

* Original article

The Rondon Commission and the representation of the Paresi identity: a dialogue by means of photographs

Luciana Alves Barbio

Master's Degree in Sociology and Anthropology (UFRJ); Specialist in Photography as a research tool in Social Sciences (UCAM); currently working as a research assistant at ICICT / FIOCRUZ.

DOI:10.3395/reciis.v5i2.495en

Abstract

This article discusses the role of photography in constructing identity in the Paresi indigenous society. By analyzing the discourse of a historical period which is considered ideal by Indians (the Rondon Commission), this study contrasts the official view and the Paresi discourse as regards the theme. Memoirs on Rondon memoirs are used to introduce the group's current issues. Photography is an important support to the history of different groups; among the Paresi, photography plays a role in connecting history and memory by constructing the basis to disseminate knowledge not only among the Paresi society but also to members of other indigenous and non-indigenous societies.

Keywords: Identity; Photography; Indigenous Societies; Representation; Rondon Commission

The Rondon Commission and the creation of the SPI (Indian Protection Service)

The "Strategic Telegraph Commission of Mato Grosso to Amazonas", which started in 1907, was a project of the recently-introduced Republic of Brazil in order to enable communication between the capital Rio de Janeiro and the states ranging from Mato Grosso to Amazonas. The aim of this project was to demarcate Brazil's strategic points, allowing communication and surveillance in border regions. Imbued with positivist and republican values, the Commission went beyond the purpose of building telegraphs and acquired great significance due to the contact it made with indigenous populations. It created the first governmental agency to assist the Indians, namely, the SPI (Indian Protection Service), which was later replaced by the FUNAI (National Indian Foundation), which operates to this day.

The project fitted into the government's perspective of promoting national integration by mapping regions which were further away from the capital and, thus, enabled connections among such regions. This mission was accomplished by a team of soldiers led by Marshall¹ Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon. Because Rondon was in command of that mission for over thirty years and added a very personal touch to his management as he wrote the reports and appeared in the photographs taken at the time, the project became known as the Rondon Commission.

The project focused on surveying and measuring locations, resources, soil, minerals, climate, forests and rivers, and it enabled the settlement of prospective population centers as well. In addition to data on indigenous tribes, the reports also provided a detailed description of the fauna and the flora specimens found in the target regions. This was similar to the work produced by nineteenth-century naturalist travelers who had documented inland areas in Brazil by means of paintings and reports.

Although the Rondon Commission had made use of the Indian figure since the early days of its establishment, such use became more important after the Commission's original objective, i.e. the implementation of the telegraph network, became increasingly pointless as the wireless telegraph quickly replaced telegraph lines. In one of the reports written by Rondon for publication, the mission given to the soldiers was described as follows:

Thus, the national heritage was to incorporate a vast territory, one of the richest in Brazil, hitherto unpatriotically abandoned, and protection was to be offered to a large number of our fellow aborigines, so unfairly relegated to the deepest oblivion and the cruelest ingratitude. This protection would, within a relatively short space of time, foster the relationship of association between the State and the various indigenous nations living in the territory explored, with the consequent possibility of a rapid incorporation of Indians into our society (Rondon, pub. 39).

According to João Pacheco de Oliveira (1999), the Mato Grosso Telegraph Commission, managed by Rondon, was the paradigm for the indigenist activity in Brazil, which included the establishment of a particular indigenous agency – the Indian Protection Service (SPI) – which operated from 1911 and 1967. As a result of countless claims of corruption and administrative violations, SPI (which was the first apparatus of power) was replaced by the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI).

According to Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima (1992), the *official protection* maintained, throughout the whole existence of the SPI, the intention to change Indians into self-sustaining small farmers. The idea of the transience of Indians, whereby the “savage” could be possibly made into national workers, had the weight of a mindset deeply interwoven in the practice of the Service, even when this idea was supposedly no longer employed to support the exercise of power of the State over the *Indians*. The notion of relative civil capacity, conditioned to the *degree of civilization of the Indians*, was based on notions which prevailed at the time. Hence, the State became the *guardian* of the *Indian status* (emphasis added).

