

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL VIEW OF THE AMAZONIAN ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL: REVIEWING FUNCTION

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BEZERRA DE ALMEIDA, M. An archaeological view of the Amazonian ethnographic collections at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: reviewing function. *Revista do Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia, São Paulo, 11: 263-274, 2001.*

RESUMO: As coleções etnográficas do Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro reúnem mais de 25000 peças coletadas desde o século XIX até os dias de hoje. Seu estudo oferece à Arqueologia caminhos potencialmente úteis para a análise e interpretação da cultura material. Para este artigo foram selecionadas peças pertencentes a grupos indígenas da Amazônia, em especial os artefatos elaborados sobre ossos de animais, que nos permitem formular questões ao registro arqueológico.

UNITERMOS: Coleções etnográficas – Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro – Arqueologia – Ossos de animais.

The pioneers of modern museums – the so-called curiosity offices – gathered since the 16th century all sorts of objects that called to people's attention, motivated by interests in the Renaissance of Greco-Roman antiquities. Being incessantly visited between the second half of the 18th century and the late 19th century, the Americas, were truly barns of exotic objects for collectors from all over Europe (Ribeiro 1986).

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Marked, among other things, by the expansion of nationalism and by discussions surrounding the issues of human evolution, 19th century witnessed – mainly in Europe – the emergence of museums with a clear anthropologic character (Stocking Jr. 1985). The practice of collecting served nationalistic purposes – mainly from 1880 –, when market and colony disputes, the decline of evolutionist ideas, and the diminishment of the belief in technology, stimulated the search for ethnic identity.

That century saw the emergence of sciences like anthropology, ethnology, sociology, linguistics, and chemistry. According to Ribeiro (1986: 104), the collecting practices of the late 19th century attempted to “avoid the

loss not only of the culture of native peoples who they thought were condemned to extinction, but also of what we could find in these artifacts regarding the origin and evolution of mankind.”

The interest of anthropology in object collections secured in museums was left aside for a long period. Cantwell and Rothschild (1981) believe there are two reasons accounting for that. First, the moving of anthropology to the academic realm would have separated anthropologists from collections, and second, the considerable emphasis given to fieldwork. They quote Fenton when asserting that “anthropology was nurtured in museums and matured in universities”. To Laurie (Stocking Jr. 1985), museums came to have such an irrelevance to anthropologists that many of them were formed without ever have entered a museum. The work with collections was seen as a lesser activity, considered “woman’s work” or “armchair anthropology” (Cantwell & Rothschild, op. cit: 580). Thus, it was up to archaeologists and curators to take on the task of studying the material culture accumulated in museums.

Lately however, symbolic anthropology has been developing an interest on the variety of possibilities of study retained by material culture. Besides anthropologists, archaeologists have also begun to research ethnographic collections willing to test hypotheses about historic and prehistoric artifacts (Kaplan 1981).

As asserted by Deetz, “material culture is that segment of man’s physical environment, which is purposely shaped by him according to a culturally dictated” (1977: 7). This material realm is by excellence archaeology’s object of study, which long ago invests in ways that would permit a wider understanding of societies through this physical dimension.

From the 70’s on, several of these ways were proposed and have been successfully applied. In this manner, the main purposes of experimental archaeology, middle-range theory, ethnographic analogy, and ethnoarchaeology are to make a link, a “bridge”, between the archaeological record in the present and the past system that produced it.

Amongst those, analogy is the reasoning form most used by archaeology. In our daily

task as archaeologists, we are constantly making use of analogies, otherwise, according to Hodder (1982), how is it that we would be able to promptly identify some artifacts as stone axes, and arrow points? The problem, still according to Hodder, is to believe that objects and past and present societies, similar in some aspects, are similar in others. We need to be cautious not to fall in a “deterministic uniformitarianism” (p. 26).

