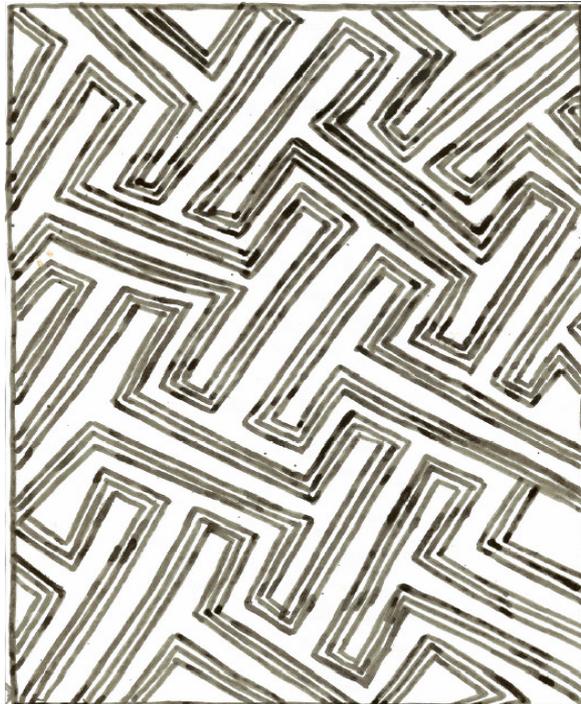


Capitalism, environmentalism and indigenous societies in Brazilian Amazonia: the case of the Asuriní do Xingu

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Abstract: this study aims to analyse the impact of world economy's globalisation over indigenous societies in Brazilian Amazonia, particularly as regards native economic practices. At the beginning of the 1990'-s a synchronic process of liberalisation of the Brazilian economy and advancement of environmentalism in Amazonia has resulted in the expansion of the commercialisation of non-timber forest products within indigenous territories through, in some cases, implementing partnerships between Brazilian State organizations and large companies. We argue that such practices, based on sustainable development discourses, neglect the cultural patterns of indigenous societies, as the circuits of distribution of property and commodities, and do not trigger the indigenous empowerment related to market determinants. Because of that, we propose that the activities of these specific public-private partnerships within indigenous territories do not constitute a tool for the indigenous ethnodevelopment. To advance our argument, we present the case of the Asuriní do Xingu indigenous society, a tupi-guarani speaking group included in the partnership for the commercialisation of Brazil-nut oil between the National Indian Foundation (Funai), through the Amazoncoop cooperative, and the UK-based cosmetics corporation The Body Shop.

Keywords: Indigenous societies, Brazilian Amazon, Asuriní do Xingu, non-timber forest products, public-private partnerships.

1. Introduction

Globalisation of capitalist economy and environmental discourse are the outcome of postwar ideologies, polarised by Keynesian and Marxist dichotomies, having failed to achieve a universal project based on the role of economic subject of national States. This failure is related to processes which, besides revealing the mythical nature of the developmental project (Furtado, 1974), generated much disenchantment with modernity: worsening of socioeconomic imbalance among peoples and countries (Sen, 2000), environmental crisis in its multiple aspects (Leff, 2006), and expansion of multiterritoriality (Haesbaert, 2004) and exacerbation of ethnicities (Carneiro da Cunha, 1986).

With the fall of real socialism, the triumph of liberal ideologies brought with it new discourses in which one observes a twofold change of focus. On the one hand, to the detriment of the east-west polarization in force during the Cold War, the relation between global and local gained greater emphasis. On the other, the outmoded dichotomy of exploration of mankind by mankind, crystallised up to that time by the contradiction of classes, was superseded by the more neutral relation between mankind and environment (Ribeiro, 1992). Several new qualifications have been added to the old notion of development, which had become so broad and elastic that it had lost its meaning. Among these new qualifications, the idea of sustainable development had great impact on capitalist world geopolitics. As can be seen in Leff (2006:223), the emergence of the idea of sustainable development is related to the perception that “the environmental crisis was the great ‘turn-off’ in the celebration of the triumph of developmentalism, expressing one of the most serious failures of the model of civilization for modern times”.

