

## Article

# Indigenous Labor and Land Resources: Guarani–Kaiowa’s Politico–Economic and Ethnic Challenges

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**Abstract:** The article deals with the meaning and the management of land-based resources by indigenous peoples, which are analyzed through an assessment of the lived spaces of the Guarani–Kaiowa indigenous people in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul. The discussion follows an analytical framework that is focused on land, labor and ethnicity. These interconnected politico-economic categories provide the basis for understanding the violence and exploitation perpetrated against indigenous groups, as well as their capacity to reclaim ancestral territories lost to extractivism and agribusiness development. Empirical results indicate that ethnicity is integral to labor and land management processes. In the case of the Guarani–Kaiowa, not only have they become refugees in their own lands due to racist discrimination, but also their labor has been incorporated in the regional economy through interrelated peasantification and proletarianization tendencies. The result is a complex situation that combines major socio-spatial asymmetries with the strategic, exploitative use of land and labor and the growing political contestation by the indigenous groups.

**Keywords:** Brazil; Mato Grosso do Sul; agribusiness; agrarian disputes; land conflicts; land grabbing; political ecology; rural sociology; indigenous geography; justice

## 1. Introduction

It has been a matter of great controversy today whether the invasion of what is known as the ‘Americas’ constituted ‘only’ mass murder or ‘pure’ genocide, especially due to the spread of epidemic diseases [1]. There is no doubt, however, that it involved a great deal of violence against the original inhabitants of the continent, which was motivated and somehow rationalized by the desire to wrestle gold, silver and other riches from nations considered destitute of rights over their land and lives. The invaders had little interest in the local regimes of management and use of resources and carried out a large-scale dispossession of territorialized resources that, according to European laws, were neither treated as private property nor commercially farmed by those already living there. Evidently the life in pre-Columbian times was far from peaceful or Edenic, with constant conflicts between the various groups and the formation of large empires that subjugated and exploited the weaker neighboring populations. Nonetheless, the arrival of aggressive explorers with much stronger weapons—also infected with highly contagious pathogens and armed with imperial and religious claims—produced dramatic transformations that have not yet finished. Amerindian societies either had to succumb to annihilation or to endure a forced conversion from ‘groups in and for themselves’ into peoples ‘for the benefit of’ others. After more than five centuries of relentless brutality and exploitation, there is a pressing need to interrogate the basis of the whole conquest experience and learn from past mistakes. All those factors constitute the ‘political economy of indigeneity’, that is, an investigation into patterns of colonization, property rights and socio-ecological change that have been reinforced

by symbolic and material ethnic demarcations. The widespread uprising that erupted in the United States in 2020, after the murder of an African-American by the police in Minneapolis on 25 May, followed by anti-colonialism protests in Western Europe and around the world, clearly demonstrates the contemporary relevance of ethnic-related politics and, also, how the injustices suffered by specific ethnic minorities reflect wider forms of exploitation and discrimination (hence the explosive outcomes that entangled millions of people in national and international protests).

The aim of this contribution is to analytically integrate categories normally considered separately, that is, labor and land-based relations on the one hand, and the production and reinforcement of ethnic and socio-spatial differences on the other, to inform a critical examination of the trajectory of the Guarani–Kaiowa, a relatively large indigenous people who live on both sides of the border between Brazil and Paraguay. The study was motivated by a key research question: how ethnic differences affect and are affected by production relations and land management strategies? The assessment will focus on the communities living on the Brazilian territory and greatly affected by the grabbing, use and management of resources [2] and its main contribution to the literature is to bring together empirical data and conceptual insights to develop a novel argument about how the socio-political agency of indigenous peoples is simultaneously permeated by ethnicity and class-based identities. The experience of the Guarani–Kaiowa and their important role in contemporary politics certainly have many parallels with the fate of other indigenous groups throughout the American continent and around the world. For example, the revival of indigenous campaigns since the 1960s in the USA in the context of the civil rights movement, which has expanded and is increasingly influential nationwide, as in the case of the opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Nonetheless, the recognition of the meaningful political experience of indigenous peoples must not detract from the enormity of their struggle against powerful forces. Indigenous groups, in different and idiosyncratic ways, occupy socio-political and politico-spatial frontiers where their ethnic existence is consistently denigrated while their assets are constantly sought after [3]. The Guarani–Kaiowa have been severely impacted by an agribusiness-based model of regional development and subjected to numerous illegalities committed in the name of economic growth, including regular killings and the denial to return to their ancestral lands (Figure 1 illustrates the regional landscape during the dry season of 2019). The present analysis will examine not only how the dispossession (appropriation) and exploitation of resources follow ethnic references, but also how ethnicity has been mobilized by those impacted in order to inform their reactions and the search for alternative social and spatial practices. Before that, it is necessary to explain the conceptual and interpretative framework employed in this study.



**Figure 1.** Amambai Indigenous Reservation, Mato Grosso do Sul; note the agribusiness farm, after a recent harvest of maize, surrounding the indigenous land (all pictures by the author).

