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PHOTOGRAPHY AND (MIS)ENCOUNTER: A PHOTOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE OF THE OFICIAL CONTACT OF THE ASURINÍ OF XINGU¹

ABSTRACT

This study deals with the agreements and disagreements of conceptions and understandings between the Xingu Asuriní and the ethnologist-priests who made the official contact with the group in 1971, regarding the presence of photography during the first contact. I will make a comparative analysis of the photographs included in Lukesch's documentary and scientific project published in 1976 in the book *Bearded Indians of the Tropical Forest*, in contrast to its agency among the Asuriní almost forty years later. The idea is to construct a photographic narrative of the ethnologist-priests' and indigenous versions of the contact. Such versions often contradict each other, while also revealing that photographs mediate the relations between natives and non-indigenous people. Although referring to the same photographs, their use is quite different: the priests employ them as evidence that the contact was peaceful, and the Asuriní use them as artifacts of memory.

keywords

Asuriní of Xingu; Photography;
Lukesch; First contact;
Non-indigenous.

¹ This text was retrieved from reflections presented in my doctoral dissertation (see Villela 2016) written at the Department of Anthropology of the University of São Paulo (USP). I would like to thank Fapesp – São Paulo Research Foundation for the scholarship (Proc. 2010/19789-5) and Professor Sylvia Caiuby Novaes, who, as my advisor, guided the study and gave invaluable feedback at various stages of the research.

INTRODUCTION OR A BRIEF DIGRESSION ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY AMONG THE ASURINÍ

The Xingu Asuriní are a Tupi-speaking people living on the right bank of the Xingu River in the state of Pará². The official contact of this indigenous group with non-indigenous people was made by two Austrian Catholic missionaries, Anton and Karl Lukesch, and their team, in 1971. The “Lukesch brothers” were hired by the company Meridional Consórcio United States Steel CVRD (a joint adventure between United States Steel and CVRD), which was interested in expanding the Carajás iron ore region to the right bank of the Xingu River, to be achieved through a “pacification” program of the Asuriní³.

The first time this native group saw a camera was precisely during this first encounter with non-indigenous people. The Asuriní say that the Catholic priest Anton Lukesh, the first to establish contact with the group, “took a photograph and then a man died, he could not bear it” (Müller 2000, 184). The camera sucks the *ynga* (the vital principle) out of the person photographed to reproduce his/her image, *ayngava*.

In my doctoral dissertation (Villela 2016) and in several articles⁴, I reflected on the Asuriní view that the photography that took place during that first contact acted pathogenically⁵, causing deaths and illnesses. It was only after considering numerous possibilities about the damaging effect of photography that I found the book, *Bearded Indians of the Tropical Forest*, written by the Austrian priest and ethnologist Anton Lukesch, published in Austria in 1976 by Akademische Druck – und Verlagsanstalt. The book contains photographs taken by Lukesch, functioning as the visual evidence for the natives: 64 color and black and white images, distributed throughout the 143 pages that the author devotes to narrating episodes of the expedition in which contact was made with the Asuriní on the banks of the Ipiaçava stream, a tributary of the Xingu River, in addition to presenting descriptions of aspects of the social life of the Asuriní, elaborated from a few weeks of coexistence with these natives.

2 On Koatinemo Indigenous Land. They currently live in two villages, and the population is approximately 200 people.

3 In the 1970s, the presence of non-indigenous people aiming to contact indigenous groups in the region intensified, arising from the emergence of new economic activities: mining, agriculture and government projects, in particular the construction of the Trans-Amazonian Highway (BR-230).

