

BOOK REVIEW

Paulo Basta et al. (Eds.) *Pohã ñana:
Ñanombarete, tekoha, Guarani ha
Kaiowá arandu rehegua*

ALICE ESSAM 



CONTRIBUTOR

Alice is a PhD researcher at the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University. Her current research explores the question of what makes plants medicinal for different people in different contexts.

Address: School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, CF103WA, UK.

Email: EssamA@cardiff.ac.uk

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Basta, P. C., Sousa, I. M. de, Benites, A., & Bevacqua, A. (Eds.) (2020). *Pohã Nãna: Nãmombarete, Tekoha, Guaraní ha Kaiowá Arandu Rehegua*. Recife: Fiocruz, 350 pp., ISBN 978-85-69717-22-5.

Medicinal Plants: Empowerment, Land, and Memory of the Guaraní-Kaiowá, is the product of a six-year investigation initiated by non-Indigenous researchers at the public health school within Brazil's biomedical sciences research institute *Fiocruz* in collaboration with Indigenous Guaraní-Kaiowá people.¹ The expertise of the principal researchers is in epidemiology and public health, yet the breadth of themes and concerns addressed in the book produce an informative and provoking political ecology – attending to land politics, how social, economic, political and knowledge systems interact with people (politics) and place (ecology), and philosophical questions about the nature of material 'objects', in this case plants.

The stated aim of the book is to identify and describe the traditional healing practices and medicinal plants of the Indigenous Guaraní-Kaiowá people, which will serve as a written record for the Guaraní-Kaiowá community. This objective supports their political struggle to preserve and continue this living knowledge. The book's objective is to highlight to wider audiences the relevance of medicinal plants for Indigenous people, in terms of their approach to health and healing, their relationship with their ancestral land, and how their relationship and engagements with plants represent an embodiment and realisation of their lives within the cosmos. In this sense the book does more than describe the pharmacological ethnobotanical uses of plants.

STRUCTURAL LAYOUT OF THE BOOK

The book has four parts: 'Roots', 'Stem', 'Leaves', 'Seeds'. Nine of the 10 chapters reflect on various aspects of what was learnt about the meaning and essence of plants (and healing) for the Guaraní-Kaiowá people, how this insight was afforded, and how it might inform future engagement between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people, particularly in healthcare.

The Preface provides a provocative opening to the work, setting up the complexity and challenge of researching plants as ontologically uncertain objects with the question of 'how to research plants, which are not only plants, but which are also plants' (Souza 2020: 23). The first chapter, through a series of quotes from *nãnderu* and *nãndesy*, establishes medicinal plants as an integral feature of Guaraní-Kaiowá culture, with knowledge about and relationships with plants having a spiritual dimension.² The second chapter describes elements of Guaraní-Kaiowá cosmology, shamanism, and healing practices, drawing on Fabio Mura's extensive anthropological work (2019). Chapter Three features a catalogue of eighty-two medicinal plants used by the Guaraní-Kaiowá community. Chapter Four details the ethnobotanical methods used in the study, contextualising and politicising the objectives of the research within the wider political ecology. In Chapter Five, Lucia Pereira, a Kaiowá researcher, draws upon her ethnographic research with *nãnderu* and *nãndesy* to reflect upon the dynamics between traditional healing and non-Indigenous science-based health care initiatives in the community.

Chapter Six explains the evolution of epidemiological research into the present work, with critical reflections on the need for multi-disciplinarity engagement with the context. Chapter Seven portrays a collection of photos helping the reader imagine the research process. In Chapter Eight Pereira

explores the gendered aspects of Guarani-Kaiowá culture, bringing the epistemology and practices of the *ñandesy* (the female shamans and traditional midwives) into conversation with academia.

Chapter Nine shares the experience of a Brazilian non-Indigenous researcher, João Paiva, immersed in ethnographic research. Through interviews with shamans, Paiva reflects on how language holds potency for the Guarani-Kaiowá. Finally, Chapter 10 analyses the possibilities, challenges and limitations of interdisciplinary research in this area.

IMPORTANCE IN THE FIELD

The publication is positioned as the product of participatory action-research. Although instigated by public health professionals, ‘epistemic pluralism’ is claimed, in which anthropological observations are added alongside botanical methods and narrations from the *ñanderu* and *ñandesy* (Souza 2020: 23). While ethnobotanical methods and classification are used, no explicit or implicit claims to legitimacy over Indigenous knowledge were made. These approaches are justified as political choices which aim to ‘create bridges and establish dialogues between apparently different worlds, aimed at strengthening and valuing Indigenous culture’ (Bevacqua and Basta 2020: 254).

Questions around how divergent ontological and cosmological groundings produce different human-plant relationships and realities have only tentatively been introduced into the expanding fields of ethnobiology and ethnobotany (Daly et al. 2016; Ellen 2006). In this book, the reflexivity of researchers from different backgrounds demonstrates how epistemic curiosity and methodological flexibility can address not only the question of medicinal plants (what makes plants medicinal?) but provoke broader reflections on aspects of one’s own culture, beliefs and ontology. Reflection on metaphysical assumptions within botany, and indeed wider biological sciences is rare and thus important in this work (Marder 2013), so while these reflections strengthen this work, they also prompt questions around how to develop and integrate this further. Here the continued openness toward personal transformation and intellectual advancement represents steps in the quest to decolonise academia (Barker and Pickerill 2020).

CONCLUSION – WHERE NEXT?

Overall, this publication provides a promising example of how interdisciplinary and participatory research in this field could help bring a wider range of ethnographic research to theoretical discussion, creating an interesting and relevant Science and Technology Studies (STS) case study. Regarding discussion of ontology and decolonising academia, the reference to plants as ‘not just plants, but also plants’ (Souza 2020), recognises not only epistemological difference, but ontological too. This statement challenges their assumed singularity and reduction to something knowable via any one onto-epistemology. However, this philosophical question is not explored in the publication: the concept of ontology is only mentioned in the context of ‘ontological dichotomies’. While ontological critique does not feature, the research presented would lend well to this. Engaging with the question of medicinal plants for Indigenous peoples through an ontologically critical lens could be useful for exploring questions regarding ontology and Indigeneity, such as those raised by Blaser (2014), and is an empirical phenomenon which could help to better understand the political ontology of Indigenous peoples, such as the Guarani-Kaiowá (Ioris 2020). This in turn would explore the

prospect of multiple worlds, the pluriverse, refining what exactly we mean by ontology in relation to Indigeneity.

Ethics and consent

Not applicable.

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This article contains research from an ESRC-funded PhD studentship.

Competing Interests

The author intends to publish a translated version of the work reviewed from Portuguese to English.

NOTES

¹ This is my interpretation of the title. The dictionary defines 'fortalecimento' as 'strengthening, fortification'. However, empowerment feels more appropriate to the context.

² These are the Guaraní-Kaiowá xamãs (shamans), anciões (elders), and rezadores (people who pray).

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