The idea of sustainable development, consolidated by the *Our common future* report (1991), was soon transformed into a new ideology/utopia for development. That is, it became “the hard core nucleus around which circled the attempts to put environmentalism ever more forcefully at the centre of the greater field of economic, ideological and political struggles concerned with development” (Ribeiro, 1992:75). The lack of conceptual definition of the term, however, enabled NGOs, environmentalists, governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and multinational corporations and other segments of diverse political and ideological orientations to claim the term for their own use. Because it was poorly elaborated from the standpoint of political economy and also because it represented an ideology blinded to the contradictions of class and cultural otherness, many scientists have criticised this notion for its ambiguous character and for not questioning the developmental model of industrialised nations (Ribeiro, 1992; Gallois, 1992). In actuality, the appropriation of sustainable development by the corporate world shows the broad ideological spectrum encompassed by the term.

The synchronic processes of globalisation – of which the opening of Brazil’s economy is only a symptom – and emergence of environmental issues trigger important transformations in the debate about the development of Amazonia. At the institutional level, the explosion of work accomplished by NGOs and of responsible socioenvironmental companies, which began to take over part of the political space earlier dominated by the State, characterised what Turner (1995) called “neoliberal ecopolitics”. Since indigenous territories were officially recognised as representing approximately 21% of Legal Amazonian territory, indigenous societies began to be understood as fundamental actors for conservation of the bioma (Peres, 1994). Thus, if in the nineteen seventies they constituted an obstacle in the way of progress

(Viveiros de Castro & Andrade, 1988), from the nineteen nineties on, they became the focus of conservationist interests due to the environmental functions they deliver (Gallois, 2001).

Within this movement for sustainability, commercialisation of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) began to be presented as a doubly effective strategy for the development of indigenous societies and, at the same time, for forest conservation (Clay, 1997). Based on this instrument, an increasing number of commercialisation projects in indigenous areas were established, several of which through partnerships with corporations (Morsello, 2002). The motivation for such initiatives varied. For those partnerships established between Funai, the government foundation for indigenous affairs, and corporations, they represented a new form of “public-private indigenism” (see Souza, 2000), seeking solutions for the chronic scarcity of capacity building programmes and financial resources of this indigenous peoples foundation. For the corporations, on the other hand, the possibility of commercialising NTFPs with indigenous societies was appealing because it enabled them to: (i) access natural resources controlled by forest societies (Mayers & Vermeulen, 2002); (ii) answer civil society’s demands for correct corporate socioenvironmental practices (Mayers & Vermeulen, 2002) and (iii) associate the name of the companies to the Amazonian cause (Morsello, 2006).

The idea of a worldwide sustainable development is not, however, consensus. As opposed to it, the notion of ethnodevelopment proposed by Stavenhagen (1985) and created from the “periphery” (Cardoso de Oliveira, 1993) represents an alternative upheld by six elements: (i) an internal or endogenous vision; (ii) directed towards basic needs; (iii) oriented towards self-support at the local level; (iv) appreciation of cultural traditions which are not seen as obstacles in the way of development; (v) respect for the environment and (vi) oriented towards the people and to participation, rather than towards technocracy. This new qualification was mainly claimed by NGOs critical of the notion of sustainable development, and was associated to “any and all initiatives that showed that an indigenous or local group is willing to and capable of freeing itself from mechanisms of dependence” (Gallois, 2001: 170).

From this approach, initiatives intending to commercialise sustainable products through partnerships between the State and the corporations are no longer interpreted as tools for the development of indigenous societies. Authors who are critical of that approach assert that, besides not representing an actual alternative to predatory environmental activities (Turner, 1995; Gallois, 2001), such practices perpetuate unilateral relations between the market and indigenous societies. The market imposes upon the indigenous societies what and how transactions will be cast. In contrast, the notion of ethnodevelopment emphasises the issue of how to guarantee that indigenous peoples’ point of view be considered as to the “sustainability” in projects or political policies. In this case, Azanha (2005:18) argues that “the rules of caution towards the market remain the same for ethnodevelopment of any indigenous society: observe the distribution of time, whether the market affects it, and how; look at how benefits are divided, if the focus still considers the sustenance of the immediate family group”. That is, it is important to perceive if the indigenous society’s production “albeit being ecologically correct, doesn’t superimpose the sociologically correct”.