4 See, for example, Villela (2015).

5 With reference to Alfred Gell’s notion of agency (1998).

Informed by reports of the pathogenesis caused by photography at the time of contact, I leafed through the recently obtained book, curious about the photos, imagining that I would see the trauma of contact illustrated by portraits of sick, grimacing people, with suffering etched on their faces. The expectation of encountering these images was reinforced by certain testimonials that I had heard from the Asuriní in 2012 about a recent expedition to the pre- and post-contact settlement sites along the Ipiaçava stream. During the trip in 2010⁶, several natives became ill and the shamans had nightmares that included the *anhynga* of the dead (ghosts liberated after death), in particular when they arrived where the priests had built their camp, at the site of the old Akapepugi village, which subsequently became the village where the Asuriní remained until 1972, at which point they were permanently relocated to the village of Old Koatinemo, on the right bank of the Ipiaçava stream. The traumatic memory of the older natives indicated that the initial moments were filled with tension, drama, deaths and illnesses. They also recalled the inefficient work of Funai⁷, which took over the “Asuriní attraction” a few weeks after the departure of the priests. Thirteen deaths occurred in a little over a year following the contact, resulting from the spread of influenza and malaria.

Surprisingly, when I looked at Anton Lukesch’s book, I realized that the priests’ photographs showed no signs of suffering, illness, trauma or cultural and population disaster. The natives, portrayed in their activities – processing food, painting their bodies with jenipapo (a tropical fruit), returning from the field, playing the turé flute, or resting in hammocks – appeared in the images as if nothing extraordinary was happening; occasions in which the camera registered people at ease, smiling and posing for the photographer, were not uncommon. Some scenes record mundane moments and events of the encounter, for example, the distribution of presents, or when Anton Lukesch tries smoking an Asuriní cigarette. In the book, the photographic narrative reinforces and confirms what the textual construction maintains: that the contact was peaceful, that the Asuriní voluntarily accepted the presence of the priests and their team, and that the coexistence with the visitors was harmonious, friendly and cordial.

The photos, which I never got tired of looking at, were incompatible with the Asuriní account of the contact as a disaster, and also with the interpretation

6 The purpose of the expedition was to carry out collaborative archaeological research and was made possible by the project “Território e História dos Asuriní do Xingu – Um estudo bibliográfico, documental, arqueológico e etnoarqueológico sobre a trajetória histórica dos Asuriní do Xingu (século XIX aos dias atuais)”, coordinated by the Ethnoarchaeology Professor Fabíola Andrea Silva, a docent at Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (MAE) of USP. The project received support from Fapesp and was carried out between August 2009 and July 2011.

7 Fundação Nacional do Índio (National Indian Foundation), a government agency that deals with indigenous issues in Brazil.

concerning the pathogenic agent of the photography. It would be necessary to better understand the photos of the work, *Bearded Indians...* and to begin considering the hypothesis that the relationship of the Asuriní with photography was not immediately pathogenic, or rather, was not only pathogenic. How to explain that the natives were so seemingly at ease, happily posing or simply indifferent to the priests' equipment?

This text attempts to compare the photographs presented in Lukesch's documentary and scientific project with its agency on the Asuriní, which I was able to learn about when circulating a collection of these photos among the natives in 2015, during field work for my PhD research (See Villela 2016)⁸. Lukesch presents a chronicle of the expedition that established contact with the natives of the Ipiaçava stream, which is illustrated by the photographs; accounts about the contact were, in turn, produced by the Asuriní upon seeing the photographs. Metacommentaries regarding the photographs among the Asuriní are produced by Lukesch, when viewing and commenting on one of the images of an indigenous woman posing for the photographer, and, from the Asuriní perspective, when upon seeing the photos, they also produced reflections on the presence of photography during the contact. The same images can be used and function in many ways, depending on the context and the on project they serve.

CHRONICLES OF THE ENCOUNTER: PACIFYING THE SAVAGES OR TAMING⁹ THE WHITES¹⁰?

