

Presence Among The Brazilian Amazon's Indigenous Communities

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I wish to offer you a personal witness of the work I do together with the traditional indigenous communities in the Santarém region, along the Amazon, Tapajós and Arapiuns Rivers, in the State of Pará, Brazil. I have no intention whatsoever of saying that this is the only way to do this type of work, but I do hope to prove that it is possible to create new and different forms of service adapted to the needs of the places where we serve and to the new times. This is also one-way of working within the context of a parish community (in this case, large rural parishes) in collaboration with the parochial ministers, whether they are friars or not.

1. Precedents

In the Amazon interior much of the native population lives in small villas called “comunidades” (communities), situated along the riverbanks. 130 to 400 persons form a community. These people make their livelihood by extracting and collecting what the jungle offers, by hunting, fishing, and agriculture. The communities are situated about 10 kilometers from each other. The only means of transportation are motorized boats, which

go from community to community and to the closest cities. The parish priest visits a community once or twice a year and each visit doesn't last more than a day. During the visit, Mass and the sacraments are celebrated and there is a quick meeting with the local catechists. That's how it is in the 90 communities of the two parishes in which I work with a diocesan priest and a religious priest of another Congregation.

Even though I was born in this region, I studied in the cities and only returned to the region in 1993, while a student of Social Sciences at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) to make a little study about the relationship of the native population with the local environment. Thus, I began to enter into contact with a world very full of rich, traditional customs and knowledge, which in general was not the focus of attention or study. For example, shamanism is the belief in the spirits of nature and the economy of reciprocity. These are customs that come directly from the indigenous peoples. These people of the communities, however, denied that they were indigenous and even were offended when called “Indians.”

Reading history books, I discovered that the people of these communities are really descendants of indigenous peoples catechized by the Jesuits in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who were then forced to abandon their native customs and to act like “civilized people.” They could no longer speak their mother

tongue. They were forced to speak the colonizer's language. Today they only speak Portuguese. They had to assimilate the white man's customs and thus they began to deny their indigenous identity. "Indians" in their estimation were only those who lived naked in the middle of the jungle.

I observed that these people, even though denying being indigenous, could not say that they were white or black. They had a profound lack of self-esteem. The mothers told their sons that they should study a lot to become "somebody" and to get a job in the city. Youth said that as soon as they got a good job, they would buy a house and take their parents to the city. This was a family's biggest dream. Unfortunately, the dream doesn't become reality, because the outskirts or peripheries of the cities became disproportionately bloated with the poor who survive in sub-human conditions, with a tremendously high unemployment rate and constant violence. The most victimized were exactly the young people of these traditional communities. Many die victims of robberies or in confrontations with gangs.

The economic situation of the communities was also not very animating. The products extracted from the rain forest like rubber and Brazil nuts (*castanha-do-Pará*) do not have high commercial value. The meal of the manioc root (*farinha de mandioca*), produced in large quantity, because it is the family's basic food, also is sold at a very low price. It is difficult to

earn money to buy clothes, shoes, school material, and other industrialized products. Despite living for centuries in this region, the families do not have any documentation for the land. The communities suffer constant exploitation and also are threatened by two big timber companies, as well as by other merchants who reside in the region. In search of the better, prized woods, these companies invaded areas even very close to the houses of these families. In this degrading and difficult situation, it is understandable that parents wanted their sons to flee to the cities, so as to become "somebody."

People commented that the main recreational options were to play ball and drink "white lightning" (*cachaça*). This is for men and women alike. Alcoholism became an ever-more serious problem. Indigenous peoples have a lower resistance to alcohol and drink it until they fall. In Brazil, alcoholism is a problem for all the indigenous peoples whose lands are threatened and who suffer social disintegration.

2. The Causes of the Problem

At the time I returned to the communities, the Franciscans were leaving the region and giving the pastoral responsibilities to diocesan priests. The solution of these socio-economic problems, however, was never a priority for the friars, or for the diocesan priests. So, the results of my survey were given to and discussed with the communities involved. But, since I did not have all the answers, I

began to elaborate a new survey about the factors that maintained the communities integrated, and the problems that disintegrated the communities. At the time, I was doing my Masters in Sociology and the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ).

I immediately shared my preoccupations and discoveries with the two priests who served the communities and also with the Church's lay leadership and with the Union of Rural Workers. I received their complete support.

