

Title: A message from the Guarani to the world: words drawn from centuries of struggle and strength

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Abstract: This is an ensemble of speeches delivered by three young Guarani leaders in December 2019, when they hosted visitors of the project “Transatlantic Crises of Democracies: Cultural Approaches” in the Jaraguá Indigenous Land, the world’s smallest Indigenous Land located on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city. In contrast with the government’s and the media’s constant attempts to misrepresent the realities of indigenous peoples in Brazil, this brief text speaks of the importance of indigenous peoples for the survival of life on the planet. After describing the presence of the Guarani people in South America, these young leaders compare indigenous and non-indigenous ways of living, drawing attention to how their respective cosmovisions diverge. They present a powerful critique of the predatory exploitation of nature by the non-indigenous, opposing the ways in which the Guarani relate to the land (shamanic/cosmopolitical modes) to the colonizers’ ways of stripping the land of its vitality in seek of financial gain (monetizing/privatizing modes). They also point out that, though the Brazilian State has historically assumed different political forms of organization – Colony, Republic, Dictatorship and so-called Democracy – profound disrespect toward the indigenous and ignorance of how to live sustainably on the land have always prevailed. However, despite all of the difficulties and crises they have had to endure and continue to face, this is a message to the world that the Guarani remain relentless in their efforts to maintain their way of life in defense of all other living beings.

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Indigenous Peoples and the Guarani: presenting who we are and where we live

In Brazil, there are currently 305 different indigenous peoples, who speak 274 native languages. We are part of the Guarani people, an indigenous group that inhabits a vast territory that stretches across the Bolivian Andes, Northern Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil. So, the Guarani are present in an extensive portion of South America. However, we Guarani do not consider this part of the planet, this continent, as America. We see it as *yvy rupa*¹.

The Guarani population in Brazil is around 84 thousand people, in Bolivia there are approximately 82 thousand, in Paraguay we are nearly 65 thousand and, in Argentina, the estimates are of 42 thousand Guarani. In Uruguay only a few Guarani families survived the history of massacres and genocide that were perpetrated against our people, so there are very few Guarani currently living in Uruguay.

This land is *yvy rupa*, and we were already here

Our people had to learn to live among the Spanish and Portuguese since 1492, when the Spanish invasion began. Despite this, we Guarani have been able to preserve our awareness and regard for what it means to live on this land. We call this *teko porã* – “the good/beautiful way of living”, and we strive to continue living this way.

When we refer to *yvy rupa*, we are saying that this land is whole and integrated, that the boundaries of countries and nations are artificial limits imposed by people, but, beyond the human beings and their divisions, we recognize that the land itself is a live organism that sustains the lives of animals, plants and humans.

We want to share this knowledge of our history with you and convey this understanding of the land, which is a very strong characteristic of the Guarani people: the land does not belong to us, it is not a thing that can be owned. Therefore, we would never say that this land is ours.

Every culture and people across the world, within their knowledge, philosophy and way of thinking, have a sense of well-being and of developing a good way of living.

¹ *Yvy rupa* (yvy = land + rupa = bed/platform). According to the Guarani, *Yvy rupa* is the terrestrial platform that supports the world. It is often translated as “the entire land” or “one continuous body of land”.

However, if this well-being exists, we must also acknowledge that its opposite also exists; that there is a lot of ill-being in the world. This is precisely why we Guarani have been struggling to survive, because hardship and ill-being followed the European settlers when they came to this territory that we call *yvy rupa* in 1500.

A sustainable life for the survival of the land and all living beings: against predatory development and accumulation of material wealth

It is vital that all peoples around the world resist this contemporary notion of progress and development – this belief that a country can only exist if it has a thriving economy, if it is financially wealthy and produces material wealth. We Guarani do not think in this manner. We seek to live life with what is necessary to fulfill our basic needs, because if we take more from the land than is required for our sustenance, we will certainly destroy this planet's capacity to provide life and we will also be destroying the survival of our future generations.

We are sending this message to you, speaking from within a house that we call *opy*, this is the house where we gather to pray. The Guarani people come together to pray every day. Where there is a Guarani community, there are always daily prayer rituals. We do not pray seeking prosperity and wealth for ourselves. Instead, we pray for the rain to continue existing, for the cold and heat to continue in balance, for our children not to become ill, for our elders to remain among us, so they can continue to give us guidance and knowledge. We pray for the survival of our people. And, our prayers for the land to continue giving us life are not only for us Guarani, but include all human beings and other creatures.

What does it mean to be indigenous?

Five percent of the world population is made up of indigenous people. This accounts for approximately 350 million people. But what does it mean to be indigenous? The word indigenous refers to native peoples, those who inhabited a place prior to the colonization processes that spread across the globe.

