

THE CANELA

BONDING THROUGH KINSHIP,
RITUAL, AND SEX



WILLIAM AND JEAN CROCKER



CASE STUDIES IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
SERIES EDITORS: GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER

THE CANELA
Bonding through Kinship, Ritual, and Sex

WILLIAM H. CROCKER

Smithsonian Institution

and

JEAN CROCKER



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CASE STUDIES IN
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

SERIES EDITORS

George and Louise Spindler

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

THE CANELA
Bonding through Kinship,
Ritual, and Sex

To George and Louise Spindler

*for their inspiration
and friendship over the years*

Foreword

ABOUT THE SERIES

These case studies in cultural anthropology are designed for students in beginning and intermediate courses in the social sciences, to bring them insights into the richness and complexity of human life as it is lived in different ways, in different places. The authors are men and women who have lived in the societies they write about and who are professionally trained as observers and interpreters of human behavior. Also, the authors are teachers; in their writing, the needs of the student reader remain foremost. It is our belief that when an understanding of ways of life very different from one's own is gained, abstractions and generalizations about the human condition become meaningful.

The scope and character of the series has changed constantly since we published the first case studies in 1960, in keeping with our intention to represent anthropology as it is. We are concerned with the ways in which human groups and communities are coping with the massive changes wrought in their physical and sociopolitical environments in recent decades. We are also concerned with the ways in which established cultures have solved life's problems. And we want to include representation of the various modes of communication and emphasis that are being formed and reformed as anthropology itself changes.

We think of this series as an instructional series, intended for use in the classroom. We, the editors, have always used case studies in our teaching, whether for beginning students or advanced graduate students. We start with case studies, whether from our own series or from elsewhere, and weave our way into theory, and then turn again to cases. For us, they are the grounding of our discipline.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

William Crocker graduated from Yale University in 1950 and was the first of George Spindler's students to earn his M.A. in Anthropology from Stanford in 1953. He completed his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1962, having made the first of many visits to the Canela in 1957. In 1962, he joined the Smithsonian Institution as Curator for South American Ethnology in the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum of Natural History. He continued his study of the Canela, making 11 trips to the field over the years, totalling 65 months of living with the tribe. Although Crocker has missed teaching, he appreciates the opportunity for intensive and long-term research his career at the Smithsonian has provided. He is the author of numerous articles on the Canela, and in 1990 his comprehensive monograph, *The Canela (Eastern Timbira), I: An Ethnographic Introduction* appeared as number 33 in the Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology series. He is at work on more specialized studies of the Canela to make available to scholars and students the voluminous field data he has accumulated. In 1993, he began a last extended field stay with the Canela.

Jean Galloway Thomas married Bill in 1987 and has since collaborated informally with him as an editor. She earned her B.A. in English from Stanford in 1960 and her M.A. in English from Georgetown University in 1971. She taught literature and writing in college preparatory schools for 20 years. Jean accompanied Bill on his 1991 trip to Brazil and lived with the Canela for three weeks. For this case study, Jean used her teaching experience to orient the text for the college student. She helped organize the material and wrote some sections. Since Bill is the anthropologist, however, Jean has preserved his voice as the single narrative "I." In addition to working with Bill, Jean gives courses in contemporary fiction through the School of Continuing Education of Georgetown University.

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

It is impossible to do justice to this case study of the Canela in the short compass of a foreword. Bill Crocker began field research with the Canela in 1957 and has continued intermittently right up to the present. As we write this foreword (June, 1993), he is back with the Canela on a final extended research stay. He has lived with the Canela for an accumulated total of more than five years during eleven field trips. There are few anthropological field studies that surpass his in duration and intensity.

This long-term approach to the study of a culture enables Crocker not only to mount a time-stretched interpretation of culture change and adaptation, but also permits him to achieve an intimacy of interpersonal relationships with the Canela people that is often voiced as an objective of anthropological fieldwork—but rarely achieved. Bill Crocker is amongst kin, locked into an intricate pattern of terminology and reciprocal behaviors, when he is with the Canela.