Based on the elders' oral memory and on bibliographic surveys, I wrote a brief history of these peoples, from the arrival of the Portuguese colonizers, including the wars and resistance movements, the slavery during the rubber-boom period, until our days. Some things then became more understandable. Firstly, they were basically the same indigenous peoples who inhabited the villages for 500 years and, even though not speaking the native tongue anymore, they inherited many customs from their predecessors and also were living still on the lands for which their predecessors fought and died. Secondly, the wood companies were exploiting the forest and the indigenous people's work force in the same way that other invaders and merchants did before. Their predecessors resisted the exploitation.

How could companies that arrived in the region only 15 years ago claim to be the

owners of lands inhabited by the native peoples for decades, centuries, and millenarities? If someone who inhabits a piece of land for a year and a day acquires the right of possession, what then can not be said of the rights of those who are born on these lands and are descendants of peoples that lived here even before the arrival of Europeans? These were questions raised by the communities' leaders. The problem was that these families had no official document that guaranteed their rights over the land. The Federal Government's Land Bureau only demarcated individual plots of land and the process is slow and costly. The companies said that they had documents issued by the government. How can we prove the native communities' rights?

At this time, around 1996 and 1997, my survey was coming to a conclusion. We succeeded in proving that these families were historically the direct descendants of the pre-Colombian indigenous peoples. The people began to repeat and promulgate this news. Now, what factors contributed to the maintenance of the communities? The collective or joint ownership of the land, work done collectively, the sharing of food, the belief in the spirits of nature, and shamanism. What caused a disintegration of their social organization? Individual salaried work, the invasion of outside companies, and the abandoning of beliefs related to shamanism. The result of all this was impoverishment, flight to the cities, alcoholism, destruction of the ecosystem, and a shortage of food.

3. The Formation of the Extractivistic Reservation

The next step was to convoke the entities that already worked in the communities to discuss a form of ample collaboration so as to face the problem of the invasion of wood companies. Before this happened, however, two groups of communities began meeting to discuss the formation of a general “council” of communities that would demarcate all the land that belonged to them. I brought them the information that one of the legal means of collective land demarcation for traditional populations was what is called an Extractivistic Reservation (Resex). It was because of this type of reservation that a Brazilian named Chico Mendes became well known throughout the world and was eventually assassinated by cattle ranchers. It could have been an Indian Reservation, but the people of these river communities only called themselves “descendants” of the indigenous peoples, without being “Indians” themselves. The best option, then, was a Resex, where the government gives ownership of the land to an association of all the inhabitants, and they could then continue doing the extractivistic activities in the forest. All the leaders and members of the entities supported this idea.

We took the question to the competent government agency, where we found people very receptive to the cause of Extractivistic Reservations. We began then a process of explaining the project to all the communities, for up until then only a handful of the communities were

involved in the studies and discussions. There were reactions from the owners of the companies, merchants, and rightist political leaders who were able to manipulate some members of the communities so that they turned against the Resex. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the parish priests, the friars, and the community associations, however, worked rapidly and well. All the church encounters and all the people used meetings to make them aware and to inform them about the project and the importance of full participation. The fact that the parish priests were kept well informed about all the questions related to the creation of the Resex helped very much, for in their visits to the communities they were able to clear up doubts and confirm that this was really the best way for the native peoples to defend their land.

We always made a point to have the support of the law. One lawyer accompanied the process from the beginning. Later we sought the help of the Public Procurator, of the Federal Public Ministry, which guaranteed that our actions did not waver a bit from legality. This trump card in our hand was essential when we had to face the enemy’s fury. They said that the NGOs wanted the Resex, not the local extractivists. We showed them the documents signed by the local people asking for the creation of a Resex. They said that with a Resex the use of the forest’s resources would be prohibited and this caused consternation among those not well informed about the project. We

showed the people the law that said the contrary. We used the laws of the country in our favor.

In Brazil there are very good laws to defend Indians and the poor. The problem is that they are not put into practice. They are there to impress international entities. We followed all the legal procedures so that when our enemies confronted us, the Public Procurator guaranteed our defense in Brasilia.

Another positive factor was the formation of a local leadership. We held regular meetings with the more evident leaders and we always held big assemblies with representation from all the communities involved. On these occasions, government authorities, lawyers and the procurator answered the more polemical questions that arose and clarified the doubts. We promoted seminars, formation encounters and various other necessary studies. Those who campaigned against the Resex said that the NGOs, not the local rural workers, wanted the project. This discourse, however, soon ran dry, because the leaders of the communities and other community members argued that the Resex was the fruit of their labor. They convincingly showed that they knew what they were doing.