The goal of transforming Indians into national workers emerged as the reports of the Commission were written. The category ‘evolution’ is found in the discourse as something necessary and positive to the Indians and hence to the Nation. Moreover, the Indians’ future dependence on whites was conceived by agents of the Government and the Commission as a form of control. The following excerpt from the introduction of one of the reports of the Rondon Commission is a relevant example:

After transforming the attitude of the Indians, it was necessary to provide them with further care by effectively protecting them against abuse and the evil influence from inferior and malicious individuals in our society.(...)Such changes are expected to take place as a result of progress whose pace is accelerated by new work tools we give them – firearms, salt, matches, sugar, clothes and other useful items that have rapidly become a part of their customs and made them increasingly dependent on their relationships with us. This has also determined closer approaches day by day; these approaches are voluntary, spontaneous and totally transform Indians but without sudden changes or disturbances. And we note that these changes occur much more quickly than one might imagine (Rondon Commission, 1916: 258 - 259).

To achieve this purpose, the SPI was organized into units of action with distinct territorial scopes corresponding to different "steps" in the Indians’ transition to rural workers: from the units responsible for direct contact with indigenous peoples, with small scope regarding spatial-administrative management; to administrative units focused on certain geographic areas whereby the Republican territory was to be divided for operational reasons; to the nation-wide management, a responsibility of the board of the SPI.

The images of the Rondon Commission and the work of Major Luiz Thomaz Reis

The contact with indigenous populations occurred during the installation process of the telegraph, and was portrayed through images (photographs, films) and reports (reports by Rondon himself and other soldiers). The need to document these Brazilian populations, hitherto virtually unknown and usually only present in people’s imagination as something distant, led Rondon to create a department of documentation using photosensitive material.

In 1907, Rondon hired a photographer to document the progress of the telegraph lines and also the daily activities and rituals of the Indians, but according to Pierre Jordan (1992), the results were disappointing. In 1910, Rondon instructed Luiz Thomaz Reis to be the official photographer of the commission, and in 1912, the Cinematography Section of the commission was created, and film cameras were introduced. For over twenty years, Reis filmed indigenous groups during the activities of the Commission. The visual record documented Reis's own attitude in the face of reality, his state of mind and ideology emerged in his images, particularly those he produced for himself as a form of personal expression.

Fernando de Tacca (1999) explains that the creation of a department specialized in documentation using photosensitive material was an innovative action for the standards of the time, requiring huge investments and mastery of a specialized technology which did not exist in Brazil, especially when one considers that the material was used in poor environmental conditions, namely transport difficulties and high humidity.

According to Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima (1995), it is clear from the observation of the photographs that spontaneity and the preservation of indigenous culture were not the main concern of the Rondon Commission. In several photographs, one can see Indians dressed in "civilized" clothes and in a static position according to the photographic resources of the time as well as typical objects

of civilization which had been introduced into indigenous communities such as the Paresi. The whole discourse in favor of the preservation of indigenous societies and the respect for their cultures and traditions was faced with the uprooting-oriented practices adopted by tutors apparently aiming at national unity.

Regardless of the subject recorded in the images, photography also documented the worldview of the photographer; therefore, it was a dual witness: to what it discloses about the last scene - irreversible with its frozen fragments - and to what it reveals about the photographer. One can also observe the endless attempt of the leading members of the Commission to show the image of a beautiful and peaceful Indian to Brazilians who lived far away from the hinterland, contrasting such image with the notion of barbarism that was part of the common sense.

The military also made an effort to show that "those peoples" could be incorporated into the Brazilian Nation, which was a major goal of the SPI (Indian Protection Service): integrating indigenous peoples into the national environment via education and the legal protection of the State (tutelage).

The photographs produced by the agents of the Rondon Commission were made available to the public by means of three volumes entitled "*Índios do Brasil*" (Indians of Brazil), two of which were published in 1946, and the third volume being published in 1953. No date was specified in the albums for either the photographs, taken from 1907 to mid-1940s, or the respective expeditions. Thus, the Rondon Commission is likely to be interpreted as a major undertaking where Rondon was the founder and director of the entire work rather than as a set of several expeditions led by different men in different time periods.

As far as the particular case of the Paresi is concerned, there is a set of 76 photographs published in Volume 1 of the book "Indians of Brazil", written by Candido Mariano da Silva Rondon. Most images were produced ??by Major Thomas Reis and José Louro. The first 15 images depicted the local landscape, specially waterfalls and rivers, and small camp sites along the river banks.