The book *Bearded Indians of the Tropical Forest* by the missionary and ethnologist Anton Lukesch is an important reference because it highlights the existence of a people whose presence was only confirmed by reports of

8 I circulated color copies of photographs from Lukesch's book.

9 Employing the term used by the Asuriní as translated into Portuguese, it was not possible to express the term used in their own language. Viveiros de Castro comments that the Araweté, as the Asuriní, sought contact with the whites and literally "pacified" them, less because they felt trapped territorially and more to escape the hostilities of enemy tribes (Viveiros de Castro 1986, 136). Albert, in the introduction to the book *Pacificando o branco, cosmologias do contato no Norte-Amazônico*, states that the theme "pacification/domestication of whites" aims at understanding the internal diversity of representations that are, in fact, devices of symbolic and ritualistic domestication to express the changeability of non-indigenous people and to neutralize their harmful powers. Albert comments that the theme "indians tame whites" had already been mentioned by Darcy Ribeiro and Rondon regarding several indigenous groups, among whom he cites the Kaingang, Xokleng, Parintintin, Umutina, Kayapó and Rama-Rama. See Albert (2000, 10).

10 The word "whites" is the literal translation of the term "brancos," from the word "akarai," used by the natives to refer to non-indigenous people. I chose to keep it in the instances where it seemed appropriate to emphasize the direct reference made by the Asuriní to the non-indigenous. In other instances, the translation chosen for "whites" is "non-indigenous" or "non-indigenous people."

gateiros (hunters of jaguars and wild forest cats), *ribeirinhos* (people who live along the river) and settlers who wandered in the so-called “land of the Asuriní,” a region between the Xingu River and its tributary, the Bacajá.

Early in the book the author writes:

It is the fondest dream of every ethnologist to discover and establish friendly contact with one of the few genuinely isolated and unacculturated societies that still survive in the modern world, and to study, understand, and make known their aboriginal lifestyle (Lukesch 1976, 9).

Priest-ethnologist Anton Lukesch documents the first meeting, or, as he says, the “discovery” of the “*silvícolas*” (indigenous forest dwellers) that were living in isolation, without contact with “civilization”. The photographs are evidence that the contact was accomplished peacefully and harmoniously, and that the natives accepted the new visitors in a natural and polite manner. The text consistently makes reference to the photographs that illustrate and confirm what the author claims.

Let us turn to the chronicle of the encounter from the priest-ethnologist’s perspective, and then to the Asuriní version.

April 1971. The brothers, Anton and Karl Lukesch, and six other men, among them “*mateiros*” (woodsmen) who knew that region of Amazon rainforest well, gathered in the small town of São Felix (Pará), at the mouth of the Fresco River in Xingu, to organize the final preparations for an expedition in search of the natives of the Ipiaçava stream. Among the equipment carried in their baggage were tools for the construction of a shed, tarpaulins, daily utensils for camp life, a first aid kit and many gifts for the natives (Figure 1).

figure 1

“Start of the land-expedition with Father Karl”. Photo and caption by A. Lukesch (Ibid., 29).



Credit: © Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

On April 28, the ranchers saw three natives in a field a two-day walk from their camp; then the Lukesch Brothers and four of their six men prepared for a large expedition; only two of the men remained in the camp.

On May 8, around 5:30 p.m., they found a trail that seemed reasonably fresh, and then followed it with a hastened pace, “excited about the discovery” and, finally, at around noon on May 9, they observed, about 50 meters away, several huts of a small village.

At the entrance, an imposing old man stood up; at his side there was a bundle with many arrows, and they could hear sounds of agitation coming from the village. The old man made frantic gestures, which, to the Lukesch Brothers, made it urgently clear that they should move forward; then only the priests advanced. Soon, a tall, strong man, about 30 years old, appeared and took the place of the old man – only later they learned that this man was one of the chiefs of the village. This indigenous man addressed the priests while pointing a threatening bow at them. Anton asked the members of his team to leave their weapons on the ground and then tried all the words he knew in the indigenous languages he had studied (classical Tupi, Suruí and even Kayapó) to make the man understand that they had come as “friends.” To make his intentions more clear, he stretched out his arms and offered some gifts: machetes, axes and beads. At this point they were completely surrounded by natives, and the young man confronting them did not change his harsh tone and hostile attitude. Anton offered two machetes to him, which the native accepted, decreasing the tension. The “cacique” then took Anton to his hut, and Father Karl brought more presents. The brothers called out to the rest of their team and the natives also left to call the other Asuriní, who were nearby, in the fields or encampments in the woods (Figures 2 and 3).

figure 2

“Asuriní camp in the forest on the right bank of the Xingu River”. Photo and caption by A. Lukesch (Ibid., 26). This image is on the cover of the book.



