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Challenges and Contribution of Indigenous Geography: Learning with and for the Kaiowa-Guarani of South America

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The contested relationship between capitalist development, environmental conservation and marginalised peoples continues to defy policy-making, research and governance around the world. Among others, indigenous studies are a growing area of interest not merely because of the specific dilemmas affecting subaltern groups, but as it also helps to understand the contradictions and the injustices of development more broadly. The characteristics of settler societies and the perennial opening of new economic frontiers represent a challenge particularly to geographers, considering the long positivistic tradition and the colonial foundations of geographical knowledge, going back to the 19th century and prior (MacDonald, 2017). Similar to feminist, black and queer studies, indigenous geography opens the prospect of decolonising and reimagining wider horizons and functions for/of geography (Panelli, 2008). This also means conducting academic work with and for the indigenous communities, allowing the expression of their own voices and direct involvement in the interpretation of findings, rather than the conventional research on those communities for the benefit of non-indigenous scholars and government agencies. The condition, the resistance and the practices of indigenous groups demand appropriate academic procedures able to connect indigenous geography with the socio-spatial experience of other minorities and question issues of representation and the authority to speak on behalf of others (Cameron et al, 2014). As pointed out by Coombes et al. (2014: 845), “working with Indigenous peoples has stretched geographers’ presumptions about appropriate modes of engagement and representation... that challenge reaches the heart of the enterprise to question the very purpose of research.”

At the same time, for the success of an engaged, transformative type of investigation, researchers must establish trusted connections with real people, without romanticising events or political leaders. In other words, avoid dealing with the hyperreal, stereotyped Indian of many NGOs, a fantasy that reinforces the simulacrum image of indigenous people, supposedly pure, ecological, stoic, unadulterated (Coombes et al., 2012). Understanding the uniqueness of the indigenous ontology, as observed by Hunt (2014), helps to destabilise academic and colonial

forms of knowledge. However, scholars need to avoid the common tendency to trivialise, homogenise and depoliticise the complex reality lived and shaped by indigenous groups. Although indigenous people now live within the framework of Western cultures (Shaw et al., 2006), there is a clear requisite to theorise the world from their own perspective, rethinking universal concepts and search for alternative socio-economic and political pathways. This should be a movement away from representing the Other and towards collective problem-solving, activism and advocacy (Coombes et al., 2014). Fortunately, geographers have demonstrated a growing commitment to embrace reflexive methods, deal with the politics of representation and the relational basis of critical research (Smithers Graeme and Mandawe, 2017). It has often been a challenging, but rewarding attempt to remove prejudices and learn together with indigenous groups. MacDonald (2017) correctly observes that the research process is even more important than the immediate outcomes.

Yet, decolonisation remains complicated and, despite good intents, positivism and Western-centrism continue to structure the field of geography and most academic work (de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018). There is a tendency to overlook that the researcher occupies a specific location within the broad socio-political context and must responsibly handle how this positionality and associated intellectual privileges inevitably shape knowledge construction. Ethics concerns are, therefore, particularly relevant and must be sensitive, and creatively engage with past, current and future aspirations of societies in the middle of land-based fighting or undergoing similar disputes. Riddell et al. (2017) list a number of crucial requirements for ethically conducting research, such as the informed and autonomous engagement of indigenous participants, respect their intangible cultural property (i.e. language and traditions), reciprocity and inter-relational accountability. That is important, for example, in terms of the confidentiality of social and personal information, the constant risk of exposing leaders and their strategies, and the risk of undermining action or negatively influencing public perception. It could likewise worsen internal divisions among indigenous families or groups, as well as between them and their traditional allies (churches, unions, NGOs, etc.).

