

# CULTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES THE TENETEHARA AND THE SERTANEJOS

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*ABSTRACT – The purpose of this paper is to present some aspects of the systematic contact between the Tenetehara – Guajajara (tupi speak) and the regional people (sertanejos) of the State of Maranhão (Brazil). They retain through many years of contact some degree of socio-cultural stability. Land ownership is an interethnic question.*

**KEY WORDS:** Tenetehara, Sertanejos, Inter-ethnic contact, Systematic contact, Self-identity.

*RESUMO – Trata-se de uma avaliação do contato sistemático entre os Tenetehara e os regionais com os quais interagem. Esta interação tornou-se inevitável, duradoura e irreversível. Os Tenetehara mantêm estabilidade sociocultural, apesar do convívio interétnico permanente. A posse da terra constitui disputa interétnica.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Tenetehara, Sertanejos, Contato interétnico, Contato sistemático, Auto-identidade.

## INTRODUCTION

The Tenetehara-Guajajara Indians speak the Tupi-Guarani language. They live in the pre-Amazon Region, in the northwestern part of the State of Maranhão which belongs to the so-called Mid-North of Brazil. The pre-Amazon is characterized by the strength of its older cities and by the appearance of new urban agglomerations along highway axes. Until 1940, it was considered a demographic void. During this decade, the entire non indigenous population of the State

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amounted to 1,231,955 individuals. Due to normal demographic growth and migratory influxes, in 1980, it reached a total population of 4,002,599 inhabitants (IBGE 1981). The Indians' habitat covers the valleys of the Pindaré, Mearim and Grajaú Rivers (Figure 1). Its population in 1940 was estimated at 2,000 individuals (Wagley & Galvão 1949); in 1979 at 5,000 (Diniz 1994); and, presently, it has reached around 9,000 persons (Funai 1998).

This paper<sup>2</sup> will show the cultural similarities and differences between members of the indigenous groups and the segment of regional population known as *sertanejos* (backwoodsmen) who interact in a more frequent manner on a day to day basis. Obviously, the two ethnic groups are different from one another, both in their socio-cultural aspects as well as in discriminatory labels used with each one, etc. However, they are alike even in subtle similarities which we will try to show here. This evaluation has its limitations because the observations were made over a short period of time. But, the fact that the observer did not pertain to either one of the interacting groups annuls, or at least minimizes, other eventual shortcomings.

## THE INDIANS

Tenetehara means "real people". This is the self denomination of the two tribal groups, the Tembé who live in the State of Pará, and the Guajajara specifically referred to herein. The Tenetehara-Guajajara have a longtime experience with foreigners which can be traced back to the XVII century, first the Europeans and then Brazilians. In the second half of this century, portions of this group were evangelized by Jesuits in the lower Pindaré River region. As for those who lived in the environs of the Mearim and Grajaú Rivers, the first references only arose in the XIX century. Inter-ethnic contact was intensified during the XX century, especially in the second half, with the regional

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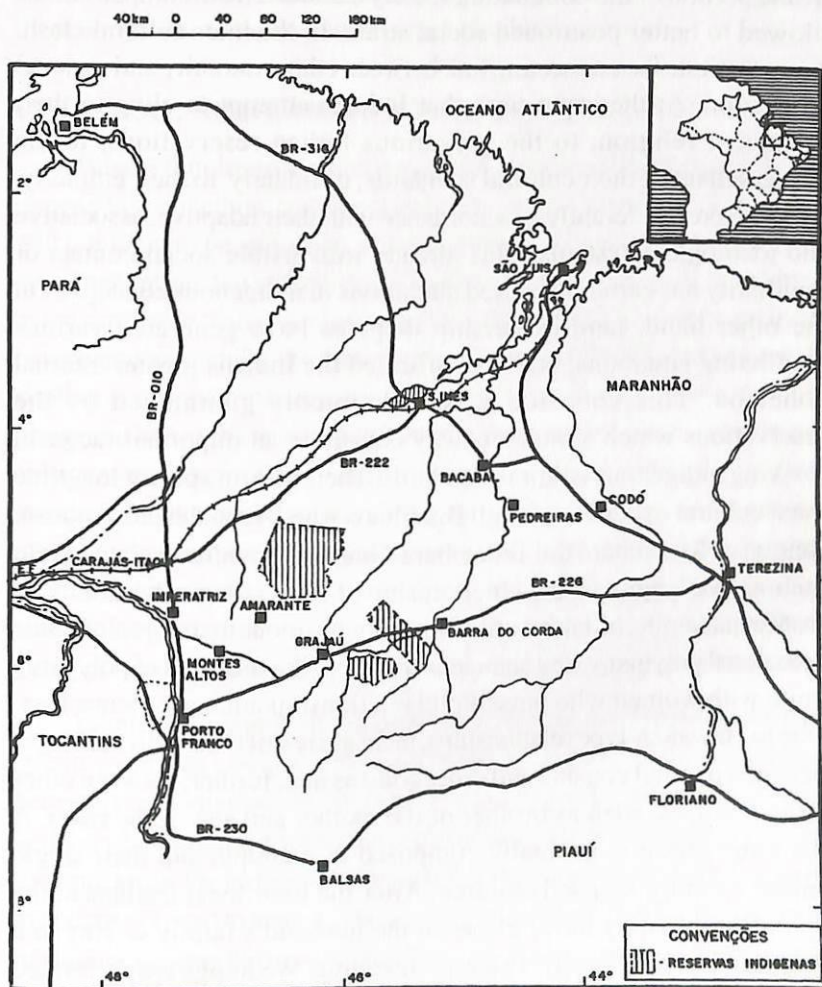


Figura 1. Tenetehara - Guajajara indigenous reserves localization.