Even though recent studies (e.g. Ros-Tonen and Wiersum 2005; Kusters *et al.*, 2006) show that the market for NTFPs generates ambiguous effects in terms of development and conservation, empirical research is still scarce using the ethnodevelopment approach. That is, since the majority of the studies of the market for NTFPs are based on “conventional indicators” of development (Kusters *et al.*, 2006), assumptions and indicators of ethnodevelopment are not always taken into account. Among these indicators, three in

particular are the focus of the present study: (i) monetary resources generated with relative equality in terms of trade, that is fostering empowerment of indigenous societies within the commercial relation; (ii) channelling benefits through indigenous circuits for the circulation of property and commodities and (iii) commercial activity adjusted to subsistence activities and to assurance of food for the households.

Based on these parameters, the question guiding the present study is: *does commercialisation of NTFPs through partnerships between Funai and large corporations constitute an instrument for ethnodevelopment of indigenous societies?* The hypothesis we defend is that, because they neglect such indicators, partnerships that commercialise NTFPs are not instrumental in ethnodevelopment.

The hypothesis will be tested through a process of assessment of the Asuriní do Xingu society, a group included in the partnership to commercialise Brazil nut oil (*Bertholletia excelsea* Humb. & Bonpl.) established between Funai and the UK-based cosmetics company The Body Shop.

2. Methodology

The field research was conducted during six months in four periods in the years 2004 and 2005, having been structured on two levels: (i) assessment of the partnership for commercialisation of Brazil nut oil (*Bertholletia excelsea* Humb. & Bonpl.) established between the Funai Regional Superintendency in Altamira, in the State of Pará, and the UK-based cosmetics company The Body Shop; (ii) ethnographic investigation among the Asuriní do Xingu, a tupi-guarani society located on the eastern portion of Brazilian Amazonia and involved in the Amazoncoop – The Body Shop partnership.

On the first level, the aim of the study was to evaluate the framework of the relations between the indigenous societies in the middle Xingu and the Amazoncoop – The Body Shop partnership, subdivided into three topics: (i) the history of the partnership; (ii) the format for production and commercialisation and (iii) the forms of payment for the activities that were part of the chain of production. Information was obtained through semi-structured and non-structured interviews with Funai and Amazoncoop employees.

The aim of the ethnographic study among the Asuriní do Xingu was to evaluate: (i) if the incoming resources from the partnership were channelled through the indigenous people's traditional distribution circuits and (ii) if the commercial activity was adjusted to subsistence activities and to guaranteeing kinship ties. The information for this part of the study came from the analysis of seasonal data collected during the three periods in the field in 2005. Due to the fact that we were unable to conduct longitudinal research, the consequences of the insertion of the market upon the indigenous economy were assessed by means of "cross-sectional research" of all Asuriní households (n = 13) (Creswell, 1994). Households were defined by the consumption criteria, that is, all individuals whose livelihoods involve sharing in the products from subsistence activities (see Morsello, 2002).

The information on the insertion of households in the market economy by means of partnerships and the distribution of benefits generated thereby were gleaned by means of surveys repeated at every field research period, when monetary income was gained for all (n = 67) adult individuals (>12 years old). The potential effects of greater engagement of the

Like other tupi-guarani societies in Amazonia, the Asuriní live in large common houses that shelter extended families or households, which make up social, political and economic units. The traditional household is matriarchal (matrilocal), i.e., the extended family nucleus is composed of women who are related by kinship, though they are led by a man, usually a shaman (Müller, 1992). Among the houses, the *aketé* (true house) or *tavyve*, is the largest house in the village community, which, besides sheltering one or two groups that reside there, is the main public and ritual space, so it also has sacred connotations for the Asuriní.