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

Despite obvious commonalities with other social groups, the politico-economic experiences of indigenous peoples also reflect unique historico-geographical trajectories and ethnic differences that are socially and politically produced. Indigenous groups have certainly been incorporated in the world system of capitalism through brutal processes of land theft, resource grabbing and labor exploitation, but they have also managed to retain a distinctive politico-spatial agency and may even be empowered by new economic trends where these preserve a meaningful community life [4]. An increasing number of studies have handled the intersection between the political economy of land rights and the politics of indigeneity, as well as the related mobilization for recognition and redistribution [5]. Nonetheless, there is still a need to theorize the ‘racial dynamics’ of capitalism and recognize the agency and creativity of indigenous groups even in the most adverse situations [6]. In addition, as kindly observed by one of the referees on a previous version of this text, gender is also a main qualifier of the category of ethnicity, as much as gender inequalities and related forms of violence further aggravate processes of resource grabbing and labor exploitation (including the double mistreatment of women by employers and male relatives). Indigenous peoples are involved, and help to produce, idiosyncratic politico-economic processes that cannot be boxed into inflexible analytical rationalizations. The political economy of indigeneity does not merely comply with pre-conceived categories such as kinship, spirituality and territoriality, just as it is not dissociated from capitalist expansionist and exploitative tendencies. On the contrary, indigeneity is a relational category with deep historical, institutional and power-inflicted ontologies [7] that is affected by and plays a very important role in the production of place and space [8]. A critical account of indigeneity is less about authenticity and purism, and more about the forms of power and economic activity that produce indigeneity in a constant relationship with non-indigenous subjects, statehood, policy-making and academia [7].

The intellectual challenge here is twofold: the first is to recognize the specific politico-economic features of indigenous groups amidst the fragmenting and normalizing driving forces of capitalism without resorting to exotic, pre-capitalist categories. According to the United Nations indigenous people are distinct because of their existential references to the pre-colonization past and segregation from wider society, but the appropriation of indigenous land and the exploitation of indigenous labor (normally achieved through severe violence and, in many cases, the physical elimination of those who refused to submit) put them at the center of capitalist institutions, production processes and socio-ecological trends. Politico-economic processes produce localized experiences of the general that make the trajectories of indigenous groups both unique and paradoxically familiar. As observed by Descola, the reversal of the pivotal dualisms of Western science should not lead to absolute relativism: it is possible to appreciate the diversity of the world without being seduced by the singular or making a return to obsolete ideas [9]. The second key intellectual challenge is to connect the idiosyncratic politico-economic experience of indigenous groups with power relations and the struggle to gain political recognition. Indigenous groups have been marginalized and systematically excluded, which needs to be connected with the broader politico-economic context. A proper regard for the politicized interactions between indigenous and non-indigenous (which are not only material, but also include intersubjectivities and interpersonal interactions) is helpful in understanding the specific trajectories and multiple contestations of capitalist relations of production and reproduction.

The transformation of indigenous territories into private property, objects of dispossession, speculation and private wealth creation has certainly been one of the oldest and most central processes of settler colonialism. It should be carefully observed, nonetheless, that those concepts have a strong Western bias and need to be used very carefully, as in the case of dispossession, which is highly contradictory as it both presupposes and resists the logic of ‘original possession’ associated with private property as a Western institution; even so, dispossession is a relevant notion that emphasizes basic indigenous rights and deep attachments to ancestral, sacred lands [10]. For instance, Wolfe [11] (p. 868) has claimed that colonialism seeks to replace the natives on the land rather than extract surplus value—according to the author, “the primary logic of settler colonialism can be characterized as

one of elimination”—but what normally happens in practice is a site-specific combination of violent displacement, physical control of labor and the gradual imposition of land as private property. From the indigenous perspective, the engagement with land is hard to reconcile with production for the market because life is inconceivable without it. Land (which is also a surrogate of nature or space) is an extension of humanity itself for indigenous groups, woven into their past, their current existence and the viability of a future. This is demonstrated through strong bounds to the natural environment and specific forms of territorialization, although in recent years and due to institutional pressures, there is increasing conversion of collectivized land into agriculture production units. Unlike the objectivism of Western knowledge, based on desubjectification and homogenization, the indigenous understanding requires personification, to personify in order to know, which means that humans are nature and nature is also human, that is, it has a defining ontological human dimension.

This identification of the indigenous person with their land happens through the application of labor to transform and interact with the world. Instead of monetized labor relations, in non-capitalist situations the indigenous individual does not work to live (pressured by the alienation of the means of production and the impossibility of survival without paid work), but they live to work, that is, to have a collective and individual intervention in a reality that is itself the result of previous socio-natural interactions. It means that the non-commodified labor of an indigenous worker is predicated upon the possibility of a meaningful interrelation with the land that has symbolic and material value for the whole collectivity. It is a form of non-alienated labor that is more than just economic production, but which comprises all the activities that creatively transform nature (and in that way transform humans themselves). For Marx,

“Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature” which “mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature”. [12] (p. 283)

Likewise,

“labour as mere performance of services for the satisfaction of immediate needs has nothing whatever to do with capital. ( . . . ) Labour is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation of living time.” [12] (pp. 272, 361)

Evidently, when involved in monetized relations of production, indigenous individuals will have similar class-based experiences as any other social groups. However, it needs to be emphasized that labor and land-based relations imposed upon groups that are not fully subsumed still retain a level of specificity that has both affected past relationships and set in motion those of the present. It means that the condition of these groups is equivalent, but also contingent upon the ethnicity that underpins the peasantification or proletarianization of indigenous communities. For Godelier [13] (p. 106), ethnicity is the coming together of groups that identify a common origin and that share languages, values, social organization rules and representations of social and cosmic orders. Being-indigenous—the conscious and active condition of indigenous-being—derives from specific material and symbolic relationships with times and spaces that are ontologically different because of such idiosyncratic attachments.