We indigenous peoples are peoples that have resisted the processes of colonization and have been able to hold on to and develop our own languages, beliefs and art forms. We do not accept, in any way, shape or form, a model of colonization that seeks to impose upon us a way of thinking, a religion, a faith and a way of living on this land.

If you are among those who do not accept a model of globalization in which a few large economies manipulate and control all natural resources and human lives, in addition to exploiting people through labor, if you object to this and envisage another possibility for human existence that respects nature, then you can also be considered indigenous.

Why indigenous populations are vital to the world

A very important and urgent question to reflect upon is: what is the importance of indigenous peoples for humanity and life on the planet?

Without a doubt, if indigenous peoples did not exist, humanity would have to invent indigenous peoples. Why? Because currently the indigenous – 5% of the world’s population – protect 82% of the planet’s biodiversity.

In Brazil, the indigenous lands account for 13% of the territory. However, the indigenous make up only 1% of the Brazilian population. That means that, out of a total population of roughly 200 million, there are fewer than 1 million indigenous people in Brazil. So, when Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, says: “*You, indigenous, have too much land*”, we are compelled to ask if, in fact, there is too much land for such a small indigenous population.

It is true that there are some large indigenous lands in Brazil, such as the Kayapó land that is the size of Portugal and the Yanomami land that is comparable to other European nations. It would seem that these are very large indeed. And, in that sense, a journalist once asked the great and wise Kayapó leader, Raoni: “*Raoni, don’t you think the Kayapó land is too big for a group of only 9 thousand people? The Brazilian population could take this land, use it to promote agrarian reform and distribute it among the Brazilian population*”.

How did Raoni respond to this? He stated the following: “*Indeed, the Kayapó land is very large. It is a very large land being protected by few people so that the entire world can survive*”. This is an example of indigenous wisdom and it is this wisdom that makes us indigenous.

We indigenous peoples do not measure the value of the land according to the price of a square meter or hectare. In the city of São Paulo, the price of a square meter varies between R\$5 thousand and R\$10 thousand². The Guarani land we inhabit has an area of 532 hectares, but we refuse to measure its worth according to the price attributed per

² These values in Brazilian currency amount to approximately US\$ 877.20 and US\$ 1,754.40, respectively.

meter or hectare, even if it is located in São Paulo, the largest metropolis in South America. How, then, does an indigenous people, the Guarani people, measure the value of the land? We value the amount of life that exists on this land. The more life that can exist on a piece of land, the more sacred it is and, therefore, more important for us to protect.

The *jurua* (non-indigenous people) constantly change, for lack of knowledge on how to live well on this land

We, Guarani, have not changed our vision. Even after 519 years of violent massacre against our people, we have not abandoned our way of thinking. But, it just so happens that the non-indigenous population, the *jurua*, can never make up their minds. In Brazil, they started off with a Colony, enslaved other people and exploited the natural resources. After that, they had an Empire and instated an Emperor, who was followed by another Emperor. Later, they formed a Republic, which was interrupted by a long period of Military Dictatorship. When that regime ended, they created a new Constitution, which has been called a “Citizen Constitution”. However, in 2019, an extreme-right, fascist and genocidal government came into power.

All of this leads us to question: is it true that indigenous peoples do not know what they want, as many falsely accuse, or would it be more accurate to acknowledge that the non-indigenous do not know how to live on this land?

We indigenous peoples are not frightened by a totalitarian government such as President Bolsonaro’s. We have never truly had our rights respected and guaranteed. We have been able to resist oppressive governments, again and again. We have resisted against all forms of oppression that have been imposed upon us since 1500 to this day. If we are still alive, it is because we know how to survive.

We are living on the planet’s smallest Indigenous Land. The Jaraguá Indigenous Land is the smallest territory in the world to be officially recognized and reserved for a native population³. The territory where we live is currently surrounded by three major

³ The Jaraguá Indigenous Land, inhabited by a population of approximately 600, was officially demarcated by the government in 1987, with an area of only 1,7 hectares. A new process of demarcation of this land, that proposes an area of 586 hectares, has been in course since the beginning of 2000. However, this process has been paralyzed due to (1) the refusal of the federal government to implement the measures required by law and take action in guaranteeing and protecting indigenous rights established in the Constitution; (2) A lawsuit filed by the Government of State of São Paulo against the demarcation, claiming that part of the Indigenous Land overlaps the limits of Jaraguá State Park.

transportation routes: the Rodovia dos Bandeirantes, Rodovia Anhanguera⁴ and Rodovia Mario Covas. These highways surround and confine our territory, but they cannot confine our spirit. Our spirit is free to wander through our country and planet.

