

INDIGENOUS BRAZILIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Indigenous knowledge and territorial struggles: utopias and reclaiming lifeways of resistance

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Abstract

This text is based on the opening keynote lecture at the 34th Brazilian Anthropology Meeting, held in 2024 at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, and was originally published in *Horizontes Antropológicos* in 2025 (volume 31, issue 7). The text addresses the relevance of indigenous knowledge, territorial struggles and the protagonism of indigenous peoples in recognizing plural, insurgent and resistant epistemologies. It reflects on the indigenous presence in academia and the contradictions faced in this still hegemonically Eurocentric and colonial space. It highlights the urgent need to value ancestral knowledge as valid and powerful sciences, rooted in thousand-year practices of experiencing and managing the natural and spiritual world. The text denounces the epistemic, territorial and symbolic violence imposed by coloniality and points to paths for the construction of an Intercultural and Pluriepistemic University, committed to the confluence of knowledge and to an anthropology open to honest, symmetrical and affective dialogue.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge; Plural Epistemologies; Indigenous University; Decolonial Perspectives.

Saberes indígenas e lutas territoriais: utopias e retomadas para vidas resistentes

Resumo

O presente texto é resultado da conferência de abertura da 34ª Reunião Brasileira de Antropologia, realizada em 2024 na Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais e foi publicado originalmente em Horizontes Antropológicos em 2025, volume 31, número 7. O texto aborda a relevância dos saberes indígenas, das lutas territoriais e do protagonismo dos povos originários no reconhecimento de epistemologias plurais, insurgentes e resistentes. Refletir sobre a presença indígena no meio acadêmico e as contradições enfrentadas nesse espaço ainda hegemonicamente eurocêntrico e colonial. Destaca-se a urgência da valorização dos conhecimentos ancestrais como ciências válidas e potentes, ancoradas em práticas milenares de vivências e manejo do mundo natural e espiritual. O texto denuncia as violências epistêmicas, territoriais e simbólicas impostas pela colonialidade e aponta caminhos para a construção de uma Universidade Intercultural e Pluriepistêmica, comprometida com a confluência de saberes e com uma antropologia aberta ao diálogo honesto, simétrico e afetivo.

Palavras-chave: saberes indígenas; epistemologias plurais; universidade indígena; perspectivas não coloniais.

Indigenous knowledge and territorial struggles: utopias and reclaiming lifeways of resistance¹

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This text briefly addresses some of the basic premises of indigenous epistemologies and their relations with western and westernised academic sciences. The first premise concerns the historical process through which indigenous peoples have come to recognise the importance of participating in academic spaces as a means to ensure their voices are heard and enable a dialogue between distinct knowledge practices, as exemplified by the participation of indigenous anthropologists in the 34th Brazilian Anthropological Meeting (RBA). The RBA is the largest event in Brazilian anthropology and our presence and physical participation — with our voices, body paintings, songs, dances, corpuses of knowledge, languages and war cries — in working groups, roundtables and symposia are the result of a long struggle for our (re)existences, lives and rights.

Even while recognising these academic spaces as sites of hard-won rights, we must never forget that we indigenous peoples still live profoundly shaped by a history of physical violence and by the denial of our rights to speak, think and exist. We remain deeply marked by the pain and trauma of the tragedies of more than five centuries of colonisation, such that events that harm our dignity and humanity continually (re)open traumatic psychological, epistemic and spiritual wounds that are difficult to heal.

We cannot forget the horrors of colonial violence and how we were filled with fear, disenchantment and the difficulty of believing in and trusting the colonising world. At the same time, it is this traumatic experience that also encourages, empowers and enables us to resist, struggle and maintain the will to keep living in accordance with our cultures, languages, traditions and bodies of knowledge. In the colonial process, fear may be the less impactful of its effects: disenchantment is far deeper and far more difficult to overcome.

The second premise concerns the spectre of the disappearance or extinction of our peoples, which three or four decades ago still haunted us at an existential level. For many years we lived with souls saddened by the pain of doubts about our future, since white society solemnly proclaimed that indigenous peoples were ultimately fated to disappear and become extinguished in Brazil.

1 Keynote lecture delivered as part of the programme of the 34th Brazilian Anthropological Meeting (RBA), held from 23 to 26 July 2024 at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte.