As a result, ethnicity is not inherent in the individual members of the social group, but immanent to politico-economic relations which ultimately produce socio-spatial settings that reflect these interactions. Indigenous identities are multiple and the self is decentered, but dislocated selves

“are not endlessly fragmented but constituted in relation to biography, history, culture and, most importantly, place.” [14] (p. 2)

Indigenous ethnicity is consequence of both unique land attachments and socio-spatial labor practices, and it is also what makes those connections unique when socio-space is subject to politico-economic transformations. For that reason, indigenous groups cope with the homogenizing

forces of capitalist modernity not in spite of but in function of an ethnic background that permeates a lived geography of violence, expropriation and segregation. Brubaker argues that ethnicity is a perspective on the world, a way to interpret and represent social realities [15]. Indigenous ethnicity is, thus, a perspective on the imposed transformation of socio-spatial practices and on the increasing appropriation of indigenous land and labor. Such rich ontological perspective of indigenous groups can be mobilized to devise alternative directions based on the rethinking of the universals of Western development [7]. That is because the subjectification of the indigenous person depends also on the interplay between a common human condition and a unique association with other groups and classes. Having briefly considered the main theoretical references that underlie this study, in the next sections, after such description of the methodological approach, it will be examined the balance of power behind land, labor and ethnicity, which are the three analytical categories employed to understand the turbulent and often tragic politico-economic interaction between the Guarani–Kaiowa and those who have coveted and misappropriated their world.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The present study is based on five fieldwork campaigns conducted around the city of Dourados (the regional politico-economic center in the southern section of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul) between 2017 and 2020, in partnership with the main regional university (UFGD–Federal University of Grande Dourados). After preliminary visits and prospective contacts, the research started with the consideration of the various communities and spatial units (in urban and rural settings) where the Guarani–Kaiowa live. Those geographical sub-units were then compared and contrasted in order to identify common socio-spatial and politico-economic patterns. The analysis initially included interviews with community leaders, schoolteachers, graduate students, activists and academics and further contacts and interviews were conducted in the largest or most representative indigenous areas. Empirical data are from 60 interviews (most conducted in Guarani with the help of a native-speaker research assistant), as well as regular meetings with indigenous communities and attendance at public events (greatly required because crucial information is also conveyed through social intercourse, rituals and practices). It also comprised the systematic analysis of academic and media publications that deal with the Guarani–Kaiowa situation, which served specially to contextualize the case study and for the design the data collection strategy.

Interviews and interviewees were selected in order to represent different indigenous communities, a diversity of social roles in those communities (leaders, teachers, shamans, students, parents, single parents, participants in recent or consolidated land occupations and reservations, youngsters, teenagers and elders, men and women, etc.) and multiple non-indigenous groups (academics, NGO activists, artists, public authorities and lawyers). Interviews were transcribed from Guarani, coded using an interactive coding system based on preliminary contacts in the area and strategic themes from the literature, analyzed in Portuguese (making use of the software NVivo 12 for Windows) and only the extracts reproduced in this paper were translated into English. It is important to recognize that the research shared the obvious limitations of qualitative case studies, in particular the impact of the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator, who had to rely on his instincts and abilities throughout most of this research effort. A related bias was the problem of generalizability, that is, the difficulty to transfer the results to other situations. At any rate, the researcher did not seek to produce scientific generalizations but to reflect on a specific experience and identify main trends and tendencies that can be, in broad terms, associated with similar situations.

The research was planned and conducted following a careful ethics protocol and with a constant reflection on the moral, political and social responsibilities of a non-indigenous researcher when dealing with highly sensitive issues (for instance, how to handle the revolt of indigenous leaders and community members against resource grabbing and racist discrimination perpetrated over generations and that continues to pervade their lives). The departing point of the investigation was the recognition that ethnopolitical demands are complex, multiple and constantly changing because of old legacies



and ongoing problems [16]. The situation of the Guarani–Kaiowa encapsulates unique challenges related to their location, specific geographical settings and particular involvement in the wider process of conservative modernization and regional development. Their contemporary condition is not only shaped by constant attacks and the pain of losing their land, but also by the resolve to resist and take the political initiative. Consequently, it was necessary to interrogate the world from the perspective of the indigenous communities involved in the study, rethinking universal concepts and searching for alternative socio-economic and political pathways. The literature demonstrates that the situation of the Guarani–Kaiowa is a product of contemporary national and international politics, as their old social institutions have largely been destroyed, and extended indigenous families have had to rearrange their socio-spatiality in a difficult, daily struggle. Epistemicide, expropriation, enslavement and forced religious conversion marked the colonization period, but these processes continue to characterize regional and national development strategies [17]. Moreover, more needs to be said about how politico-economic forces have involved the Guarani–Kaiowa and the role played by their strong ethnic identity, which will be discussed below.

#### 4. The Historico-Geographical Trajectory of the Guarani–Kaiowa

The Guarani–Kaiowa are one of the largest indigenous groups in present-day Brazil (around 45,000 people live in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, with an equivalent population of the same ethnic group across the border in Paraguay; other Guarani populations with distinctive identities but shared traditions occupy other areas in those two countries and in Argentina and Bolivia) and are deeply involved in a fierce struggle for land recovery, political recognition and basic social rights. Their political, territorial and economic troubles, however, are not new: they have had to struggle against powerful enemies for more than four centuries. The people who are now described as Guarani–Kaiowa (this denomination was only adopted in the nineteenth century) were repeatedly mentioned by missionaries and adventurers engaged in the project of exploration and colonization. The first pioneers who crossed the region, initially motivated by the desire to find a route to the riches and silver of Peru, reported meeting indigenous communities living in the Itatim in the 1520s, who were then called ‘Itatines’ [18]. Many other historical documents included information about such groups with a distinctive Guarani identity in the region. The Itatim is an area located in the center of the continent (approximately the western portion of today’s Mato Grosso do Sul) and formally belonged to Spain under the terms of the Treaty of Tordesillas, although it was often invaded by Luso-Brazilian expeditions coming from São Paulo.