Slash-and-burn agriculture is the main source of indigenous economic resources. Manioc is the basic dietary item, and one variety (wild-manioc) is used to manufacture various kinds of flours, porridges and *beijus* (toasted wafers). Traditionally, the women are responsible for harvesting, while the men of the household have the job of the preparing the land (slash, burn and digging holes). Both men and women do the planting. Besides agriculture, they depend on gathering forest products for food, materials for building the houses and for making ritual and objects for everyday use.

Hunting is basically a masculine activity, and today that activity is carried out exclusively with shotguns. Besides being the main protein complement to agricultural foods, produce from hunting are also central elements in indigenous mythology, as seen in the *Tajaho* maraká ritual (wild pig) (Müller, 1992). Despite being traditionally an inland society, the group dislocated to the margins of the Xingu in the mid nineteen eighties, with the result that fishing gained importance in the Asuriní diet, specially during the dry season.

Over the last twenty five years, several factors have contributed to transformations in the group's social, political and economic organization. Among the main factors, we can name (i) the expansion of intertribal relations and intermarriages with individuals of the Tupi-Guarani (Parakanã), Carib (Arara) and Gê (Kayapó-Kararaô) indigenous groups; (ii) the actions by Funai, mainly through the heads of the Indigenous Outposts in the villages; (iii) catholic and evangelical missionary activities since 1982; (iv) greater contact with the population in the region and (v) greater engagement in the market economy. The standard of polygamous and intergenerational marriage was partially abandoned, as was the rule of matrilocal residence. The society's political organization also stopped being predominantly determined by the shamans' prestige. Rather, "political" is now also determined by multiple forms of "exterior relations".

Except for gathering Brazil nuts, the following income benefits were available to the Asuriní: retirement funds, salaries for indigenous health and basic sanitation agents, commercialization of craft products and sporadic jobs. The major and most regular sources of income for the Asuriní society came from retirement funds and health workers salaries; of the one hundred and nineteen individuals living in the village at the time of research, eighteen received minimum wages from the Federal Government.

4. Results

(i) The Amazoncoop partnership - The Body Shop

The first attempt to commercialise Brazil nut oil involving the British cosmetics firm The Body Shop and indigenous societies came as an invitation made by the leader of the

Kayapó group to the firm's owner (Anita Roddick) in 1989 during the Altamira protest (Morsello & Adger, 2007). During its initial stages, this commercial partnership which started in 1991 involved the kayapó villages of A'Ukre and Pukany, both located in the Kayapó indigenous territories in the south of the state of Pará (Morsello, 2002; Morsello & Adger, 2007; Turner, 1995).

As to the Amazoncoop, the idea of establishing a cooperative came from the Funai Regional Superintendent in 1998. According to him, the aim of creating the cooperative was to extend commercialization benefits to other indigenous societies in the middle Xingu, since Funai had already been intermediating relations between the British firm and the Kayapó for some years. In The Body Shop's case, the company's counterpart for being allowed to associate the name of the company to the image of generic amerindians and to the cause of conservation of Amazonia, was the development of several responsible socioenvironmental practices: (i) they installed showers, sinks, wash basins, cisterns and artesian wells; (ii) they built a hotel called Tataquara on an island of the Xingu, the aim of which was to provide ecocultural international tourism as an economic alternative for indigenous societies and (iii) they paid for some of the indigenous schools.

During the time the agreement was valid, oil production was accomplished in the following way. At the first stage of the chain of production, indigenous societies of five Indigenous Territories (Koatinemo, Araweté-Igarapé Ipixuna, Laranjal, Trincheira-Bacajá and Kararaô) gathered the Brazil nuts and sent them into town, receiving R\$30³ in exchange for a box of 30 kg. This amount represented a premium price when compared to the price on the local market (R\$13/box in 2005). In 2005, the indigenous societies involved gathered a total of 1,832 boxes of Brazil nuts, generating gross income of approximately R\$55,000, unevenly distributed among the various villages. Through financial transfers to the Amazoncoop, the company advanced goods (food and work implements) to the amerindians, which were to be used during the gathering periods; the costs thereof were later discounted from the Brazil nuts that had been gathered. The costs of transporting the Brazil nuts from the villages into the city were divided between the company and Funai.