When the Portuguese came to this territory where Brazil is located, they initially began to exploit a tree called pau-brasil. This is a tree native to the Atlantic Forest, where the Guarani people live. They exploited this tree to near extinction. People in Brazil are called “Brasileiros” (Brazilians), a name used to refer to people who exploit the tree pau-brasil. Are we Guarani going to be “Brasileiros”, in that sense? Never. And you should know that the patches of forest that still remain here will only disappear if they are able to kill all of us. As long as there is one Guarani alive, we will continue protecting life on this planet.

Some of the struggles we currently face

The number of indigenous students in Higher Education is proportionately low, but growing in Brazil. Being an indigenous person in a university is one of our biggest challenges, because we suffer a great deal of prejudice and discrimination of all sorts. Nonetheless, we persevere. Many indigenous students have to leave their villages for years in order to attend university. They become very isolated and lonely because, in addition to having to live in cities that are distant from their villages and families, the reality and conditions they endure in these cities are totally different from their lives in the indigenous villages.

Along with the current struggle to guarantee our access to education, from Elementary to Higher Education, we must acknowledge that indigenous peoples have been suffering in many other aspects, since the invasion and colonization of our territory. We have had to deal with organizations that were created with the sole purpose of hunting down and controlling the indigenous. This is not a thing of the past. In fact, Brazil's President recently defined the indigenous as indigent, saying that we don't produce anything and we don't pay taxes.

⁴ The Rodovia Anhanguera and Rodovia Bandeirantes, that border the Jaraguá Indigenous Land on the West and East, respectively, carry in their names references that evoke the history of Brazil's violent and racist colonial past. The Bandeirantes were groups that charged from São Paulo to other parts of the territory in search of gold and precious stones, but mainly chased fugitive slaves and went after indigenous populations that were captured and sold off as slaves. Anhanguera was the epithet given to a famous leader of these expeditions, whose violence granted him a name that in the Guarani language means “old devil” or “evil spirit”. The fact that these major transit routes were named after such figures, demonstrates that they continue to be celebrated as heroes and founding fathers.

We frequently discuss political issues in our villages and evaluate the government's actions, but the fact is that no government that has come into power has ever been good for the indigenous peoples in Brazil. In the past, many politicians would lie and try to hide their contempt for the native populations. However, today we have a President that doesn't conceal this and speaks openly about his disdain for us.

In the past, during the Dictatorship, there were indigenous persons that were taken from their communities and trained by the military to impose martial conduct and repression in their villages. Today, we see this happening again.

Within the government institutions, there are indigenous persons that joined the armed forces and were trained by the military to speak and act against their own people. This has been very prejudicial to our cause, because when an indigenous person associated with the armed forces is appointed to work in a public institution, the federal government feels unhindered in making claims, such as: "*We have put an indigenous person in charge of the indigenous health service*⁵. *She certainly understands a great deal concerning indigenous health issues, because she is indigenous and lives in a village.*" But none of that is true, because these are actually members of the armed forces that may identify as indigenous, but they don't live in villages and many of them never have.

This happened during the Dictatorship and, now, we see history repeating itself. Since the beginning of the current government, many indigenous persons have been killed in their villages and territories, for the mere fact that they are indigenous and have a different life style.

This is very serious and sad, but this kind of information does not reach people. It is not published in newspapers and mainstream media outlets, because we are invisible to the large media groups. This is why we are working to expose what is really happening to us in this country. The situation of indigenous peoples in Brazil is extremely difficult.

Closing words

We want to stress that our people, the Guarani, is being forgotten and ignored by the media and, therefore, we are invisible to the world. Many countries are unaware of all

⁵ There are several cases in which the current government has placed members of the armed forces who identify as indigenous in public institutions that deal with indigenous affairs. It should be noted that their identity as members of indigenous groups has often been objected by these very groups. The case mentioned here refers to Sílvia Nobre Wajãpi, who was appointed by President Bolsonaro as head of the Secretary of Indigenous Health. She is a member of the Brazilian army and claims to be part of the Wajãpi indigenous people, despite objections made by leaders and organizations of this indigenous group.

the violence and retrogression that assails us. But, here, we have an opportunity to speak to people who come from around the world and expose our reality, in the hope that this will be shown to societies in every nation. We treasure this opportunity to share our thoughts with people who have been illuminated by our Great Father. Those of you who have come all this way to our village or are reading this from have been illuminated and sent by Him to hear our voices and learn about our situation.

That is why we Guarani from the Jaraguá Indigenous Land are grateful for the opportunity to share our words with illuminated people who will be able to carry our voices further on, so that more people can become aware of our reality. We hope to spread this information, so that more people can join us to overcome the violence and retrogression that we are facing and help us in any way possible to find peace. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

You will always be welcome in our village, not only this village, but the other Guarani villages that you may someday come to visit. Our villages will always welcome illuminated and responsible people who come to join and aid our cause. *Ha'evete!* Thank you!

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