Considering all the above qualifications, we can now move to the concrete social, political and spatial circumstances of an indigenous people of South America seriously affected by development and agriculture intensification. Most readers of *Geoforum* would have come across some information about the Guarani first nation, which could include, for example, stories about the imposing architecture and a complex settlements managed by Jesuit priests in the 18th century and a number of violent battles fought between the Guarani and the armies of Spain and Portugal. Some may also be well informed about the ongoing violence against the

Kaiowa, one of the Guarani peoples, in the Brazilian state of Southern Mato Grosso (considered the Gaza Strip of Brazil), but few will be fully aware of the scale of land rights violations, systematic killing of adults and children, ferocious discrimination against people living in precarious sheds along the roads or in the periphery of the cities, widespread suicides of youngsters and teenagers, serious levels of food insecurity. The recent geography of the Kaiowa-Guarani is marked by displacement, survival and expectation, whilst their culture it has a lot to offer in terms of land management, ecological wisdom and social cohesion. The notion of the Kaiowa person emerges from relations across wider categories of their society, it is an intense dialectic between the self and their collective condition. Special geographical sensibilities are thus required to capture the acute political situation of the Kaiowa and how they mobilise culture and religion to recover ancient areas lost to agricultural expansion.

Ours is a call for a meaningful and critical engagement with the Kaiowa-Guarani and for a critical reflection with them upon their current situation, the causes of their unhappy fate and the reasons for precluding the possibility of politico-economic recognition. The study of Kaiowa socio-spatiality cannot be contained within the narrow boundaries of conventional non-indigenous science and reasoning, hence the justification for novel methodological and interpretative approaches. Indigenous cultures and identities are fluid, their narratives and engagement with place and space are mutable, not linear, inviting a joint search for investigative experimentation, innovation, affection and partnerships. We have pursued that through a growing North-South collaboration between Cardiff University's School of Geography and Planning, the Federal University of Great Dourados (UFGD) in Brazil, in particular its Department of Geography and the Intercultural Indigenous College (FAIND), and a number of indigenous communities and individuals. Additional results of this ongoing research will be certainly publicised in the near future and our intention here is to invite academic and non-academic colleagues to pay more attention to the specificities and commonalities of the Kaiowa-Guarani experience. Hence, the present analysis is based on interviews and contacts with more than 30 residents in various indigenous settlements, reflection on public documentation and the personal experience of the second author, himself a Kaiowa-Guarani.

Those controversies already populate the pages of colonial history, when thousands of indigenous peoples were exterminated because of the European invasion, as much as the accounts of mass killings during the Paraguay War (1864-1870), the bloodiest ever in the continent, that took place right in the middle of the Guarani territory. During that long and tragic process, power inequalities and the harsh application of force were validated by various legal subterfuges. The Brazilian legislation in the second half of the 19th century guaranteed the

user rights of indigenous peoples, but that did not prevent the concession of millions of hectares of Guarani land to the Matte Larangeira company, which explored the native mate herb (*erva-mate*) through the scandalous, but tolerated, enslavement of Indians. After 1920, large farms were increasingly opened by migrants attracted to the region from the south of Brazil in the context of the new agricultural frontier stimulated by the national government. A small number of reserves were created by the newly established, and highly inefficient and corrupt, Indian Protection Service (SPI), what generated a range of new problems due to the agglomeration of different groups and families in very small areas (CIMI, 2001).

A more recent, but no less brutal, phase initiated in the 1950s with the intensification of commercial agriculture and, after the 1990s, the exponential growth of plantation farms. The Kaiowa were violently obliged to leave their land and take part in the cutting of the forests that give them their name ('people of the forest'). It led to a common exploitation of indigenous labour, drastic change of traditions and the degradation of communities. The region where most Kaiowa live in Southern Mato Grosso is well known for its excellent, red soils – it is claimed by the indigenous that it is red because it contains their own blood – which were appropriated by cattle ranchers, other farmers and land speculators.

The unfortunately apt description of the situation of the Kaiowa under the rapid advance of cattle, soybean and sugarcane production (among other crops) is genocide. Short (2016) rightly proposes a broader, more sociological account of genocidal practices than just the physical elimination of a determinate group of people, but including also cultural destruction, social death and ecological devastation (ecocide). The Kaiowa-Guarani have undoubtedly been suffering from the convergence of all those genocidal processes, aggravated by the political arrogance of export-based agribusiness farmers, national and international land-grabbing investors, and the dishonest movements of a powerful regional elite (who have been illegally appropriating land from the Indians for several decades). Recurrent violence against the legitimate land proprietors – the Indians – is in direct breach of the elementary principles of the Brazilian constitution (articles 231 and 232, in particular), but the local judges, civil servants and politicians have firmly decided against the Kaiowa. This tendency in favour of the most powerful social groups corresponds with the wider problem of non-consensual expropriation of indigenous people's lands around the world (Doyle, 2015).

