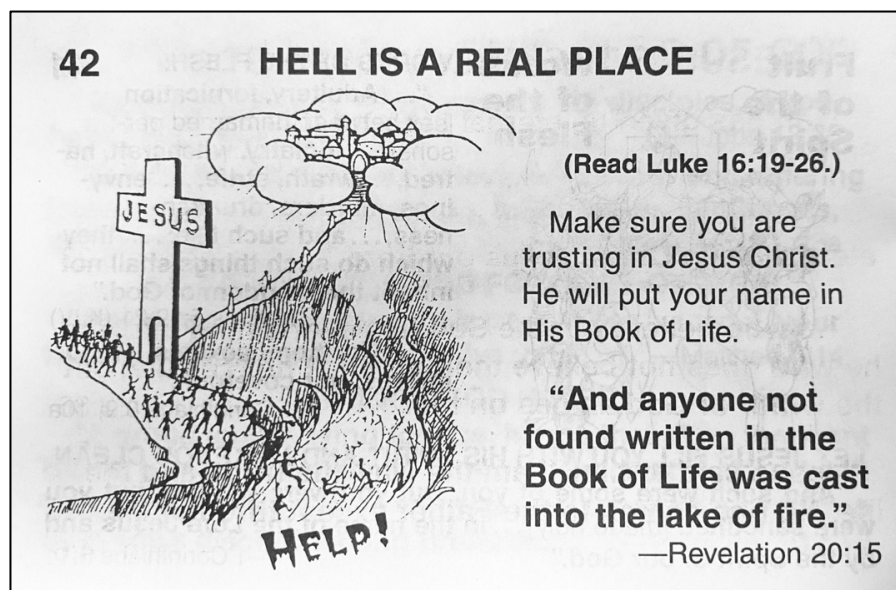


## Colonization, Evangelization, and Militant Research in the Peruvian Amazon

It was my fortune to be invited by my friend, renowned Brazilian anthropologist [Darcy Ribeiro](#), to join him on a research trip in July 1976 to interview the first teachers in the Indigenous communities in the Amazon region. Schools were a new phenomenon, an imposition of the federal government, after the previously nomadic hunters and gatherers had been pressured to settle in small villages.

The Minister of Education supported Darcy's research on the early experiences of the first Indigenous teachers, and I was to support him in the process with photos and reviews of his interviews.

The airfield where we landed was constructed by the [Summer Institute of Linguistics](#) (SIL), a Christian organization founded in 1933 by an American missionary in Guatemala, and associated with the Wycliffe Bible Translators. As it spread throughout Latin America in subsequent decades, the SIL became known for its training of linguists who immersed themselves in Indigenous communities for years to study and document languages that had not previously been written. In one way, their work helped to preserve native languages, but their translations of the Bible also aided in the evangelization of these peoples.



In one community I visited, the villagers showed me small newsprint pamphlets, short cartoon stories warning of the consequences of *not* replacing their pagan gods with Jesus Christ. The drawings depicted terrified people burning in hell; Biblical words were portrayed literally, evoking fear in the hearts and minds of the new readers. It horrified me that this was the version of Christianity they were being exposed to, focusing on the fate of the unfaithful in the afterlife ("hell fire and brimstone"), rather than the building of loving relationships on Earth, the main message of my own Christian upbringing.

My first journal entries recorded some doubts:

*When we landed in Pucallpa, it was raining and there was no one waiting for me.... So I took a taxi, which after 20 km, was impeded from continuing by a chain -where the road was too gutted with mud. There, however, appeared the person from SIL who had come to pick me up. Bob Weber, who grew up in Yarina Cocha, and married the daughter of another linguist family, took me to La Quinta Rosa, the guest house where Darcy awaited me.*