The second production phase took place in the city of Altamira. In a shed owned by the Amazoncoop, some fifty city dwelling native Brazilians organised in the Akarirá⁴ association took care of processing the extraction of the oil, which involved drying, shelling, grinding, toasting and pressing. During the three months annually it took to do these activities, each member of the association received a minimum monthly salary (R\$240 in 2004). At the end of the process, the extracted oil was sent by river in two hundred litre barrels to Belém, and from there to the UK by ship.

Even though it was presented as an indigenous cooperative, the Amazoncoop was actually structured on a hierarchical basis; the Funai Superintendent in Altamira (honorary President), a local businessman (executive President) and a missionary who was a member of the Evangelical Linguistic Missionary Association (financial Director) made up the highest level of the management pyramid. The amerindians who were involved (both those of the Indigenous Territories as well as the Akarirá Association) were not in the cooperative, i.e. they did not participate in the division of the profit-sharing of the cooperative and, in fact, had no voice in the decision process. As compensation, the role of Vice-President belonged to an

³ Conversion in 2005: US\$ 1 = R\$ 3

⁴ Presided by Mrs. Maria Xipaya and made up of Xipaya, Kuruaya and Juruna indians who have inhabited the periphery of the city of Altamira for many years.

amerindian, and this place was occupied by Myrá Asurini up to the beginning of 2006. Adherence to the cooperative was not freely decided on, but rather it depended on criteria established by the non indigenous directors. The outcome was the exclusion from this commercial partnership of other indigenous societies in the middle Xingu (i.e., Apyterewa-Parakanã and Arara-Cachoeira Seca) as well as the large indigenous urban contingency.

Furthermore, the rules of the commercial agreement as well as the responsibilities and rights of each of the parties participating in the partnership were not established beforehand through a formal contract. To the contrary, according to the financial Director of the Amazoncoop, the agreement with The Body Shop had been worked out as a “gentleman’s agreement”.

According to information provided by Funai’s regional Superintendent (and the honorary President of Amazoncoop), in 2003 the cooperative exported 6 tons of oil at the price of US\$9/kg, generating a gross revenue in the order of US\$54,000. In 2005, the cooperative exported 9 tons of oil at US\$12/kg, which resulted in a gross revenue of US\$108,000. Even though the gross income generated by the activity doubled during the period, the fact that the dollar devalued at the end of 2005 led to disastrous consequences for the actual income of the cooperative. At the beginning of 2006, conflicts in management led to the beginning of political and legal disputes involving the directors of Amazoncoop and the Body Shop Foundation, which resulted in the end of the commercial partnership.

(ii) Brazil nut gathering and distribution of income

Even though the Asurini had been formally included in the Amazoncoop cooperative since 1998, the whole society of households only began gathering Brazil nuts for commercial use in 2003. In 2005, they collected a total of 300 boxes of 30 kg worth of Brazil nuts (Avg = 23 boxes/household; SD = 25; Range = 6-97) over the months of February through March. Although there had been cooperation among households related by kinship in gathering activities, the sale was accomplished individually. Considering the price (R\$30) the Amazoncoop paid for each box that year, the Asurini earned a net income of approximately R\$6,200 (i.e. discounting the advancements in goods), which was unequally distributed among the households (Avg = R\$481; SD = R\$636; Range = R\$2 – R\$2,410).

On average, two adults per household participated in the commercial activity (SD = 1.4; Range = 1-5). The two households (23% of the indigenous population) that benefited the most financially gathered two fifths (41%) of the Brazil nuts and took in half of the total net income. On the other extreme, the two groups (10% of the population) who were least involved were responsible for approximately 5% of the nuts gathered and received less than one percent (0,8%) of the net income generated by commercialisation. What stands out in this imbalance of income distribution is the fact that the group that benefited the most financially from this activity has close kinship ties to the group that benefited the least. In this case, the ethnographic observation was unable to clarify if this fact corresponds to cooperation and complementation between the two households (specialization in commercial and subsistence activities) or if, to the contrary, it represents a break in economic relations determined by kinship ties.

