

**INDIGENOUS BRAZILIAN ANTHROPOLOGY**

# The trajectory and work of an indigenous anthropologist

TONICO BENITES <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, National Museum, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil**Abstract**

In this article I present myself as both an Indigenous person and an anthropologist from the Guarani and Kaiowá peoples of southern Mato Grosso do Sul, born in the Sassoró Indigenous Post and an actor active in education, translation, and research in the Jaguapiré Indigenous Land. I recount my personal and professional trajectory, highlighting research conducted between 2008 and 2013 amid intense land conflicts involving Indigenous communities and large landowners. In this environment, anthropologists and students faced intimidation, accusations, and surveillance. I emphasize the historical role of anthropology in Brazil in defending Indigenous rights and note an increasing opposition from rural landowner groups seeking to invalidate anthropological reports. I underscore the long struggle of the Guarani and Kaiowá to reclaim and demarcate their traditional lands and the involvement of both FUNAI and the Federal Justice system in these processes.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Anthropologists; Guarani; Kaiowá; Land Conflicts; Brazil.

# Trajetória e atuação de um antropólogo indígena

## Resumo

Neste artigo, apresento-me como indígena e antropólogo dos povos Guarani e Kaiowá do sul do Mato Grosso do Sul, nascido no Posto Indígena Sassoró e ativo na educação, tradução e pesquisa na Terra Indígena Jaguapiré. Relato minha trajetória pessoal e profissional, destacando pesquisas realizadas entre 2008 e 2013 em meio a intensos conflitos fundiários envolvendo comunidades indígenas e grandes proprietários de terras. Nesse ambiente, antropólogos e estudantes enfrentaram intimidações, acusações e vigilância. Enfatizo o papel histórico da antropologia no Brasil na defesa dos direitos indígenas e observo uma oposição crescente de grupos de proprietários rurais que buscam invalidar relatórios antropológicos. Destaco a longa luta dos Guarani e Kaiowá para reivindicar e demarcar suas terras tradicionais e o envolvimento tanto da FUNAI quanto do sistema de Justiça Federal nesses processos.

**Palavras-chave:** antropólogos indígenas; Guarani; Kaiowá; conflitos de terra; Brasil.

# The trajectory and work of an indigenous anthropologist<sup>1</sup>

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First of all, I would like to introduce myself to the participants of the 29th RBA as both an indigenous person and an anthropologist. I am proud to belong to the Guarani and Kaiowá peoples located in the south of Mato Grosso do Sul (MS). I shall therefore begin by outlining my personal trajectory, from the mid-1980s onwards, as well as my research as an anthropologist carried out between 2008 and 2013, particularly within the contemporary context of dispute and conflict over land ownership between the Guarani and Kaiowá peoples and large landowners, precisely in the far south of Mato Grosso do Sul state.

In this context, anthropologists have suffered and continue to suffer intimidation from landowners and anti-indigenous politicians. Anthropology students, in particular, are frequently accused of being inciters of farm ‘invasions.’ As a consequence, these professionals and students experience fear, pressure and surveillance while performing their anthropological research.

I present my life history as follows: I am Ava Guarani Kaiowá, belonging to the Kaiowá extended families originally from the territorial spaces of Jaguapiré, which were reoccupied and recuperated through our intense struggle from the 1980s onwards. These areas were later demarcated as the Jaguapiré Indigenous Land. I was born on 12 December 1971 at the Sassoró Indigenous Post. I emphasise that this lecture is grounded in my own experiences as an indigenous person, an indigenous primary-school teacher, interpreter, translator, researcher and anthropologist — activities carried out both at the Sassoró Indigenous Post and in the Jaguapiré Indigenous Land, in the municipality of Tacuru, Mato Grosso do Sul.

One of the themes I have foregrounded was the history of anthropological studies that had proved significant, as well as the courageous engagement of a number of non-indigenous anthropologists in defence of indigenous peoples’ rights against the continuing domination and violence inflicted on these peoples by colonial forces in Brazil.

Drawing on my recent experience and my position as an anthropologist, I make a number of observations concerning the roles and challenges of anthropological studies in the face of these ongoing disputes and conflicts over land ownership. This has unfolded within a historical context marked by mobilisations and demands on the part of federations and unions

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of so-called ‘rural producers’ — that is, large landowners — who oppose anthropological research and demand that the Brazilian judicial system cancel and annul the conclusions of anthropological reports on these issues.

