Nambiquara Recordings, 1967-76

David Price

When, in 1967, I went to western Brazil to conduct field research in social anthropology among the Nambiquara Indians, I had only the vaguest notions about what to do with a tape recorder. I had never taken a course in field techniques, and in fact, I had never owned or operated a tape recorder. Prevailing opinion in my department held that the best field machine was the Uher, so I went to the nearest distributor and bought one. I also bought four five-inch tapes. My research grant had not yet come through, and I had no idea what I would want to record, so four tapes seemed adequate.

The region where the Nambiquara lived was very remote. Access was by a dirt road that had been built only seven years before, to connect Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso, with Porto Velho, the capital of Rondônia—1500 kilometers away. The road was barely passable during much of the year, and several Nambiquara groups had not yet come into contact with Brazilian society. I had serious problems with my health, with the exchange of my quarterly stipend into local currency, and with the maintenance of a dilapidated, second-hand jeep. It was so hard to get to and from the Nambiquara that I thought any kind of material I could put on tape would be a boon to science. I was not concerned with quality.

My recordings also suffered because of the conditions under which they were made. It was hard to get fresh batteries, and it was hard to protect a piece of complicated equipment from rain, dust, and vibration. I remember, in particular, trying to cradle the recorder against the jounce of a mule that carried me into the old Indian post at Pyreneus de Souza. Background noise was frequently a problem: babies cried, roosters crowed, and in one case, rain on a tin roof abruptly truncated a vocabulary list. I recorded almost everything at slow speeds, so that I could fit as much as possible on each tape. I was able to acquire more tapes through the Summer Institute of Linguistics, but I continued to fill them up, at slow speeds, with all sorts of material, in no particular order.

The first legitimate use to which I put the machine was in recording vocabularies from different Nambiquara groups. On my first attempt, I tried to elicit the Swadesh two hundred word list in a sequence dictated by the alphabetical order of the English glosses. I quickly realized that this was a mistake, and grouped the terms semantically for subsequent recording sessions. In nearly every village visited during a survey of the Nambiquara region, I attempted to record a word list. Eventually I managed to get at least a few words in fourteen different dialects. Most of these vocabularies have never been transcribed, however. I discovered that the number of apparent cognates was not a good indication of the linguistic distance between dialects, since some informants failed to understand some of the terms I was trying to elicit, while others chose uncommon synonyms in order to make their dialects seem unique.

My research interests involved kinship and social organization, and I soon found that the recorder could help in my study of kinship terminology. The traditional way of finding out how terms are used is by asking informants how other people are related to them—a practice known as the genealogical method. I thought it was wrong, however, to reduce the meaning of the terms to the genealogical facts they reported. To find out what a word means, you have to ask the natives. So, after using the genealogical method with several informants, I compiled a list of all the kin terms mentioned. I then asked several people to define these terms, one at a time. My command of the language was not good enough to understand the explanations, but I overcame this difficulty by recording them. I could then transcribe and study them at my leisure.

In the beginning, I only recorded myths that were directly relevant to my research interests. I did not feel that I should record myths for posterity, since members of the SIL were busily doing just that. I also tended to shy away from myths because they were the preferred objects of study in a theoretical approach that was much in vogue when I was in graduate school, and I had revolted against what I felt was a dubious fad. Eventually I realized how much myths can reveal about the people who tell them, and made a point of recording those that are best known.

At first I just recorded myths in the native language and then got a rough translation of them, in the belief that eventually I would learn to speak fluent Nambiquara and would be able to transcribe them with ease. I soon learned, however, that untranscribed material is virtually useless. So I developed a routine. First, I would record a text; then I would enlist the aid of someone with a clear voice, who would listen to the tape, phrase by phrase, and repeat it very distinctly so that I could transcribe it

Photo by David Price

Rondon, a highly respected shaman, sings over a sick woman. Village of Camararé, 1976.

accurately. After this, I would get a good bilingual to give a translation, phrase by phrase, which I wrote in pencil, between the lines. This technique was so productive that I began using it for expository texts, as well as myths. When, in discussing a subject such as marriage or shamanism, I began to have trouble understanding what an informant was trying to tell me, I would turn on the tape recorder and let him expound. In the process of getting such a text transcribed and translated, new questions would arise, and I would learn a good deal about the subject under study. Working on texts in this way also helped me improve my Nambiquara.