The establishment of ethnographic parallelisms however, widens the researchers’ horizons. To Gould (1978), ethnographic models can furnish verifying hypotheses relatively free of ethnocentric biases. It is necessary to choose the ways of making those models operational. Discontinuous models, for instance, presuppose analogies between areas which environment and adaptation of human societies are similar, though distant in space or time. Continuous models refer to areas where continuity between prehistoric and contemporary populations can be evidenced. To Schiffer (1987: 363), ethnoarchaeology, as other sub-disciplines, has been furnishing general principles extremely interesting for the understanding of the ambiguities of the archaeological record . On the other hand, Hodder believes ethnoarchaeology became more related to anthropology and ethnohistory, and this can end up making the former lose its independence. According to him, “as ethnoarchaeology becomes more like anthropology and ethnohistory, and as it needs to incorporate the methods of these adjacent disciplines more fully, its independent existence comes under threat – at least in its present form. In its place we are likely to find material culture studies sitting astride many disciplines, and a different ethnoarchaeology of ethnic groups and with an archaeological dimension to ethnohistory.” (Hodder 1987: 117).

In his most recent publication “Archaeological Process – An Introduction” (1999), Hodder asks if two contexts can be really compared against each other, mainly when dealing with formal analogies. The solution would be the identification of the context and its boundaries – interpreted by the archaeologist – and the recognition of similarities and

differences within the contexts (Hodder 1999: 48). Gould (1990) believes that ethnoarchaeology must explore the relations between etic and emic interpretations, saying that “one of the most important roles of ethnoarchaeology in the development of acceptable ideas about human past is to inform archaeologists about kinds of ideas that are not possible through its evaluation in relation to such conditions in the real world” (p. 15). According to him, it is necessary to order variables that he divides in the ones tied to ecology, economy, and technology, and those relating to the symbolic domain.

Ethnographic collections allow comparisons with archaeological material in relation to the first variables, and the ones dealing with the symbolic character of material culture. Nevertheless, we should accentuate that such aspects can be linked between each other. “In small societies technology is inseparable from spiritual or ancestral involvement in the process of production.” (Tilley 1999: 59).

The data resultant from studies, under ethnoarchaeology’s view serve as base to the formulation of hypotheses and also as empirical material against which hypotheses elaborated from other reasoning can be tested (Kobylinski 1991).

As Hodder (1982) affirms, our dependence in other societies, behaviors, and forms of thought is extremely vast (p. 27). Thus, ethnographic collections are potentially useful to the archaeologist. Such collections, even though badly documented in many cases, constitute a valuable physical support for the archaeological research, contributing to the re-dimensioning and reorientation of our working hypotheses.

Our choice for studying the ethnographic collections of the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro arose from the necessity of widening the horizons of our studies of faunal remains found in Brazilian prehistoric sites. We are looking for investigating all the possibilities that could furnish us with more information for a better understanding of the interaction between prehistoric populations and zoo-cultural systems.

Ethnohistorical sources, for instance, have been largely utilized. The narratives offer us

important descriptions not only regarding the fauna, but also concerning the relationship between observed populations and the environment. Because it deals with this relationship in present populations, ethnozooology (Bezerra de Almeida 1998a) has also contributed to our work, allowing us to reorient some questions, but, above all, furnishing a data base to the construction of models to be tested by archaeology.

The ethnographic collections of the ethnology sector of the National Museum represent a rich source of information for ethnoarchaeology. Assembling, among others, artifacts and adornments made out of animal bones by populations of several parts of the world, this collection has allowed us to improve our studies.

Altogether, there are 28.000 pieces of native origin, of which an expressive part is from the Amazonic region. Our purpose is to establish a functionalist analysis, since we agree with Leach when he says that “functionalism as a social theory is now something of a fossil in the history of ideas, but as an analytical approach it retains its importance in the understanding of objects” (Leach 1996: 41). In the first stage of our work we analyzed around 200 artifacts, all elaborated from animal bones. For this brief presentation, we are going to concentrate on some of the ones related to Amazonic groups.