The data showed that, for the most part, the net income per capita of the households (Avg = R\$53; SD = R\$44; Range = R\$0.7 - R\$172) was determined (i) directly by the

number of individuals that participated in the gathering activity and (ii) inversely by the value of the baskets of goods (food and work implements) ordered by the amerindians and advanced by the company to enable the job to be accomplished. In the first instance, all five households in which three or more adults gathered Brazil nuts earned a per capita net income of over R\$40. Of these five, the case of one group in which five adult individuals gathered one third (32%) of all the Brazil nuts and took 38% of the net income (per capita net income of R\$172) is especially relevant. To the contrary, of the seven households in which only one adult participated in the commercial activity, three obtained a per capita net income below R\$10.

In the second case, the analysis of the distribution of baskets of merchandise shows that there is no linear standard of correlation between the population of the household and the size of the basket that was ordered. Within the Asuriní universe, two cases are representative of the role the basket of merchandise advanced by the company has in determining the per capita net income. On the one hand, despite the fact that one man from one of the groups had gathered six (2%) of the boxes of Brazil nuts, a rather large basket of goods had been consumed during the gathering period, so consequently the resulting per capita net income for the group was less than R\$0.70. On the other hand, although in another household one man had gathered twenty two (7%) boxes, the group was able to take a tenth (10%) of the net income. Since this last group had not ordered a large basket of goods, even though there were more people in the group (nine people), they achieved the second largest per capita income (R\$70), exceeding the other households in which two, three or up to four individuals participated in the gathering.

Besides this imbalance in the distribution of income among the various households, several disparities were also observed intra-households and between genders as to access to the benefits generated by the partnership. Survey data from all the groups showed that, with few exceptions, the net earnings were spent individually in town by the people who went to Altamira to sell the produce that had been collected. Since the Asuriní demands for industrialised foods is almost totally provided by retirement income ($n=16$) granted by the federal government, and which is equally distributed among all the households (Avg=R\$ 295; SD=R\$200; Range=R\$0-480), the net income earned from the Brazil nuts was used almost exclusively for purposes other than for the kinship group as a whole.

Despite the fact that this intra-household disparity is hard to measure, if we consider that most of the net income generated by the activity was taken by those individuals who sold the Brazil nuts, it can be safely said that less than a quarter (22%) of the Asuriní people benefited directly from this new economic alternative, and furthermore, the elders and the children (<12) did not directly benefit from the partnership. Thus, it is unlikely that the variable "household's per capita net income" can be taken as an exact portrait of the distribution of earnings, when our presupposition involves an equal division within the household. It would be more pertinent in this case to divide the net income only among the individuals ($n = 27$) who participated in the activity (Avg = R\$ 230; SD = R\$180; Range = R\$2 – R\$636). As to gender disparities, they are even greater, especially when we consider that the vice-President of the Amazoncoop was the only woman involved among the 27 who participated in the sale of Brazil nuts and who had access to the monetary earnings.

(iii) Brazil nut gathering and agricultural activity

Since the period for gathering Brazil nuts doesn't overlap the plot clearing season, it is possible to discard the hypothesis that time spent between both these activities might be superimposed. Nevertheless, studies such as those carried out by Morsello & Adger (2007) point out that the hypothesis of an increase in income for a household might have bearing on the lack of incentive for subsistence activities. A comparative analysis associating liquid income obtained from gathering nuts and the area of plots cleared in 2005 showed four diverse situations in the case of the Asuriní:

(i) inverse relation between income and area of plots cleared. The evidence taken together on the three groups indicates that a large investment in commercial activity (57% of the total liquid income) can be associated to the lack of incentive for clearing plots for plantation (5% of the total area). In this case, however, the situation can be explained by the fact that two of the three domestic groups in question were the only ones in the village to receive health agent salaries. This variable, then, may be related both to a greater dependence on financial resources as well as to the lack of incentive for agricultural activity.