The emphasis during more of the colonization period was not exactly on the appropriation of land or territorialized resources, but on the physical seizure of individuals and communities distinguished by their ethnicity. Different projects competed for the same Guarani populations and their territories: the Spanish authorities, Catholic missionaries and Luso-Brazilian explorers (known as *bandeirantes*). The main activities in this period were related to the establishment of a network of indigenous settlements—*reducciones* (reductions)—by Spanish priests. In the 1630s, a network of six Jesuit reductions was established in the Itatim, whose operation was based on a complex ethnic-based politics whereby the Catholic intervention tempered to an extent the Luso-Brazilian pressure and the demands of Spanish colonialism. The religious–economic experiment did not last long as it was repeatedly assaulted by the *bandeirantes* and then abandoned [19]. Following the collapse of the Jesuit religious–economic–geopolitical enterprise, international borders were reorganized between Portugal and Spain. Under the terms of the Treaty of Madrid, signed in 1750, most of today’s Mato Grosso became part of the Portuguese empire but the territory occupied by indigenous groups that were not attracted to or outlived the Jesuit reductions (roughly, the Itatim province) remained part of Paraguay. Those groups were previously known as ‘free Itatines’ and gradually came to be described as Caaguá. In the first decades after the independence of Brazil in 1822 there was a growing emphasis on the appropriation of indigenous land and labor on both sides of the international border in line with the expansion of an extensive form of agrarian capitalism. The Caaguá were then subordinate to the

Paraguayan state and remotely connected to a national economy based on the nationalization of rural land. During the same period, there was a coordinated effort in Brazil to relocate and control both ‘domesticated’ and ‘free’ indigenous tribes, as part of the reorganization of the economy according to the priorities of the landed elite in charge of the now independent country.

An important milestone was the introduction of the 1850 Land Act, which formally instituted the private ownership of rural land in Brazil and blocked access to land acquisition for squatters, peasants, indigenous and other disadvantaged groups but favorable to those able to influence state agencies and the government [20]. One of the consequences of the War of the Triple Alliance, between 1864 and 1870, was that the Itatim region was lost to Brazil and the Caaguá population, who were neither consulted nor informed, was split between Brazil and Paraguay when the new international borders were formalized in 1872. Those living in Paraguay became known as Paĩ-Taviterã and those left in Brazil have been ever since described as Guarani-Kaiowa. A new agro-industrial activity dominated the regional economy for several decades related to the production and export of *erva-mate* (literally ‘mate herb’, the leaf of a small tree with medicinal properties and the basis of an indigenous beverage (*mate*)). The extraction and commercialisation of *erva-mate* had existed in the region since the *encomendieros* and the Jesuit *reducciones*, but it significantly expanded between the 1880s to the 1940s. The extraction and production of *erva-mate* during this phase was basically an early form of public-private collaboration, a pattern that continues to define policy-making in the region to this day. The activities of Matte Larangeira corporation, established in 1882 and expanded in 1894 with the consent of the Brazilian government, exploited 5 million hectares of (basically) Guarani-Kaiowa land, implemented a large physical infrastructure [21]. The hard work of harvesting the native trees was mostly carried out by semi-enslaved indigenous hands [22]. As in the case of the fur trade in North America, the extraction of *erva-mate* was inconceivable without the exploitation of the productive capacity of indigenous people.

The arrival of migrants from other parts of Brazil from the turn of the twentieth century intensified the opening of new farms on land grabbed from indigenous communities. In order for the settler state to expulse indigenous groups from their ancestral land, eight reservations were cleared by the SPI between 1915 and 1928, aggravating the fragmentation of original indigenous territory. (SPI is the acronym of the Indian Protection Service, created according to the ideology of Positivism that was very popular at the time and which had an operation that was primarily assimilationist and biased against the most basic needs of the indigenous populations; it was reorganized into a new agency in 1967 (FUNAI), but the problems of inefficiency, corruption and violence remained unchanged.) This was a process of ethnic cleansing through ‘containment’ of the indigenous population in small spatial settings, from which it was expected that they would gradually be assimilated into wider national society. The demarcation of the eight reservations was an attempt to stabilize the indigenous population, always within the limits of the doctrine of top-down progress and elitist civilization that then prevailed among the Brazilian military and most segments of the national state. The indigenous reservations, because of their location close to urban and agro-industrial areas, constituted a concentrated labor force that was easy to recruit from, as well as easy to contain due to racial discrimination and authoritarian, often brutal, management by the SPI. The initial reservations comprised 18,000 thousand hectares, a small fraction of Guarani-Kaiowa territory (estimated to be originally around four million hectares), but even that was soon reduced by two thousand hectares because of land grabbing tolerated by the corrupt authorities.