Although the colonial hurricane that has destroyed — and continues to destroy — our cultures, traditions, languages, knowledges and values has been profoundly devastating, much has nonetheless resisted and survived to the present day. More than 1,000 indigenous languages were destroyed and disappeared. Around 200 are still spoken, even though in many cases only a few words or lexical fragments remain in use. Fewer than 180 indigenous languages are spoken in everyday life by a population or a people. But the greatest losses and impacts of colonisation have occurred and still occur in relation to territorial dispossession. We have lost more than 85% of our territories, which were stolen and taken from us through intense physical, psychological and spiritual violence. We were expelled and are still expelled from our territories. Today we occupy just 13% of the national territory, meaning that the other 87% was seized from us. Even so, there are ongoing attempts to strip our peoples of these remaining 13%, as exemplified by the *marco temporal* legal doctrine, which seeks to further suppress our territories, including those that have already been demarcated and officially recognised. This is a cruel and inhumane form of violence that continues to sustain and deepen wounds that have never healed. For this reason, the struggle for our ancestral territories remains our primary cause and a permanent political agenda.

The wave of colonial violence was — and continues to be — so great and so profound that it has impacted our sociocultural structures, weakening and confusing our forces of (re)existence and our ancestral strength. As an example, I cite the case of the countless invasions and unprecedented presence of churches within indigenous territories and villages, often with the permission or collusion of indigenous leaders and communities themselves. These are hundreds of churches of every creed and ideological affiliation that have come to form part of the everyday life and dynamics of villages, persecuting wise elders and shamans and burning down traditional houses of rituals and prayers. These churches enter with the purpose of conversion, which means compelling indigenous people to cease being indigenous in order to become non-indigenous. Behind the idea of conversion, faith and belief lies a project designed to force indigenous peoples to abandon their own beliefs, traditions, religious practices and spiritualities in order to assume those of white people, the colonisers. One of the most harmful consequences of this process is the growing number of indigenous leaders, communities, peoples and organisations that have begun to negotiate away their territories. How can one negotiate or lease Mother Earth, Mother Nature? Communities that already have demarcated lands have started to negotiate their lands, leasing them for the implementation of small, medium and large-scale private and public projects. This is deeply troubling, because according to tradition it is unthinkable to negotiate territory, which is our parent. No one negotiates, leases or sells their mother. This demonstrates the cultural fragilisation produced by more than five centuries of violent colonisation that has yet to end, despite some important historical achievements in terms of rights and public policies. Today, the violence

that victimizes indigenous peoples every day continues and is becoming even more severe, as revealed by the most recent violence report of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI 2024).

The third premise of this approach concerns the entry, access and presence of indigenous peoples within the academic world, particularly in the field of anthropology, where there is now a significant and growing number of indigenous students in postgraduate programmes, and where a first generation of more than a dozen indigenous scholars has already completed doctoral degrees. In terms of the relationship between indigenous knowledge and its place within academia, it is important to emphasise that indigenous bodies of knowledge are the result of thousands of years of production, lived experience and experimentation, whose laboratory is the world itself: nature, humanity and life experiences over time. This point is important to stress because academic science often claims that indigenous forms of knowledge cannot be considered science on the grounds that they do not follow recognised methodologies of production, application and validation. The methods most commonly recognised and employed by academic science are observation, experimentation and laboratory-based research, in addition to peer bodies and scientific committees. Yet indigenous knowledge is also produced through these very same procedures — indeed, with even greater depth and rigour. Indigenous knowledge systems are the outcome of hundreds or thousands of years of observation, experimentation and continuous processes of collective validation and practical resolution, whose laboratory is nature itself in all its richness, generosity and magnitude. Nature (the cosmos) is the sole source of knowledge.

Indigenous knowledges are recognised and lived by indigenous peoples because they have ensured thousands of years of highly sustainable life and the development of societies that are socially, politically, economically and technologically complex and advanced. In this sense, our indigenous sciences offer indisputable bodies of knowledge that signal and secure sustainable pathways for a world now in global crisis, especially with the growing recognition that academic science alone has proven insufficient to guarantee or construct a sustainable future for our planet. Our ancestral knowledge has always guided us — and will continue to do so — along enduring and sustainable paths without ever having been responsible for planetary crises or for any ecological or socio-ecological instability.

But what are indigenous bodies of knowledge? These are theoretical and practical forms of knowledge, endowed with their own logics, rationalities and modes of production, validation, dissemination and application. They comprise principles, knowhow, practices and values that continue to guarantee the existence of indigenous peoples, sustaining their own ways of life in accordance with their traditions, cultures and languages. Guided by these bodies of knowledge, indigenous peoples live intensely, abundantly and in dignified fashion. Rituals and ceremonies that may last for days or weeks constitute powerful moments of celebrating life, overflowing with meaning, joy and existential fulfilment.