The work in partnership with other institutions and popular organisations was very positive for the movement. As soon as the struggle began in the communities, we formed a Working Group (Group de Trabalho) that brought together all the

organisations, governmental and non-governmental, involved in the creation of the Resex. Thus, we unified the discourse and always maintained ourselves well informed about all that happened. What guaranteed the seriousness of our proposal was the collective nature of our positions before society in general and also before those who were against us. Finally, we reunited in the Working Group the Catholic Church (the Diocese of Santarém and the local parishes), the government agency responsible for the Resex, the local NGOs and all the associations representing the local people. We were able to isolate those “against.”

Partnership did not limit itself to the political arena. We have a profound conviction that it is possible to work with other churches and religions. Sure, this requires care, patience, and tolerance. The results, however, are worth the effort. In the river communities, the evangelicals Christians actively participated in the movement and were always allowed to have their say, especially during the prayer services, which opened our encounters. We initiated all our encounters with prayer. The people wanted to pray. Catholics and evangelicals petitioned and praised the Lord together. The great number of Catholics never intimidated or discriminated against the brothers and sisters of other churches. As there are no non-Christian religions in these communities, we have no living experience of them. If they were here among us, they certainly would receive the same treatment.

After all was said and done, the majority won the battle. The Resex of the Tapajós-Arapiuns was created in the waning months of 1998. Soon the assembly elected the first directory that coordinated all the projects developed in the area. Today our function is to accompany the leaders and to fiscalize the projects. The directors are learning how to administrate the projects of the area. There are difficulties, for sure, but the worst part is past. Today the federal government does not create any more Resex, because they cause difficulty for the wood companies to enter the area. The government officials are always at the service of the wood companies and the big landowners. Our Resex was the last one to be created.

This collective effort became better after the Resex' creation. Today, universities and other survey agencies that were not present during the first phase are participating in the work related to the production projects and they are programming scientific research that can benefit those living in the area. The old Working Group is now the Support Group of the Resex project. The Social Pastoral Group, the Franciscans, the Rural Workers Union, the National Council of Rubber-Tree Cutters and various NGOs continue to meet. This group is always near to support the co-ordination and to correct what needs to be bettered. The Support Group and the Resex Co-ordination meet monthly for information, evaluation and programming. Nothing, good or bad, goes unnoticed in these meetings. The Church through our presence and the

coordinator of the social pastoral continues to have an important role in the process.

4. Yes, We Are Indigenous

There is a small community called Takuara on the shore of the Tapajós River. In the beginning of my survey, I went there to interview a famous, elder pajé (xamã). After that initial interview, I rarely went to Takuara. The community that was outside of the Resex (reserve) lost its great spiritual leader in 1997. On his deathbed, he reminded his family and relatives not to forget that he was an Indian and that they also are Indians. Afterwards they often listened to the interview I did with their deceased elder. In the interview, he explained very well his indigenous identity and spoke about the traditional wisdom that was practically disappearing. He spoke longingly of the time when people really lived as a family and respected the traditions.

This revalidation of the traditions, together with the problems of not possessing the necessary documents for the land, resulted in the fact that this community assumed its identity as indigenous and went to the official government agency to reclaim this recognition. I found out about this in August 1997, and we began a process of re-valuing the indigenous identity and culture of those people of Takuara. We held a big assembly, together with rituals and dances. On that occasion, there were plenty of the traditional drinks. Words of the mother tongue,

almost completely forgotten, were heard in the songs. At this encounter, the community reaffirmed its decision to assume its indigenous identity. And we of the Pastoral and of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI) began to offer all forms of help to the community.

I visited the Takuara community a number of times. We celebrated together as they do, discussed their indigenous rights and ways to obtain their official recognition and the demarcation of the land by the government. Every visit I noticed that these people recuperated more of their traditions, such as corporal painting, necklaces, feathered ornamentation, musical instruments, etc. The youth and children were the most enthused of all.

We established contacts between the local leadership and the news media. Thus they began to appear before society in general. Only then did people from the city find out that nearby there were Indians. The Indians of Takuara related in newspapers and on radio why they were Indians and what importance this had for them. As professor at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), I promoted seminars and other events in which the indigenous leaders had the opportunity to speak and discuss with the academic community. The context of the 500 years of Brazil helped a lot, because there was a thirst for knowledge about the native peoples, those whom the Europeans met when they arrived in this land. In a short time, they found out about the history of the Indians of Takuara.