After the decline of *erva-mate* production due growing production in Argentina and the removal by the Brazilian president of the concession granted to Matte Larangeira in 1943, the politics of exploitation were superseded by the even more damaging politics of deterritorialization and invisibility. The federal Brazilian government exacerbated the expropriation of Guarani-Kaiowa land with the implementation of the National Agricultural Colony of Dourados (CAND) in 1943. This happened during the Vargas dictatorship, known as the *Estado Novo* (New State), as part of its developmentalist attempts to occupy the western half of the country and reinforce security on the border with Paraguay. CAND was

established over more than 300,000 hectares in lands historically occupied by the Guarani-Kaiowa. These areas are described and praised as *tekohas*, which are ancestral, family lands and comprise not only the physical terrain, but are sites of collective memory that reinforce and inspire socio-political networks. The government attempted to remove the indigenous residents (the actual owners of the land, according to colonial and national legislation, see [8]) and forced them to move to the small indigenous reservations. Official documents and public speeches systematically ignored the presence of the indigenous community and totally neglected their legal rights over the area [23]. Those individuals who were not killed or expelled were left with almost no other option but exploitation as estranged labor. Likewise, from the 1940s, landed property had to be artificially made more expensive in order to transform the workers who normally didn't do pay jobs into wage workers (following the politico-economic mechanisms described by Marx [24]). These trends continued and deepened in the second half of the twentieth century and memories of the brutality suffered during the advance of the agricultural frontier are illustrated by the following interviews:

"I remember the stories that my father used to tell us when I was five. He told us that the 'whites' (non-indigenous) entered our land, they had to run, abandon their houses and go. Later they (the invaders) returned, again forced them to flee, leave the plants, the house, all became empty. This happened several other times. My uncle tried to make our settlement safer, but it was never safe. The indigenous families were too few, only a small number of people. ( . . . ) It was only much later, after a long process, that the land was demarcated." (woman, Indigenous name Kunha Uruku, 53 years, Pirajui reservation, municipality of Paranhos)

"My name is Ava Vera Vera Rendyju, but people also call me Xxxxx and the majority know me as Cachi. I am 62 and I live near (the city of) Amambai. I have lots of memories and I am happy to present them, as I understand, because we have seen so many changes, (the world) is no longer how it used to be. To be born and to transmit knowledge today, it is very different. That is why I meet many people, many folks, who live poorly in our community, who bring what is wrong for us; I no longer have a true happiness, but I am already scared, there are many things that we can't defeat and that most (people) are not able to overcome." (man, 62 years, Amambai reservation)

The more recent phase of regional development has been primarily associated with agro-industrial intensification, urbanization and a formalist legal regime established in the 1980s. The Guarani-Kaiowa territory, which for centuries was considered one of the most remote areas of both Brazil and Paraguay, has been increasingly inserted in agro-export transactions of central economic relevance. In the last three decades, agribusiness production and commercialization have been organized according to an ideological construct that privileges market-based policies and private capital circulation without ever removing the mediation and support of the state apparatus [25]. Agro-neoliberal goals are now the hegemonic reference for regional development, interpersonal relations and personal success, particularly in Mato Grosso do Sul, which echoes the post-industrial tendencies of the contemporary Brazilian economy [6]. Most agricultural production in the state has been restricted to soybean, sugarcane and maize—at the expense of basic staple food—and dominated by transnational corporations and foreign capital, with renewed forms of labor exploitation (including evidence of contemporary slavery) and growing territorial conflicts due to encroachment on indigenous areas.

The state of Mato Grosso do Sul is run by an authoritative agribusiness elite (who partly replaced the old cattle barons) and which has also become highly influential nationwide, such as the Minister of Agriculture appointed in 2019, who a congresswoman is from this state and many of her key advisers have championed the criminalization of the Guarani-Kaiowa movement, which is analyzed below.



## 5. Ethnicity of Land and Labor Conflicts and Reactions

The summary of centuries of colonization and resource grabbing presented above demonstrates that the regional economy was built and continues to expand because of the appropriation of indigenous land and the tacit subjugation of the original inhabitants. In the last half century, most Guarani–Kaiowa areas in the southern part of Mato Grosso do Sul, which are famous for its flat red soils, have been targeted by agribusiness farmers because of the relatively easy mechanization of crop production. The region has become a Brazilian version of the Corn Belt with a landscape dominated by metal silos, storage units, agro-industrial units, paved roads, hard fences and huge monoculture plantations. If the Guarani–Kaiowa population already seemed ‘out of place’ during the formation of farms and towns in the region, for many people they currently appear to have been obliterated. Because the Guarani–Kaiowa use regular clothes, mobile phones, motorcycles or cars, they even seem unable to embody the folklore of the ‘primitive Amerindian’ as stereotyped in movies and paintings. Only the indigenous names of places, plants and objects suggest a Guarani presence that seems to have basically disappeared. The prolonged trends of intolerance, exploitation and piecemeal concessions have resulted in a xenophobic or paradoxical situation where the indigenous individual cannot be what they are, although they continue to exist and act. Note the sense of discrimination and the desire to go back (in space and time) to the land that was lost in the following interview extract:

“My name is Xxxx and my native name is Kuña Poty Rendy’i. The town is not far from where we live (Dourados reservation) but it has squeezed us more and more, from all sides; I only go there if there is an invitation, otherwise I never go. ( . . . ) Things are no longer how they used to be, it is much worse now. Because of so many changes, there is no way our body can find peace; we who are religious people cannot practice our rituals. Many times it is difficult to teach our children because the body does not follow the right way of life, which was created to correspond to the situation of the land of each family (*tekoha*). I want to go back to my original land, because as God (*Nhanderu*) said, when I return to my *tekoha* I will be born again. Where our *Nhanderu* lives the harvests will be blessed, that is why we need to take our grandchildren and relatives back to our land. That is the reason why we do not live well here, it seems that our body does not like it here.” (female shaman, 58 years)

