

Project I

An investigation into the language and cultural identity of the Nambikwara



Nambikwara hut (picture by Leo Wetzels)

The history of the tribe that we nowadays call the Nambikwara has many unclarities, even if we limit ourselves to the time from the colonization of the state of Mato Grosso. The most important reason is that it is not clear which peoples are meant by the names of the tribes that we come across in early descriptions. Not seldom do different names refer to the same people, or are different peoples referred to by the same name. The name 'Nambikwara', for instance, leads one to suspect that it originally belonged to another tribe. The name is suspect, because it is composed of two Tupi-Guarani words, *nambi* 'ear' and *kwara* 'hole' and suggests that the people might wear earplugs, which is not the case. They sometimes pierce their nasal cartilage, however, through which they stick a feather.

The origin of the Nambikwara can only be guessed at. It has been speculated that they represent one of the oldest indigenous cultures in Brazil and they are sometimes connected to the very old rock inscriptions that have been found in their habitat. Probably their name was taken from another tribe by the advanc-

ing pioneers, and transferred to the group that we now call the Nambikwara. The famous colonel Rondon discovered the people in 1907 on an exploration trip through the region, as a preparation for a telegraph line that should connect the federal capital with the outposts along the north-west border of the country by way of the settlement of Diamantino (Mato Grosso) across a distance of 1,500 kilometres. In his reports Rondon referred to the Nambikwara, and in this way the name of the people was settled on forever.

The Nambikwara region stretches across the north-eastern zone of highlands, the 'Planalto dos Parecis', which comprises the largest part (about 50,000 sq kms) of the Mato Grosso state. The Planalto landscape is a barren savannah that is covered, except for the river valleys, by thorny undergrowth. During the dry season, from April to September, there is no or hardly any rain. During the wet season things are quite different: then it pours down hard and constantly, while the temperature rises to above 40 degrees. At first, the Nambikwara led a semi-nomadic existence. From April to September they lived in improvised huts, built on natural elevations, close to a stream, and grew vegetables (beans), roots (manioc, earth nuts), tobacco and cotton. They conserved manioc by making cakes of the rasped pulp and dry them in the sun. In the dry season the population would scatter into small groups, which tried to survive by themselves, roaming across the savannah. In the meantime the Nambikwara people have settled down, forced by circumstances. Men hunt, their only source of animal food, or work the crops, while the women take care of the children, gathering food on the land or close to the village, weaving baskets and baking pots. Their possessions are few and limited to domestic utensils. Originally they did not use hammocks and used to sleep on the bare floor, in the ashes of the fire that has gone out.

Lévi-Strauss estimated the number of Nambikwara at the moment of their discovery by Rondon (1907) at 10,000. Today, some 1,400 are left. In spite of their low numbers, they have recovered from a demographic low that, at the end of the nineteen seventies, indicated a number of around 700 individuals. The systematic opening up of the living areas that until shortly offered protection to the Indian population and the ecological destruction of the tropical rain forest have played a decisive role in the downfall of the Nambikwara.

At this moment, the Nambikwara consist of a collection of sixteen groups, who live scattered across about 30 settlements of between 5 and 40 people each. In spite of the differences between the groups, they form a cultural and linguistic unity. They have the same socio-economic structure and identical beliefs with respect to death, the role of taboos, and the importance of spirits, such as those of their deceased relatives.

The Nambikwara Languages

Genetically, the Nambikwara linguistic family is unclassified. All of the Nambikwara languages, except for Sabanê, belong to the polysynthetic type. The names 'Northern Nambikwara' and 'Southern Nambikwara' are collective names for groups of languages that are less different among themselves and whose speakers can, easily or with more difficulty, communicate with speakers of the other languages in the cluster.

The northern branch comprises the languages Latundê, Lakondê, Mamaindê, Tawandê, and Negarotê. With about 210 speakers, the Mamaindê constitute the most numerous community of the Northern Nambikwara. This group is located in the Guaporé Valley, between the confluences of the Cabixi and Pardo rivers, in the village of Capitão Pedro. Nearby the Mamaindê, but in a separate village, live the 80 or so Negarotê. The Latundê inhabit the Terra

Indígena Tubarão-Latundê, in the south-east of the state of Rondônia, in the town of Chupinguaia. The nineteen Latundê share their living space with two different, linguistically unrelated, ethnic groups, the Aikanã and the Kwazá. Of the former Lakondê community only seven persons are known to be alive, but there has not been an autonomous group for at least the last 50 years. Only one person still speaks the original language. The Lakondê, together with the few remaining Tawandê have now settled in the Terra Indígena Pyrineus de Souza, locally known as the Aroeira village, east of the city of Vilhena, southern Rondônia and nearby the Terra Indígena Nambikwara, where most of the Southern Nambikwara live.