Credit: © Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

figure 3
“Leader of the
group trying
father Karl’s
cigarette”. Photo
and caption
by A. Lukesch
(Ibid., 103).



Credit: © Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

The chronicle of the encounter with the *tapy'yia* (enemies) – the way the Asuriní referred to the non-indigenous at the time of contact – was remembered and told by Marakauá, a 60-year-old indigenous woman, more than 40 years after the incident occurred. One hot afternoon in May, looking at Lukesch’s published images while quietly lying in a hammock within her home, she took the photograph reproduced above and silently stared at it for a few minutes. After gazing at the image awhile, Marakauá remembered the story of this first meeting and wanted to tell it.

According to Marakauá, then Avona’s wife, her husband said that one day he was going to dream and tame the white enemies, because he was a “real shaman.” The way he tamed was by dreaming (*gapuau*, he dreamed) and in dreaming he “saw in the clear” (*aripeuarave gyresak*). The ability to travel to the worlds of the spirits while sleeping and during shamanic rituals and to see the ghosts of the dead (*anhynga*) are both referred to by the verb *aesak*, to see, an ability that only the shaman possesses¹¹. The emphasis on “seeing the truth” refers to this special aptitude of seeing what not everyone sees and implies the possibility of acting on what has been seen. It was thus by this dreaming and seeing (or “dreaming seeing”), that Avona “tamed” the white enemies.

Avona would have now seen, as any Asuriní, a large number of beads and machetes on the edge of the Ipiaçava stream and would have already known that these were gifts brought by the whites for them. It was only after having “dreamed and tamed the enemies” that the whites appeared in the village.

¹¹ For more information on Asuriní shamanism, see Müller (1993), especially Chapter 3, “*Maraká*, o ritual xamanístico,” in which the author addresses both the ritualistic acts and roles, and the cosmological principles underlying shamanism.

The life of the Asuriní before May of 1971 was very difficult. Marakauá says that Avona could no longer bear to walk in the forest, retreating from *tapy'yia* – enemy groups with whom they had tense relations, such as the Araweté and the Kayapó – and eating *maritá'ui* (babassu coconut shell flour) because they could not work in the fields. After losing some of his relatives (an uncle and a brother) in intertribal wars with the Araweté, Avona, strong shaman that he was, decided to dream “to tame” the enemies. Marakauá says: “He was angry. He said he was going to tame *tapy'yia* [enemy, white]. He lost his relatives, got angry and dreamed of killing one of them (from the enemy group), dreamed of eating their heart, their liver, making children get sick because of his anger. Shaman spent the day like this.”

CAPTIONS AND NAMES, TO DESCRIBE AND RECOGNIZE

Although the photographs in Lukesch’s work are seamlessly integrated with the textual narrative that they present and illustrate, the photos are accompanied by their own explanatory captions. From my first viewing of these images, the peculiar way that the author’s captions presented and described some of the photos struck me as curious. Facing the unknown object, Lukesch provided explanations in a distant and objective way, but when the referent of the photo becomes extremely exotic and a description is impossible, the author relies on his creative imagination. The captions of the photographs are a good barometer for measuring the imaginative content (and reverie) of Lukesch’s scientific project, as well as his devout idealization of the “forest dwellers” that lived in isolation. The strange habit of the recently-“discovered” natives – of wearing the fabric of a net seized from the river people on the head or tied to an axe as a pendant –, produced picturesque captions to explain “primitive fashion,” as shown in Figures 4 and 5 and their explanatory captions.

figure 4
 “Man dressed
 in pirated
 costume”. Photo
 and caption
 by A. Lukesch
 (Ibid., 103).



Credit: © Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

figure 5
“Enthusiased
youngster
wearing axe
as a pendant
on a fiber-
band on the
back”. Photo
and caption
by A. Lukesch
(Ibid., 107).