It occurred to me that I was becoming familiar with the language of myths and formal discourse, while I hardly knew how to say hello and good-bye. I though it would be helpful to record some everyday conversation, so I stuck a microphone in the thatch of my roof, so that I could unobtrusively turn on the recorder when visitors were approaching and record their casual conversation. I was especially interested in cross-cousin joking behavior, and I encouraged some boys to joke so that I could find out what kind of things they said to each other. But they were reticent about joking on demand, and eventually spied the microphone in the thatch. After a few such experiments, I concluded that the recording of casual conversation was a waste of tape.

Music was as irrelevant to my research design as myth, but it was virtually inescapable. Few are the nights when the Nambiquara do not make music—for a while in the evening, if not all night. Often, after washing my supper dishes and writing a few notes by the light of a small flame, I would join them, either to sit in the dark of the flute house, listening to the hypnotic refrain, or to sing myself dizzy along with other well-wishers as a shaman treated someone who was ill.

I was aware that a serious study of Nambiquara music would require considerable effort. Every village had its own musical tradition; it would be necessary to record many tapes in several different villages to begin to understand the system. This, I had neither the time nor the skill to do. But I did record a bit of music in several different villages, largely to please the Indians. They were always eager to hear the playback of music that they themselves had made, and they were very interested in the music of other villages as well.

Nambiquara flutes are made of bamboo, about two and half feet long. An important myth accounts for the origin of flutes along with the origin of agriculture. Sometimes they are played in an empty house. But a full-blown "playing of the flutes" (the Nambiquara have no other name for it) takes place out of doors, from sundown to sunup, after an especially successful hunt. As in other

Photo by David Price

Vitorino, master story-teller. Village of Camararé, 1969.

parts of Amazonia, the flutes are forbidden to the sight of women. I remember talking to a Brazilian who found this custom peculiar. I suggested that it is no more peculiar for men to go stark naked but conceal their flutes, than to play their flutes in public but conceal their reproductive organs.

Flute music has a certain haunting quality that the recorder simply could not capture. I did not record much of it because I was dissatisfied with the results. But I did tape a few samples, from different parts of the region. I also taped snippets illustrating the sounds produced by three other instruments. Gourd trumpets consist of a gourd affixed to the end of a bamboo tube. They produce a single, low note, and two or more are played at the same time, in a pattern of interlocking rhythms. They are sometimes played at the same time as the flutes, but with complete disregard for them. Small versions of the flutes are sometimes made, so that boys can practice without having to flee the presence of women. The three-holed nose flute, which seems to be peculiar to the Nambiquara, may be played by anyone. There are no percussion instruments, other than the foot. Frequently, in the flute house, the men will rise and stomp their feet in rhythm to the music.

Among the Savanna Nambiquara, whom I know best, four types of vocal music are recognized. These are sacred songs, popular songs, war songs, and puberty songs. Sacred songs are taught to shamans by spirit beings whom they encounter while away from the village. These songs are used in curing the sick in an all-night sing, and not to be hummed idly during daylight hours. Popular songs, on the other hand, are tunes that people just sing for pleasure. They often know the composers of both sacred and popular songs, and this music is part of a village repertoire that is continually changing as new examples enter the system and old ones are forgotten. In contrast, war songs and puberty songs are both fixed by tradition. War songs used to be sung by the men of the village as part of a ceremony to be conducted before going off to raid another village. Puberty songs are sung at the festival that is held when a young woman comes out of seclusion, following her first menstruation.

The female puberty festival is the biggest ceremonial occasion in which the generally pragmatic Nambiquara indulge. Unlike the male-oriented playing of the flutes, which happens whenever chance provides a bountiful hunt, the female-oriented puberty festival happens at nature's appointed season, a key moment in the process of ripening. I have seen the festival twice, both times in the savanna region. The first time was shortly after I arrived in the region, and I had not yet learned enough about the Nambiquara to make good observations. But six years later I had a second chance.

I was making my first trip back to the Nambiquara, during the summer vacation between two semesters I spent at the University of Brasília. Shortly after I arrived in the village of Camararé, the cry went up that Miriam had begun to menstruate, and she entered a hastily-built seclusion hut. I knew that I had a month to prepare for the ceremony itself. The only recorder I had was a little Panasonic meant for taped letters, which I had bought from missionaries the day before I left Brasília. It took three-inch tapes, of which I had only a couple, since I had not expected to do much recording. But I sent word to SIL in Cuiabá asking for tapes and batteries, and these arrived on a plane that dropped in a few days before the festival.