Extensively found in Brazilian archaeological sites, rodents – as agoutis (*Dasyprocta spp*) and capybaras (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) – are animals still consumed in Brazil (Bezerra de Almeida 1998a). Ethnobiological studies (Posey 1986) showed their inclusion in the diet of contemporary populations of the Amazonic region as well as the hunting techniques for their capture – that include the so-called “garden hunting” (Linares 1971). Horticulturist groups utilize their own fields to attract and capture small and medium sized rodents.

Regarding their skeletons, the most frequent elements in the archaeological samples are mandibles and teeth, mainly incisors, usually found separated from their mandibles. Our zooarchaeological research does not register, so far, the usage of these elements

outside the alimentary and adornment (as necklaces, for instance) contexts. Ethnographic collections allow us to see that teeth, as well as mandibles, were utilized basically in three forms: as scarificators, as chisels, and as earrings.

Scarificators are instruments for bleeding the skin, strengthening this way, the body. They are formed by a small wooden staff in whose extremity it was attached the animal teeth (Ribeiro 1988). I selected six examples: one made out of an agouti tooth by the Txikao group, also used as a chisel (Photo 1 – piece n. 2); two fish mandibles used as escarificator by Ipurinã and Kayapó groups (Photo 3); and a gourd slab with encrusted fish tooth, from the Bororo group (Photo 4).

The chisel is a kind of plane used for scraping, smoothing, and drilling shell, wood, and bone. A tooth of agouti, capybara, paca (*Cuniculus paca*) or peccary (*Tayassu pecary*) is attached in the extremity of a wooden staff. It can be simple, with a single capybara tooth (Photo 1 – piece n. 1) as the ones made by the Bororo, or double, with teeth on both extremities of the staff. It resembles, in its form, to the Txikao scarificator, previously described. Another kind of chisel is utilized by the Mura-Pirahã, that simply use a peccary or agouti mandible as they are, for smoothing wood used to make bows and arrows (Photo 2).



Photo 1 – 1 = chisel – Bororo; 2 = scarificator – Txikao; 3 = earlobe – Kayabi.



Photo 2 – 1 = mandible of peccary used as chisel – Mura – Pirahã; 2 = mandible of agouti used as chisel – Mura – Pirahã.



Photo 3 – Fish mandibles used as chisel – *Ipurinã* and *Kayapó*.

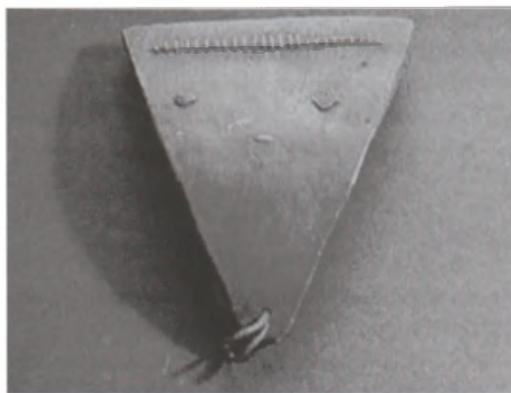


Photo 4 – Gourd slab with encrusted fish tooth used as chisel – *Bororo*.

The Kayabi earrings are used in the earlobes. They are made of a wooden staff with two agouti teeth attached to one extremity, between which they put wax, giving it a chisel-like appearance (Photo 1 – piece n. 3). Its form is similar to that of the Bororo chisel and the Txikao scarificator (Photo 1).