population of the State of Maranhão, especially with the *sertanejos* who live in the environs of the villages and in nearby towns. *Sertanejos* are the portion of the dominating society excluded from compensations allowed to better positioned social strata. In the inter-cultural clash, they constitute the connecting link between ethnic minority and regional population. At the same time that Indians attempt to cling to their shamanist religion, to the gregarious Indian reservations, to the conservatism of their cultural standards, ultimately, to their ethnicity, they live preponderantly in accordance with their adaptive, associative and ideological systems. This already irreversible social contact or familiarity has certainly caused alterations in indigenous concepts. On the other hand, land ownership disputes have generated various conflicting situations, but have afforded the Indians greater internal cohesion. This cohesion was undoubtedly guaranteed by the reservations which simultaneously constitute an important factor in reviving indigenous cultural standards. Therefore, in spite of longtime inter-cultural experiences with Brazilians who live in the pre-Amazon Region of Maranhão, the Tenetehara-Guajajaras continue to maintain their native language, the chieftainship of each village, the extensive matrilineal family, bi-lateral affiliation, monogamous marriage along side occasional polygamy, and shamanist religion. Practitioners of polygamy unite with women who have blood relationship amongst themselves. Due to Hawaiian-type relationships, there are restrictions as to marriages between parallel cousins and cross cousins and, further, between other close relatives, such as brother of the mother and son of the sister. A domestic group is generally composed of a couple and their single and/or recently married children. After the uxori-local residence, the young couple may move closer to the husband's family or stay in a dwelling next to the wife's parents' dwelling. Weddings are performed when the girls are between 13 and 15 years old and the boys between 16 and 18 years of age. They may be performed, preferentially, during rites of passage festivities of the young girls to adulthood. A subsistence economy, based mainly on slash and burn agriculture, is still maintained. However, as Indians have adapted to using manufactured goods, albeit

on a reduced scale, they have become marginal participants in the regional economy. In summary, the Tenetehara-Guajajara maintain their basic cultural standards and ethnic identity, in spite of their partial incorporation into the regional *sertanejo* culture.

## CULTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

What ethnological experience has greatly demonstrated is the impossibility of ethnic transferal from one people to another. The Indian will continue to be an Indian, even though acculturated, not only in his own conception, but in the non-Indian's conception, as well. The latter, in the same way, will never be transformed into an Indian and is no more considered as such by the Indian. The situation of both, in this case, is similar, even when they are married to individuals from another ethnic group and live in the spouse's different ethnic community. Many are not able to switch their ethnic origin due to lack of skill within the cultural standards of the other society. Indigenous ethnic identity is taken on without ado when the individual is in his tribal environment, especially on the reservations. Outside of them, indigenous ethnicity for the *sertanejos*, for they are within their non indigenous environment and are a part of it, even though they may be the riffraff of a larger social group.

Ethnic self-identity, in the general context, is reaffirmed by the two ethnic groups in contact with each other, as shown by the separation between the "Indian world" and the "civilized world". Indians, in contact with non-Indians, must speak the national language because the *sertanejo* does not know the indigenous language, either because he does not want to or does not need to learn it. The situation of cultural ambiguity distresses the Indian, causing him psychological disorders and disappointment within his social system as a whole. This happens, obviously, because there are barriers of understanding due to differences in culture and experience and, consequently, diverging interpretations. There are, furthermore, reciprocal prejudices in the conception of division in tasks, of economy,

family, marriage, land ownership use, collective character amongst Indians and individual character amongst *sertanejos*.

Acculturated and/or eventually assimilated Indians, living outside the reservations, in neighboring towns and/or, rarely, in Maranhão state capital, take on an apparent "freedom" in the hubbub of the "civilized world", in the life of a person integrated with values that are different from those of his ethnic group. But, in fact, the attempt to be accepted in the dominating society, in practice, is out of reach. The "racial brand" stamped across his phenotype labels him an "Indian" and/or a "*caboclo*" (civilized Brazilian Indian of pure blood or half-breed white and Indian), pejorative terms in the opinion of non indigenous individuals. Even amongst *sertanejos* who are at the base of the regional social pyramid, Indians are seen by the line of ethnic separation considered "inferior", incapable of overcoming this barrier to reach the social class system. It is in view of these facts, amongst so many others of intercultural antagonism, that the Tenetehara, situated in a mixture of ethnicity, shamanism, gregariousness and conservatism, are impelled to continue to be "real people". This cultural persistence ethnically hardens the *sertanejo*, who considers himself to be "superior" to the Indians. Such value judgements of ethnic "superiority" and "inferiority" constitute a characteristic of the incommunicability of cultural standards between these two ethnic groups who are irreversibly predestined to live side by side.

## CONCLUSION

Similarities in the customs of human societies such as the organization of the family, the economy, politics, religion etc., are evident. However, differences in behavioral variables in each context are what obviously differentiate cultural standards in each human society in particular. Even when there is continuous contact between individuals of different cultures, it is notorious that the underlying cultural



differences in values and attitudes survive under a cloak of usual "similarities" of cultural behavior. Therefore, in systematic contact between two ethnic groups, one indigenous and the other not, intercultural relationships are made difficult by new forms of conduct that the dominated ethnic group faces in the acculturating process, substituting the forms of conduct of its own traditional culture.

Indians and non-Indians are different from each other. A non-Indian is never accepted as an Indian and the latter is never accepted by the former. In the situation under study, between the Tenetehara-Guajajara and the *sertanejos* of Maranhão, there is a marked similarity which is the social marginality of both groups. *Sertanejos* for being the riffraff of the dominant society and Indians for constituting a different people, considered and scorned as "inferior", the dregs of the greater society to which it is definitively linked. Similarities aside, for both sides the differences are fundamental.

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