Since I could not tape continuously, I decided to record a few repetitions of each identifiably different song. I also tried to take a flash photo of every new phase of the ceremony. From time to time the Indians would come up and encourage me to dance, and I would put camera and recorder aside for a few minutes and join the circle. Despite these distractions, I managed to record samples of 104 songs.

Not all of the songs I recorded at the ceremony belong to the category of puberty music. Popular songs and a

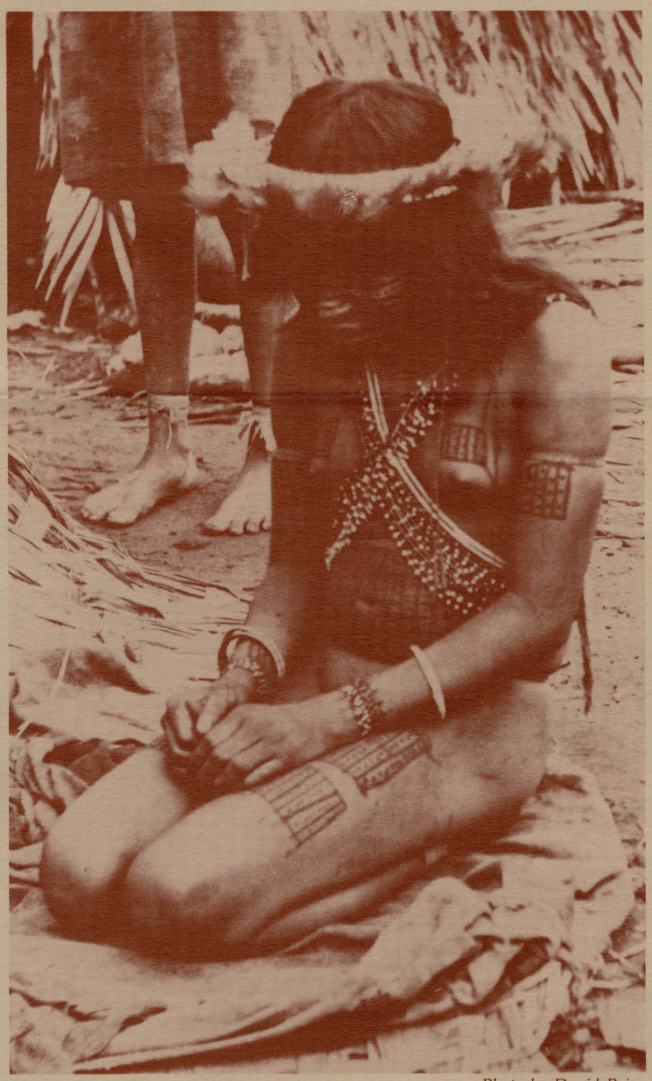

Photo by David Price

Teresinha seated on a mat at her puberty festival. Village of Serra Azul, 1968.

few sacred songs that people love to sing had been mixed in. The lyrics are very simple, their brevity and condensation reminiscent of haiku. Many refer to the maiden and her change of condition. Almost all the songs end on the base note of the pentatonic scale, but the last one, which is sung just at dawn, ends a minor third above it. Naming an insect known for the transformation it undergoes while in a cocoon made from little sticks, the people sing: "Caterpillar awake; the day has come."

Despite its limitations, the material I recorded among the Nambiquara will, I hope, be of some use to linguists and ethnomusicologists. The linguistic material is plentiful and diverse, which should make it possible for a dedicated scholar to grasp many essential features of the language. There is not enough music for the kind of comprehensive study I would like to see, but there is enough to reward more circumscribed types of inquiry.

David Price's Nambiquara collection may be found under Archives accession number 85-352-F.

Lorenzo D. Turner Collection

Northwestern University has transferred to the Archives of Traditional Music the nearly seven hundred recordings made on wires, tapes, and discs made by the late Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner. The collection includes the recordings he made in Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana, Brazil, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria throughout several decades of research on the influence of West African languages upon the Gullah dialect spoken by Afro-Americans on the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. The documentation for the recordings identifies the informants and provides, in most cases, dates and locations. A small portion of the stories, song texts, narratives, and prayers on the recordings were transcribed for publication in Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, first published in 1949.

During the summer the Archives will begin to make tape copies of the collection for preservation and for public use. The collection will be available to the public in January, 1987.

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