The arrow points (Photos 5 and 6), also made out of animal bones, display an interes-

ting variety. Out of a group of 38 pieces, 19 are double points attached to bamboo stems (Photo 6); 10 are double points made in such a way that the distal extremity remains pronounced, they are called “flecha fisga” (fishing

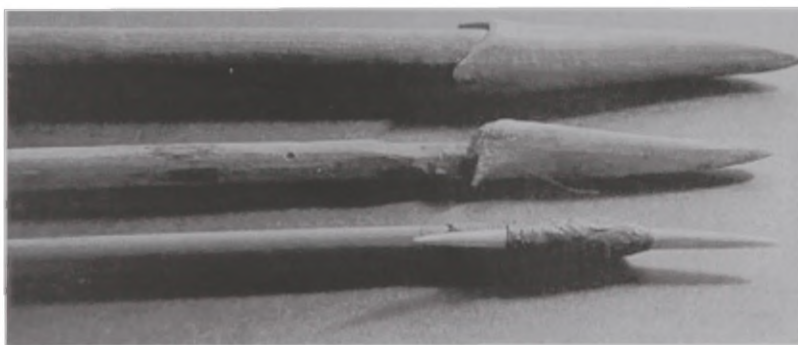


Photo 5 – 1 and 2 = arrow point = attachment bones. See the n. 2 with the epiphyses – *Meinaku*; 3 = arrow point = fishing spear – *Bororo*.

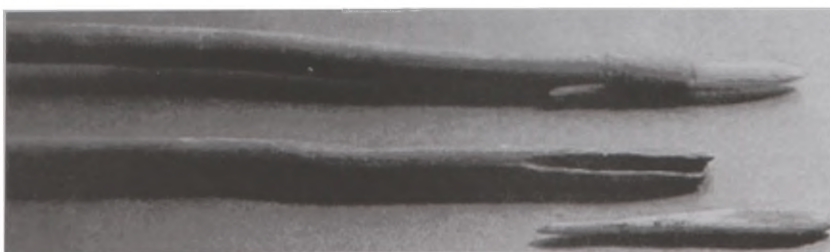


Photo 6 – Arrow point = double points.

spear), and are used for hunting and fishing among the Bororo (Photo 1 – piece n. 3); and 7 are of bone attachments (Photo 5 – pieces n. 1 and 2). These ones are constituted of mammal or bird epiphyses cut in one of their extremities and sharpened in the other for the attachment of a bamboo stick. They are used for hunting bigger animals. In one of them, we still have the diaphysis, which allowed us to identify it. It is a right mammal tibia made by the Meinaku group (Photo 1 – piece n. 2). They are from distinct origins within Amazonia.

Another ensemble of bone made artifacts constitutes of flutes from the groups Tukano and Maku (Photo 7 – pieces n. 1 and 2), Bacairi, Araweté, and Erigpatsa (Photo 8 – pieces n. 1, 2, and 3), and Karajá (Photo 9). They are made basically the same way. A long bird bone,

generally the radius, is cut in both extremities, then wax is applied as a diaphragm in the interior of the tube. In the Tukano example (Photo n. 7 – piece n. 1), they are decorated with beetle wings. There are at least 10 different types of flute described in Amazonia.

A different ensemble includes three artifacts manufactured out of long mammal bones. They are sharpened at their distal extremity. The functions attributed to them are different, despite the similarity of their physical characteristics. The first one, from an occidental Amazonic group, is described as an awl (Photo 10 – piece n. 1), and is used among other things, to perforate the lower lip, earlobes, and nasal membrane. Another one, made out of a long monkey bone by the Bororo, is described as an implement for scratching the