Price (1978) distinguishes four different dialect groups for Southern Nambikwara: the Manduca dialect group, which includes the dialects of Siwaisu, Hunkutesu, and Niyahlosu, the Campo dialect group, consisting of the dialects Kithãulhu, Wakalitesu, Halotesu, and Sawentesu, the Guaporé dialect group with the Hahãintesu (130), Waikisu, Alãntesu (60), and Wasusu (85) dialects, and the Sararé language, also called Katitãulhu (81). The groups that speak one of the Guaporé dialects or Katitãulhu, which together are designated by the natives as Wanairisu, are located in the forests of the Guaporé Valley, in the western part of the state of Mato Grosso, while the other languages are spoken by the 'cerrado' groups, east and northeast of the Guaporé Valley.

The Sabanê inhabit two discontinuous areas in the state of Rondônia and Mato Grosso. Of the approximately 300 natives that live in the Posto Pyrineus de Souza, one hundred are identified as ethnic Sabanê. There are moreover some forty Sabanê in the Sowaintê Village, officially known as Área Indígena Roosevelt. The majority of Sabanê are monolingual in the local variety of Brazilian Portuguese. Of the 140 ethnic Sabanê, only three possess a native mastery of the language.

The Project

The research project aims to study the Nambikwara languages and to investigate the cultural identity of the different groups. The primary goal is to describe the three main groups, to get a clear picture of the structural properties of the Nambikwara and of the linguistic diversity that exists within the Nambikwara family. We wanted to achieve this by composing a grammar and a dictionary of one representative of each of the three language groups. For this purpose, we have selected the languages that are most threatened.

Within the Northern Nambikwara group we have chosen Latundê. Latundê is an as yet undescribed language, spoken by some twenty persons in an area that is known as Tubarão-Latundê. The language is threatened by extinction, partly because of the circumstances in which the Latundê Indians live. Because of their low number, they have to share their living area with two non-related groups, the Aikanã and the Kwazá, to which they are culturally and economically subjected. This has isolated them from the other Nambikwara groups, and has forced them to adapt to a social order and world view that are alien to their own culture. The research on this language was carried out

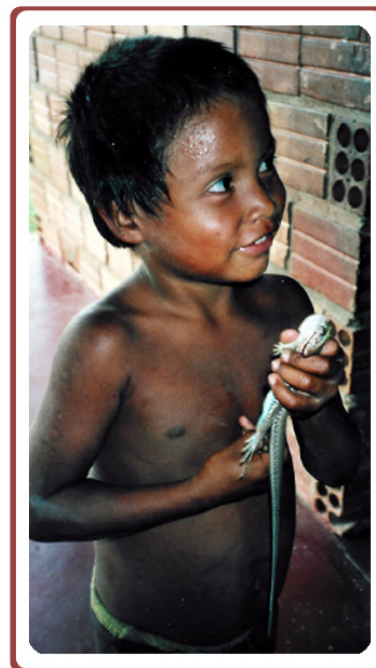


Latundê woman baking manioc bread (picture by Stella Telles)

by Stella Telles, now professor of linguistics at the Federal University of Recife, who defended her thesis *Fonologia e Gramática Latundê/Lakondê* (The phonology and Grammar of Latundê/Lakondê) at the VU University on December 19, 2002. An English version of her grammar is forthcoming.

Sararé is the southernmost representative of Southern Nambikwara. It is spoken between the rivers Sararé and Galera. The language has 75 speakers left. The Sararé is one of the groups that, in spite of frequent contact with whites, has adapted very little and has retained much of its original heritage. Research on the language of the Sararé is still being carried out by Cristina Borella.