Indigenous knowledge systems, or indigenous epistemologies, can be characterised through a number of ontological and epistemological dimensions. The first ontological dimension

concerns the relationship or place of humanity within nature, grounded in relations of interdependence, complementarity and systemic and organic solidarity. Human beings are an integral part of nature and are therefore (inter)dependent on it for their existence and for a dignified life. There is no ontological separation between humans and nature, or culture and nature. No knowhow or knowledge exists outside of nature.

For this reason, we find deeply unsettling academic thought that clearly fragments and separates nature on one side and humanity on the other — or, more precisely, that situates humanity above and nature below — with disastrous consequences for the planet and, within it, for humanity itself or for the humanities more broadly. To a large extent, the current process of planetary destruction stems from this human-nature separation, as it has opened a mental, ontological and practical pathway through which human beings have come to feel themselves and act as superior, better and wiser than nature, assuming the wisdom to decide for themselves, for nature and for the cosmic world. Without an ontological and spiritual reunification with cosmic nature, it becomes extremely difficult to secure sustainable alternatives for life in this world.

By contrast, indigenous peoples feel themselves and live as organic parts of nature, not as though they were external to it, still less superior. This does not mean that they are captives of nature and its components or dominated by it. It means that they exist in relations of interdependence within the cosmic system, where all depend upon all, and all care for all.

The idea of the ontological organicity of cosmic nature present in indigenous thought leads us to another important concept perceived in indigenous cosmologies: the ontological incompleteness of nature — that is, the incompleteness of the world, nature and life itself. This differs from the basic premises of Western thought, which are grounded in notions of completeness, absoluteness and perfection, as represented in biblical ideas of paradise or the Garden of Eden and God as a supreme, absolute, omnipotent, eternal and perfect being, or a single, true, superior, infallible or absolute science.

In modern times, and from this same perspective, academic science emerges and reproduces the same logic of the biblical Genesis, except that this time, in place of a divine, omnipotent and perfect being, it is the human subject who, through rational science, presents and imposes itself as the sole, objective, universal and true authority. The university thus becomes the exclusive site for the production and dissemination of true knowledge using so-called scientific methods. From this point onwards, all other knowledge produced through other methods and by other subjects, cultures and peoples come to be denied or rendered inferior.

The ontological incompleteness of cosmic nature calls into question common interpretations of the philosophy of *Bem Viver* (Living Well) as indicative of a harmonious nature and of human life governed by harmony, thus presupposing harmonious relations between the beings that compose nature, including between humans and non-humans. I regret to disappoint readers, but I have never encountered a harmonious world among indigenous worlds. The origin narratives of indigenous peoples generally tell how the world emerged from voids or darknesses

that were gradually populated by forces and beings living in permanent tension, conflict and predation, a dynamic that persists to the present day. For this reason, one of the primary tasks of shamans is the ongoing domestication of beings in dispute. In my doctoral thesis, I refer to this as the necessity of *managing the world* (Luciano 2013). Thus, the pedagogical role of the shaman is to administer and manage the forces of nature in order to achieve or maintain the necessary balance as a condition of life (conviviality) and existences (coexistences). Harmony, therefore, is not a natural reality but an ideal of reality (Kopenawa & Albert 2015).

The shaman remains attentive at all times since spiritual forces or natural beings may attack and kill him at any moment. Even while asleep, the shaman remains in a state of alertness through dreaming, as a way of living in order to defend, combat and manage. The illnesses that he heals — another central task of the shaman — are the outcome of imbalances, maladjustments, disputes and tensions among the spirit beings of cosmic nature. Curing illnesses, therefore, entails managing and rebalancing through dialogue and negotiation with the spirits in dispute.

Ontological incompleteness, as a constitutive and natural feature of the world, performs an important existential role in the lives of indigenous peoples because it establishes the necessity for beings — human and non-human alike — to fulfil their tasks of mutual respect, reciprocity, solidarity, management and dialogical cosmic communication.

Indigenous peoples preserve nature because they are constitutively bound to it. This organic existential relationship is not an option or a choice for indigenous peoples: it is a condition of life and existence. The guarantee and sustainability of life require balance, management, respect and dialogue among beings. Curing illnesses in indigenous worlds can be understood from this perspective: healing is the outcome of complex processes of dialogue with the beings responsible for sickness. Shamans must travel to wherever the spirit causing the illness is located — whether in the underwater world, the forest world, the world of the stars or other worlds — in order to negotiate healing through an appropriate and specialised form of communication between the parties involved: the spirits that produce the illness, the shaman as mediator or manager, and the person under attack. Within this relationship there is no saviour, healer, arbiter or superior being who unilaterally judges and decides. Communicative dialogue in an incomplete and imperfect world must be guided by respect, solidarity, complementarity and reciprocity — principles that permeate indigenous thought. These existential principles are fundamental in societies that have not created beliefs in superior or supreme beings to whom solutions to the problems of life might be attributed or outsourced. The healing of sicknesses and other afflictions present in the world must be resolved by the beings of the world themselves through solidarity, complementarity, respect and resolute dialogue.