Though "one of the family," he must retain perspective as an anthropologist, a viewer and interpreter of behavior into which he has been socialized. He does this, in part, by acquiring "research assistants" rather than "informants." They share knowledge and their interpretations of behavior with him. They also share responsibility for culturally correct reporting and analysis. Crocker acknowledges their input but still retains his obligation to produce alternative perspectives and interpretations flowing from his anthropological training and his position as a cultural "other" to the Canela. The result of his special, long-term relationship with the Canela is a complex, detailed description and analysis of a spectacular way of life.

Canela culture is radically divergent from European-based cultural expectations, values, and perspective, even though their common humanity is apparent. They live a joyous life of festival, ceremony and ritual that is inconceivable from the perspective of a work- and time-oriented Westerner. The Canela spend hours and days engaged in symbolic re-enactments of their cultural meanings, and parts of each day engaged in what seems like plain everyday fun—such as racing around the village perimeter carrying heavy logs on their shoulders (a great way to keep in shape, it seems).

The theme of bonding runs throughout this case study: bonding through kinship, through ritual, and through sex. The first two are to be expected, given our anthropological understanding of social life, symbolism, and the reinforcement of commu-

nity through ritual and ceremony. The third, bonding through sex, is unexpected, though not unknown in tribal cultures of some parts of South America. It is not that sex is unexpected. Sexual activity and sexual restraints are everywhere, in every culture. Its regulation is what is interesting. In the United States we stimulate it with tantalizing imagery, dress, and innuendo, and then deny and punish it. This ambivalence is a major theme in European-American culture. Among the Canela, sex is a joyous expression and reinforcement of community bonding. The story of this bonding is too complex and startling to more than mention in this foreword.

Two major challenges to Western perspectives and sensibilities are sequential sex—when one woman may receive as many as twenty men—and the induction of young girls of eleven years of age, and even younger, into sexual experience involving full intromission. What is most interesting, anthropologically, is that sexual behavior that seems to involve the ultimate of licentious freedom from a Western point of view is stringently regulated by Canela custom and mores. It is just as easy to become disreputable among the Canela as it is in any Western community, but for quite different reasons. Among the Canela, one who is “stingy” with sex is scorned, for such a person does not contribute to community well-being.

The implications of this case study for understanding cultural relativism, as well as the sources of a common humanity, are of great importance for teachers and students everywhere. We are fortunate to have it available and fortunate that it is clear and thoroughly readable, despite the complexity and detail of its subject matter. For the latter, we have the Canela and Bill Crocker to thank. For the former, we have Jean Crocker to thank, who has written some portions of this book, and edited all of it.

George and Louise Spindler
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Acknowledgments

George and Louise Spindler helped me find my life's work by inspiring me to go into anthropology, and they have been treasured friends ever since. They encouraged Jean and me in the writing of this case study, always countering our many doubts and delays with a hearty "let's get on with it." Their enthusiasm and wise counsel were indispensable.

Betty Meggers and the late Clifford Evans have supported my career at the Smithsonian in many ways, and I have benefitted immeasurably from their advice. The late Charles Wagley, who first oriented me to fieldwork in Brazil in 1956, also encouraged and advised me over the years. I have indeed been fortunate in having these distinguished mentors and faithful friends.

Gail Solomon has been my research assistant for 17 years, and it is impossible to imagine doing without her. As the archivist for all my data—field notes, photographs, films, and recordings—she retrieved and organized needed data for this case study. Her help in matters large and small has been vital. Victor Krantz of the National Museum of Natural History prepared the photographs with his usual skill and much appreciated cooperation.

The sensitivity and wise perspective of Kenneth Kensinger of Bennington College has been a valued resource. I am grateful for the Conferences on Lowland South American Indians, which Ken organizes and leads. The constructive criticism of my colleagues at the Bennington Conferences has sharpened my thinking and spurred me on. One of these Bennington friends, Katherine Adams of the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, read drafts of Chapters 4 and 5 and gave helpful advice.

In Brazil, Berta Ribeiro of the Museu Nacional made the 1991 and 1993 trips possible through her energetic resolution of the many technical requirements for permission to visit and do fieldwork among the Canela. Her encouragement and sponsorship have been essential. Over the years, many others in Brazil have extended to me great warmth, kindness, and practical assistance. Darcy Ribeiro helped me to obtain my original permission to conduct research among the Canela in 1957. Heloísa Alberto Torres gained the critical support and permissions during the 1960s. The late Olímpio Martins Cruz managed my financial affairs in Brazil from 1957-1963 and became a great friend and advisor. Eduardo Galvão was another mentor and advisor in the years 1957-1976. Expedito Arnaud was my representative from 1978-1979 and gave me great moral support at a time when it was much needed.