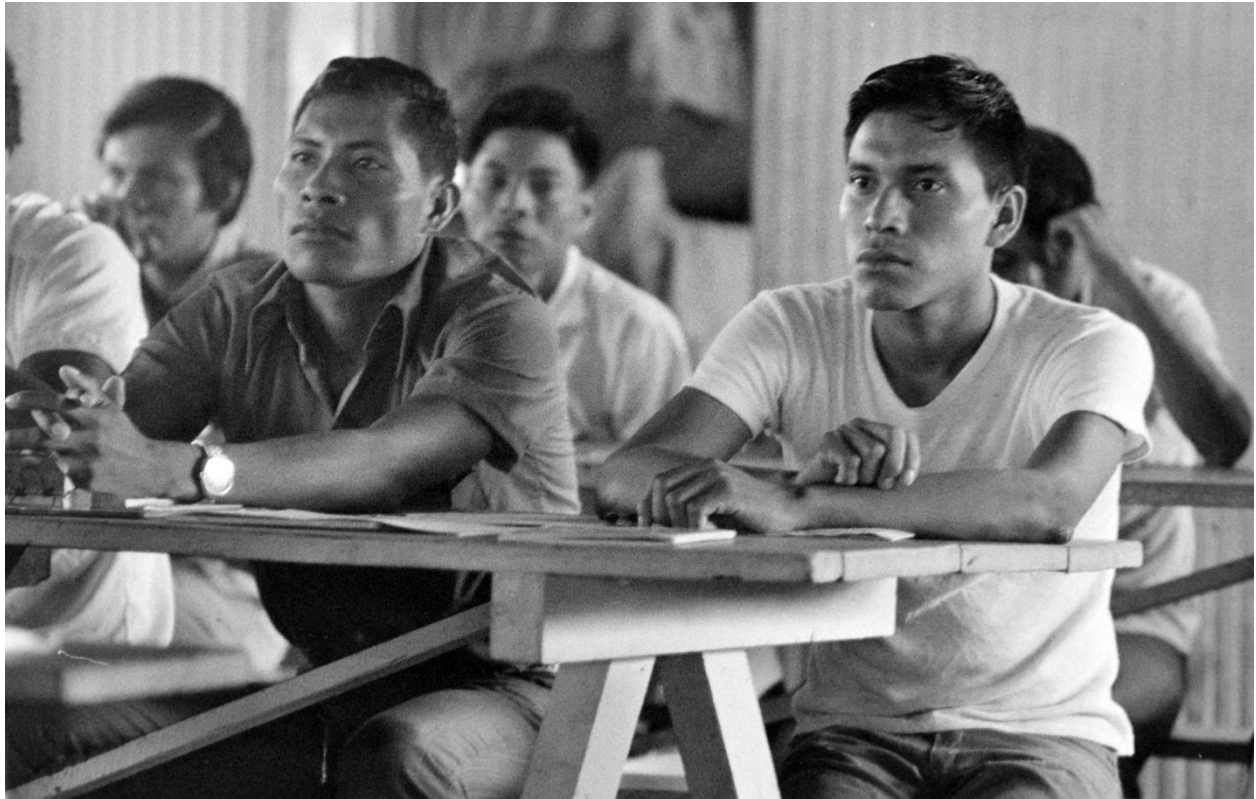
*Darcy Ribeiro on the right chatting with staff of the Summer Institute of Linguistics*



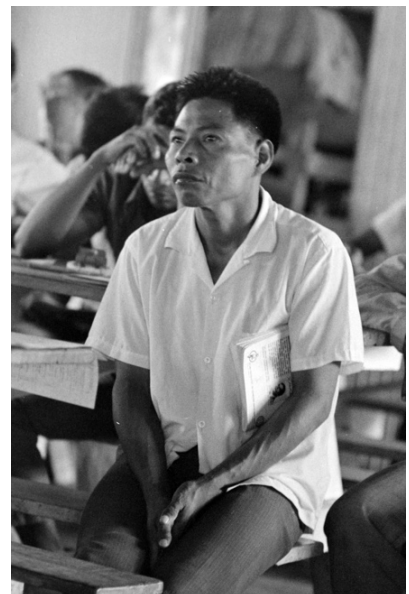
He introduced me to some of the SIL staff, and carried on his charming banter with them, getting one of them to pose in a Shipibo designed poncho.

*Darcy was warm, but also apologetic, explaining that we wouldn't be able to fly to the villages to photograph, as we had planned. He had tried to communicate this to me. (So perhaps I shouldn't have come!)*

While our initial plan was botched, Darcy had other ideas about how I could be useful. We were lodged at the Amazon Training Center of the Summer Institute where the missionary linguists and the Indigenous teachers gathered for an annual meeting.



The Indigenous teachers sat in a very conventional classroom, reflecting a teacher-led pedagogy, and not the more participatory culture circles advocated by Freire's popular education approach. As I photographed them, I could only wonder what they were thinking and feeling in this American missionary led context.



We were lodged at the Amazon Training Center of the Summer Institute where the missionary linguists and the Indigenous teachers gathered for an annual meeting. Darcy arranged for me to meet with a dozen of the American missionaries who had come in from their remote and isolated villages in the rainforest. Knowing my work with photographs as a research tool, he suggested I talk with these linguistic researchers about their experiences with taking pictures of tribal life. I was impressed with the dedication of these expats; many had devoted a good part of their lives, 20 to 30 years, to living with Amazonian peoples. It was that level of commitment that eventually paid off in both their documentation of the native languages and their evangelization of the populations.

As the first outsiders to penetrate the jungle, these missionary linguists were often the first to bring cameras into the region and to photograph the original inhabitants. They shared stories of the diverse responses of the Indigenous tribes to the mechanically produced likeness of themselves, their bodies, their activities and their environment. "No! You can't have my spirit!" some had protested. Others were upset when photos showed only parts of their bodies, not the full person. Or complained when a person was framed to appear isolated from their natural environment, the more-than-human elements that they saw as their relatives, central to who they were.