It is we — nature, human and non-human — who must produce the solutions for healing and for the problems that we ourselves create and confront through intracosmic dialogue. More precisely, this involves a polydialogue involving humans and non-humans. For us indigenous peoples, it is insufficient for humans alone to dialogue and reach an understanding if such understandings are not also shared with and agreed upon by the other subjects of cosmic

nature. To avert worse climatic problems, dialogue is needed with the spirits of thunder, lightning, rain, winds and so on. From an early age, our children learn to relate respectfully to water, rivers, seasonally flooded forest and nature in general. They learn early on the logics of how nature functions, logics that must be known, respected, managed and followed.

Given the gravity of the climate changes currently under way, it is both necessary and urgent to recommence a process of (re)educating contemporary humanity by creating curricular disciplines dedicated to this (re)education in schools and universities, such as environmental literacy or ecological literacy. Urban children do not know what rain is. They do not know why it rains, still less where rain comes from or where it must go, how it must flow. We indigenous peoples know that rain is essential to the continuity of human life and that of the planet itself. We also know that when it rains, water must follow its natural course in order to return to its origin, whether river or sea, and that along this path it waters plants and soils and quenches the thirst of people, plants and animals alike.

However, the modern urbanised human obstructs the path of rain with asphalt, walls, houses and concrete buildings, impeding and blocking its passage. With its natural course obstructed and needing to flow somewhere, it is evident that the water rises much higher, invading and flooding whatever lies downstream — houses, streets and cities. So, the problem is not the climate, the rain or nature, but humankind, which, through ignorance and arrogance, places itself in the path of the rain, because it neither knows, nor perceives, nor believes in the organicity, respect and interdependence of cosmic nature in which human beings are an interdependent part.

Another constitutive premise of indigenous knowledge systems is the predominance of cosmopolitics — or, more precisely, the politics of nature — in the pedagogical and political processes involved in managing the world. Moral and political order does not belong to human beings but to nature itself in all its diversity and plurality. Thus, a hunter will rarely achieve successful (productive) results in hunting unless he first enters into dialogue and negotiation with the spirits of the game and the spirits of the forest, within a relationship of considerable symmetry. Without this, the hunter may not even be able to enter the forest, being prevented by thunder, lightning and storms, which are there to remind him of the need for respectful and reciprocal dialogue.

According to indigenous ontologies, cosmic nature is a complex and diverse assemblage of subjects — material, biological and spiritual beings, each endowed with their own consciousness, will and agency, yet cosmically interconnected and interdependent — that is, considering the totality of the cosmic world. It is important to emphasise the agency of all existing beings, human and non-human alike, including so-called inanimate ‘objects’ or ‘things,’ such as stones, beaches and built objects like houses, swiddens, canoes, paddles and so on.

The fifth premise of the bodies of indigenous knowledge that constitute ontological incompleteness is astutely captured by the concept of ontological confluence formulated by Antônio Bispo (Santos 2023). Confluence is the possibility of plural, diverse, dialogical and negotiated coexistence, reciprocally or complementarily managed. It does not, therefore, imply superimpo-

sition or parallelism, nor even the intersection, bifurcation or fusion of horizons, configurations typical of ontologies grounded in binary logics, as in the case of classical western ontologies.

The notion of confluence helps us understand our recent process of colonisation. Colonial oppression over the past five centuries has gradually produced a partial distancing from our origins and ancestries. The 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution represented a moment of respite and a possibility, albeit partial, of neutralising the threat of our disappearance as ethnically, culturally and linguistically distinct peoples. Since then, we have begun to (re) assume our own forms of life and existence, rethinking and projecting our future on the basis of our ancestral origins. Our ancestral knowledge is our guide and timeless point of reference for life and existence. Ancestral principles, values and knowledge are not limited to any particular historical period. They are independent of lived time — whether antiquity, pre-modernity, modernity or post-modernity — since they are perennial principles, values, bodies of knowledge and practices that guide our spirits and our senses of existence. It does not matter if you live in a materially and technologically advanced society or in a life of simplicity in a forest or along the banks of a river: the meaning of life and existence will be the same if grounded in ancestral references. This is because ancestry is not a material condition of life but a spiritual and existential condition. Ancestrality involves an affirmative and collective attitude towards oneself and, consequently, towards the organic, systemic and interdependent collectivity in relation to life and the world. Ancestrality is not a historical, sociological, political or economic construct. It is an existential state of spirit and thus belongs to the order of feeling, affect, belonging, engagement and cosmic identity. If ancestrality gives meaning to life, it is also the source of fulfilment, balance and existential serenity in a life, which, as we have seen, is replete with tensions. As a principle, ancestrality is not, strictly speaking, a way of life since it is lived across different modes and living contexts.