Special thanks must go to Jaldo Pereira Santos of Barra do Corda. Between 1964 and 1979, Sr. Jaldo was my representative in Barra do Corda, handling all my finances and extending limitless hospitality to me and my family. Sr. Jaldo used his prestige and ingenuity to help me solve countless difficulties. The friendship and assistance of Sr. Jaldo can never be repaid because it was so vast, generous, and open. His family's warm hospitality, his competence in handling my finances, and his clearing the way for a safe passage through the politics of the town, were so helpful over such a long period of time that his assistance must be among the greatest advantages any ethnologist has received in the field.

More recently, Júlio Alves Tavares of Barra do Corda has handled the extraordinarily difficult logistics of my 1991 and 1993 trips. Sr. Júlio managed my finances and acted as liaison with the Canela. His resourcefulness and steadfastness have made it possible to conduct my last fieldwork among the Canela. Jean, especially, remembers Sr. Júlio's alacrity in getting her excellent medical care when she fell ill in Barra do Corda before visiting the Canela in 1991. Sra. Rosamar used her great cooking skills to prepare comforting and nourishing dishes for the recovering invalid. Daughter Romenia patiently improved Jean's Portuguese and acted as her guide around the town.

Jack and Jo Popjes of the Summer Institute of Linguistics arranged for making and sending Canela informant materials during the 1980s. They have shared with me their knowledge of the Canela language. But more importantly, they have been great friends over the years.

The field research was carried out under the auspices of the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi and the Museu Nacional. Financial acknowledgments go principally to the Smithsonian Institution for the various years of field and office support, but, for 1964, especially to the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. Permission to carry out research among the Canela was granted before 1968 by the Serviço de Proteção aos Índios and afterward by the Fundação Nacional do Índio. For most of the trips, permissions were also obtained from the earlier Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas or the later Conselho Nacional do Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico. I am deeply grateful to these cultural and governmental institutions of Brazil for authorizing my work.

Finally, I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, Curt Nimuendajú, the great Brazilian generalist in anthropology of the first half of the 20th century. His work, *The Eastern Timbira*, originally inspired me to pick the Canela as the subject of my research and enabled me to carry out my goal of a long-range study of culture change and continuity.

Preface

The imagination of the public today is much caught up with the fate of the rain forest and its indigenous peoples. This book tells the story of a group of Brazilian Indians, far to the east of the rain forest, whose brutal encounters with the Brazilian frontier began in the middle of the 18th century and culminated in their surrender to settlers in 1814. Not until the 1830s could they live in relative peace with Brazilian society, which by then had completely surrounded their lands. The frontier had moved on, leaving the Canela to reestablish themselves, recalling and reconstructing their traditional culture as best they could.

A visitor to the Canela today comes upon a huge, circular village of perhaps 90 houses of palm-thatch construction. On the outer edge of a boulevard enclosing a cleared circle, about 1,000 Indians live in houses two or three deep, each family grouping connected to a central plaza by its own path. In this plaza, the Council of Elders may be meeting, or long lines of young women may be singing in unison before the male sing leader with his gourd rattle. At other times of day, the age groups of boys and young men may be racing with logs around the boulevard; or a group of men and women may be returning with the tractor-pulled wagon from distant gardens with piles of manioc roots.

In one of the “wealthier” houses made of mud and wattle walls instead of palm thatch, a Canela man who for years lived in a Brazilian family receives visitors. His house is surrounded by a well maintained fence of branches that keeps the pigs out, and the yard of sand is swept clean. A new appliance sits in its factory box inside one of the two rooms of his house. He returned to the Canela village after 18 years of living in Rio de Janeiro as the adopted son of a Brazilian woman. He is one of the few Canela in this century who have stayed away from the tribe for any length of time. Even those Canela who have the opportunity do not choose to leave the village permanently, preferring the Canela way of life to what they see on the outside.

