authors. Any eventual additions are indicated in footnotes. The presentation took place during the Inaugural Lecture of the Social Sciences Program, at the Freshmen Reception Week of 2005. Out of recognition and respect, I considered it only fair that the article should be published in the *Revista Sem Aspas*.

Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank CAFF for the invitation to develop some reflections on Indigenous issues during Social Sciences Week. In conversations with several people, while attempting to establish some important contributions for a presentation such as this one, we considered two possible approaches: the first derived from training in Social Sciences within the current professional landscape, the difficulties involved, anthropological training, and employment possibilities. The second was more directly focused on current theoretical issues in ethnology and their most interesting implications.

Without intending to navigate too deeply through my own waters, I would like to begin with a reflection on my own trajectory. I justify this intention because I seek to bring together the two points mentioned above. The special situation in which I now find myself speaking to you results from a very particular circumstance: speaking during Social Sciences Week represents, for me, both an encounter with myself and, at the same time, with another self, different from who I am today. As you know, I completed my undergraduate studies here in Araraquara. At the time, I worked as secretary of the Miguel Angel Menéndez Center for Indigenous Studies (CEIMAM), founded by Professor Silvia M. S. Carvalho and also involving the participation of Professor Miguel Angel Menéndez, my undergraduate research advisor. I no longer remember exactly, but around 1988 I was part of the slate elected to manage what was then called the José Arantes Academic Directory (DAJA), named in honor of an almost native of Araraquara who was killed by the military dictatorship². During those years, we decided to organize here the First Meeting of Social Sciences Students. I must confess that it was a fiasco. Very few people attended, we had no infrastructure whatsoever, and we ended up accommodating our guests from UNICAMP and USP in student houses throughout the city.

Reflecting on that time and on the present, I see the relationship that constitutes our academic universe as a river. Professors and staff stand along its banks, while all of you are the flow of the waters. You pass by us and continue on your paths in search of your tributaries or your own banks.

I must admit that this metaphor left me somewhat thoughtful, since I had always believed that I lacked the vocation for a static image such as the riverbank. I tried to remember the things I learned while I was still flowing with the waters and noticed that a significant part of them emerged from relationships developed outside the classroom—not only among

² Available at: <https://memorialdaresistenciasp.org.br/pessoas/jose-roberto-arantes-de-almeida/>. Accessed on February 22, 2024.

students, but among all the people who inhabited the university world. In this discomfort of imagining myself as a riverbank, I remembered a professor, Uilcon Jóia Pereira, with whom I constantly spoke and who, in his own text-vampire style, used to say: “only poetry saves... me and Mário Quintana.” With Uilcon’s words came to mind a character from Manoel de Barros who ran away carrying a river in his pocket. The problem was that if he walked upside down, the river would spill out:

At dawn, this João
put the river in his pocket and ran away...
Catch him! Catch him!
He stumbled through steep hills, jambs,
fragments of sambas
Exhausted from so much running
this João collided
with the entire river still in his pocket!
He entered an abandoned 10-by-20 lot overgrown
with weeds
Moon branches turned green again from tin cans
Rains shifted stains from one place to another
He could not do somersaults, otherwise the river
would pour out inside him (Barros, 2001, our translation).

In this search for redemption after imagining myself as a riverbank, I turned to my own choices and began to wonder: why Anthropology, and why Indigenous Ethnology? In our profession, it is often said that the anthropologist’s initiation takes place when they leave to conduct fieldwork. Surrounded by an absolute difference of relations, the anthropologist is left to feel like a foreigner and thus becomes distant enough from people to be able to speak about their relationships. However, the anthropologist’s initiation does not occur simply upon arriving in another culture. It begins there, but only gains meaning when they return to their own society. Taken by an inevitable and endless effect of distancing, the anthropologist comes to perceive that everywhere there is always something constructed as given and something given as constructed (Wagner, 1981). Traversed by their condition as a foreigner, the anthropologist enters the flow and also becomes part of the waters that run (or moves toward the third bank of the river).