It is our ancestrality that enables us to make sense of our relationship, as human beings, with nature and to feel it — as a dynamic, living, organic, systemic, pulsating, diverse and plural nature of which humanity is a part and by which it is always generously welcomed and cared for. It is Mother Nature who welcomes, cares for, nourishes and educates. If, in the world of white people, the source and seedbed of knowledge is the academy, for us indigenous people, the source of all knowledge is nature itself. In indigenous societies, access to knowledge requires the consent of nature. If this is not granted, access will not occur, and if access is forced or acquired improperly, serious consequences can follow, including sickness.

This ontological and epistemological relationship with cosmic nature has been a pillar of our cultural and ethnic resistance throughout colonisation. If today we are nearly two million indigenous survivors in Brazil, according to IBGE data from 2022, this is because something — indeed, much — of us was never colonised. This means that a significant portion of our knowledge and our existence has, fortunately, never been fully affected by colonisation. We are here today as indigenous peoples with our forms of knowledge, languages and traditions

thanks to the resistance and continuity of knowledge that was never conclusively colonised by modern colonial science and politics.

In this sense, it is important to highlight the specialised knowledge specific to shamans, which is transmitted exclusively to rigorously and personally selected heirs. These bodies of specialised knowledge are currently under threat due to the increasing difficulty of finding individuals capable of receiving and continuing them. The new generation of young people no longer display the specific abilities and dispositions required to receive and manage such knowledge and practices — knowledges that is profoundly important and powerful, but also dangerous. At the same time, it is crucial to understand that what makes us indigenous are our ancestries, this substantial portion of ourselves that was not colonised, our non-colonial existential dimension. I advance the idea that we must place greater value on these non-colonised dimensions, actively promoting them, rather than relying solely on projects of decolonisation, which, in general and in practice, are far more difficult to realise. Over more than thirty or forty years of accompanying and participating in discussions on the possibilities of decolonisation or decoloniality, I do not know of anyone who has, in fact and in practice, truly decolonised themselves in terms of their ways of thinking and living. Moreover, in attempting to decolonise ourselves, we often cease to promote, care for, strengthen and live what has not been colonised within us. I believe that fully promoting and living what has not been colonised is the most potent way of not being colonised — that is, of preventing what is (still) uncolonised from being dominated, destroyed and colonised. I recall once again that many of our forms of knowledge, practices, traditions and ways of life have resisted and been preserved to this day. This is also intended to call the attention to us, ‘postcolonial’ researchers, who are often seduced by the conceptual promises of decolonisation or decoloniality, as though they were new beliefs or magical or miraculous solutions, yet are far from objective, resolute, effective or affective.

If we do not have an effective and efficient method of decolonisation, we do have very concrete processes and spaces of non-colonial cultural practices and ways of life. Over the past thirteen years, I have lived in Manaus — a metropolis of more than two million inhabitants — working as a lecturer at the Federal University of Amazonas and coordinating the State Forum of Indigenous School Education (FOREEIA).² Throughout this period, I have been consistently impressed and made proud by the strength and vitality of the indigenous traditions, cultures and languages practiced everyday by the more than 70,000 indigenous people living in the city. These cultural practices were not performed for touristic purposes, as they are so often mistakenly interpreted, but as expressions of identity and existential pride. Children, adolescents, young people and adults painted their bodies every day, spoke their indigenous languages with pride, sang and played traditional music, and danced to ancestral rhythms before going to school or work, or even before staying at home or visiting relatives. All of this is non-colonised life.

2 TN: In Portuguese, *Fórum de Educação Escolar Indígena do Estado*.

Amid all this, what do we expect from academic science and from anthropology specifically?

First, I ask whether, within academic science and more specifically within the field of anthropology today, space and voice are truly guaranteed for our indigenous forms of knowledge and for the subjects of this knowledge. What place does our knowledge occupy in anthropology today?

The Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA) and the Brazilian anthropological community have been — and remain — crucial partners in the struggle to obtain and defend indigenous rights, but still in a largely tutelary manner of ‘white people speaking for Indians.’ Moreover, we do not see sustained commitment to the promotion and defence of indigenous knowledges within society, academia or even the anthropological world itself. I still hear, with sadness, anthropologist colleagues openly saying that this talk of indigenous epistemologies is nonsense. Nonsense is excluding indigenous peoples in the name of a meritocracy based on alleged standards of excellence. Excellence in what and for what — or indeed for whom? An excellence that does little or nothing to help resolve the problems of society and the world, not even those faced by indigenous peoples, who are still victims of racism, genocide, ethnocide, linguicide and epistemicide.

Many of us indigenous people are now physically present in anthropology courses and departments. But where are our bodies of knowledge? Where are our logics of thought, our languages and our ways of producing, disseminating and applying knowledge? Why is it that, in anthropology — as in other disciplines — we are required to follow the logic of white thought, writing according to standardised formats and models, studying European (neo-European) or North American thinkers and enduring, painfully, the racist distortions that have been written — and are still written — about us?

We are given no incentives, support or freedom to apply our oral traditions and our own modes of research and knowledge production in our academic work, constantly occupied and entangled instead in the bureaucratic rules of a Eurocentric, anthropocentric, productivist, individualist, meritocratic, capitalist, rationalist and colonial academy that suffocates us. We are unable to draw on our own traditional authors because we have to cite recognised and renowned authors from the Eurocentric academic world. The end result is a series of institutional framings that turn us into indigenous anthropologists who nonetheless operate in accordance with the logic of western colonial anthropology, even when we are addressing indigenous forms of knowledge, which remain captured and trapped within the methodological snares of western colonial science.

It was in recognition of the historical absence of space for indigenous anthropologies and their subjects within the traditional structures of Brazilian anthropology that indigenous anthropologists created the Brazilian Articulation of Indigenous Anthropologists (ABIA)³ in

3 TN: In Portuguese, *Articulação Brasileira de Indígenas Antropologes*.

2020, in an endeavour to open spaces for dialogue and protagonism. Yet, by all indications, this initiative has yet to alter the discipline's classical hegemony or its institutional structures.

It is also in the wake of this difficulty in encountering spaces and amplifying the voices of indigenous forms of knowledge with their own logics and subjects in universities that we have come to argue the importance and necessity of building an Intercultural and Pluriepistemic Indigenous University in Brazil. This proposal emerges after more than two decades of affirmative action policies and academic quotas that have enabled significant indigenous access to higher education — currently estimated at over 100,000 indigenous people, including both current students and graduates — yet with little progress in terms of a respectful and meaningful inclusion of the knowledge, cultures and ways of life of indigenous quota students. Recent studies reveal widespread and serious racist practices inside and outside the classroom, perpetrated by students, academics and technical staff, victimizing indigenous students in public universities (Luna 2021).

As we have already noted, the university has accepted us physically but not cognitively —in terms of our ways of thinking, our knowledge, our practices and our modes of life. An indigenous university can become a seedbed, promoter and custodian of both indigenous forms of knowledge and all other forms of knowledge of the world. A seedbed is not an archive, nor a library: it is a living and dynamic laboratory for the production of knowledge and for diverse experiences of ways of life and existences.

Over these decades of quotas and affirmative actions, we have observed only very peripheral, partial and isolated changes in university structures aimed at fully welcoming us with our cultures, traditions, languages, knowledge, ontologies, epistemologies and spiritualities. After all, which anthropology curricula have actually adapted to accommodate our knowledge? Which anthropology departments actively campaign to implement quotas for indigenous candidates in public recruitment processes for academic staff? Because without indigenous academics working in these departments, the effective practice of intercultural, interscientific and symmetrical dialogue is impossible.

Anthropology needs — and belatedly so — to update its curricula in order to accommodate knowledge of indigenous peoples following their own logics of production and transmission. Other disciplinary fields like education have been making efforts to innovate their methods through more collaborative, collective and co-authored modes of production. Anthropology, which has historically been the discipline closest to indigenous peoples, curiously appears to face greater difficulties and resistance in coping with these new times, in which indigenous peoples claim space, voice and protagonism within the field itself.

Given this incapacity of the traditional colonial university to accommodate our knowledge and practices, we place our trust in the Indigenous University as a space in which our knowledge can interact with other forms of knowledge about the world. The Indigenous University should not be a university solely of indigenous knowledge since that would risk reproducing the monoculturality or monoepistemicity of the colonial university that we so strongly criticise.

Rather, the Indigenous University must do what the traditional university has failed to do, owing to a lack of political will and decision, and to a deeply ethnocentric and Eurocentric vision and culture. Anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, among others, know and recognise our forms of knowledge: they write and publish about them, yet they do not accept the need to transform university structures in order to better accommodate, promote, and value them.