Following the classification by Fernando de Tacca (1999), this set of photos was divided into three stages: the wild/savage Indian, the pacified Indian and the Integrated / civilized Indian. A preliminary analysis made it possible to identify groups of images belonging to each of the three stages. The first images of the Paresi basically portray their daily lives, showing the women carrying their children and preparing food. In the photographs, one can notice the presence of native artefacts such as baskets, spears and sieves. It should be noted that, at that period of time, the Paresi were portrayed with their original outfits, consisting of necklaces worn across their shoulders and a short skirt known as *xiriba* (worn by women).

The presence of the photographer is noticed in some images where the natives looked directly at the camera, while in other images an impression of distance exists between the observer and the observed, as if the photographer had gone unnoticed in the scene depicted (although because of the technical conditions at the time, it is known that the pose was imperative so that the photograph would not come out blurry due to the exposure time required to produce the image).



This set of images is categorized as "savage Indian" because the agents of the Commission did not directly intervene in the scenes presented. The images of waterfalls and landscapes of the *Planalto dos Parecis* (Paresi Plateau) show a hostile natural environment that the military explored to reach their objective; while the Nambikwara photographs portray Rondon's bandolier being hit with an arrow by an attack of this group, the reception of the Paresi was peaceful, according to the reports of the Commission. In the absence of a savage Indian to attack the agents and jeopardize the expedition, images were used to create a wild nature of rock walls, wide rivers and impenetrable waterfalls that only the perseverance of the agents of the Rondon Commission could have overcome. Thus, the great challenge posed to the military consisted in overcoming the natural barriers they had to face along the way, showing that despite the ordeals, their mission was accomplished successfully.

The analysis of the image of the pacified Indian discloses how convenient it was to show that despite their "savage" nature, which was related to the idea of a remote Brazil, these "savages" were not as aggressive as they were thought to be and were rather open to the pacifying contact that should integrate them to the new nation being formed. By dressing them and making them look like the civilized, a condition of identity is imposed with values and customs of the Brazilian society. More important than showing them dressed was to show them being dressed, taking advantage of a resemblance and becoming closer to the integrated, generic Indian (Tacca, 1999: 163).



In the images of the Paresi, the crucial moment of passage occurs in the photograph where Rondon, accompanied by another soldier, gives "gifts" to the natives. In this image, some Paresi Indians already appeared dressed in their "gifts" while others still wore their costumes. The caption of photograph 126, subsequent to the photograph aforementioned, should suffice to reinforce such discourse: "After the distribution of clothes, the Indians seemed inhabitants of civilized cities".



In this picture, all couples are dressed from head to toe; the males are wearing trousers, jackets and hats; the females are wearing long skirts and long sleeve blouses or dresses in the same pattern. Theodore Roosevelt provided the following description of Rondon's actions:

COL. Rondon gave numerous gifts to the Indians; the women were given chintz, which they truly appreciated, as well as bottles of scented oil, imported from Paris. In the evening, the men improvised a dance on this occasion, and the majority (there were some exceptions) set aside the civilized clothes and performed dances as if there were no strangers present (Roosevelt, 1948: 187).

The following photographs depict the daily life of the group, but they differ from the first set of images in that the Indians are always clothed now, whether in images of women pounding corn in a mortar or in images of children. There are also images of women weaving and spinning cotton.

These images can be analyzed as part of the pacification discourse, where the group appears controlled under the military presence.



This sequence of photographs maintains the visual logic of displaying scenes of tribal life, later followed by the imposing figure of Rondon distributing gifts and clothing. The scenes show the everyday life in the village once again, and these are the only internal images of the houses included in the book.



Another way to analyze the political discourse of the Commission is through the captions of the photographs. Only when the images start to show the concluded telegraph stations, schools and the Indians in activities deemed "civilized", the subtitles bear the inscription "Rondon Commission." This inscription can be interpreted as a kind of stamp endorsing the work done by the military, as if after the changes were implemented by staff, and the proposed objective were reached, the portrayed groups were given the trademark of the Rondon Commission, thus showing that the action had generated results and the "improvements" had been absorbed by the Indians. As a consequence, a new stage of pacification began among the Paresi: the school of music, physical education class and the instructors.



