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NAMBIQUARA 'NOMADISM': A FINAL NOTE

In a trio of articles that appeared in this journal some ten to fifteen years ago, Paul Aspelin and I were concerned to demonstrate that the Nambiquara, of northern Mato Grosso, Brazil, are not seasonally nomadic, as portrayed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, but, in fact, have reasonably permanent villages and a well established agricultural tradition (Aspelin 1976 and 1979; Lévi-Strauss 1948 and 1955; Price 1978). I have recently become aware of evidence that bears on the case, contained in two papers by Karl Carnier (1909, 1911) that Aspelin and I both overlooked.

Carnier was a German geologist who accompanied the exploring party led by Col. C.M.S. Rondon in 1908 (Carnier 1911; Rondon s.a.:76, 135, 144, 146, 165). During that season, the party traversed the Nambiquara region from the Rio Juruena to Campos Novos. Carnier never actually saw the Nambiquara, for they fled as the expedition approached, but he visited several abandoned villages and examined the artifacts he found there. He was a careful observer, made numerous measurements, and presented his inferences with due caution. The first of the two papers that resulted from this trip contains the earliest non-anecdotal report that bears on the Nambiquara's settlement pattern and means of livelihood. It was written immediately after Carnier's return to civilization, translated into Portuguese, and published the next year. The second paper has less to say about the Nambiquara, but appeared in the original German. In both of Carnier's papers, his ethnographic observations are tucked away among descriptions of the region's geography and geology.

Carnier's first paper, which was published as a sixteen-page pamphlet, has become exceedingly hard to find. Neither Aspelin nor I was familiar with the work, although Lévi-Strauss calls it 'without doubt the most useful' of the reports written by members of the exploratory expedition (Lévi-Strauss 1948:2). Perhaps our less-than-thorough search for the paper reflects its failure to appear in Herbert Baldus's *Bibliografia Crítica da Etnologia Brasileira* (1954), upon which we both relied heavily. (Recently, after the Brazilian pamphlet had been brought to my attention*, library work uncovered the second paper in a German journal.)

In the pamphlet, Carnier says:

'In part the Nhambiquaras form a sedentary tribe, as we may deduce from their well-made huts, villages, and plantations; and in part they are also nomadic.

* My thanks to Alba Lucy Giraldo Figueroa for sending me a photocopy of Carnier's paper made from the example in the Biblioteca do Museu Paulista.

They appear to be a reasonably numerous tribe, for in a circumference of only two leagues around the "Jurueña Detachment" we found eight villages and many huts, with an even greater number likely. As one goes away from the river, well-made structures become less frequent, and the huts we saw later were made with scant material, apparently serving principally as camps during hunting expeditions.' (Carnier 1909:12.)

There follows a detailed description of the different kinds of huts, with measurements, as well as descriptions of villages and village locations. (There are also descriptions of baskets, flutes, bows, and arrows.) Toward the end of the report, Carnier states:

'The Nambiquaras undoubtedly constitute a tribe that is quite strong and has already attained a certain degree of civilization. They are a people that is both sedentary and nomadic. Sometimes they travel over vast tracts of land on hunting trips, and at other times they clear the forest and cultivate the earth. Plantations of manioc, both old and new, are everywhere found near villages; and these are always reasonably well maintained, which clearly demonstrates the care given them by these savage agriculturalists.

Ears of corn and leaves of tobacco demonstrate, moreover, that these plants are not unknown to them.' (Carnier 1909:14.)

In the report of his trip written after Carnier's return to Germany, his observations on the Nambiquara settlement pattern are pared down to a brief statement:

'The well constructed huts and the clearings with plantations indicate that these Indians have an inclination to be sedentary; close by, one also finds, of course, many signs of nomadism. Apparently they alternate periods of sedentary existence with periods of roaming around.' (Carnier 1911:28.)

What Carnier saw, as he tells us, were villages of well-made huts near well-maintained gardens – and windscreens 'made with scant material' used for overnight shelter by people out on hunting trips. From this evidence he infers that the Nambiquara were both sedentary and nomadic. This seems peculiar, if not self-contradictory. But it becomes intelligible when viewed as an attempt to place the Nambiquara on an evolutionary scale. Carnier's statement that the tribe had 'already attained a certain degree of civilization' shows that he held the evolutionist views current among many scholars of his day. By saying that the Nambiquara were partly sedentary and partly nomadic, he was putting them part way up the evolutionary ladder. He also places them in a transitional position between evolutionary stages in the 1911 paper, saying that they had an 'inclination' (*Neigung*) to be sedentary.

Thirty years after Carnier, Lévi-Strauss saw villages near gardens and occasional windscreens out in the countryside, and thirty years after that,

Aspelin and I saw the same thing. But our interpretations differed both from that of Carnier and from each other. Lévi-Strauss concluded that small bands of Nambiquara wandered around in search of game during the dry season, but came together and settled down to tend their gardens during the rains; while Aspelin and I described a people who live in villages all year long, relying on their gardens for vegetable foods, while going on periodic hunting trips to acquire meat.

At first glance, it would seem that Carnier's evidence supports Lévi-Strauss's interpretation, for he says of the Nambiquara, 'Sometimes they travel over vast tracts of land on hunting trips, and at other times they clear the forest and cultivate the earth'; and again, 'Apparently they alternate periods of sedentary existence with periods of roaming around'.

But there is no reason to believe that the alternation between hunting and gardening was seasonal, or that everyone in the village went off to hunt at the same time. Moreover, Carnier's observation that the gardens were 'always reasonably well maintained' suggests that they were being tended at the time of Carnier's visit, which was in the dry season. When conjecture and interpretation are peeled away, there is nothing in Carnier's reports to suggest that the Nambiquara had a different mode of livelihood in 1908 than they did in 1968.

Since my first paper was published in *Bijdragen*, I have gained a greater respect for Professor Lévi-Strauss's ethnography – especially his observations on exchange (1942) and leadership (1945). I have also revised my interpretation of eighteenth-century evidence (Price 1983), and no longer think that one can make a case for the existence of Nambiquara agriculture at that time. But in other respects, my conclusions have withstood the tests of time and the evidence in Carnier's reports.

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