In recent years, we have raised our hopes with the emergence of ideas of interculturality, yet the colonial world has quickly neutralised their possibilities and potential, restricting their practical and theoretical meaning to external manifestations such as dance, music, body painting and other performances and cultural activities, while shielding the concept from political and epistemic critique. The contagious force of colonial thought is so powerful that it erodes, empties or diverts the meanings and significance of concepts that initially appear innovative.

In response to this scenario, other concepts and categories have been developed in an ongoing effort to escape the traps of colonial thought. Going beyond the idea of interculturality — no longer able to do justice to our historical, ontological and epistemological realities and perspectives — we have begun to work with the concepts of pluriepistemicities (epistemic pluralism), interepistemicities (epistemic dialogues, dialogues between different epistemologies) and interscientificity (dialogue between sciences, dialogues between different sciences). All driven by the need to evade the perspectives of colonisation, coloniality, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. These new concepts encourage us to conceptualise the huge epistemic diversity of our peoples and our planet. In this sense, the Indigenous University's statutes will need to guarantee space for this diversity of cultures and ways of thinking, living and existing, precisely all those elements that the structures of current universities, through their outdated senior and disciplinary committees, refuse to incorporate into curricular frameworks, whether due to vanity, arrogance or ethnocentrism. This refusal is justified by appealing to university autonomy, exercised by these committees to impose punitive, almost medieval measures under the spectres of 'epistemological vigilance,' 'meritocracy' and 'excellence.' Public universities and their governing bodies should instead deploy their technical, methodological and epistemic autonomy to foster innovation, rather than doing the precise opposite: using it to block the changes, advances, transformations and revolutions demanded by the society they are meant to serve.

Epistemological vigilance: for the surveillance and protection of which epistemology? The Eurocentric colonial epistemology? Is it meant to ensure that the Eurocentric colonial epistemology suffers no threat or rupture to its hegemony? We must take these epistemological traps extremely seriously if we are to move towards a world that is less racist and less unequal, and towards a science that is less epistemicidal and more plural and diverse. Our hope is that, one day soon, Brazilian anthropology will truly embrace our political causes and our knowledge. The rare attempts at dialogue between us, indigenous anthropologists, and non-indigenous anthropologists have been of limited productivity because they have not been fully honest. In general, we pretend to engage in dialogue while each side maintains its

positions and beliefs. We are told: ‘Ah, we like indigenous people; we opened spaces for them as our partners, and now they are no longer our objects.’ Yet the physical and administrative spaces we have accessed through quotas and affirmative actions are rights won through long and intense struggles; they are not favours, nor acts of charity, granted reluctantly. At times, we feel that we are being framed and imprisoned within the colonial systemic structure of the university as a form of punishment for our audacity in claiming our rights.

We reaffirm the importance of an attitude of honesty in these dialogues. We know that many people conduct research in indigenous villages and are aware that when they arrive in a village, in the home of an indigenous family, the doors of the house are opened — and the entire community with them. But this is not how we are received at the university. We do not feel welcomed or accepted. It seems that the only things received are our CPF number and enrolment registration. Our faces, our languages, our knowledge, our cultures and traditions, our ways of being and living, are of no interest and are not welcomed, because they are deemed inconvenient. The welcome must be whole, respectful, generous and grounded in solidarity, just as we welcome people in our villages and homes. This is a fundamental condition for constructive, productive, symmetrical and honest dialogue.

When a white researcher is received in an indigenous community in the Upper Rio Negro, the primary concern of the host family is the visitor’s food, respecting their dietary culture. The family, and often the community as a whole, makes an effort to obtain foods associated with white culture — such as rice, beans, pasta, coffee, milk and other items — alongside, of course, the traditional food of the community itself. This is not what happens in universities when they receive indigenous students. University restaurants show little interest or sensitivity in including, in their daily menus, elements of indigenous cuisines alongside Minas Gerais, Arab, Chinese or vegetarian dishes. Nor do they, as even the bare minimum, provide kitchen spaces so that indigenous students can prepare their own food. Nobody asks or shows any concern as to whether indigenous students enjoy chicken stroganoff or whether such food is beneficial or harmful to them. The issue is rejected or simply ignored that young indigenous women students, during menstruation or in pre-partum or post-partum periods, must follow restricted diets, avoiding a wide range of foods (fish, birds, animals, fruits; foods considered cold or hot; salted or unsalted, and so on), or else risk serious physical, psychological and spiritual complications that may affect them for the rest of their lives.