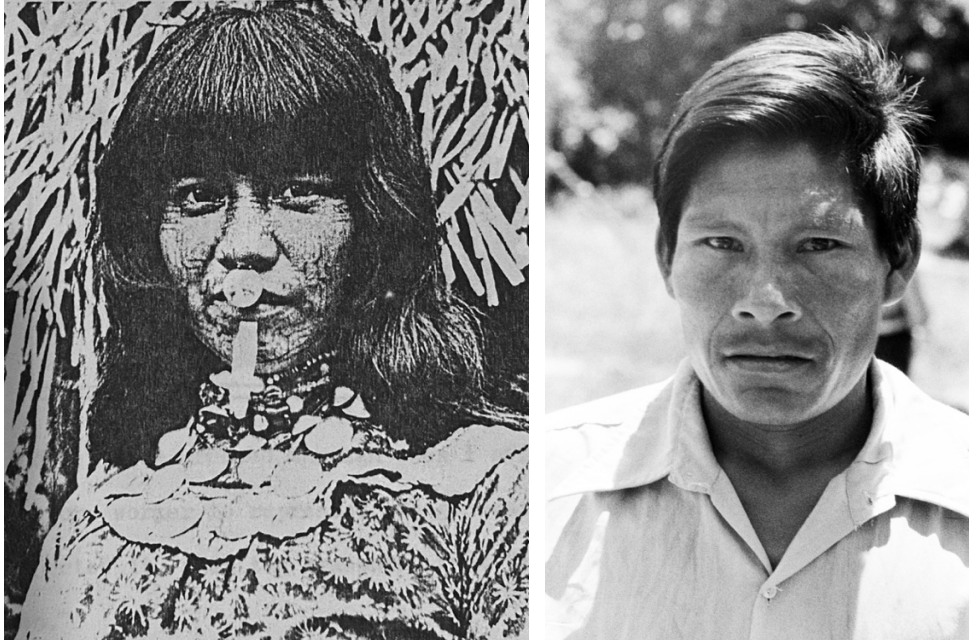
Soon cameras became more common, and eventually some requested prints of their portraits, or more importantly, a photo of a loved one who had passed away. I could see that the missionary linguists were well-intentioned and had developed affection for their Indigenous counterparts. I was touched by their stories, but I was very offended by their religious mission. While I didn't have the words for it at the time, I felt I was witnessing what we now call "cultural genocide".

In a 1978 report to my colleagues at the Participatory Research Group, I shared a disturbing incident:

*We discussed the possibility of sharing the earlier photos with natives: to gather their reflections on their own history and their own responses to social change within their lifetimes.*

*However, the evangelical bias toward such a reflection was clearer when a missionary nurse showed me her photo album of the village healthworkers she had trained over the last ten years. There was a photo of Emmanuel in 1967, when he was first discovered by outsiders and recruited for health work: long-haired, bare-breasted, face painted, ring in his nose. Proudly she pointed to Emmanuel in 1975: short-cropped head, clean shaven, stripped of his jewelry, dressed in a western-style shirt.*

*In those two contrasting photos, what represented for her the progress reaped by their good influence reflected for me the death and destruction of a culture. Again, the use of photos had clarified our differences.*



*While these are not the photos referred to above, they illustrate the contrast*

After my 'visual anthropology' seminar, I decided to use the next day to return to Santa Teresita with the photos I had taken during my visit a month earlier. While I was away, Darcy had spent the day interviewing the teachers from the various tribes who had gathered for this annual training week. While these interviews had been private, and recorded, Darcy invited me to his final meeting with the teachers the next morning. His closing comments began:

*You have told me about some of the dramatic changes among your peoples in the past ten to twenty years. You are making history as the first teachers in the first schools in the region. There may be some good things coming from that. But there are also dangers. You don't want to lose your language, your foods, your culture, your rituals and your spirituality. You will face many threats in the coming years.*

At this point, his voice rose in volume, as he launched into an impassioned plea:

*You must defend yourselves against the government and foreign companies who come to take the precious resources in the Amazon region! It doesn't mean that you can't or won't change. But you can use your schools as places to preserve your language, to protect the beautiful and important parts of your culture.*

All my graduate training in western positivist social science research had stressed neutrality and objectivity. It was certainly challenged by this passionate advice from an internationally known anthropologist. I was witnessing what I came to see as a different model, an example of what is called in Latin America "*investigación militante*" or "militant research."

Darcy Ribeiro was a key proponent of what is known as *Indigenismo* or [Indigenism](#), a political perspective that critiques European colonial attempts to assimilate or destroy Indigenous cultures, and advocates for Indigenous rights and resistance. While I was not yet very conscious of the extent of the cultural genocide that colonialism had unleashed in the Americas, I was struck by the stance that Darcy as an academic was taking toward what sociology and anthropology identified as our “research subjects.”

It resonated with my own research on Paulo Freire’s notions of praxis, which posits the non-neutrality of education. It would also become central to my later participation in an emerging participatory research network, which challenged the ideological underpinnings of all research activity.