The strong trend of land privatisation and nature commodification, aggravated in recent years by global agri-food market pressures, has caused the expropriation of most of their remaining areas, ignoring not only their ancestors' legitimate rights over the land, but the vital association between Kaiowa's identity, culture, religion, livelihood and the land where they were

born and their relatives were buried. It is essential in the life of the Kaiowa the regular interaction with other family members and the constant movement around the landscape, which play a role in the production of space through the affirmation of socio-cultural norms and values (as much as it represents a nuisance to public authorities). Land had never been a private property with titles and fences; life was not centred around the individual, but the family; agriculture was part of their cosmology, not the cultivation of genetically modified crops for the global market. In the words of a resident and school teacher in the Indigenous Reserve Panambizinho, interviewed in August 2018:

“Agriculture practices [by the Indians] may change, but the spirituality remains, it is inside us, we continue to believe in the spirits. We drink from the spring of spirituality, appreciate its value. The seed of maize has a soul, but transgenic maize is poisonous.”

The application of violence and the containment in unwanted areas have only reinforced the bitter sense of genocide mentioned above. It has been a regular experience of social, ecological, cultural and physical death. Between 2003 and 2016, there were 1,009 murders of indigenous people in Brazil and 44% of the total (444 homicides) happened in Southern Mato Grosso and the great majority involved Kaiowa (CIMI, 2016). However, it is difficult to find effective allies. There is now a growing feeling of bitterness and desperation among the indigenous families in the region. A long-term consequence of the formation of inadequately small reserves by the SPI is the incredibly high levels of suicide (555 between 2001 and 2011, in a population of around 30,000, according to the Indigenist Missionary Council - CIMI). Out of the eight million hectares originally occupied by the Kaiowa and other Guarani groups, they are now left with around 50,000 hectares to accommodate more than 52,000 people spread in the reserves, roadside encampments and in reconquered areas (Cavalcante, 2014). At least 88 additional ancestral areas have been targeted by the Kaiowa in recent decades (CIMI, 2001), but the formal recognition of their rights has been barred by prejudice, with more setbacks than triumphs.

The indigenous ‘collectives’ (as they describe their groups and sub-groups) have reacted according to their means (it must be noted that they operate as a network, but with no central coordination, as it is the case with the Brazilian landless movement), and formed some limited, but important alliances with national and international organisations, universities and churches. Progress is, nonetheless, slow and patchy. The municipal and state (provincial) levels of government and the local judiciary typically do very little in favour of the indigenous groups, leaving most meaningful improvement in the hands of the federal government, the parliament and the upper judiciary. Public agencies normally take action only after a large-scale tragedy is

published by the international media. One of the most notorious crimes in recent years was the assassination of Ambrósio Vilhalba, leader of the community *Guyra Roka* ('Place of the Bird') who spent decades campaigning against the planting of sugar cane on the lands of his tribe. He became internationally famous after taking part, as the main character, in the award-winning film *Birdwatchers* (sadly and prophetically, the character was based on himself and, as in the movie, he was eventually murdered). Ambrósio had travelled the world to speak about the Brazilian government's failure to protect native Guarani land and, after months of death threats, in 2013 Ambrósio was found dead in his hut from multiple stab wounds.