I emphasise that throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, in what is now the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, the Guarani and Kaiowá peoples returned to occupy their traditional lands. In this scenario, anthropological studies were — and continue to be — mobilised both by the indigenous affairs agency (the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples: FUNAI) and by the Federal Justice system.

Before analysing my own work as an indigenous anthropologist, I highlight the history of struggle and resistance of these indigenous peoples in their fight for the recognition and demarcation of their traditional lands (*tekoha*). I note that in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, in the face of the sustained resistance of these peoples and their struggle to return to live in their traditional lands, the indigenous affairs agency began, for the first time, to involve non-indigenous anthropologists in conducting studies of Guarani and Kaiowá ways of being and living, above all, in relation to the traditional lands they claimed.

From the mid-1980s onwards, therefore, these anthropologists began to describe and analyse the histories of indigenous expulsion from their lands, their narratives, their claims (to territories) and, above all, the vital conceptions of these peoples, revealing the specific traditional lands of each group formed by extended families. In this way, indigenous narratives and arguments were systematised by anthropologists, paying due attention to the historical events, testimonies and, above all, the memories of the Guarani and Kaiowá. These indigenous accounts and arguments challenged the versions, claims and documents produced by landowners and issued by official state bodies.

In general terms, the Guarani and Kaiowá peoples who resisted and demanded the recognition and demarcation of their traditional lands were and still are classified or accused by landowners, the media and even by state institutions as ‘criminals,’ feared, disobedient *indios*, and as invaders of private property. In the historical context of the 1980s, anthropological studies officially analysed and demonstrated that Guarani and Kaiowá extended families were the original inhabitants of the lands being claimed and had belonged to these specific places for centuries. In this way, for the first time, anthropology, anthropologists and anthropological studies gained official prominence among indigenous families in the dispute with farmers — a dispute that continues to the present day.

It is important to recognise that, as a consequence of these anthropological studies conducted in Mato Grosso do Sul, the anthropologist has come to be perceived mistakenly as an inciter of ‘invasions’ of farms or other private property. The anthropologist is seen as an opponent of landowners and often blamed for the demands made by indigenous peoples for the demarcation of their lands. Within this litigious and complex context, most anthropologists are reluctant to openly assume their association with anthropological research out of fear of receiving death threats. Indeed, some anthropologists were subjected to intimidation

and death threats from landowners during the course of their fieldwork. Even so, the working groups coordinated by anthropologists completed their studies and submitted their reports to FUNAI, as well as Technical Notes or Information Briefings to the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, thus fulfilling their professional responsibilities and mission through these studies.

Given these facts, it should be evident that big farmers and anti-indigenous politicians view anthropological studies negatively and see them as useless, while at the same time constituting a class that has come to threaten and intimidate anthropologists for producing studies for the identification and demarcation of indigenous lands in the southern Brazilian state.

In order to develop a brief analysis of some of the functions of indigenous anthropologists in the contemporary setting, we need to make explicit that an indigenous person trained in anthropology is, at once, an anthropologist-researcher and a permanent member of their indigenous people. In the current historical context, indigenous individuals who study, conduct research and become qualified professionals in anthropology cannot dissociate themselves either from the struggles of the peoples among whom they carry out their research or from anthropology as a broader field of study. For example, prior to dedicating myself to anthropological studies, I am a permanent member of my Guarani and Kaiowá peoples (through both my maternal and paternal lines). More recently, in order to qualify in anthropology, I conducted research among some families of these two peoples who share a specific historical trajectory, marked by a perennial struggle and resistance to the policies of domination and processes of territorialisation promoted by the Brazilian state throughout the twentieth century. In the present context, I am an indigenous person trained in anthropology and continue to live and struggle as a Guarani and Kaiowá person. At the same time, I am conducting and participating in further studies as part of my anthropological training.