(ii) inverse relation between income and area of plots cleared. Contrary to the former situation, the data on the four households shows that low involvement in commercialisation (5% of the total liquid income) can be counterbalanced by larger investments in agricultural activity (45% of the total area). In two of these four groups, the greater part of the Brazil nuts gathered was meant for consumption. Although all groups participated individually in the commercial activities, much cooperation in clearing the plots was observed among individuals who were related by kinship in three of the four groups.

(iii) direct relation between income and area of cleared plots. In the case of three other groups, the data show that a large involvement in commercial activity (30% of the total net income) doesn't necessarily discourage agricultural activity (47% of the total cleared area). Even though there are similar patterns in the relation between income and the area of cleared plots, the composition of the groups is quite diverse. While in one group both commercial and agricultural activities were undertaken by three individuals (of these three, two worked in both activities), in the second group all commercial activity was carried out by one young individual and most of the agricultural labour was done by an elderly man (helped by three people from other households). The third group, in a way, is a synthesis of the two other groups: if on the one hand three individuals (two young men and an elder) were involved in commercial activities, the fields were cleared by only one elderly man with the help of relatives from other households.

(iv) direct relation between income and area of cleared plots. Finally, for three groups, the outcome showed a situation where low participation in the commercial activity (6% of the total net income) did not necessarily correspond to a greater investment in agricultural activity, since these three groups were responsible for only two percent of the total area of plots cleared. Amid the three groups, the situation of two of them was determined by situational factors such as disease or death of the only male adult of the household. The situation of the third group is unique, since this group was made up of a single young couple. Although this household took in a small part of the net income generated by the Brazil nut gathering, having contributed to a small proportion of the total area of the plots cleared (0.8%), the fact that the household was made up of only two people meant that the per capita results were quite reasonable.

Within this context of agricultural production, two factors stand out. The first refers to the imbalance of labour involved in the commercial and agricultural activities. While work gathering the Brazil nuts involved 27 individuals (40% of the adults) and was undertaken primarily by young people (75% of the individuals < 30 years old), clearing plots for plantation was undertaken by 20 people (29% of the adults) whose mean age was higher (45% of the individuals older than fifty years) than the labourers employed in the commercial activity.

The second is that in 2005, both households that gathered the most Brazil nuts and, at the same time, were the only ones to receive health agent salaries, were obliged to buy flour from the local stores due to the scarcity of manioc. This fact clearly showed that these groups had become dependent on food produced outside the villages, obtained at the market. Paradoxically, the richest groups in monetary terms were also the poorest, considering that for the Asuriní, the non production of flour carries a symbolic connotation of poverty, associated with laziness.

5. Discussion

Based on the ethnodevelopmental approach presented here, several considerations can be made about the case of the partnership between Funai, through the Amazoncoop cooperative, and the UK-based cosmetics company The Body Shop. Even though the regional Superintendent of Funai in Altamira defended the Amazoncoop as a viable alternative for indigenous societies in middle Xingu to “walk on their own two feet”, the results presented here point to the opposite conclusions. Among them we have: the hierarchical non participative organizational framework of the Amazoncoop, the non inclusion of amerindians in the coop administration and the power imbalance observed in the relations involving the company, those directing the cooperative and the indigenous societies.

Besides these instances, the exclusion of the Arara (Cachoeira Seca Indigenous Territory) and Parakanã (Apyterewa Indigenous Territory) from the commercial activities shows that territorial tenure, a basic prerequisite for any ethnodevelopmental policy (Azanha, 2005; Gallois, 2002), has been neglected. They were left out due to the fact that their lands had not as yet been regimented, and the result of this is that these are exactly the areas where problems of territorial invasion and timber extraction are most serious. Along this line, it is clear that this alternative was not a means of fostering empowerment of indigenous societies in relation to market determinants, as was seen when the dollar devalued in 2005, leading to negative impact on the cooperative’s finances. To the contrary, the process can be detrimental to their livelihood, due to the groups’ economic vulnerability.