The factors that have led to the survival and success—as far as cultural success can ever be measured—of the Canela people form the topic of this study. Some of these factors might be considered historical and geographical accidents and thus outside the sphere of Canela culture; they will be discussed first. Other factors lie within Canela culture itself, however, and they form the main thrust of this book. Many other nations in the same Timbira group became extinct, most of them between 1750 and 1825, and none that survived has conserved its traditional culture as completely as have the Canela. The Canela were sufficiently out of the settlers’ invasion path to escape extreme cultural change. There were hills to hide in to escape the most devastating period of the late 1810s and early 1820s. Vacant lands awaited their occupation in the 1830s, lands which were of little value to the settlers. These lands had no desirable resources and were only marginally good for cattle and farming. Thus, the Canela were able to experience 100 years of relative peace from 1840 to 1940, during which time they could adjust to the settlers’ backland culture and build back their own culture. In 1938, the advent of the Indian Service introduced new forces of change. The extent of Canela cultural retention, and thus the richness of their remaining culture, is unusual for a Brazilian Indian nation pacified as early as 1814.

Outstanding features of their culture worked within this framework of geography and history to bring the Canela to their position of relative prosperity and pride today. The Canela are quite conscious of their dependency upon the surrounding Brazilians, and have rationalized this position, along with the resulting practice of begging, from outsiders. But their positive morale is shown in the growth in their population, their decision to remain in one large village rather than splitting into several, and their continued resistance to emigration.

Their social cohesiveness is both the cause and the result of Canela survival. Certain kinds of bonding constitute this cohesion. Bonding through an elaborate system of kinship, bonding through rituals including daily meetings and complex festivals, and bonding through an extensive practice of extramarital sex are distinctive aspects of Canela culture. The first chapter will trace the historical narrative of pacification and resulting culture change. Then a chapter will be devoted to each of these major types of social bonding, which have served to counter the destructive forces. After a consideration of the balance between the sexes, an epilogue will bring the discussion of culture change and endurance up to 1991.

The record of Canela survival reaches back to the beginning of the 19th century and the accounts of the Portuguese Captain Francisco de Paula Ribeiro. After these historical accounts of military encounters with Canela ancestors, their story was resumed in the 1930s by Curt Nimuendajú, Brazil's foremost anthropologist of the first half of the 20th century. Nimuendajú was born a German, but became a naturalized Brazilian. His great work on the Canela, *The Eastern Timbira* (1946), inspired my choice of this tribe for my doctoral research. When I arrived in 1957 to start my study of the Canela, and over the next 34 years, I spent 65 months in 11 field stays as an adopted member of Canela families. I could draw on the experience of Indian Service agents and the memories of the Canela themselves to study culture change, my principal topic. Since the memories of the old people in 1957 reached back to the 1890s, my study of the Canela has covered over 100 years.