Another theme I have analysed in my capacity as an indigenous person, pedagogue and anthropologist is the distorted image of the generic *indio* found in textbooks and in the media. Throughout my educational trajectory, I have met with incongruent ways of life and images of stereotyped and homogenised *índios* in the textbooks used in Brazilian education. These issues need to be revisited more broadly within the country's educational systems. From my childhood onwards, the negative images of *índios* in books and the media have consistently generated confusion and indignation for me, since the ways indigenous peoples are represented do not correspond either to the histories recounted by my indigenous kin or to the reality of the diversity of indigenous peoples in Brazil. For this reason and the trajectory described earlier, my position and struggle as an indigenous person and as an anthropologist are directed towards deconstructing and decolonising these idealised and homogenising views of *índios* circulated in Brazil, particularly through textbooks and the mass media. These ways of presenting *índios* are extremely harmful both to successive generations of Brazilians — especially younger ones — and to indigenous peoples themselves, as they generate and intensify prejudice, racism and hatred against them. Only through change will new generations of the Brazilian population acquire access to a different form of education and to more accurate knowledge of the histories and contemporary situations

of indigenous peoples in the country. This demanding work of deconstruction poses a challenge for indigenous and non-indigenous anthropologists alike in the present context.

Following my studies, I recognise that, over the past forty years, a group of Brazilian non-indigenous anthropologists has made sustained efforts to organise studies, seminars, conferences and academic symposia to debate the situations of indigenous peoples in Brazil, seeking to involve indigenous leaders in these discussions. These activities undertaken by anthropologists have been and remain fundamental both for indigenous peoples and for indigenous students.

In relation to the functions and perspectives of the indigenous anthropologist, I observe that some indigenous graduates and students of anthropology come to assume the role of rapporteurs and spokespersons for their peoples, as well as translators of the demands and projects submitted by their peoples to state bodies and to national and international organisations. Additionally, indigenous anthropologists are beginning to take on roles as consultants, expert witnesses and translators for government agencies and the federal justice system, as in my own case.

Drawing on my position and experience as an anthropologist and indigenous leader, I would like to offer some reflections on the functions and challenges faced by indigenous anthropologists in the context of frequent interethnic mobilisations and the diverse claims advanced by indigenous peoples before the Judicial, Legislative and Executive branches, as well as the agencies responsible for overseeing the enforcement of the laws of the Brazilian nation-state.

It is important to mention that in diverse public institutional spaces and in intercommunity and interethnic meetings and assemblies, indigenous anthropologists and students have generally been called on to clarify and translate public policies and social programmes of the Brazilian state for indigenous peoples. In this way, indigenous individuals trained in anthropology begin to live within and circulate between two sociocultural and political systems, mastering complex and distinct bodies of knowledge. Indigenous anthropologists thus come to analyse and translate government policies for indigenous peoples: in other words, these indigenous scholars develop the function of analysing and translating both for indigenous communities and for state agents.

I would like to record that my work as an anthropologist, researcher and indigenous person is constantly observed and scrutinised both by indigenous representatives themselves and by non-indigenous actors, whether linked to the state, academia or to anti-indigenous politicians, big farmers and others.

I observe that indigenous students and leaders, especially among the Guarani and Kaiowá of Mato Grosso do Sul, consider indigenous anthropologists to be essential since they strengthen contemporary demands and land struggles, while helping press for the effective implementation of indigenous and human rights. The importance attributed to indigenous anthropologists resides, above all, in the fact that the indigenous anthropologist is able to narrate their own history and struggle, as well as comprehend the relations that shape the contemporary world in which they live. In this way, these anthropologists are perceived by members of indigenous communities as researchers who are rooted in indigenous lifeworlds and simultaneously up to

date. At the same time, they are seen to indicate possible solutions to contemporary problems and are thus placed in a position of considerable responsibility. For this very reason, the research and professional practice of indigenous anthropologists are constantly monitored and analysed by both indigenous and non-indigenous actors, as noted above.

It is worth noting that these anthropology students are frequently asked to discuss indigenous issues in a range of occasions and settings, particularly the demarcation of indigenous lands and public policies directed towards indigenous peoples more broadly. In this way, they pass through multiple challenging experiences, since, by circulating through these different spaces, they are able to debate and perceive the many opinions, proposals and solutions advanced with regard to the indigenous situation in Mato Grosso do Sul and in Brazil as a whole. Our participation in these arenas allows us to understand the different ‘solutions’ envisaged for indigenous peoples and their lands.