These questions of food are not trivial in indigenous lives and they should not be trivial for the universities that receive indigenous students, since they are directly connected to cultural systems, worldviews, ontologies and epistemologies of indigenous peoples. *Tucupi*, *saiúva*, *japurá*, *curadá* and *beijú*,⁴ central to Baniwa foodways, are not merely matters of flavour or

4 TN: *Tucupi* is a juice extracted from wild manioc, central to many indigenous cuisines. *Saiúva* refers to leafcutter ants, widely consumed as food in diverse regions of Brazil. *Japurá* and *curadá* designate regional forest foods whose preparation and consumption are embedded in specific ecological and cosmological knowledge systems. *Beijú* is a flatbread made from manioc flour, fundamental to indigenous foodways across Amazonia and beyond.

taste: they are also — and above all — ontological dimensions that these foods (both bodily and spiritual) represent for Baniwa health and existence.

Choices concerning types of food are the outcome of lengthy processes of knowledge production and are therefore forms of science. This demonstrates that academic science is neither unique nor sufficient. Academic science cannot be self-enclosed. There are many other sciences in the world. If it is neither unique nor sufficient, then it should have the dignity and humility to recognise its limits and to develop the capacity to supplement, complement and enhance itself through other sciences.

Indigenous sciences, understood as systemic rationalities, generally do not operate according to a mathematics of division and subtraction, but rather of addition and multiplication. As we have seen, the notion of ontological incompleteness present in indigenous knowledge systems foregrounds the necessity of complementarity, reciprocity, and solidarity, always oriented towards adding, augmenting, expanding, refining, contributing, sharing and distributing.

It is in this sense that our indigenous peoples have contributed to the formation and consolidation of Brazilian society since the very beginning of colonisation. Our cultures, traditions, languages, cuisines and many other forms of knowledge and practices are present in national culture and in the everyday life of the Brazilian people. Historically, we have contributed our sciences and our knowledge of biodiversity to the development of science and technology in Brazil and worldwide. We need only consult the libraries of scientific institutions to find countless works written about indigenous cultures and knowledge. Yet Brazil and colonialist science fail to recognise these contributions and the civilisational capacities of indigenous peoples.

If historical responsibility is assumed for the need to overcome the political and epistemic culture of colonisation that still haunts our university corridors, offices and classrooms, then it is time to begin constructing effective processes of decolonising our minds and our life practices — starting with what we call a conceptual detoxification of the linguistic categories that, consciously or otherwise, sustain and perpetuate colonial theories and practices. A minority of scholars within the academic world, often well intentioned, have, in recent years, sought to produce new concepts described as postcolonial, decolonial or even counter-colonial, with a reasonable degree of success. However, some of these concepts, seemingly formulated in favour of other, traditional or indigenous knowledges, have also ended up disqualifying, subordinating, and once again colonising them. By way of provocation, I cite the notions — very common over recent decades — of concepts preceded by *ethno*: ethnohistory, ethnoanthropology, ethnobiology, ethnobotany, ethnomathematics, ethnoastronomy, and so on. At first, we understood this as, finally, a form of recognition and valorisation of other kinds of knowledge — those of other peoples and cultures (and, in part, we still do). However, deepening our reflection, we came to realise that these terms continue to indicate or reproduce the hegemonic colonial system of thought, insofar as *ethno* designates a particular identity and a specific subject of knowledge. In other words, such terms imply the existence of a level of

knowledge that is *a-ethnic* — namely western knowledge — presented as universal, superior and true, while other, non-western forms of knowledge, labelled as ethnic, are relegated to a lower, local level, identified by their particular and specific subjects. Thus, ethnohistory comes to mean the particular history of a given ethnic group (valid only for that group) whereas history is taken to mean History proper, universal and hegemonic, and therefore valid for everyone, namely, the history produced and narrated by Europeans through historical science. In this way, we return to notions and concepts that are disqualifying and discriminatory, along with a science that remains profoundly historicidal, racist and epistemicidal. Why do we not instead level or equate concepts symmetrically and horizontally? Why, rather than using the prefix *ethno*, do we not identify subjects explicitly: European history, Baniwa history, European mathematics, Baniwa mathematics, and so on.

Finally, we invite everyone to continue building a plural science and a university capable of welcoming this cultural and epistemic diversity, and an anthropology genuinely open to respectful and honest dialogue.

TRANSLATED BY DAVID RODGERS

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data on which this essay is based are part of the research project “Diversity of Knowledge and Logics for Intercultural, Inter-scientific, and Pluriepistemic Dialogue,” developed under my responsibility at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Brasília. It is not included in any open data repository.

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