This mantle of invisibility is nothing other than a manifestation of the powerful politico-economic microdynamics associated with the constant upholding of a highly hierarchical model of development and society. Land taken from the Guarani–Kaiowa—a reality which is systematically denied by most members of the judiciary and by the new/old political oligarchy closely allied with the land grabbers—is the site of most agribusiness production today. This asset would be worth billions of dollars if it were acquired through the market, which in practice represents a vast economic subsidy that continues to be extracted from the Guarani–Kaiowa in the form of immoral, imposed land rents. That is even more the case because the transitory rulings of new Brazilian Constitution, approved in 1988, determined that within five years the whole process of legalization of indigenous territories should have to be completed. Article 67 of the Temporary Constitutional Provisions Act stated that “The Union shall conclude the demarcation of the Indian lands within five years of the promulgation of the Constitution.” In formal terms, it means that these vast areas should have been returned to the Guarani–Kaiowa by 1993 (without any payment to the invading farmers, because their action was essentially illegal), which evidently did not happen and shows no signs of happening any time soon. Meanwhile, land-based disputes linger on and the presence of Guarani–Kaiowa families in more than 250 locations represents an embarrassing problem for the national government and the international community. There exist today more than 50 roadside encampments in Mato Grosso do Sul, constantly reminding the rest of the regional population of this unresolved geographical debt. In many cases, people live for several decades on small plots of public land on the side of the roads and, many times, in front of the land they expect to regain one day:

“I arrived here in the encampment in 1980, more than 38 years ago. I was born in these fields, I was not born in any reservation, and I grew up here. My mother is Guarani, my father I don’t know, I never met him, and maybe he was mixed blood. He left my mother when I was very small, people say that he was Paraguayan. Our life here is extremely difficult, we lack everything. We need assistance, food, medicine. ( . . . ) We have nothing, and sometimes the farmer mentions that he wants us to get out of here. I keep quiet, I am very religious, don’t really want to start a fight, but I wish I had a piece of land.” (Male, municipality of Juti)

It is significant that such a dialectic of forced social invisibility and persistent physical presence has ethnicity as a central, but highly contested, category. Rather than separating indigenous people into an entirely distinct politico-economic condition, ethnicity influences land and labor relations (i.e., facilitating land grabbing and the over-exploitation of labor-power) and also the mechanism of adaptation and political reaction. The Guarani–Kaiowa labor force remains an important pillar of the regional economy, for example in the harvesting of sugarcane, working on cattle and plantation farms and as housemaids [26,27]. Indigenous laborers have acquired new technical skills to be able to operate digital machines and use novel tools on farms and in agroindustry. Yet, because they have started filling jobs that were normally taken by non-indigenous workers, the Guarani–Kaiowa have begun to share the same challenges faced by other proletarian groups regarding labor rights, precarious pensions and the trend towards deunionization. Unemployment is likewise a mutual problem, caused for instance by the growing mechanization of sugarcane harvesting. This lived reality defies any simplistic politico-economic and identitary categorizations. Internal economic differentiation is, obviously, not without contradictions. This is particularly true when some indigenous people decide to adopt agribusiness production techniques or rent out their land to non-indigenous farmers or other ethnic groups. It is well known that renting indigenous land to commercial farmers is illegal, but the practice is increasingly encouraged by the agribusiness sector and the federal government (as the emblematic visit of the Minister of the Environment to soybean production fields in indigenous land in February 2019). In 2020, the president sent a new legislation proposal (PL 191/20) for the exploration of minerals and water resources in indigenous areas [28]. There are also cases of other indigenous groups renting the land of Guarani–Kaiowa families, which lead to unanticipated tensions, as in the case of Panambizinho, to the north of Dourados:

“It is not only the leasing of land by non-indigenous farmers, but also some indigenous do it, members of the Terena group who live in the Dourados reservation. They call this a ‘partnership’, they come every year, clean the land and plant, they also help us to cultivate the land (with their machinery). They don’t take all the land, but leave some space for cassava, sweet potato, for the local family. But 100 m from the house they cultivate (commercial crops), make use of pesticides, normally they spread in the evenings.” (woman, 36 years, Panambizinho)

One of the most serious situations in terms of (illegally) leasing land to farmers can be found in the Dourados reservation, which is also the most urbanized and troubled of the original eight reservations created by the SPI. Agribusiness farmers have rented out a significant proportion of the 3,475 hectares of the Dourados reservation (some interviewees affirmed that more than half of the total has been used by farmers in the agricultural season 2019–2020) and the same phenomenon is expanding in most other similar areas (Figure 2). The leasing of indigenous territories is a growing problem as it tacitly undermines the argument that the Guarani–Kaiowa need land to maintain their way of life. In that way, the Kaiowa and many other indigenous groups are inserted in the latifundist and rentist machinery, which represents the most powerful institutions upholding the position of agrarian, regional elites in Brazil and their decisive influence over the national political system. The involvement of some members of indigenous communities in highly asymmetric and opportunistic associations with agribusiness farmers is a major source of controversy, not just amongst Guarani–Kaiowa, but in many other indigenous groups throughout Brazil. This involvement may represent a guaranteed

source of income in the short term, but at the price of undermining the long and painful struggle for the recovery of lost territories. At a more personal level, it creates the illusion that indigenous peasant families are partners in the agribusiness-based economy, when in fact they are offering some of the last fractions of their territory to be illegally exploited (and contaminated and eroded) for crop production.



**Figure 2.** Soybean cultivated by an agribusiness farmer in the Dourados indigenous reservation in the growing season 2019–2020.

