

Report from Brazil

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“The Wajãpi youth only wants to use shorts. I’m not ashamed of using loin-cloth, adults are not ashamed of using loin-cloth. But the Wajãpi youth is ashamed.”

Joapiriá Wajãpi

To write a text with four hands is not always an easy task. So, what about a text written by six hands? The solution proposed by Garcia Lima, assessor of the Apiwata Association, created primarily to meet the Wajãpi community’s urgent health problems, was the following: he would dictate me his thoughts, leaving to me the responsibility for taking notes and then typing them up. In fact, his days are always busy, taking Wajãpi people – or Waiãpi, according to another spelling – that have had accidents, have fallen seriously ill or been bitten by snakes to hospitals in Macapá. Mataraura Waiãpi, in turn, who presents himself for Westerners as Cristiano, found a place in his schedule to sit down with me so we could write this report together. However, this time my schedule did not coincide with his. So we also had to apply the method suggested by Garcia. But although I, Murilo Seabra, take responsibility for the writing of this text, I must say that the ideas expressed here are the result of the reflections of not just of one but three heads (at least!).

Where should I begin? Perhaps with Mataraura Waiãpi’s school experience here in Macapá, to which he was driven by the desire to know, in his own words, “how was the study of the white people”. That was in 2009, when Mataraura, aged 17, came to live in Macapá. On his first day of class, the teacher called his name out loud. The other students immediately began to laugh. From that day on, Mataraura started to suffer bullying by his schoolmates. “They wrote on my notebook, they called me names. They said that Indigenous people were beasts.” As a result, he asked the headmaster if he could be called at school by a “normal white name”, and he chose “Cristiano”. And he also warned that if measures were not taken against the students who harassed him, he would end the bullying using his own hands. Unfortunately, he had to use them. But only once. It was enough. Since then, his schoolmates have stopped bothering him.

There are now 55 young Wajãpi studying in Macapá. The number is quite large, considering that Wajãpi Indigenous Land has about 1,200 inhabitants. Possibly, most young Wajãpi, if not all of them, go through situations similar to those Mataraura Wajãpi went through in school. It is difficult to evaluate the marks that this brutal mockery of Indigenous peoples by white youths might leave on young Wajãpi. It is also difficult to predict the long-term impact of this massive exodus of young Wajãpi from their land. For instance, there is today

only one shaman in Wajãpi Indigenous Land and it is absolutely uncertain that he will have successors, because few of the young Wajãpi who leave their land in order to study return. They adopt other names, change their hair cut, start to wear white clothes and behave like whites – they adapt themselves, at all levels, to the demands of Western civilization. When they do return to their land, it is only to spend the holidays. Their symbolic value becomes connected to the fact that they are living in the city.

To have a son studying in the big city is something that makes Wajãpi parents proud. It is something that gives a certain status to the family, according to Garcia. Thus, more and more parents want their children to move to Macapá in order to study – or to smaller towns closer to Wajãpi Indigenous Land if their income is not sufficient to cover the cost of having a son living in Macapá. Marriage with whites is also seen as a positive thing, though not if the Indigenous person in question is a girl. When a Wajãpi man marries a white woman, his family starts to enjoy some status. But this does not hold for marriages between Wajãpi women and white men, explains Mataraura.

This symbolic asymmetry between Indigenous things and city things reproduces itself within Wajãpi Indigenous Land. It is better to dwell in Macapá than in the forest. And if one lives in the forest, it is better to live alongside the road that crosses the city of Pedra Branca and enters Wajãpi Indigenous Land in the form of a dirt road than living in the so-called “limits” (the remote regions of Wajãpi Indigenous Land). This makes access to the things that the white world has to offer easier. The Brazilian government, in an at least doubtful policy, injects about \$1 million per year into Wajãpi Indigenous Land in the form of wages. Naturally, every month Wajãpi employees want to go to the city to withdraw the money to which they are entitled. The easiest way to do this is not to live in the “limits”, as they have done until recently, but to live alongside the road that gives access to Pedra Branca and Macapá. Unfortunately, the concentration of Wajãpis along the road can be used by the Brazilian authorities to state that they do not need the entire area, which, by the way, has many precious minerals and has attracted the attention of mining companies.

In fact, the Wajãpi were outraged to discover, at the end of 2012, that there were a great many research interests registered by mining companies in their land at the National Department of Mineral Production (DNPM – Departamento Nacional de Produção Mineral). They requested the annulment of all of these registered interests. But the fact is that the Brazilian government is considering changing the federal Indigenous legislation, which today still gives Indigenous peoples full power over their lands. And the mining companies exert great pressure here. There are now over 5000 mining requests on Indigenous lands solely in the Amazon region. The mining companies are just waiting for the green light to attack.

The Brazilian government is doing what it can to help these companies. For example, it is widely known that the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam poses a serious threat to all the peoples of the Xingu. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that the dam will be able to operate only at sixty percent of its total capacity. So it is a major construction carried out with huge investments that is very hard to justify. It will bring incalculable social and environmental damage and virtually no benefit to the local population. And it will contribute decisively to drying up a large area rich in gold and other precious minerals already acquired by Belo Sun Mining Corporation. In spite of the United Nation's (overt) opposition to the construction of this dubious dam, the Brazilian government has stubbornly decided to go on with it. With the construction of the Belo Monte dam, the interests of a large mining corporation will be met. It seems that for the Brazilian government this is the only thing that matters.

Currently, there are about 817 thousand Indians living in 688 Indigenous lands within Brazilian borders. To the delight of international capital, especially the mining companies, they are all under threat. Perhaps there is no Brazilian politician that these companies should thank more than Senator Romero Jucá, who is trying to legalize mining both on Indigenous lands and in natural sanctuaries – and, just in case, he is also making a big effort to criminalize social movements with a ruthless anti-terrorism law. Among the companies that will directly benefit from the senator's measures is the company Boa Vista Mineração, whose majority owner, Marina Jucá, the senator's daughter, has already requested authorization to conduct mining activities in nine Indigenous lands. But as the senator explained, he is not trying to change the law to suit his private interests. Well, there is some truth to that. For the Boa Vista Mineração will be neither the only company that will profit nor the company that will profit most.

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¹ Murilo Seabra graduated in philosophy at the University of Brasília (UnB), where he also obtained his masters degree. In 2012 he taught Philosophy at the State University of Macapá (UEAP).