

The Munduruku People's Sacred Heritage¹⁰⁶

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We come from the Munduruku people, an ancestral people. We are more than 14,000 indigenous living at Mundurukania, which comprises territories in different stages of demarcation by the Brazilian government. The largest of them, recognized as Munduruku Indigenous Land, encompasses areas from the cities of Jacareacanga and Itaituba, in the state of Pará. Our lands extend along the Tapajós river, including Sai Cinza, Sawre Ba'pim, Sawre Muybu, Praia do Índio, Praia do Mangue and Kayabi, the latter bordering the state of Mato Grosso. All these territories were left to us by our forefathers, but when the Brazilian government demarcated the indigenous lands, we lost areas used by our ancestors to fish and hunt, and now we can no longer access them. Currently, we devote a considerable part of our lives to protect the territory from invaders and avoid the destruction of our greatest heritage: our sacred places.

For us, waterfalls, mountains, rivers, rocks, açai fields, moriche palm fields, all places frequented by our ancestors, who left their mark and spirit there to guide us, are sacred. To this day we find at these places old instruments used by them, such as arrows and axes, and receive their messages in dreams or through shamans. We know we need to preserve these places because they are our cultural and natural heritage. For example, in a waterfall, a rock site, many species of fishes and birds are usually found. This is from nature, but the places are also cultural, because at the bottom of waters we found all instruments left by our forefathers, so these places gather a lot of history.

106 From the interview conducted by Luciana Gonçalves de Carvalho.

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Also, in these places, especially upstream Tapajós river, where most of our villages are located, every year the rituals from our people are prepared. On these occasions, we fish there, but not with a gillnet or other instruments from *pariwat* (white people); we only use traditional techniques to grab the different types of fish that come every month. In the waterfall, we also make our sacred rituals.

For example, Kerepuca is a very sacred place. One cannot just go there, a series of rules must be followed: women having their periods cannot enter, and people cannot play there. In other words, places like Kerepuca are not just natural spaces, they are not just waterfalls. The spirits are there, and we have a lot of respect for them. Among the *pariwat*, many people think they are just waterfalls and want to turn them into tourist spots, but, in fact, for us the waterfalls are very sacred and highly connected to our spirituality.

Another example, Morro do Jabuti, is a mountain under which there is a rock site no one can reach. This happens because, spiritually, this is a protected place. The messages to not go there always come to us in dreams. We also know that it is very risky to enter there, so we don't even try to do it. Also, the shamans guide us; they have more understanding of spirituality and the gift of receiving messages from spirits who live there.

The shamans teach us that sacred places like waterfalls are heritage for the Munduruku, they are much more than rock and water. We have so much respect for them that we even avoid saying their names. Taking pictures? Not at all. Despite this fact, some *pariwat* do this. There are photos of Kerepuca in magazines and websites, and this is very upsetting, very revolting for us, because it's something that breaks the rules from the place and could represent a problem for us. Recently, after a couple of pictures were published in a book, we lost a child at Kerepuca. Places like this one are much more than waterfalls, they are places of spirituality and history, and this is why they are our cultural heritage.

The Rasteira waterfall, the Biwa waterfall (which the *pariwat* call Chacorão), Morro do Jabuti, Kerepuca. We don't want the same thing happening at those places, as happened with Dekoka'a and Karobixexe, the latter a waterfall named Sete Quedas by the *pariwat*, which were destroyed to give place to hydroelectric power plants at the Teles Pires river, in the state of Mato Grosso. Karobixexe was one of the most important places for our forefathers; they crossed the forest to get there, made boats out of tree trunks, made instruments to go through the waterfalls and be able to walk on that sacred place. It was truly a very sacred heritage for our people. The place where the dead are living, that is, heaven for our people.

In addition to the destruction of waterfalls, hills, mountains – all significant places to the Munduruku people –, the construction of power plants in this area also caused the loss of funerary urns (which we call Itiğ'a) from our forefathers. During the construction works, these urns were removed from their place and taken to the Natural History Museum in Alta Floresta, Mato Grosso, and we had to fight to have them returned to us. They were taken to the museum because they were considered archaeological heritage, but no one consulted us, disrespecting the Convention 169 from the World Labor Organization, which ensures us

the right to prior, free and informed consultation. Only our shamans know exactly how they must be handled, because they come into contact with the spirits from sacred places. With their guidance, we fought hard to retrieve the urns, because they are not just assets, they are not just heritage. Each urn is a life, a spirit living there.

Now, we fight to preserve all places still remaining for us, because new power plants intend to destroy them. Morro do Jabuti, Biwa, Kerepuca, Daje Kapap, we fought to protect all of them from power plants and other death projects planned for the Tapajós river. All these places also have the mother spirits. This is why we always say they cannot be touched. We must protect them because we know that the spirits are there, and we need to make our rituals to offer them traditional beverages, such as manicuera porridge, to feed the spirits.