Elizabeth Edwards (1996) suggests that the meaning of photographs can be naturally guided or suggested by texts, thus involving them in a particular context. From the moment of its creation, photography "means" something, reflecting the intention of the photographer. The music class contains instruments for a conventional band such as clarinet, flute, tuba, etc. One can notice the presence of a teacher conducting the class. The map of Brazil on the wall shows the sense of integration sought by the Commission.



There are also pictures of the Paresi alongside their teachers, especially Ms. Olga Higgins, in a conventional classroom where all students are holding a pencil and a girl is writing on the blackboard. The nationalized power is imposed by the Rondon Commission by spreading an image of superiority, which is undoubtedly embodied in Rondon himself, either through the national flag or a picture found in indigenous posts, as a sign of the totality that transcends immediate experience of the natives, the illusory power which is offered as the only alternative to total conflict or slavery in many cases (Lima, 1995:175).



Therefore, the true pacifying and thus civilizing role was played by those who taught how to do Swedish gymnastics, play the tuba, glorify the national symbols and use telegraphy. Working knowledge of the Portuguese language (reading and writing) was fostered in detriment of using indigenous languages; besides, a series of small changes were introduced in the everyday life of an indigenous people through forms of socialization which are typical of societies where school is a major vehicle for cultural reproduction.

The idealized model of government, which was certainly implemented in some cases, tried to reach all the activities done by the natives, placing them at different times and spaces of cycles, rhythms and limits of indigenous life.

The flag of Brazil is a constant element in the images produced by the Commission. The imagery of protection has the national flag as an icon of paramount importance, which is a symbol of nationality found in numerous photos. These photos are reducible to two basic sets, because according to Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima (1992), the natives either appeared naked, suggesting the first contacts with the administration, as proto-nationals to be disciplined, or presented themselves dressed, next to the flag, symbols of progress and social transformation, profiled in civil ceremonies that performed the effectiveness of the methods of laity. As regards the Paresi, the national flag is placed in the second case, since it arises in the classroom with all students and instructor profiles in a superior position and in the concluded telegraph stations, which is evidence that the objectives proposed by the Commission had been accomplished.



In the Rondonian documentation, the shift from the pacified Indian to the integrated / civilized Indian is made by including certain significant objects in the photographs. The presence of the map of Brazil, both in classrooms and at the entrance of the telegraph stations is one of the signs, as is also general and technical education. The presence of the Paresi working in telegraph stations as linemen and guards indicates that the pacification achieved its goal of integrating them into the concept of nation state. The transformation of a savage Indian into a generic Indian was a practice that carried new values ??for the construction of "homeland"; thus, the Indian became a worker that should produce orderly progress, and the civilizing actions were seen as a step to be achieved in this script (Tacca, 1999: 247).

With the dual purpose of bringing benefits to the public service from the work of the people already installed and adapted to the hinterlands, and giving them conditions to not need or depend on elements which were strange and indifferent to the regenerative action Rondon intended to exert on them, since 1908 the Marshall endeavored to employ their labor in the conservation of the works of the telegraph line area which lay wedged in the referred territory. Two years later, he managed to have the main leaders of the Caxinitis and Uaimarés groups to bring their people over and live in the vicinity of Ponte de Pedra and Utariti stations, so that they could deliver the services that were their responsibility more easily. All the preservation work of the line has been delivered to these Indians ever since, who do their job with great zeal and intelligence. They clean the paths, repair the bridges and tracks, manage the ferries crossing the rivers and operate as linemen. For these duties, which are overseen and directed by employees of the Commission, they receive the remuneration that would be paid to any employee (Rondon Commission, 1916: 258 - 259).

However, the main argument in this regard is the assertion that indigenous people are perfectible and can "be civilized" and, with good education, "are able to progress morally, intellectually and practically." It is no longer the Jesuit catechism, as one is intended to keep away from the Salesians who replaced the Jesuits, but it is nothing less than a secular catechism: Rondon's own words

maintain a healthy Christian tone of guilt and atonement for one's sins that is unlikely to be challenged. One can also consider that the educational intentions of the SPILT (Indian Protection and National Worker Location Service) and later the SPI in relation to non-indigenous peoples participating in a type of control already practiced against peasants, *coboclos*, freed blacks, *mestizos* of all types throughout the hinterland. It is necessary to transform "nomads", Indians or otherwise, into "national workers", i.e. docile and subdued employees for all the developments of Brazil, which was opening up to changes of the industrial and capitalist modernity (Piault, 2001: 94).