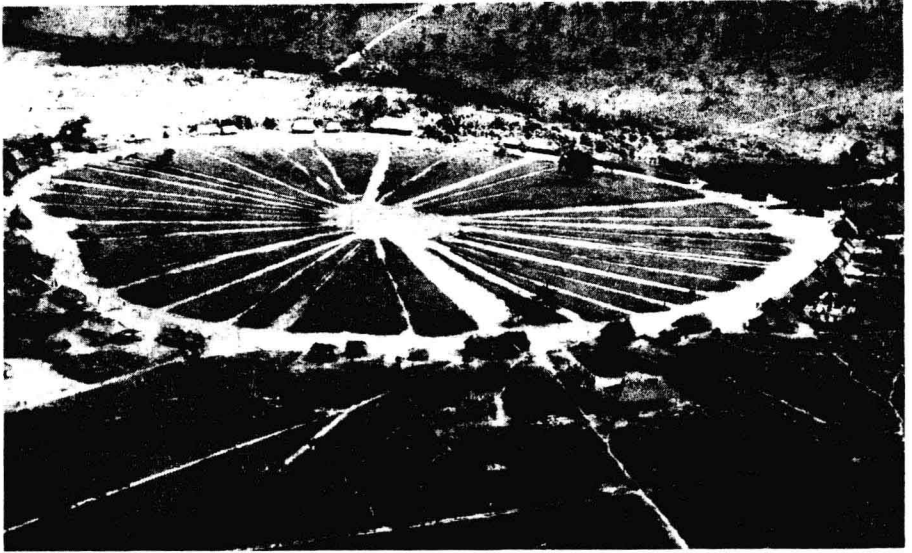
Contents

Foreword	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
Preface	xiii
Introduction: A First Visit to the Canela	1
 1. The Historical Context	 13
Pacification and Adaption	13
Timbira Nations: The Canela's Ancestors	13
Pioneers Decimate the Timbira Nations	15
Tales About Becoming Aware of Peace	19
A Myth Is Created to Justify Inferior Status	22
Learning Their Place among the <i>Civilizados</i>	24
The Fox People Join the Canela	27
Canela Warriors Put Down a Guajajara Indian Uprising	29
Executing a Witch Begins Social Disorganization	29
Ranchers Massacre the Kenkateye-Canela	30
Without Warfare, Discipline Starts Breaking Down	31
Culture Change in the 20th Century	31
Weakening of Discipline and Loss of Elders' Authority	31
Loss of the Community-Marriage Ceremony	32
Loss of Youths Having Sex with Opposite-Sex Elders	33
Loss of the Hazing-Shaming Ceremony of Youths	35
Impact of Outsiders on the Canela in the 1930s and 1940s	37
Loss of Childless Women Sleeping with Men in the Plaza	37
Nimuendajú Reinforces Canela's Belief in Themselves	38
Further Shocks to Canela Culture in the 1950s	39
Indian Service Turns from Paternalism to Self-Reliance	39
A New Bridge Gives Trucked Commerce Access to the Region	40
Canela Turn to Believing the <i>Civilizado</i> Way Is Better	40
The Messianic Movement of 1963	41
Solution to Life Through Extensive Agriculture and Work	42
Solution to Life Through Mythic Transformation, Prophecy	42
Prophetess Defiles the Chief's Daughter to Assume Full Power	43
Maria's Prophecy: The Canela will Live in the Cities	44
Sex-Oriented Punishments Used to Maintain Control	46
Ranchers Attack the Canela to Stop Cattle Theft	46
Indian Service Heroism Saves the Canela People	47
Exile to the Forests of Sardinha	48
Crocker, the Academic, Became an Activist	49
Adaptations of a Savannah People to Forest Living	50
Outside Influences from the 1970s Onward	51
Emigrants Return Bringing Urban Knowledge	52
Indian Service's Strong Support	53
Effects of Missionary Presence	53

Effects of Anthropologist's Presence	54
Effects of Indian Service's Activist	55
The Changing Canela View of Themselves—a Summary	56
2. Bonding Through Kinship	61
Consanguineal and Affinal Kinship	61
Kin, Affines, and "Spouses" Around the Village Circle	61
Roles in My Canela Sister's Household	63
Kinship Terms and Their Roles	66
Bonding <i>Around</i> the Village Circle of Houses	73
Bonding <i>Across</i> the Village Circle of Houses	76
Joking Behavior Between Aunts, Uncles, Nieces, and Nephews	78
Other Forms of "Kinship"	79
Informal Friendship	79
Formal Friendship	81
Personal Name-Set Transmission	83
Contributing Fathers	83
Keeping the Peace Through Alternative Systems	87
3. Bonding Through Meetings and Ritual	91
Tribal Meetings and Judicial Hearings	91
Daily Tribal Council Meetings	92
"Hearings": Legal Trials Between Extended Families	95
Afterlife and Pollutions	98
Canela Other-Worlds	100
Creation Myths	100
War Stories	101
Tales About the Origins of Festivals	102
Ghosts' World: Lesser Than the Living World	102
Canela Relationships with Ghosts	103
Becoming a Shaman: Ghosts' Choice	103
Culture Change	105
Do-it-yourself Empowerment	105
"Prayer": for Self-Development, not for Supernatural Intervention	105
Pollution Control by Food and Sex "Restrictions"	106
Self-Empowerment Through Maintaining "Restrictions"	108
Use of Shamanic Powers	109
Curing: Social Usage	109
Witches' Spells: Antisocial Usage	111
Shamans' Pronouncements Create "Social Facts"	112
Shamanism as the Ultimate Social Control	113
This-Worldly versus Other-Worldly Religious Activities	113
Life Cycle Rites	114
Ear-Piercing Rite: "Opening" Boys to Knowledge and Compliance	115
Death and Mourning as a Cluster of Rites	119
Wailing: One Aspect of Mourning	119