The Ethnologist's Craft

In 1955, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote a book entitled *Tristes Tropiques* (Lévi-Strauss, 1996). A large part of the book deals with his time in Brazil. While in the interior of the state of Mato Grosso, among the Pareci people, during a moment of hardship, he begins to ask himself: “What have we come here to do? With what hope? For what purpose? What exactly is an ethnographic investigation? Is it a strategy for future reintegration or a profound incompatibility with one’s own environment? Would it be an investigation into the deserts of memory rather than those surrounding us?” After narrating a tragedy in the style of Greek drama that he had imagined, the author once again asks himself: how can one escape the contradictions resulting from the circumstances of our choice? (Lévi-Strauss, 1996).

According to Lévi-Strauss (1996, p. 409), the anthropologist is poorly adapted to the society into which they were born. Subversive within their own milieu and conservative in others, the anthropologist must renounce their own society³ in order to account for others. No society is perfect; none is absolutely good or bad. Each is the result of its own choices and, therefore, they are equivalent. In summary, the ethnologist’s contradiction is one without solution, but as an inevitable consequence, knowledge of other societies helps free us from our own. This liberation, in turn, allows for the possibility of critique, which, according to Lévi-Strauss, can only properly be directed toward the society of which we ourselves are a part. In our case, therefore, if there is anything absolute, it is the constant possibility of critique:

But the problem remains: how can the ethnographer escape the contradiction resulting from the circumstances of his choice? Before his eyes, and at his disposal, lies one society: his own. Why then does he decide to disregard it and reserve for other societies — chosen among the most distant and different — a patience and devotion that his determination denies to his compatriots? It is no coincidence that the ethnographer rarely adopts a neutral attitude toward his own group. If he is a missionary or an administrator, one may infer that he has accepted identifying himself with an order to the point of dedicating himself to its propagation; and when he practices his profession within the scientific and academic sphere, there is a strong possibility that objective factors from his past reveal him to be poorly or not at all adapted to the society into which he was born. By assuming his role, he sought either a practical way to reconcile belonging to a group with the reserve he feels toward it or, simply, a means of taking advantage of an initial state of detachment that grants him an advantage in approaching different societies, toward which he already stands halfway (Lévi-Strauss, 1996, p. 409, our translation).

³ A notion called into question when it comes to thinking about others. See Marilyn Strathern (2006; 2014).

Without extending these considerations further and falling into endless digressions, I believe that the choice of becoming an anthropologist results from a set of circumstances that lie beyond our objective control. It would be difficult to draw a comprehensive picture of the current situation of anthropological work and to indicate the possibilities for ethnology. As the name itself suggests, ethnologists are always involved in academic and political activities with Indigenous peoples. The ethnologist's commitment (and that of anthropologists in general) is to return the results of their studies or, at the very least, to offer support for the political causes of Indigenous peoples in return. One may find ethnologists working on land identification processes, Indigenous school education, projects with non-governmental organizations, and even with Indigenous organizations, which continue to proliferate throughout the country. These activities, much like academic studies in ethnology, are works of interface. The transposition of meaning between one culture and another does not occur as though there were a mirror between them. The problems are not the same, and the anthropologist does not know beforehand what those problems are (Viveiros de Castro, 2002a).

From a political standpoint, the ethnologist's support for Indigenous causes is fundamental. We know that Indigenous peoples are profoundly diverse among themselves. Nevertheless, when fighting for rights, we adopt the generic term "Indigenous" in order to secure at least the minimum guarantees necessary for Indigenous peoples to exist within our world while preserving their differences. As Louis Dumont (1993) has already stated, each culture expresses the universal in its own way. One of the great contemporary challenges for Western values—our values—lies in the demand, or the problem, of human solidarity on a global scale. In other words, the issue concerns how relations between peoples and Nation-States will take shape (Dumont, 1993).