Since 2003, at least 15 strategic territories have been expected to be returned to the Kaiowa, after being demarcated and officially approved by government agencies, but the process is repeatedly frustrated because of endless court appeals and shenanigans by the farmers. One heart-breaking consequence is that large groups of Kaiowa continue to live at the side of motorways and with no other choice than to persistently try to recuperate their land, lost to the agricultural frontier. The coordinated mobilisation to reoccupy their legitimate land is described as *retomada*, that is the retaking of their legitimate areas expropriated in the process of regional development (see Pictures 1 and 2; all pictures by the first author). They deploy their traditions and land-based culture to fight back (Morais, 2017). As argued by an elderly in an interview, "*To be a Kaiowa is our first weapon to get our lands back, but I know that it is a long and complex process. We have been living for many decades [in the reserve], but we still have a memory of our past.*" However, this desperate attempt to regain control of the land of their family inevitably results in new rounds of hostility, expulsion and murder. There are no limits to the escalation of violence and in 2016, just a few days after the departure of the United Nations Rapporteur, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, shots were fired by gunmen and hit the *rezador* (shaman) Isael Reginaldo in the municipality Coronel Sapucaia. Cases like this have been unfortunately very common.

[Pictures 1 and 2 around here]

Public outrage has soared and on 24/Nov/2016, the European Parliament approved a resolution that strongly condemned "the violence perpetrated against the indigenous communities of Brazil", deplored "the poverty and human rights situation of the Guarani-Kaiowa population", reminding "the Brazilian authorities of their obligation to observe international human rights standards with respect to indigenous peoples" and, among other things, expressed "concern about the proposed constitutional amendment 215/2000" (PEC 215). Brazilian indigenous peoples are fiercely opposed to it, given that, if approved, it will

threaten indigenous land rights by making it possible for anti-Indian interests related to the agribusiness, timber, mining and energy industries to block the new indigenous territories from being recognised.¹ PEC 215 is a canny manoeuvre by the Brazilian parliament to stop the creation of new indigenous reserves, which would become an exclusive prerogative of the agribusiness-dominated congress. Another extremely controversial measure, adopted by the Supreme Federal Court and now under analysis in the same parliament, is the “*marco temporal*” (arbitrary cut-off date for land claims). The intention is to restrict legal rights to claim traditional territories to land physically occupied on 05/Oct/1988 (the date of approval of the current constitution). This would have terrible consequences for most Kaiowa, who were forced from their ancestral lands. Unfortunately, the election of a right-wing administration in October 2018, led by the controversial army-officer Jair Bolsonaro, greatly enhanced the representation of agribusiness-associated parliamentarians, who have an outspoken anti-indigenous agenda and are likely to try to approve even more restrictive legislation and procedures.

The main threat to the territorial, cultural and physical integrity of the Kaiowa-Guarani today is definitely the hegemony of the agribusiness sector, considered the ‘green anchor’ of the Brazilian economy (Ioris, 2015), which received a significant boost with the election of Bolsonaro and the appointment of an influential allied politician of Southern Mato Grosso (Ms Teresa Dias) as Minister of Agriculture and the preposterous transfer of the responsibility for the demarcation of indigenous lands to her department. The agribusiness sector in Brazil, which includes a broad coalition between landowners, conservative politicians, banks, industries and transnational corporations, represents one of the most perverse political forces in the country. Because of the erosion of the industrial sector and the accumulation of policy mistakes, agribusiness has become a key macroeconomic player and increasingly responsible for commodity exports (Ioris, 2018). Agribusiness has been naturalised and situated above party disputes, as something that is supposedly intrinsically beneficial to the country and any obstacle, including the rights of indigenous groups, must be removed, at any cost. The deification of agribusiness and the systematic disregard for mounting social and ecological impacts has been fuelled by the confluence of the opportunism of right-wing groups (with manifestation of neo-fascism and open racism) and the betrayal of populist-bureaucratic left-wing politicians. The catastrophic bonfire of the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, on 02/Sep/2018, even offers a

¹ Those apprehensions were reinforced by another resolution approved on 03/Jul/2018 by the European Parliament against the violation of the rights of indigenous peoples, including the impacts of land grabbing.

sinister metaphor of the low quality of the Brazilian democracy and the sustained neglect of subaltern, marginalised social groups.