Nonetheless, despite pessimistic tone of newspaper articles over the last decades because of mounting internal and external pressures (for example, the long piece published by the national newspaper *O Globo* [29]), the Guarani–Kaiowa remain key players both in the land where they currently reside and in the areas that they have lost but are attempting to retake. If ethnicity contributes to leaving most indigenous families in precarious circumstances characterized by abject poverty, high unemployment and the impulse to adopt quick-fix solutions, such as relinquishing land to agribusiness farmers or submitting to evangelical proto-theology, it also continues to be their main existential reference and source of political mobilization. The trajectory of Guarani–Kaiowa communities is not merely a metaphysics of endless strife between predestined losses and hopes for a miraculous escape, but is infused with creative politico-economic agency based on ethnicity. We must consider that, despite all their difficulties, the ancestors of today's indigenous communities were able to withstand, albeit with grave losses, the attacks of the *bandeirantes*, the instrumentalized Christianity of the Jesuits, the War of the Triple Alliance, the extraction of *erva-mate*, the partition of land and the consolidation of agro-neoliberalism. In each of the tragic moments in Guarani–Kaiowa history they managed to avoid the worst, to outlive crises and, in recent decades, to significantly expand the population. This did not happen for any mystic reason or by pure luck; the Guarani–Kaiowa were able to react to land and labor exploitation through a strong attachment to their ethnic-spatial heritage. 'Indian-ness' has been retained even with the adoption of waged labor, evangelical rituals or the commercialization of land. The importance of the action/reaction articulated by indigenous groups is related to their attachment to the ancient places: people are where they do and think, something that is fundamentally different from the emptiness of Western, abstract universals [30].

Among other ethnicity-based reactions, the most prominent initiative today is the retaking (*retomada*) of ancestral lands (the abovementioned *tekohas*), achieved by mobilizing the community through a complex articulation of cultural symbols, extended religious ceremonies and shrewd territorial tactics. The *retomadas* are inspired by the notion of *tekoharã*, that is, the idea that the *tekoha* is

likely, or has the potential, to be recovered. Unlike indigenous reservations planned by the state, in a *retomada* the operationalization and the risks are the responsibility of the Guarani–Kaiowa, beyond the tutelage of the state (Figure 3). Typically, after a long wait and deep frustration with unfulfilled promises and repeated losses, the Guarani–Kaiowa realize that the official route of demarcation is never going to serve them and decide to take ‘geography into their own hands’:



**Figure 3.** Image of the early process of *retomada* (picture taken in February 2020; a few weeks later police presence was requested for the removal of the indigenous families by force; the land dispute, like in many other locations in Mato Grosso do Sul, continues unresolved).

“I am called Kuña Jeguakaru’i, my traditional name. (Long time ago) the farmer expelled us from her, where there is the little forest, and dropped us in front of the (Evangelical) Mission. But we came back, and he again forced us out, took us to the indigenous post Sassoró. We stayed there for a while, my parents and grandparents discussed, gathered more people, and we returned. The farmer called the police and it was the police then that removed us from here and left us in Porto Lindo, where there were other people, relatives from different areas. I was eight years old then, but I remember, I used to pay a lot of attention to what the elders said. We stayed there for four or five years, and then we returned to retake our land. People from various *tekohas* joined us (in the fight), I don’t know the number, but it was big group. When we arrived, everything was changed, they cut the trees, it was only pasture and asphalt. Here we are, our community is always growing, I always tell my children, show them the marks of our struggle.” (female shaman, Jaguapiré indigenous land, still pending regularization and has been repeatedly attacked by farmers and the police)

The *retomada* is thus a spontaneous, autonomous reaction (decided by the collectives, independently and according to their own preferences, led by shamans (*rezadores*) and supported by spirits). It is more than simply a desperate reaction against land grabbing and severe poverty, but rather a well-orchestrated attempt to meaningfully preserve and reaffirm the Guarani–Kaiowa way of life (*teko porã*) in its material, spiritual and symbolic dimensions. As explained by Warren, the struggle for indigenous land in Brazil is very much about a joint quest for space and identity [31]. More importantly, the *retomadas* produce a geography of transgression because they subvert the linearity of hegemonic development and frontier making since colonial times (see in Figure 4 with a religious celebration of the retaking of land after years of struggle; note the infrastructure of the farm that used to operate in the indigenous land). Distinct from the abstract value assigned to land by agribusiness, the spaces



recovered through the (painful and high-risk) *retomadas* have unique characteristics because collective identities and memories are catalysts for mobilization and resistance, where practices that draw on ancestral knowledge and worldviews create new possibilities for prefiguring alternative futures [32]. Observe the next interview extract below:



**Figure 4.** Religious celebration by a Guarani–Kaiowa community which had their land recently returned after a long and painful dispute with the farmer and the public authorities (August 2019).

“I am 59 years old, I now live in the *tekoha* Jarara, we took this land 23 years ago. The first *retomada* was in 1980, the second in 1984, then in 1990. In the third occasion, (when they removed us), they burned everything, houses, plantation, cattle. And then in 1996 we came back, and we stayed, we arrived on the 23 March, we clashed with the police, state and municipal authorities, we had a long journey to win back this piece of land. ( ... ) We worked hard and, now, where I have relatives who need my help, I am always available to fight for the land and the documentation. Also to demand education, agriculture. ( ... ) We still only have 471 hectares, but in reality our *tekoha* has 7800 hectares, so the struggle remains unfinished.” (male, Jarara, municipality of Juti; the community was removed from the ancestral land in 1953 by order of the Mate Larangeira company)