Kinship, Perspective, and Politics

Indigenous ethnology leads us to reflect upon this relationship. As academic studies advance, more questions are directed toward the type of political action that can be undertaken alongside Indigenous peoples. I will draw some parallels related to this issue while also pointing to one of the most contemporary discussions within Brazilian ethnology. If we consider that public policies may gradually incorporate academic discourses—whether directly, indirectly, or even subtly—then we may understand the importance of anthropology as a model for understanding other cultures.

I must make it clear here that anthropologists engage in a wide variety of actions through their commitment to Indigenous causes, just as there are multiple theoretical frameworks mediating such actions. In this text, I chose to address two approaches recently advanced by the same anthropologist. My choice is obviously guided by a sympathy toward the issues discussed, though not by a rejection of other analytical possibilities. The approaches I will discuss are those recently developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in his revisiting of the theme of kinship (1993; 2001; 2002c) and in the epistemological discussion concerning the relationship between Indigenous thought and our own (2002a; 2002b). I will begin with the latter.

According to Viveiros de Castro (2002a), the anthropologist is always someone who speaks about the discourse of another. The relation of meaning between the two discourses lies in the fact that the former presents itself as science—that is, as a relation of knowledge. This difference conditions the relationship between the two discourses and grants an advantage to the anthropologist’s discourse. Anthropological knowledge would therefore constitute a relation between two relations: one in the domain of the subject and the other in the domain of the object. This advantage derives from the fact that our relationship with other cultures is conceived in such a way that we understand there to be a difference in the relationship each party—the anthropologist and the other—maintains with their respective cultures. Implicit in such considerations is the idea that so-called natives possess a spontaneous and natural relationship with their culture, whereas the anthropologist expresses their culture culturally, that is, in a conditional and conscious manner (Viveiros de Castro, 2002a).

After developing these considerations, Viveiros de Castro (2002a, p. 115) asks:

What happens if we deny the anthropologist’s discourse its strategic advantage over the native’s discourse? What occurs when the native’s discourse functions, within the anthropologist’s discourse, in such a way as to reciprocally produce an effect of knowledge upon that discourse? When the form intrinsic to the matter of the former modifies the matter implicit in the form of the latter? Translator, traitor, as the saying goes; but what happens if the translator decides to betray his own language? What follows if, dissatisfied with the mere passive or factual equality between the subjects of these discourses, we claim an active or rightful equality between the discourses themselves? If the disparity between the meanings of the anthropologist and the native, rather than neutralized through such equivalence, is internalized, introduced into both discourses, and thereby intensified?

For Viveiros de Castro (2002a), Indigenous thought is an objective form of thought that expresses a possible world to the same extent as the world conceived by the anthropologist. The discourses of both reflect a relationship of intelligibility between two cultures: they provoke a

double uprooting, since they attempt to represent the other within the realm of the same (Viveiros de Castro, 2002a). What this author seeks to accomplish is the application—with some inflection—of what Bruno Latour (1994) defined as symmetrical anthropology. Viveiros de Castro intends to treat Indigenous ideas as concepts and to examine the effects that Indigenous thought may produce upon our own. Notice that questions which previously possessed only one direction of meaning now acquire a two-way interpretation, revealing an intention on the part of the author that is simultaneously intellectual and political.

Let us consider, for example, the status of knowledge as proposed above and its implications for public policy actions concerning Indigenous school education. In recent years, numerous Indigenous teacher-training programs have been implemented throughout various regions of the country. The Ministry of Education invited specialists—educators, anthropologists, and others—to design an appropriate proposal that would respect Indigenous cultures. In the end, the following principle was established: Indigenous school education must be specific, differentiated, intercultural, and bilingual. How can we conceive of a formal education that is intercultural without taking into account the status of knowledge itself? This constitutes one of the greatest impasses, since taking Indigenous knowledge seriously would require us to revise our own concepts. The problem is that we associate our knowledge and our science with the idea of truth and, consequently, Indigenous thought—which constitutes other worlds through other concepts—can only occupy a secondary role within the relationship. I raise these questions in order to highlight both the contemporary relevance of anthropological discussions and the political importance of the debate brought forth by our discipline.