Credit: © Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

Most of the captions only inform the reader about the activity performed, about the objects and the places where the action occurs, seeking a way to describe the newly-contacted people. In other captions, Lukesch’s imagination and empathy take shape in adjectives that qualify the actions: the man who lies *comfortably* in his hammock, the woman that *carefully* paints her leg with geometric designs, another who prepares a *delicious* porridge with honey and corn, or even a mother who takes care of her child with *tenderness*, as is seen in the following photo (Figure 6).

figure 6
“Mother tenderly
taking care of
her child”. Photo
and caption
by A. Lukesch
(Ibid., 102).



Credit: © Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

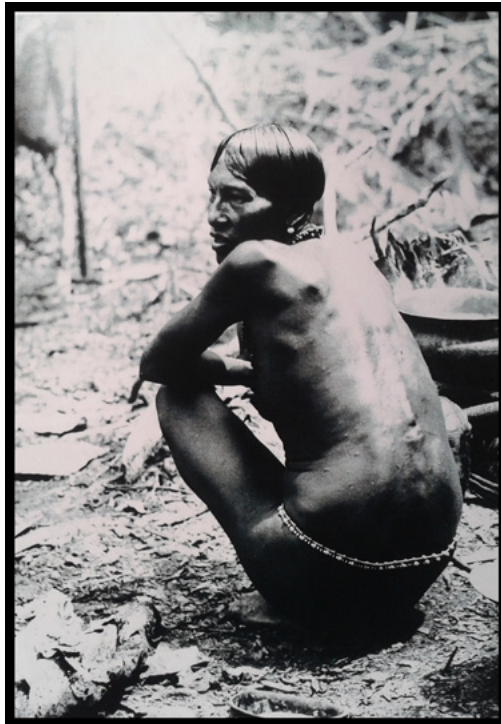
The woman who tenderly takes care of her child is Patuá, and the child, a girl, Matuia, is today 50 years old; her mother died at least 15 years ago. Today, Matuia’s two-year-old granddaughter is named Patuá.

The circulation of the photographs of “Father Antônio,” to speak in the Asuriní manner, in field work carried out in 2015, brought back many memories of fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law, wives and husbands who had already died. The usual attitude towards the photo of an “ancient” – a deceased Asuriní who is referred to by the term *bava* – consisted in identifying that person by indicating his/her own or another living person’s kin relationship to the person portrayed. At first, the proper names were mentioned when the name of the dead portrayed in the images already belonged to a living child or young adult; in this case, an effort was made to explain to me the kin relationship between the child and the deceased in the picture, to show from whom the child inherited the name. Veveí asked for the photograph in which Avona, the man who tamed the whites, is portrayed (Figure 3) to give to her grandson, Itareí. Avona, who was also called Itareí, is the boy’s grandfather on the maternal side and it is from him that the 15-year-old Itareí inherited his name.

The Asuriní traditionally change their names at the death of a relative; on this occasion, they substitute their names for others that belonged to the dead further back in time. It is not as if the deceased would return, since all of his/her belongings need to be destroyed, with nothing remaining in the village but their bones (*ga akynquera*, his/her bones) buried in the big house, and since the *ynga*, the vital principle, follows the path of Maíra, and the *anhynga*, the ghost of the deceased released by death, also takes its course, hidden by the shaman until it disappears. Only the proper names return from the dead, since death is responsible for the change of names. Souza (1994), who worked with this subject among the Asuriní in field work in the end of the 1980s and in the beginning of the 1990s, claims that an old man could end up with as many as fourteen names. She states that every adult begins to use another name when someone dies, but that until the age of 10, children keep their birth name. Regarding the inheritance of names, Souza observes that, although not a strict rule, it is common for women to receive names from their maternal side and for men to receive names from relatives on their paternal side (Ibid., 91).