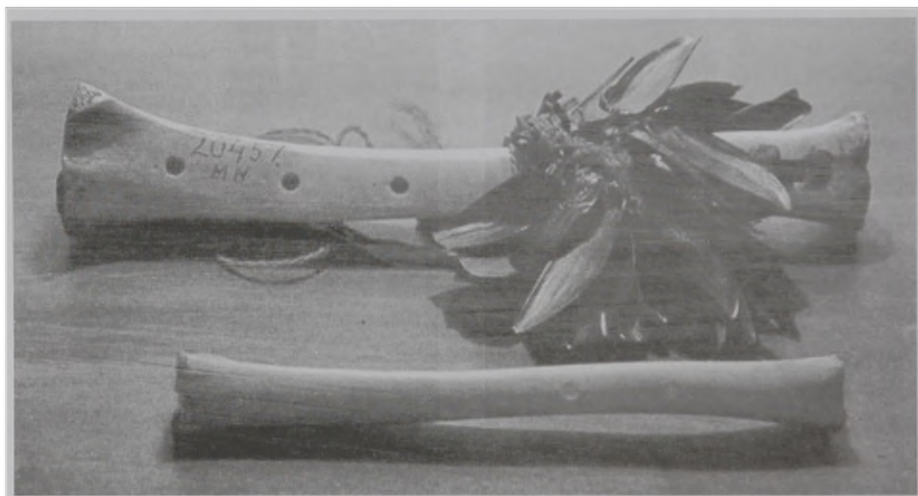


Photo 7 – 1 = flute decorated with beetle wings – Tukano; 2 = flute – Maku.

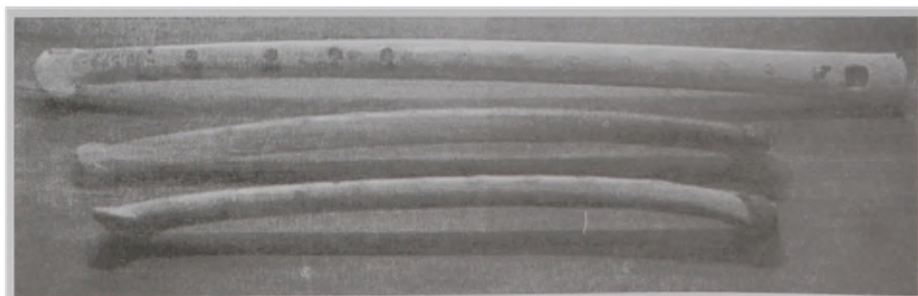


Photo 8 – 1 = flute – Bacairi; 2 = flute – Araweté; 3 = flute – Erigpatsa.

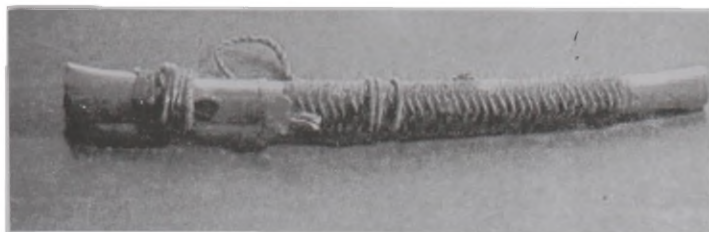


Photo 9 – Flute – Karajá.

head (Photo 10 – piece n. 2). And at last, an awl related to the Maué group, is decorated with incisions (Photo 10 – piece n. 3).

Finally, an extremely singular group of artifacts: an axe whose blade is a bone plaque (probably of a large aquatic mammal), from the Ipurinã groups (Photo 11). A monkey cranium used as a globular rattle by the Karajás (Photo 12). A small container made out of bone, described as used for drinking water by ill people, from the Tikuna group (Photo 13 – n. 1). And a fragment of a monkey cranium cap used as a spoon, by the Mura-Pirahã groups (Photo 13 – piece n. 2).

These artifacts may be rearranged in other categories according to the methodological procedures chosen for the research (Ribeiro 1986).

In the first group we can see the differentiated use of the same raw materials (loosen or even unloosen teeth), and the making of similar artifacts by different groups, used also in different ways.

The arrows group, furnish us with elements for the study of the technical

system – including the making of the points and their specific usage, besides the investigation of the relationships between hunted animals by each kind of arrow, and the animals used in making of such arrows (see MacGhee 1996).

The flutes are artifacts sufficiently evident from the standpoint of its recognition in the archaeological record. Interesting of mentioning is their similar building techniques and the fact they are originated from distinct groups. In an archaeological analysis, it is almost certain that they would have been attributed to a same culture.