As the families were all Catholics and liked very much the moments of prayer and spirituality, we programmed two indigenous Mass celebrations. One in Takuara and the other in a community that showed interest in rescuing its cultural identity as a people, just as the Takuara community. We tried to incorporate in these Eucharistic celebrations the traditional celebration customs of the communities, such as the use of the bonfire, fumigation with good-smelling tree bark, drums, and dances. The Mass began at night and ended the next day at noon with a communal dinner. Despite the length of the celebration, no one was tired. There was ample receptivity and participation. The Indians were content to see that their parish priests and Church leaders valued their way of praying and living. We asked that the elders present tell their people's history, their myths and traditional wisdom. They spoke, breaking the silence of decades and centuries. Beforehand, the priests said that their beliefs were vile "superstitions."

To recuperate the indigenous language, already forgotten, we began a series of workshops with the aid of an Indian woman who lives near another Amazonian River and who speaks fluent Nheengatu. These were not courses in Nheengatu, but rather more general workshops to recuperate the culture. We always initiated with what the people still remembered. Many words of the old language still survived in the minds, especially of the elderly. The recuperated words lead the group to study health, produce, reli-

gion, and the language itself. The result was a strengthening of the indigenous identity and a greater interest in continuing this recuperation process.

How to organize and accompany all this? With some persons of indigenous origin who live, study, and work, in the city, I formed a group called Indigenous Conscience. Most of these people came from the river communities, such as Takuara. They felt lost in the city. The Indigenous Conscience Group began to study the history of our region and the question of indigenous identity. At night, we celebrated indigenous rituals in the forest. When the persons of the group assumed their indigenous roots, they began to work together with the people of Takuara, visiting regularly the communities and offering assistance in the city.

We can count on the support of the Social Pastoral of the Diocese, of the Franciscans, of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI – which is a sector of the National Council of Bishops), and also of the National Council of Rubber-Tree Cutters. The parish priests continue to accompany our work and are informed of all that happens. The bishop receives letters from the indigenous leaders about their demands. The Church, then, is fully committed to this process.

We participate in the communities' traditional feasts so as to be present and to give value to the life and customs of the families. At one of the feasts of the

patroness of the community of Takuara, the feast of Our Lady of Aparecida, in October, two other communities of the Resex manifested their desire to participate in the movement, assuming their indigenous identity. We planned a ritual-encounter for the New Year celebration (1999-2000) in one of the interested communities. We announced the encounter on the radio and invited all the neighboring communities. We celebrated this encounter.

The Indigenous Conscience Group and the parish's pastoral did the general organization. We invited representatives of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI) and the Co-ordination of the Indigenous Organisations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB) who came to the encounter. Some students from the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) also went there. The ambient was very positive. The Indians from Takuara came and even other neighboring communities who also were enthused about rescuing their indigenous tradition. The hosts, all painted, received the visitors with songs and dances. On the night of the New Year, the ritual was celebrated around the bonfire. Afterwards all went into the community center, where the celebration continued with a dance modern-style. The next day there was a meeting in which the people committed themselves to return to their respective communities to decide with the others of the communities about the assuming of their identity as Indians. The general climate indicated that they would adhere to the movement.

During this encounter, we informed about the Indian People's March 2000 marked for the month of April. The indigenous communities could send representatives to Bahia. The results arrived during the following months. Three, four...and in March there were already 11 communities committed to assuming their indigenous identity. The biggest motivation was the participation of the Indigenous March in Santarém and afterwards the trip to Porto Seguro, Bahia. Already at this time, a religious sister who worked in Manaus arrived in Santarém to serve the indigenous communities. Her presence in each community helped answer the questions and make the people of the communities conscience. She helped add seriousness to the whole process, for she was a religious sister liberated to serve the Indians. With Sr. Emanuela's presence, the organization of the work became more efficient and efficacious. The Indigenous Conscience Group supported the movement in the city and on bigger occasions, Sister Emanuela visited the families and communities and Frei Florêncio coordinated the work and the contacts.