Aware of the taboo on pronouncing the names of the dead, I was careful, at the beginning of the viewing sessions of Lukesch’s photographs, not to ask for them. However, to my surprise, by seeing the photographs, and in an effort to help me recognize the person portrayed, many Asuriní uttered the names. This confused me at first. Marakauá helped me understand what was happening. After all, why, when seeing the photographs, did they pronounce the names of the dead? Marakauá, observing a photograph depicting the back of a squatting native (Figure 7), said: “It’s Jakundá. An Araweté shot her in the back with an arrow. There is no child with this name, but you can say it because she is very old.”

figure 7
“Old woman
surrounded by
her household
items”. Photo
and caption
by A. Lukesch
(1976, 99).



Credit: ©Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

The native woman revealed to me that, having died long ago, Jakundá belonged to the group of the “ancient dead,” and the memories associated with her could be remembered, as well as her name, without bad consequences. This was the case for most of the “ancients” portrayed by the priests. The taboo regarding the recently deceased still remains, and the danger exists because the disintegration of the person releases the *anhynga* (ghost). In this case, pronouncing the name of the dead, as well as seeing his/her photograph or simply remembering him/her, poses an imminent threat, because the thought, name and image can draw the *anhynga* closer to the village. In May 2015, it was confirmed that it is not desirable to see images of the recently deceased. The Ita’aka village nurse¹² told me that the natives constantly asked her to erase a baby’s (Taymira’s son) photo, who had died around eight months before, from her cellphone. Without anyone having explicitly stated, I believe that there was a relationship between keeping the photos and the fact that the nurse had dreamed of the dead baby night after night following his burial. An indigenous woman, Ipikiri, explained to the nurse that she was having nightmares about the child because the “spirit of the baby” was hanging around her.

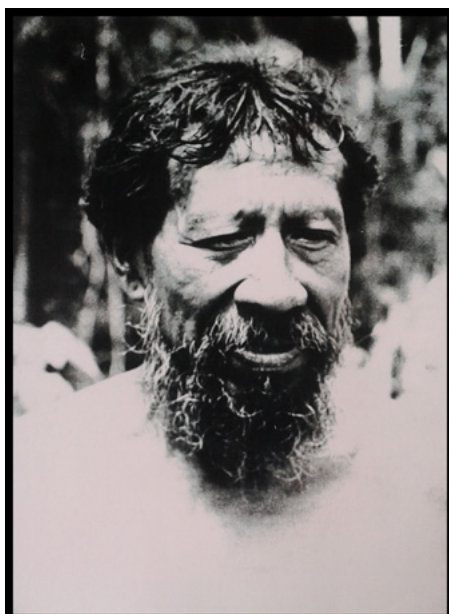
¹² The Asuriní villages have a well-equipped health clinic with *Distritos Sanitários Especiais Indígenas* (Special Indigenous Health District – DSEI) nurse technician, who remains full time in the villages. Ângela, a nurse from the village of Ita’aka, observed the last days of the baby who died and, in this respect, was the one who informed me, since I avoided talking about it with the Asuriní.

Returning to the “ancient dead,” I noticed that Lukesch’s photographs triggered memories from the past, and although some of the memories of the contact were negatively charged, there was a positive aspect to the memory of the relatives and their names. The relationship between names and memory has already been noted by Sousa (1994), who, in her ethnographic study, observes a historical dimension to the names for the Asuriní. The researcher states that when they mentioned their names, they always told facts related to the relatives from whom those names were inherited, thus remembering events from when this or that individual died, personal anecdotes that linked the person telling the story to the deceased, among other memories that indicated “the existence of a cognitive dimension to the personal names, in the sense that the names would be one of the resources of historical perception and the recollection of the past” (Ibid., 75). We can also say that the photographs by Anton Lukesch, upon being circulated in the villages, also entered the game in which names and memory move, with difference that the images are not passed down through generations.

NOTES ON BEARD

The presence of beard among a “genuinely isolated” people attracted Anton Lukesch’s attention to such an extent that he incorporated that physical trait into the title of the book as an adjective describing the natives of the tropical forest. However, although highlighting this attribute, little is dedicated to describe or explain it; the author mentions it using exactly three lines: “Many of the men have a long beard that reaches the top of the chest, covering the neck. The color of the beard is often reddish, from *urucu* (*Bixa orellano*), which they like to use as a dye” (Lukesch 1976, 24 and 33) (Figure 8).

figure 8
“Typical bearded
Asuriní”. Caption
by A. Lukesch
(Ibid., 27).