The multiple demands of the various communities, including the planning and preparation of new *retomadas*, are intensely discussed in regular assemblies (called *Aty Guassu*, formally the (General Assembly of the Guarani and Kaiowá People) have been held since the end of the 1970s. The assembly involves a large, collective effort to bring together members and leaders of different Guarani–Kaiowa communities to spend several days debating, praying and deciding on their next steps of their movement, as well as to foster interaction with non-indigenous allies and friendly public authorities. The *Aty Guassu* is the most important political space created by the Guarani–Kaiowa to share experiences, learn from the elders and from the most prestigious religious leaders and develop short-term and long-term interventions and, in particular, guide the recovery of their ancestral lands. In addition, the *Aty Guassu* plays a very important role in the affirmation of an indigenous ethnic identity that is deeply political and a politics that reflects the Guarani–Kaiowa existence. The general assemblies have become very well respected by indigenous and non-indigenous alike that it was difficult to cover all relevant issues and, in recent years, parallel meetings have been organized by female leaders (*Kuñangue Aty Guassu*, the Great Assembly of Guarani and Kaiowá Women—see Figure 5), by young members of the communities (RAJ or the Guarani and Kaiowá Youth Movement) and by the



shamans (*Aty Jeroky Guassu*, the General Assembly of Guarani & Kaiowá Shamans) dedicated to more specific themes.



**Figure 5.** First day of the 2019 *Kuñangue Aty Guassu*, the Great Assembly of Guarani and Kaiowá Women (August 2019).

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has examined the evolution of land-based disputes involving the Guarani–Kaiowa and how the growing exploitation of their labor have both been pervaded by the social construction of ethnicity. The case study demonstrates the relevance of racial regimes of social exclusion and territorial control beyond simplistic ‘resource determinism’ notions that limit the analysis of socio-spatial controversies to a narrow economic base. The concrete example serves to illustrate the connection between political economy, racism and subjectivities (including religious practices) that refute claims of total contingency of social relations. It must be acknowledged that the empirical results and the present discussion are evidently limited by the nature of the research project, which covered a relatively small group of interviewees and a restricted number of locations, and additional work is certainly necessary to further investigate how ethnicity and group identity influence labor and socio-spatial relations in a situation of acute political tensions. At any rate, it is unequivocal that the deployment of ethnic differences in Mato Grosso do Sul were instrumental for the appropriation of the Guarani–Kaiowa areas by explorers and farmers but also used by the indigenous groups in their mobilization for political recognition and land recovery (notably in relation to the *retomadas*). These socio-spatial processes have resulted in a political economy of indigeneity, in which land, labor and ethnicity need to be considered as interconnected categories, intersecting with wider socio-political transformations. Rejecting the concept of the ‘idealized Indian’ and the stereotyped proletarian or peasant, the centrality of ethnicity means that the subjectification of the indigenous person disrupts the prevailing narrative of progress and development. Subjectification means resistance, as much as resisting demands that indigenous people be seen as subjects of their own lives and spaces. Being and resisting are non-dissociable here; they potentialize each other. The indigenous group needs to be indigenous to resist, and they resist because they exist. There is an organic interdependence between structure and subject, but the singularity of the subject makes it incompatible with and prone to try to reconfigure an iniquitous structure.

The politico-economic trajectory of the Guarani–Kaiowa during the last four centuries—including moments of acute destruction followed by efforts to reorganize life in response to what was lost—is highly emblematic of such ontological and politico-economic richness. From the early days of colonization to the current pressures from agribusiness, their landscape, resources and community life have been the object of monetization and trade. Because of accumulated socio-spatial experiences

and the ability to creatively engage in the processes of change (despite the highly asymmetric balance of power), the Guarani–Kaiowa have managed to maintain important elements of their ancestral practices that are now gathered in the struggle to retake land and fight for the most basic human rights. Nonetheless, politico-economic scholars must be fully aware that racism operates as a core element of a capitalist order. Racial subjects and private property institutions actually produce one another in a context of settler colonialism [33]. Racism not only predates capitalism, but is also exacerbated through dispossession and racialized labor politics [34]. White supremacy, as in the case of settler colonialism and agribusiness-centered regional development, is essentially based on racism and affirmation of a narrative of the inferiority and supposed decadence of the Guarani–Kaiowa. Their experience, however, proves that the preservation of a distinctive ethnicity is an integral element of politico-economic processes. On the other hand, the unique elements of the politico-spatial trajectory of the Guarani–Kaiowa have been predicated in more general forms of land and labor disputes shared with other subaltern groups.

Another important lesson is that regional capitalist development has employed a syntax of control and exploitation based on the universalization of what is spatially singular, as in the case of the opening of the agricultural frontier, where ethnic specificity of indigenous groups was reduced to the abstract references of exchange values and the language of markets. In diametric contrast, the socio-spatial logic of the *retomada* is to singularize the experience of consciousness, association and action. Whilst land grabbing homogenizes the world in the form of private property the unique features of non-Western groups, the *retomadas* serve to particularize land struggles through the singularization of socially meaningful spaces. It indicates that the role and agency of indigenous peoples is not a curiosity or a residue of other ‘more important’ politico-economic disputes taking place elsewhere in the country, but indigenous politics and ethnic-related challenges are central to understanding and overcoming processes that affect the majority of the population. In the concrete case, the powerful movement to return and rebuild their ancestral places makes the Guarani–Kaiowa experience very emblematic and at the same time a vital component of the much wider effort to decolonize society and the economy. The case study further helps to understand that what is commonly described as globalization or contemporary capitalism is, in effect, the result of place-specific and historically situated combinations of hegemonic, alienating market-based forces—experienced and resisted by individuals and their social networks through concrete opportunities they create for themselves according to their own socio-spatial trajectory and politically mobilized ethnicity.

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