When the Indian's March came to Santarém, all the communities were represented. Our people were painted and dressed as "Indians." They brought to Santarém their drinks, necklaces, dances and all that in past times caused shame. The encounter with the other Indians who arrived from the States of Amazonas and Roraima was a magical

moment that certainly will not be forgotten. The reborn Indians saw that they were not alone. The March around the city and all the programming that followed helped to strengthen our work of giving value to the indigenous culture.

A group of 15 Indians of the communities participated in the March all the way to Porto Seguro. When they returned enthused and committed, we suggested that they organize a Council of all the communities, for the majority of the indigenous people that we met from all of Brazil were organized in Councils or Confederations. The leaders convoked a general assembly and formed a Council. They elected their coordinators. This removed others and me from the functions of leadership and co-ordination of the movement. We were now to serve as supporters and agents of information. We make sure that the leaders of the Indigenous Council participate in the encounters with other indigenous organizations; speak to the press and elaborate documents for entities and authorities. What is important is to strengthen these local leaders, not us or the Church.

Recently, we held a workshop about recuperating the culture with leaders of the communities and we were able to observe that we are going in the right direction. The awareness about their rights as indigenous peoples is growing. They are also conscious of the necessity to strengthen the political organization in defense of these rights. Some of the youth were chosen to study in another

Amazonian region, where the indigenous movement is older and where the people speak fluently the language that should be revitalized. The young people are anxious to make the trip. The contacts will be made between the Indigenous Council of the Tapajós and the Indigenous Council of the Rio Negro (The Black River). The youth have committed themselves to share their knowledge when they return to the Tapajós. We still need some financial support to pay for these studies. The communities are searching for partners to resolve this question.

The reborn indigenous communities of the Tapajós are being recognized by the indigenous organizations. The Coordination of the Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB) decided in their last meeting to form a regional office in Santarém, because of the new demands of the movement that has blossomed there. One leader of Takuara is on the national commission, which prepared and coordinated the Assembly of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, which is happening these days in Brasilia. The Coordination of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI) decided to hold its November meeting in Santarém so as to observe this new phenomenon, the reborn Indians of the Tapajós. CIMI's next regional assembly (July 2000) with all the missionaries will be in Santarém. CIMI is also programming a national encounter of the reborn peoples for May 2001, because in the Northeast of Brazil various peoples considered to be extinct

are resurrecting (actually, they were afraid and ashamed to say that they were Indians). It is necessary to unify this movement.

5. Some Lessons We Learned

It's necessary to know the people with whom we work so that we can work well with them. We can acquire this knowledge in part through reading and statistics, but we can only penetrate into the soul and heart of a people by means of a patient and humble lived-experience with them. People only speak of their true drama and dreams to people in whom they confide. We were able to approach these people, living with them in their homes for two or three days and returning other times. We experienced a little of their daily work, their feasts and other common activities. During these moments, we were able to perceive things that do not appear in meetings and community assemblies.

To have a meal with people is important. To be content and happy with this sharing is even more important. For humble people, meals are a time to share food and also to share experiences, problems, and joys. Families and friends eat together. Even when the food is not plentiful, these people eat together. When the table is replete with food, they also eat together. If you enter into this world of affection and intimacy, certainly you will be able to have more success when you propose your pastoral ideas and when you initiate a project of social promotion.

Another point that I want to emphasize before ending my exposition is the question of the relationship with the fraternity in this work. We are but a small vice province, with few active friars. The majority is young friars still in studies or friars already elderly. In my fraternity we are only two: one works in a parish in Santarem's periphery, and the other, yours truly, accompanies rural communities and teaches in the university. It would be better if we were three or four friars together in each direction, but that right now is impossible. We divide up so as to attend a greater number of people and thus we sacrifice fraternity. What can we do?

The solution is a very open and constant line of communication so that the other friar knows what I am doing and I know what he is doing. We thus are able to work together. I travel to the interior from Friday till Sunday and remain at

home in the friary on the other days when I teach. We pray and have our meals together. After breakfast and at meals we socialize our activities. In this way, my confrere could accompany the whole tense and conflictive situation that I went through with the Resex (we received death-threats and I could not even step into some communities). I could also share in these moments his service in the urban communities. Despite the fact that contact with other friars is more difficult, due to the distances in the Amazon, I offer as much information as possible to all the friars about the work I do. Since I am a Definitor of the vice province, the other friars of the Definitory always know how this process is developing.

With this information I hope that I have provoked you to ask some questions or that I have given you a desire to travel to the Amazon to see this work for yourself.