Credit: © Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

However, contrary to Lukesch's observation, the presence of a beard was not a "typical" Asuriní trait, but reflected a particular circumstance. One afternoon when I showed the priests' photographs to a Koati domestic group, Boaiva, a 65-year-old man, explained to me that they had always used a plant called *marupá*, which, because of its sharpness, served as a razor to shave the beard (some told me it looked like "taquara" – bamboo, others, like grass). However, the constant wars against enemies forced the Asuriní to abandon villages and camps, they had lost access to the *marupá*. The presence of beards in the photographs also proved to be an exotic element for the younger natives. Koatirei, 20, said, after seeing the images: "I didn't know we were like this. I didn't know we were so bearded".

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIVES AND NON-INDIGENOUS

Returning to a question asked at the outset: if the accounts of the photographs at the time of contact point was a pathogenic agent, why were the Asuriní smiling and at ease in the photographs published by Lukesch?

Previous experience among the Kayapó¹³ provided Anton Lukesch with the knowledge that indigenous people harbor a profound distrust of the activities carried out by visitors, anthropologists or field researchers, especially related to photographs. In their interactions with the Kayapó, the fathers encountered difficulties with photography from the beginning, since these natives identified the act of taking photographs with "soul theft." Lukesch stated that the term used by the Kayapó to refer to "soul" is the same that they attribute to photography, to portrait and to shadow, all of which were thought of as "mysterious things." The Kayapó women's distrust of photography remained even long after initial contact with "civilization"; Anton Lukesch reveals that he had never used the camera flash to avoid frightening them and "not to stir up their old mistrust" (Ibid., 22). Among the Asuriní, something quite different was observed.

A full contradiction to this attitude was found in the behavior of the Indians on the Ipiaçava stream. With benevolent interest they followed all our activities. When we were taking photos they even stood still and smilingly posed for us [referring to Figure 28 of the book, reproduced in this study as Figure 9]. They obviously believed that we tried to see them better through the mysterious thing with its large eye, pointed at them (our camera), being fascinated by their appearance. Whenever my brother (Father Karl) was using

¹³ Lukesch published some works from his field expedition among Kayapó, which occurred years before he established contact with the Asuriní. See Lukesch (1956; 1968).

flash-light it was great fun for them and they applauded it with loud and general laughter (Ibid., 22).

The photograph mentioned in the middle of the passage transcribed above is of a young woman in front of a house. She holds both hands close to her head, as if in the middle of a gesture, interrupted by the photo. The left leg is in front, in what appears to be a pose; while twisting the trunk to look at the camera, she shows a trace of a smile (Figure 9).

figure 9
"Woman posing for a photo". Photo and caption by A. Lukesch (Ibid., 70).



Credit: ©Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt Graz

It is undeniable that the Asuriní were comfortable with their visitors; otherwise, why were there so many smiles recorded by the camera? The natives understood well, in fact, that the Fathers were fascinated with their appearance. Regarding the flash, I find it strange that they would have applauded; I believe it to be possible that the flash of artificial light could have provoked laughter, but the image of recently contacted indigenous people applauding the flash seems an exaggeration to me. Indeed, the receptive attitude of the natives to the presence of the camera and the smiles that appear in the images reinforce the Lukesch's narrative that the contact was peaceful and that, once accepted as friends, the non-indigenous people could partake in the community's environment of "harmony," a harmony attributed not only to the rules and norms of "tribal traditions," but also to the isolation of the Indigenous "forest people" of Ipiaçava (Ibid., 21). The following photograph captured a small scene of coexistence and friendly exchange between Father Anton Lukesch and an Asuriní native. Although not credited, Karl Lukesch must have taken the photograph (Figure 10).

figure 10
“Author learning
how to smoke
in the Asuriní
manner”. Photo:
Karl Lukesch
(although the photo
is not credited to
him) and caption
by Anton Lukesch
(Ibid., 76).