In the case of the three artifacts made out of long sharpened bones, they would likewise have been identified as awls in the archaeological samples, and serve as an example of a different functional attribution, or double function. They still show that even with the collector's register it is difficult to define uses.

Finally, the last group of artifacts. The Ipurinã axe, certainly a ceremonial object, within the context of its cultural system can be studied as a globular rattle, in the light of symbolic approaches that privilege discussions around the metaphors of material culture (Tilley 1996). Lastly, the bone utilized, without any sort of alteration for drinking and eating purposes.

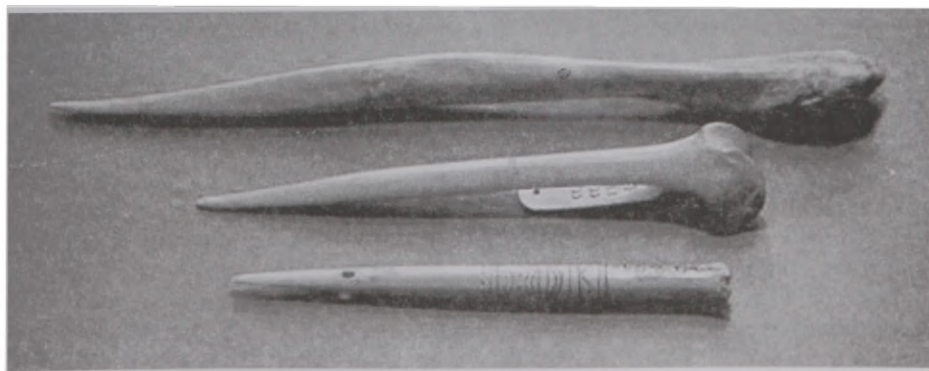


Photo 10 – 1 = awl; 2 = used to scratches head – Bororo; 3 = awl – Maué.

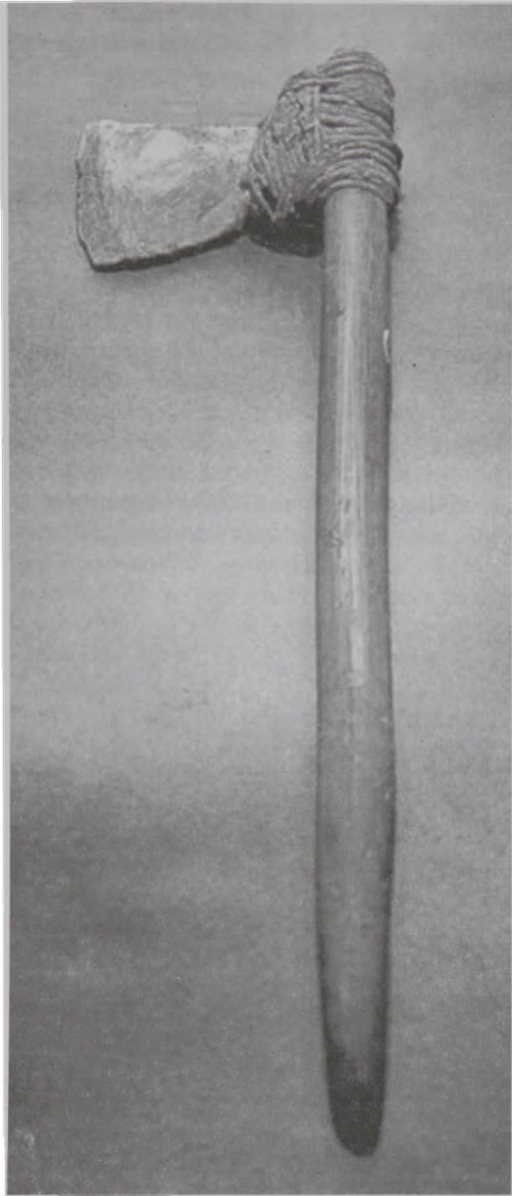


Photo 11 – Axe with blade made of bone – Ipurinã.