The clearest way to illustrate the concept of integration is through the images of indigenous people in uniform. Firstly, the military clothing demonstrates a dignified relationship between management (the clothes are often delivered or presented by Rondon himself); secondly, it is an image that goes beyond this situation and aims to show a wider audience the concrete relationship between the Commission and the Indians. The clothing plays this role, i.e. for an outside look at this relationship, the sign military clothing on an Indian's body reinforces Rondon's civilizing work (Tacca, 1999: 224).



Still as regards military clothing, photographs of two Paresi Indians as students at Instituto João Alfredo, in Rio de Janeiro, reinforce the civilizing purpose of the expedition. These images legitimize the whole discourse of Rondon, before proving that the savage can be tamed and eventually integrated into the Brazilian nation-state. It is worth noting that images always imply an overall direction of a simple scene, and faster movement of one of the Indians photographed could tarnish the image, giving it movement. The images were static, however; the Indians were petrified for Rondonian posterity. The representation of the construction of telegraph stations reflects the progress coming to areas once forgotten, and changes occur concurrently to the locality and to the people.

For Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima (1995), there are constant elements of the visual image created by the Rondon Commission and the Indian Protection Service throughout its trajectory: body posture, costumes, the classroom setting itself, photographs of physical exercise, with emphasis on the presence of the flag - the Indians often profiled before it - and a map of Brazil. From the body to the territory, all manipulable surfaces seem to serve the purpose of registering images nationwide.

In addition to the clear intent on showing a perfect school life, it is essential to point out how the photographs engender a supposedly efficient way of disciplining students, following the proposed logic of incorporating Indians into the surrounding society. Also working within this doctrine, the symbols of what is "national" are found inside the classroom in the form of maps and flags of Brazil, as a disciplining power of the body, exemplified in the images of Swedish gymnastics classes, which reflect the rigor of military posture. The classes of music and musical instruments complement the Rondonian civilizing objectives: during the expeditions, it was common place for gramophones to play the national anthem in high volume as one of the attempts to publicize the power of the Rondon Commission.



Claiming that isolated groups "retain" their socio-cultural integrity means that they maintain active cognitive and organizational mechanisms through which they are able to *interpret* and *adapt* to extremely diverse and constantly renewed situations. What remains intact - or what is shaken by the situation of domination - is the dynamics of each culture and not necessarily a collection of original features (Carneiro da Cunha, 1986, emphasis added). If the logic of integration advocated by the Rondon Commission had been successful, today we would not have differentiated groups, each in its cultural milieu. The logic of adaptation assimilated consciously by the Indians, rather than a simple explanation for domination, rests on the analysis of recent cases of contact.

Paresi memory and history through photographs of the Rondon Commission

Political representation of the whole process of pacification and integration of the Indians to Brazilian society was the basis of the imagistic work of the Rondon Commission. The idea of ??showing the generic Indian reinforces the concept of uprooting them from their culture. This policy was considered the most effective at the time to deal with the "indigenous issue". One can realize that one hundred years after this process occurred, indigenous peoples continue to exist with their specificities and cultural backgrounds.

The images do speak for themselves, but express and dialogue constantly with ways of life that are typical of the society where they were produced. In this dialogue, they refer to cultural and political issues, expressing the diversity of groups and ideologies found at certain historical moments. The analysis of these images fosters better understanding of the changes and transformations that different social groups have experienced.

It is through the signs provided by the culture that the memory of a social group is constructed, in a selective complex work that stores facts after they are transformed into some kind of text. In the case of most indigenous groups, the facts are passed on through stories and myths, a system of oral transmission from generation to generation. The photographic images play a significant role in this process of selection and registration of what has to be stored and constitute a useful system to transmit memory to some social groups.