Sabanê has only 15 speakers and is the smallest language of the Nambikwara family. At present, the Sabanê live interspersed with other Nambikwara groups. Nobody knows exactly where their original place of origin may have been located. The Grammar of Sabanê, a Nambikwaran Language, was written by Gabriel Antunes de Araújo, now professor of linguistics at the Universidade Estadual de São Paulo.



Little Sabané boy with lizard (picture by Leo Wetzels)

Another goal of the project is to reconstruct the original Nambikwara sound structure, on the basis of the data gained from the study of Sabanê, Latundê, and Sararé. By reconstructing the proto-language the projects aims at making a contribution to the (pre)history of the South American indigenous

languages and provide answers to questions concerning the mutual relations between Nambikwara and other South American language families. The original common Nambikwara vocabulary may also tell us something about the

original way of life of the Nambikwara and perhaps even about the region they came from. A monograph on the reconstructed Proto-Nambikwara sound structure was written by Januacele da Costa, professor of Linguistics at the Federal University of Alagoas, and Leo Wetzels. The manuscript will be published soon.

Finally, the project wanted to investigate what the Nambikwara Indians think about their own cultural identity. In the framework of a linguistic investigation this is an important consideration, because the tendency to give up one's own language in favour of Portuguese, the official language of Brazil, is probably related to the waning feeling of self-respect on the part of the Indians. It often happens that indigenous peoples take over the contempt for their own language and culture from condescending outsiders and then they are inclined to give this up in favour of the dominant language and culture. At a later stage, however, they start searching for their own cultural roots again, at a moment when nobody speaks the language anymore. Describing languages that are at the point of extinction is therefore not only important for theoretical linguistics and the cultural or cognitive anthropology. It is also vital for the indigenous peoples themselves, to reach back, if necessary, for documents in which their language and culture are described in detail. This part of the research was carried out by Edwin Reesink, an anthropologist working at the Federal University of Bahia, Salvador, Brazil, who finished his book *Allegories of Wildness: Three Nambikwara Ethnohistories of Sociocultural and Linguistic Change and Continuity in Southern Amazonia*, to be published by the Dutch University Press in 2008.

The list of completed and ongoing research on the Nambikwara languages is provided below:

Title : **Fonologia e Gramática Latundê/Lakondê** (The Phonology and Grammar of Latundê/Lakondê)
Researcher: Stella Virginia Telles, Recife Brazil
Financed by: WOTRO, The Netherlands
Defence: December, 19, 2002. VU University Amsterdam
Current profession: Professor of Linguistics, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil

Title: **The Grammar of Sabanê, a Nambikwaran Language**
Researcher: Gabriel Antunes de Araújo, Campinas Brazil
Financed by: NWO/WOTRO, The Netherlands
Defence: November, 1, 2004. VU University Amsterdam
Current profession: Professor of Linguistics, Universidade Estadual de São Paulo (USP), Brazil

Title: **The Phonology and Grammar of Mamaindé** (Northern Nambikwara)
Researcher: David Eberhard, U.S. A.
Financed by: private funding
Defence: expected December 2009. VU University Amsterdam

Title: **Fonologia e Gramática Sararé** (The Phonology and Grammar of Sararé) - Southern Nambikwara
Researcher: Cristina Borella, UNICAMP, Campinas, Brazil
Financed by: NWO, WOTRO, The Netherlands
Defence: expected December 2009. VU University Amsterdam

Title: **Allegories of Wildness: Three Nambikwara Ethnohistories of Sociocultural and Linguistic Change and Continuity in Southern Amazonia**
Financed by: WOTRO/NWO
Researcher: Edwin Reesink
Year of publication: to appear 2008
Current position: Professor of Anthropology, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador, Brazil

Title: **Proto-Nambikwara Sound Structure**
Financed by: WOTRO/NWO
Researcher: Januacele da Costa, Leo Wetzels
Year of publication: to appear 2008/2009
Current position: Federal University of Alagoas, Maceió, Brazil

Chapters on Nambikwara languages and culture in Leo Wetzels (ed.) 2007. Language Endangerment and Endangered Languages: Linguistic and Anthropological Studies with Special Emphasis on the Languages and Cultures of the Andean-Amazonian Border Area. Indigenous Languages of Latin America series (ILLA). Publications of the Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies (CNWS). Leiden University, The Netherlands.