Spirituality guides our behavior, and even our body paints have their rules: there are specific paintings for women and men, for example. Also, we cannot paint ourselves in any manner and act freely when we have a certain body paint. For example, we have a lot of respect by genipapo paint. When we have genipapo on our body, we have the obligation of jumping into water really early at dawn, because this will impact our soul, our spirituality, since, after death, comes a soul that will try to pass under the genipapo tree. We usually say to our children: when you are using genipapo, you need to bathe early so this does not happen after death! If we don't follow the rules here, we will have a problem. Everything is related, it has a relation to culture. The same thing happens with our animal foods – we have rules to consume each game, and everything is related to the culture and is part of our cultural heritage.

With the goal of getting demarcation of our territories and protecting our sacred places, we created in February 2018 the Association Wakoborün, an organization comprised only of women, created to strengthen our resistance movement, the Movement Munduruku Ipereğ Ayü. We took different fronts in the fight that were previously led by men, and now work alongside them, with other male and young leaders. We also have alliances with other organizations of the Munduruku people, such as the Munduruku Indigenous Council from Upstream Tapajós (Cimat), gathering the chiefs; Arikico – a teachers' organization; Da'uk; and Association Pariri, from Midstream Tapajós, who aim especially at the demarcation of the munduruku territory. We are performing our roles as mothers, taking care of our people, healing our people, but with freedom to work and take the lead on many actions, despite the difficulties we experience.

In 2021, our headquarters, in the city of Jacareacanga, was attacked and vandalized. Shortly after, the village to which one of our members, Maria Leusa Kaba, belongs, was also attacked. After these attacks, we gathered with other munduruku organizations and founded new headquarters, the "resistance headquarters", in the Nova Trairão village, inside the Munduruku indigenous land. The selection of Nova Trairão to host the organization was strategic, because there is a waterfall right in front of the building, where the Brazilian government intends to build a power plant. We wanted to demarcate a point of resistance, because we know that when the government wants to build something, it comes with full force, and we also need to be prepared.

To prepare our people, we made a joint effort to create the Resistance Formation Center, which has gradually been built and organized, according to the resources we have. This is a space for transmitting knowledges with the goal of formulating our strategies, and for this reason it is also considered a very sacred place for us. It is like a school, and teaching is a sacred thing. Despite being unfinished, the center operates nearly all year round as a space for meetings, learning, and skill development for both youngsters and adults. We have activities for qualification in the use of audiovisual tools, artisan craft and traditional medicine workshops, assemblies, planning meetings, and meetings with women and shamans.

Also, we are part of the movement Ipereğ Ayũ, created in 2011 and named in 2013, during an occupation against the Belo Monte power plant, at the Xingu river. In that occasion, we were outraged at the Brazilian government and its plans to build power plants at the Tapajós river. We understood we needed to join forces against those projects that threaten our people and fight to retrieve or preserve our sacred places. We joined this movement and were really dedicated to it, and Maria Leusa Kaba was the first woman to become its coordinator, between 2015 and 2017; Ana Poxo is the current coordinator.

In this path, we've had victories and achievements. Today, the Munduruku people knows who is fighting, acknowledges the women's fight, and understands why women are fighting. In the past, we felt alone, because we were not highly recognized. We suffered a lot of prejudice and discrimination, even from our own relatives, because of joining this fight. And now we are here, we managed to get to this place and feel victorious. But there are several concerns. Just yesterday, we said: we need to pay attention to our brain, because we're working as if we were a clock, and that worries us. In addition to being women, mothers, grandmothers, we need to take care of our village and our people for the fight, it's a lot!

Unfortunately, there are many difficult situations. On one hand, there are violences and threats experienced collectively by our people, in our own territory, caused by power plants and mining, which bring many impacts to our health, especially due to the growth of malaria and contamination by mercury used to separate gold in gold-digging sites. On one hand, individually, we have faced numerous threats, including death threats against all of us.

To face these situations, we have the munduruku organizations, but unfortunately associations of our own people were co-opted by white people and they are articulating with their projects for digging sites and power plants. We also have very important external partners and made an appeal to the International Court of Human Rights, but we never take for granted our shamans, who have our full trust. They do a fundamental work, connecting us with our ancestors, they are our historians, who know how to tell our stories.

Concerning our cultural heritage, we don't have many partners. We take care of ourselves to preserve what is ours. In addition to the shamans, parents always guide their children to ensure safety and not destroy our heritage, ensuring that nothing is done to harm it. They also encourage them to report any actions that could threaten our land. We believe it would be important to have more actions to protect our common heritage, but it takes trust, security, dialog. Concerning the government, we haven't had good experiences; in fact, we are very afraid. The government is already helping by not destroying, but we hope things get better and we can have more trusted partners to work with.