It is important to emphasise that, recently in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, as a result of long-standing land disputes and conflicts, attempts at interethnic conciliation and dialogue have emerged between indigenous leaders and landowners. These initiatives have been promoted by the Ministry of Justice, the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office and the Federal Justice system, in contexts in which indigenous anthropologists are called on to perform the difficult and complex work of translation. I understand this work to be, in part, fundamental both for indigenous peoples and for the parties involved in resolving land-related disputes in Brazil. Indeed, in mid-2013, as a consequence of this historical struggle for the demarcation of Guaraní and Kaiowá indigenous lands, a *mesa de diálogo* (dialogue roundtable) was set up by the federal government, in which I, as an indigenous anthropologist, began to act as a translator in a cycle of intense discussions on land conflicts. In this forum, I repeatedly asked farmers to cease the massacres and killings of indigenous people. Likewise, indigenous leaders and indigenous anthropologists have demanded that the media report on the struggles and demands of indigenous peoples in Brazil in an unbiased manner. I understand that this attempt at dialogue between indigenous leaders, farmers and other actors represents an enormous challenge for the work of translation and engagement of indigenous anthropologists, given that involved is a permanent historical conflict that does not primarily take place within or between indigenous peoples themselves, but rather concerns an ongoing dispute between indigenous peoples and farmers over land ownership, overseen and mediated by the Brazilian national state systems.

Through our exchanges of lived experiences and our professional activities as indigenous anthropologists, given that our work and research are participatory and implicated, we are able to better understand the ways of being, acting and thinking of legal professionals, university researchers, state and non-state indigenous affairs agents (including NGOs), as well as actors from the government and the Brazilian judicial system.

I would emphasise that the master’s and doctoral programmes in Social Anthropology provided us with a solid foundation for comprehending and respecting different people and their diverse views concerning indigenous peoples in Brazil. These courses and the associated academic

work were personally a very demanding experience, but also as one of great significance for my personal and academic formation. On the basis of the experiences acquired through anthropological training and during fieldwork, I can say that anthropology, when practised with rigour, becomes fundamental for acquiring an in-depth understanding of the conceptions, interests and real needs of the indigenous families and peoples under study, as well as those of non-indigenous actors, always taking into account their histories, interests and multiple ways of living and being.

As already noted, from 1990 to the present day, in my capacity as an indigenous student and spokesperson for the Guarani and Kaiowá people, I have participated actively in numerous local, regional and national events. Today, as an indigenous anthropologist, I would also mention my participation in congresses, seminars and meetings in which I was able to deliver many lectures and denounce serious issues, addressing complex and controversial themes related to the recovery of indigenous lands, indigenous school education and indigenous health, among other issues of significance to the Guarani and Kaiowá. In the course of these important events and assemblies, I prepared — frequently at the request of indigenous leaders — various documents written in Portuguese, setting out their decisions and demands. In response to the acute problems affecting the Guarani and Kaiowá more widely, I wrote many petitions and statements indicating possible solutions from the perspective articulated by indigenous leaders. These documents were sent to multiple authorities across the Executive, Judicial and Legislative branches, as well as to universities and researchers from different areas.

Finally, as an indigenous person trained in pedagogy and anthropology, working alongside indigenous peoples, I feel challenged to seek out, indicate and discuss possible responses to indigenous peoples' demands. I assume a great responsibility in recording and reinforcing the contemporary demands and claims of these peoples, since one of my functions is to transcribe and translate into written documents the thoughts, demands and decisions conveyed orally by indigenous leaders. My greatest hope is that the written claims and denunciations of indigenous peoples will be understood and addressed by the institutions of the Brazilian state. In my capacity as an anthropologist, researcher and indigenous person belonging to the Guarani and Kaiowá peoples, I understand that the experiences narrated here have been valuable and simultaneously challenging, not only for my personal life but also for my work as an indigenous anthropologist in Brazil.

TRANSLATED BY DAVID RODGERS

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT:**

The data set that supports my reflections is available in my doctoral thesis (Benites, Tonico. *Rojeroky hina ha roike jevy tekohape (Praying and fighting): the historical movement of the Aty Guasu of the Ava Kaiowa and Ava Guarani for the recovery of their tekoha*. Doctoral thesis. Rio de Janeiro: National Museum/UFRJ, 2014), accessible at: <http://obj-dig.ufrj.br/72/teses/824969.pdf>.

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