We do not intend to know how the prehistoric groups thought, but what they did and how they did is our main preoccupation.

Here we briefly presented a small portion of this 28.000 specimen collection that we are currently studying. What strikes us the most is the little attention given to these collections

by Brazilian archaeologists. The scarce existing studies deal with the ceramic materials (Andrade Lima 1986), although Brazilian archaeology has much to gain with the study of those collections.

For research in the Amazonic region, the information resulted from specific analyses of these collections can be extremely advantageous, mainly concerning regions such as the Rio Negro area, where archaeology has been recognizing a continuity between prehistoric and contemporary populations (Neves 1999). It is widely known that the archaeological record of Amazonic sites gives excessive privilege to ceramic materials. However, the analysis of artifacts made out of different materials is equally important, once they often give clues to the



Photo 12 – Globular rattle made of monkey cranium – Karajá.



Photo 13 – 1 = container made of bone used to drink water – Tikuna; 2 = fragment of monkey cranium used as spoon.

understanding of the relationships of these populations and their environment. Besides, the studies in the region have been increasing in the last years, as well as the number of prehistoric sites presenting faunal remains (Roosevelt 1999).

Moreover, the discussions about multi-ethnicity in that region and the support of ethnographic data can bring to this issue, have been provoking positive practical results in the Xingu (see Heckenberger 1996) and Rio Negro (see Neves 1998) areas, as well as in the pioneer work by Wüst (1983, 1987/89, 1990, 1994) among the Bororo. To some researchers, as Roosevelt, the “ethnographic projection” is truly a problem, due to the impact of the conquest over native populations that would had made it impossible for the drawing of comparisons between contemporary native societies. However, ethnohistory has been showing that such an impact happened in different ways within that region (Porro 1996), what makes it viable for comparisons in determined areas.

Another question is the establishment of seriated and chronological sequences based solely in ceramics. It cannot account for the ethnic and linguistic plurality in Amazonia. This search must be careful, once that due to its fluid and polymorphic character, the recognition of ethnicity in the archaeological record is not an easy task. According to Díaz-Andreu (1999),¹ archaeology cannot study ethnic identity in isolation of other types of identification as gender, religion, and status, among others.

The Amazonic collections, as we briefly saw here, reinforce the necessity of a systematic ethnoarchaeological study in the region. The material expose singularities of different social groups, similarities of artifacts produced in different cultural systems, and the use of similar artifacts in different contexts. Finally, we wanted to show the vast array of possibilities in the study of diverse archaeological issues having as object this kind of collection.

The interpretation of material culture by archaeology is a contemporary activity (Tilley 1996). The study of ethnographic collection is an experience both contemporary and as such, alive and fascinating for the archaeologist.

Acknowledgments

To the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum; to Fátima Regina Nascimento (and her team), curator of the collections of the Ethnology Sector at the National Museum; to Dr. Hélio Vianna, professor of Ethnology at the National Museum; to the archaeologist Lilian Thomaz for the photos. To the archaeologist Alfredo Minetti of Indiana University.

(1) Lecture “Nacionalismo e Etnicidade”, Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia da Universidade de São Paulo. 19th November, 1999. São Paulo.

BEZERRA DE ALMEIDA, M. An archaeological view of the Amazonian ethnographic collections at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: reviewing function. *Revista do Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia*, São Paulo, 11: 263-274, 2001.

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ABSTRACT: From the last decades of the nineteenth-century to the present, amateur's expeditions and researchers during their fieldworks, collected more than 25.000 objects that form the ethnographic collections at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro. The study of the techniques and meanings attached to these objects, enriches the interpretation in archaeology. We assume that the study of the material culture of the Amazonian indians enables us to formulate more questions to the archaeological record.

UNITERMS: Ethnographic collections – National Museum of Rio de Janeiro – Archaeology – Animal bones.

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Recebido para publicação em 23 de novembro de 2000.