Annual and Great Festivals	122
The Nature of Festivals	122
Relative Status and the Sisterly Role Portrayed in the Firebrand Act	122
Mothers-in-law Hold Strings Tied to Sons-in-law	123
Clowns as Individualists, Support the Right by Doing the Wrong	123
An Interpretation that Assistants Could not Provide	124
The Annual Ceremonial Cycle	125
Red and Black Moiety Relay Log Racing Brings "Spring"	125
Age Class Moiety Log Racing; Logs of 300 Pounds	126
Agricultural Rituals Increase the Crops	126
Hardwood Log Racing Ritual Forecasts Summer Amusements	127
Ceremonially Elite Wè?tè Girls Ensure Peace	127
The Wè?tè-Showing Ceremony Turns on Passions	127
"Summer" Season Festivals Enhance Extramarital Sex	129
The Ghosts' Festival: Kinship Reenforced	129
Warriors' Festival: To Learn Restrictions and Group Living	130
Preparation for a Festival's Final Phase: Hunting	132
Festival of Masks: "Begging" Supported	132
Portrayal of Status and State Through Drama	136
Food Distribution Enhanced	137
The Wè?tè-Concealing Ceremony Limits Sex to Trysts	138
Interpretation of the Great Festivals	140
 4. Bonding Through Sex	143
The Extramarital Sex System, Public and Private	143
Growth in Awareness of the Ethnographer	143
Public Extramarital Practices	145
Private Extramarital Practices	149
Learning about Sex	150
Socialization of Virginal Girls for Sex	154
Steps into Full Marriage	155
Teaching a "Stingy" Girl to be Generous	156
Socialization of Non-Virginal Girls for Sequential Sex	157
Female Orgasm?	159
Winning Her Maturity Belt	161
Her Free Adolescent Years	163
Childbirth and Its Limitations	165
Socialization of Boys for Sequential Sex	165
Summary and Further Thoughts	166
 5. The Balance Between the Sexes	173
Visiting Protection Chiefs	173
Political Power	174
Ceremonial Models for Behavior	174
Judicial System	175
Supernatural World	175

Domestic Scene	176
Rites for Individuals	178
Life on Farms Away from the Village	178
Canela Social Control in General	179
Social Context of the Extramarital Sex System	180
Female Socialization for Extramarital Sex	180
Male-Female Balance in the Extramarital Sex System	181
Male-Female Balance Viewed in General	181
Changes Over 180 Years	181
 <i>Epilogue: 1991</i>	 183
Orthography	189
References	191
Index	195



The Canela village of Escalvado from the air in 1970.

On another occasion, the 13-year-old Kô-nkrêê (streams-three)³, my late niece, “insulted” her great-uncle, Kaarà-?khre (deer’s-hole/nest), as he appeared naked in the family doorway—naked according to custom—with “your penis is screw-turned like a large yam’s root, and its naked head is rotten and so is purple like a sweet potato.” Highly amused, he retorted, “your vagina is so big from use that it needs the grinding of a penis as large as a manioc pestle with a rutting goat’s energy.” These privileged verbal endearments, and other forms of sex joking, kept life amusing and vivid during my years of fieldwork, as they do for the Canela every day.

When my nieces were finished with their fun, my number one informant and helper, the younger⁴ Rārāk (thunder), approached me with a serious demeanor. After a long handshake and courteous questions about each other’s wives, he pointed out that my wife and three children were waiting under the plane’s other wing, getting hot and impatient. They had asked for water and were pointing to themselves and to the houses, indicating they wished to be there for protection against the heat. Recalled to my family responsibilities, I asked Paul, the missionary’s⁵ pilot, to unlock the vacant missionary house, where we would spend a few days until we could establish our own quarters in the house of whichever Canela family was willing to adopt Roma and her children. Then I would live with Roma in her adoptive house and visit the house of my own “kin.”

After lunch we settled into our hammocks for naps, but I was sleepless with the excitement of my return. Adding to my sleeplessness was the disturbing news received the preceding day in Belém at the mouth of the Amazon 400 miles away to the northwest (Map 2).

During the afternoon in Belém, the national Indian Service⁶ official had inspected my Brasília-issued authorization to work with Indians. He had given me the standard