Last, the procedure by which the company prepaid the native Brazilians with supplies and foodstuffs needed for carrying out the gathering activities can be characterised as a contemporary form of one of the practices that is typical of the old indentured labour system called *aviamento*. In this system, one practice consists of prepayments by the head of the firm or the foreman, who advances supplies that will be necessary for carrying out the extraction activities, to be discounted later from earnings due, according to the value of the extracted produce. The system is often based on unequal terms of trade (the value of industrialised products > value of forest products), unilaterally determined by the price of transacted merchandise and consequently resulting in indebting the labourers. Among the thirteen Asuriní households, the data showed that, in practice, at least one of them paid to work, or, at

the most, worked for no wages. In the same way, in three other households, the high value attributed to the basket that had been ordered generated adverse effects on the liquid income per capita received.

Despite this criticism, we cannot ignore that the company considered some conventional indicators of development. In a sense, even though they were not estimated, the investments made by the company in basic sanitation probably had a positive impact on health indicators of the native Brazilians. The effects on the education indicators are more doubtful, especially when we consider the complexity of the issues involved and how hard it is to implement culturally differentiated curriculum in indigenous schools.

For the Asuriní do Xingu, diversity among households as well as intrahousehold disparity and gender differences, also observed by Morsello (2002) and Morsello & Adger (2007) for the kayapó society, are indicators that the circuits of distribution organized by the partnership are quite different from the indigenous circuits (Azanha, 2005), which are based on the security of kinship nucleus, with equality of access to resources and reciprocity. That is, contrary to what happens in subsistence practices, it is not a given that the proceeds from the commercialisation of Brazil nuts were destined exclusively to the sustenance of the family group as a whole.

The comparative analysis associating the net income received from the commercial activity and the area prepared for plantation by the Asuriní showed four distinct situations which indicate, therefore, an absence of a general pattern. Considering that there is no evidence of a specific relation between net income and agricultural activity, the analysis of the impact generated by market economy on subsistence practices could be refined by means of techniques to assess both the time spent by the native Brazilians in commercial activities and in subsistence practices as the weight of different activities within each of the household economies.

Since the Asuriní are not engaged in predatory economic activities such as extracting timber from the forest, mining and cattle ranching, the hypothesis that the NTFPs market can represent an alternative to such practices was not pertinent to this study. Even though environmental and forest conservation indicators were not evaluated, the data about the distribution of benefits between the households confirm the hypothesis defended by Kusters *et al.* (2006). That is, if we accept that the Asuriní can be classified in the “subsistence group” category proposed by these authors, the hypothesis that the NTFPs generate negative distributive effects is valid in this case. However, in the Asuriní case, contrary to what these authors suggest, the negative impact appears to have taken place not from the lack of accumulation of social capital by the indigenous society, but rather by neglect on the part of Funai and of The Body Shop which ignored the indigenous circuits of distribution.

6. Conclusion

The evidence presented partially confirms the hypothesis that the partnership between Funai, through the Amazoncoop cooperative, and the UK-based cosmetics company The Body Shop was not a positive instrument for ethnodevelopment of indigenous societies in the middle Xingu. Among the three ethnodevelopmental indicators that were considered, the outcomes presented here demonstrate that two of them were neglected.

In the first place, the partnership in question reveals an ambiguous developmental discourse. That is to say that, even though it is presented on the basis of current discourse emphasizing sustainability and socially responsible commercial relations, in practice, the partnership has not improved upon earlier forms of economy in Amazonia. In this case, the hierarchical format of the cooperative, the inequalities in power relationship along with the terms established in the commercial agreement show that the partnership enhanced their vulnerability in relation to market determinants, instead of fostering indigenous societies' empowerment. This ethnographic investigation also revealed that the indigenous circuits of circulation, based on the security of nuclear families, were neglected, causing distortions between households, within households and between men and women in the distribution of financial resources generated by the partnership.

The comparative analysis of net earnings and the area of farming showed that an absence of quantitative standards between the two variables. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis revealed clear fundamental differences about the ways these two economic activities are organised: while the sale of Brazil nuts was individually done by a majority of young people, the clearing fields for plantations was a cooperative activity, undertaken by older individuals related by kinship. In terms of ethnodevelopment, the specific characteristics of each household indicate that the impact of market economy on subsistence practices should be evaluated not according to general models for change, but through ethnographic observation.

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