Early images showing the waterfalls, rivers and trails of the *Chapada dos Parecis* attracted the attention of the Indians, who were trying to identify the places documented in order to talk about their experience with those sites, establishing a close relationship with the story presented by the photographs of the Rondon Commission. One of the topics discussed was the similarities and

differences between photographs and the current situation. In addition to identifying the waterfalls, the Paresi retold an entire story about the sites, offering the paths and the means to reach them, exemplifying a case of knowledge shared with the history experienced by Rondon.



Everyday life in the villages was documented by the lenses of the photographers of the Rondon Commission; this resulted in two types of discourses among the Paresi, directly associated with the traditional concept of culture, a recurring topic in conversation which expresses the yearnings of this society. The first discourse aimed to identify the objects found in the portrayed setting, such as baskets, spears, sieves and hammocks, emphasizing the fact that the items are still a part of the Paresi life. The presence of arrows in the photographs was immediately noticed, because they are an important piece for Indians, who hang them in the middle of the house; if they break, they are believed to attract something evil to the group. Certain behaviors documented in the photographs were also analyzed by the Paresi; for example, women lying in a hammock, grains being pounded in a mortar, and cotton being woven to make artefacts.



A reading offers realistic descriptions of space, practices and characters to be seen as representations of social groups. A realistic reading of the document reproduces the evident artistic representation that already existed, i.e. the fact. Such reading is the sum of the descriptions, and it is raised naively and not recognized – just like the descriptions are not recognized – as a possible representation.

The elements found in the images that were somehow indicated and emphasized by the Paresi express the identification of the Paresi Indians with their peers from previous generations. The whole discourse, focused on traditional aspects of the Paresi culture, highlights the concern of this society about showing that it preserves the same customs of their ancestors. The concept of traditional is

recurrent in the Paresi discourse, and it is appropriate in this work as part of the native terms used to establish the relationship we / others. Rather than emphasize the indigenous culture, the main objective was to distinguish the Paresi culture.

One of the proposals of the Paresi into the context of traditional culture is to recreate artefacts in the same way as they had been documented by Rondon. As the Paresi highly appreciate everything that is related to the period of the Rondon Commission, the production of handicrafts is now viewed as a form of recovery and affirmation of the more latent, traditional aspects of the Paresi culture. The classification of what is or is not traditional is part of their discourse and follows a logic of ancestry. In this sense, the images of the Rondon Commission stress the importance of affirmation and preservation of what had been portrayed in a given situation. Besides considering Rondon's attitudes and everything that involves his name as ideal in terms of raising benefits for indigenous populations, the representation of the Paresi in everyday acts was also suitable as it was originally conceived as the essence of the Paresi. The nature of the questions asked by the Paresi on this topic favors the ancient as traditional and therefore more important for the purposes of conservation for future generations.

The discussion on the traditional category in the Paresi society presents a confrontational aspect involving different generations. There is clear concern among older adults to educate young people about the importance of appreciating the traditional Paresi culture. One source of complaints is the assumed lack of interest among young people in learning from their elders about the history and customs of the Paresi. As much as this kind of disagreement is present in situations involving people from outside the village, youngsters are the first to display typically Paresi artefacts, which contradicts the claim that they are not interested in indigenous traditions.

The photograph that represented Major Libânio deserved a closer look by the Paresi. The Paresi chief was wearing clothes immediately identified as traditional, with necklaces worn across the chest. He was identified as one of the leading representatives of the Paresi; the one who stood by Rondon. Even with the discourse on the preservation of traditional culture, every reference to this chief was alluding to the military rank conferred upon him by Rondon. No Indian referred to him as chief Libânio, but as a major. The arrow in his hands was another item that was pointed out, as it is a part of the Paresi cosmology to this day.



The image of Major Libânio served as an example to show the Indians the other props that composed the garments of the Paresi. It was pointed out that the habit of wearing necklaces across the chest was shared by everyone; it was not exclusive to the chiefs. The type of seeds used for making necklaces and the uses of these parts by the Paresi contributed to the discussion of what is considered traditional in their culture so that it can be shown to others.

For the use of clothing, the change of this perspective considered original within the Paresi culture is currently considered with a slightly derogatory tone, expressing a sense of loss for the group. But when this tone of loss is compared with the images of Rondon distributing clothing to the natives, another parameter for analysis emerges. Two discourses on the same subject are detached from each

other: the fact that Rondon had clothed the Paresi is seen as a preparation for the contact with the whites, and the fact that the Paresi changed some habits over time is analyzed as a cultural loss, without the first being correlated as a cause for the second.