Another theme recently revisited by ethnology concerns kinship relations. One of the driest provinces of Anthropology, kinship studies have regained prominence, especially through the development of ethnographies concerning the peoples of the Amazon. Such studies have shown that the functioning of Amazonian kinship regimes is characterized by a concentric opposition between consanguinity and affinity. Unlike our society, which is based on consanguinity, Indigenous peoples operate through a socio-political-cosmological gradient of distance in which, within the group, consanguinity encompasses affinity, whereas outside the group affinity encompasses consanguinity (Viveiros de Castro, 2001).

In our own kinship relations, we also establish an opposition between consanguinity (relatives) and affinity (non-relatives, such as in-laws). However, our point of departure is consanguinity; it constitutes what is given to us. Affinity, on the other hand, is something we construct: we seek relationships, we marry, and we gain brothers-in-law and mothers-in-law

(there is even the common expression: “you do not choose your relatives”—meaning they are given to us). In the Amazon, the opposite occurs: the given dimension of cosmology is affinity, whereas consanguinity must be continuously constructed (Viveiros de Castro, 2001; 2002c). Furthermore, the distinction between consanguinity and affinity is established through an opposition within a scalar field that ranges from the distant to the close. The principle underlying relationships lies in what Viveiros de Castro (2001) defines as potential affinity. What conclusions can we draw from this? That in Amazonian societies the outside encompasses the inside, which is merely one moment of the outside; that consanguinity is a limit point of affinity; and that identity is the relative absence of difference, rather than its opposite. In summary, according to Viveiros de Castro (2001), there exists only difference.

So that one does not assume that kinship studies serve solely to understand Indigenous societies, or that this area of anthropology functions as a kind of black box, I cite here an interview given in 2000 by the anthropologist Adam Kuper to the journal *Mana* (Kuper, 2000). Asked about his most recent work, Kuper stated that he was interested in conducting a kinship study of large capitalist corporations. According to him, many multinational companies — he mentions, for example, Fiat and Olivetti — are managed by family groups. In his view, there is something there that may reveal interesting questions for anthropological study. Beyond Kuper’s considerations, it is also worth remembering that cosmological perspectives emphasizing the importance of difference provide valuable counterpoints to the constant debates surrounding the concept of identity.

Final considerations

Finally, and in order to conclude this text, it is necessary for us to begin breaking down the barriers separating our various themes. Ultimately, what connects us all is the fact that we practice social anthropology, whether with Indigenous peoples, rural communities, or urban communities. The focuses of our analyses may vary, but our methods remain the same. We must overcome the great divisions. There are no complex or simple societies, because it is analyses themselves that construct uni- or multidimensional realities (Goldman; Lima, 1999). This is not to say that all societies are identical, but rather that we must put an end to the asymmetry implicit in the idea of a division between “us” and “them.” As Roy Wagner (1981) already stated, the anthropologist participates in the culture of the other, though not as a native. What the anthropologist does is construct a relationship between two cultures and translate one

set of meanings into another. The anthropologist can operate only through analogies, but through this exercise they may experience the transformation of their own world.

Acknowledgments

To the Florestan Fernandes Academic Center for the invitation.

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CRediT Author Statement

- Acknowledgements:** To the Florestan Fernandes Academic Center for the invitation.
 - Funding:** There wasn't any.
 - Conflicts of interest:** There wasn't any.
 - Ethical approval:** None.
 - Data and materials availability:** None.
 - Authors' contributions:** The author is solely responsible for the work.
-

Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação
Proofreading, formatting, standardization and translation