The political influence of agribusiness is bad enough in the rest of Brazil, but in areas of agricultural frontier it gives rise to even higher levels of speculation, dispossession of common land and wide-ranging brutality (Ioris, 2017). Frontier-making creates favourable conditions for the arrival of unscrupulous individuals in search of rapid enrichment and prepared to accept spurious economic and political practices. The recipe for serious politico-ecological conflict is surely there: on the one hand, agribusiness farmers and a range of agro-industrial and financial groups (all with only recent experience in the region) and, on the other, native peoples who have been living in the region for many generations and have a different relation with land, society and the spiritual world. The Kaiowa-Guarani have a profoundly qualitative involvement with land, nature and life, beyond the reductionist treatment of land as commodity and agriculture as business. Their identity and social experience is directly influenced by the place where the family lived and where relatives were laid to rest.

Our main conclusion is that the moment has come to overcome such asymmetries and secure a minimal level of justice, starting with the compensation for past mistakes and a fundamental process of recognition and social inclusion. The required focus on race, culture and identity requires a simultaneous criticism of the fundamental basis of capitalist development and its drive towards exploitation of society and the rest of nature (Ramirez-Cendrero, 2018).

The prospects of the Kaiowa-Guarani in the next few years will continue to depend, even more than before, on their ability to coordinate action across families, communities and settlements in order to preserve what they have achieved and stand up for the areas that were expropriated. In any case, we can at least end this brief reflection with a small positive note. The determination to resist the escalation of threats and the erosion of rights under the new Brazilian administration is already triggering a new round of protests and calls for judicial interventions. On 10/Jan/2019, the authors were able to attend a meeting of around 20 Kaiowa leaders with the public prosecutor of Dourados, Mr Marco Antonio de Almeida, to propose an injunction against the recent decisions of the federal administration that undermine indigenous land rights (Picture 3). The evolution of any court case is uncertain, but the meeting revealed a high level of determination and tenacity. Resilience is today a popular word in academic circles, but it seems that the Kaiowa-Guarani are better than many to demonstrate, according to their cosmology and daily practices, that the authentic meaning of resilience is resistance and respect. This contrasts with the immediate, hyper-commodified and risky bases of mainstream regional development based on agribusiness exports. Overall, despite all the tragedy and the prolonged genocidal

trends, the Kaiowa-Guarani continue to hold the most consequential socio-ecological knowledge and generously offer robust answers to the multiple regional dilemmas they have been forced to endure together with the rest of society.

[Picture 3 around here]

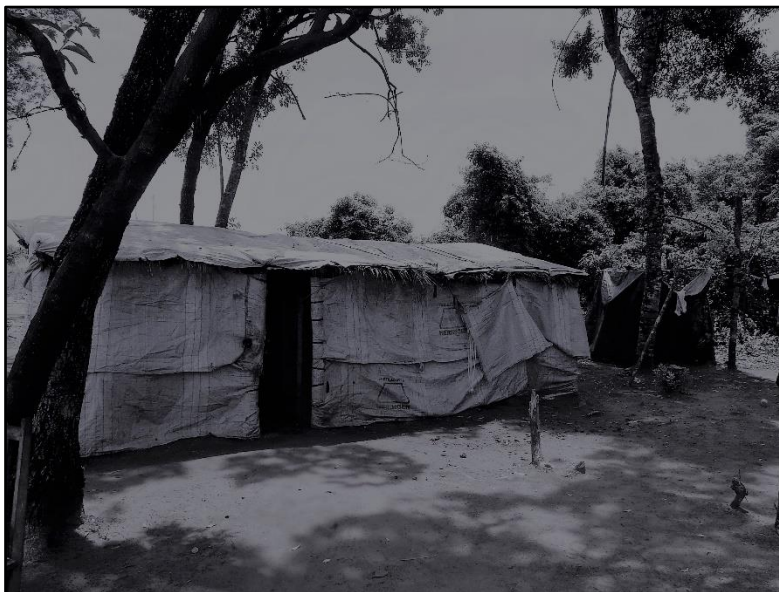
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Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

Figure Captions

Picture 1: Private security guards (paramilitaries) hired by the farmer to contain another retomada near Dourados (2018)

Picture 2: Retomada settlement in the municipality of Caarapó (2019)

Picture 3: Kaiowa-Guarani leaders meeting the federal public prosecutor in relation to the erosion of land rights and mounting violence in the region (2019)