The Paresi depicted in the photographs aroused curiosity not only about the indigenous way of life a hundred years ago but also about the details of the images; there was an intention of identifying the Indians who were represented there. According to Walter Benjamin (1978), the value of worship of the images is the last refuge of the cult of remembrance of loved ones, whether they are away or missing. There were frequent questions about the captions, and the absence of nominal identification in each photograph caused discontent among all the Paresi. Only the photograph of Major Libânio bore a name, while the others were usually followed by vague captions identifying the Paresi group or reading the names of subgroups.

The questions about the names of indigenous people sought to establish kinship with the Paresi photographed by Rondon. As it was inappropriate to establish this relationship by name, possible physical similarities and physiognomy were identified as traits to develop ties of kinship and somehow enable participation, even if indirectly, in a time the Paresi considered to be historic. Man's visual experience when faced with his own image, pictured on the occasion of the simplest and important situations in the past, makes one ponder over the significance of photography in people's lives.

Conjectures about kinship were not made only in relation to the Paresi that had been in contact with the Rondon Commission, as some stories include Rondon himself. There are several reports in Mato Grosso on the many indigenous children that Rondon allegedly had. These reports list the villages and indigenous groups where there would be children of the marshal living away from Cuiabá. During various parts of the talk about Rondon, Antonio Zonizare arises as his grandson, and says that he met Rondon as a child, thus demonstrating the importance of family ties (whether or not confirmed) between Rondon and the Paresi.

First, my grandfather General arrived in the village distributing gunpowder, many things (...)

After I was bigger, mom told me: "General is your grandfather" (...) When he met me at the post of Sarare, when I was still a child, he recognized me and gave me many things (Antonio Zonizare).

Any sign of closeness to the time of the story is emphasized by the Paresi, highlighting the importance of this subject for that society. These facts indicate the idealization of that period, and of Rondon in particular. Everything that involves the Rondon Commission and the main symbol-character of this period is considered positive, serving as a role model for the successful development of relationships between the Paresi Indians and the non-indigenous society.

Final remarks

This study on the Paresi village from Rio Formoso attempted to show how the identity relations are formulated in line with the agents to whom such Indian identity, or rather, Paresi identity, is to be introduced. We chose a specific moment in the history of the Paresi – The Rondon Commission – which was inherent in other indigenous groups in the region. Based on the discourse about that particular period of time, our objective was not to define the history told at the time of Rondon, but rather to realize, from what was said about Rondon, that the Paresi were actually speaking about their yearnings for improvements in the village to this day. The Rondon Commission was the perfect time for that because it can be compared to all the complaints made by the Paresi about losses built up over time.

The current discourse among the Paresi from Rio Formoso does not match the goals and accomplishments of the Rondon Commission whatsoever. The perception of the Indians as opposed to official reports of the time does not produce a new story about that contact, but rather the transformation of a historical character – Rondon – into a myth within the village. All aspects that are placed as a relation between Rondon and any other issue show that Rondon is the example to be followed; a parameter of the model to be adopted in favor of improvements to indigenous societies.

The experience shared by the Paresi on the Rondon Commission was formed from memory constructed and transmitted over time through the stories told in the village. The use of images in this study was fundamental to maintain this story, and in some cases, it served as evidence for facts that some Indians knew only through stories. Having visual contact with Rondon and the Paresi at that time secured a new approach to the testimonies, raising issues which could not be addressed without the aid of photographs.

Photography equates with memory and cannot be totally distinguished from it. Inexhaustible source of information and emotion. Visual memory of the physical world and nature, of individual and social life. As long as it lasts, it is a record which crystallizes the image chosen and reflected – a tiny portion of space from the outside world (Kossoy, 2001). The restoration work of historical-sociological memory indicates that it is important to consider how the group being studied sees the use of the image in the process of recording and transmitting the past. The way the group turns facts into memorized texts through photographic signs may provide clues to understanding the internal logic and trajectory of the group in question.

♦ We would like to thank the Indian Museum (Museu do Índio) / FUNAI by making the photographs of the Rondon Commission available.

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Note

1 The highest rank in the Brazilian Army at the time.