I must mention a certain naivité in Anton Lukesch’s claim that the receptivity of the indigenous people was demonstrated by the “harmonious” atmosphere that he seems to believe is projected by the photographs. By talking to the Asuriní almost 45 years later, it became clear that today’s view of the priests’ camera at the moment of contact suggests a somewhat different interpretation.

As bitter coffee, the photography was tolerated as an inevitable and necessary practice, inherent in the contact and coexistence with the whites. It is known that for years preceding the contact, the Asuriní were cornered by enemies, the Xikrin and Araweté, on the one hand, and pressured by local people advancing on their territory on the other, thus seeing no alternative but to establish contact with the *akaraí* (*non-indigenous*).

As a witness to the encounter with the priests, Marakauá stated that the photographs were initially perceived as strange and potentially dangerous, but when they realized that it was standard practice for the non-indigenous people, the Asuriní accepted and yielded to it. She said: “the *ta-py’yia* [enemies] were taking a photo and the shaman was frightened by the photo. Then another said: ‘It is not to fear, no, that’s what the whites are going to do to us.’” Matuia, the native who translated Marakauá’s account, explains, reformulating the phrase, that the native, upon seeing that the shaman was frightened by the photography, would have said: “He doesn’t turn into a shaman for them [for the whites] because we are going to change our culture. It’s something else now, we have to get used to it.” In order to explain his comment, Matuia compared photography to the consumption of industrialized foods to which the Asuriní got “used to,” such as biscuits, sugar and flour, among many others.

Accepting the contact and the production of images, photography provided the mediation between the natives and missionaries, becoming the exchange currency with the priests: the Asuriní accepted the contact and allowed themselves to be photographed in exchange for gifts (Figure 11).

figure 11
“The author distributing axes”. Photo by K. Lukesch and caption by A. Lukesch (Ibid., 50).



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For Lukesch, the gifts are a necessary strategy for the initial contact, and the offer of industrialized goods explicitly demonstrates the peaceful attitude of the non-indigenous people from the beginning (Ibid., 121). In Marakauá’s account of the contact, after receiving many gifts, Avona shouted to the other natives who were nearby that they could call the relatives, because the whites “were not doing anything bad to them.” Avona had managed to tame the whites and the gifts were proof of that. Giving and receiving goods was confirmation that the bearded Indians of the tropical forest had accepted the contact, having been “pacified,” from the perspective of the priests, and that the whites had been “tamed,” from the perspective of the natives.

If distrust as to what photography can cause was present at the time of the first contact, the death and illnesses resulting from the encounter with the whites only confirmed the initial assumptions that photography could act in a harmful and negative way. It is only *a posteriori* discourse, an interpretation of a past event. Had the official contact with the national society not been the disaster that it was, ‘it is quite possible that they would have had less reason to be suspicious of photography, which would not imply, I believe, a total absence of suspicion, since being subjugated to non-indigenous people was sufficient reason to be skeptical.

To summarize, I hope to have provided a context for the reader regarding the agreements and disagreements of conceptions and understanding between the Asuriní of Xingu and the priest-ethnologists in terms of the presence of photography during the first contact. These versions sometimes contradict each another, while revealing that photographs mediate relations between natives and non-indigenous people. Among the Asuriní, photography has acquired different interpretations that can even help us understand their first reactions to the priests' camera – that the very first images of the book *Bearded Indians...* bear witness to (at the same time as constructing) – the discourse that is present to this day regarding its pathogenic agent as an *a posteriori* interpretation of a disastrous contact, and the positivity that it is imbued with today. Circulating the photos by Anton Lukesch in the village in 2015 reinforced the positive aspect. The photographs evoked memories of the relatives portrayed, and brought back their names, which made for a pleasant experience, especially for those Asuriní older than 60 years of age, who had a more vivid memory of the arrival of the priests. In addition, along with the photographs came memories of the contact. Although the events of that encounter were loaded with tension and were dramatically charged, they have already faded with time, thus allowing the Asuriní to look back at what happened then with new eyes.

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