

Participatory Indigenous Geography Research: The Experience of the Guarani-Kaiowa in Brazil

Antonio A. R. Ioris

IorisA@cardiff.ac.uk - Cardiff University

This paper is aimed at discussing important ethical, methodological and operational questions that should be considered when doing participatory research involving indigenous groups, considering specially the perspective and the contribution of human geography. Most indigenous peoples around the world have been involved in the complex interplay of clashes, violence and resistance due to their brutal insertion in processes of socio-economic modernisation and agricultural or extractive frontier making (Ioris, 2018). Discourses of sovereignty, development and legitimacy certainly underwrote “settler colonialism’s desire to uproot and destroy the place-based autonomies of Indigenous peoples in the relentless acquisition of ever more land and resources” (Larsen and Johnson, 2017: 4). Particularly in Latin America, the tragic history of indigenous peoples is well known, written under the auspices of colonisation and following the pattern of a racialised power exerted both by the European powers and by governments in Latin America after independence (Quijano, 2008). Mariátegui (2007), almost a century ago, rightly denounced the idea that the ‘Indian question’ in the region was primarily a problem of the land ownership regime. Still, the process of colonisation and frontier making was a devastating blow that went far beyond only land or resource grabbing: it has been a true phenomenon of world-grabbing in the sense that it has been an attempt to reduce lives and landscapes of the previous inhabitants to the language of money and profit. Unlike migrant peasants, miners, construction workers or farmers, indigenous peoples had already been living in the areas converted into frontiers, which raises an important question regarding how they differ from other subaltern groups involved in frontier-making activity.

The involvement of indigenous peoples in socio-spatial transformations, although widely studied throughout the world, still demands further conceptual and empirical scrutiny. The typical academic narrative, influenced by a colonialist or modernist mindset, describes the waves of domestic or international migration promoted by national or international settler states to foster economic activity, at the expense of the land and resources of those who were already living in the area. These accounts normally deal with politico-economic control, and in some cases sheer genocide, historically exerted to crush opposition to the new patterns of production. The focus in such academic texts is on the systematic imposition of a new socio-spatial order by the settler states on indigenous peoples, at the expense of pre-existing institutions such as common ownership of land, a self-sufficient economy, nomadic stateless life and spiritual bonds to the land. They discuss how the original inhabitants of the territory were obliged to retreat in the face of the advance of the new frontier, forcing them into situations of acute exploitation, deprivation and overcrowding. However, this literature has frequently overlooked the perceptions, the inventiveness, the active reactions and the complex ontology of indigenous peoples. It is really only since the 1970s that indigenous voices and political subjectivity have started to attract better recognition. Indigenous groups are the quintessential targets of resource colonialism and the theft of land and resources (Parson and Ray, 2018), but their history and agency did not end with the loss of their land and decimation of members of their society. On the contrary, individuals continue to claim an indigenous identity in daily life activities and maintain attachments to places under difficult circumstances. Consequently, the indigeneity of frontier making requires post-colonial sensibilities and recognition of the political significance of culture in space. Beyond essentialist, romantic and reductionist positions, there should be a concern for the politics of race, as well as questions of representation and the ideological

construction of various racialised ‘others’, in favour of conceptualisations that are time and place specific (Jackson and Penrose, 1993).

The present analysis is based on a case study conducted in Brazil between August and November of 2018, coordinated by Cardiff University and the Federal University of Great Dourados (UFGD), which involved local and national academics and also members of the Kaiowa first nation (one of the Guaraní peoples of South America). Disruption and aggression towards Kaiowa communities is a long-established phenomenon, originally related to the process of colonisation and aggravated during moments of territorial dispute since the 19th century (Ioris et al., 2019). It is estimated that the Guaraní population includes around 280,000 individuals (represented by Figure 1): 85,000 in Brazil, 80,000 in Bolivia, 61,000 in Paraguay and 54,000 in Argentina. They are normally described as belonging to four clustering groups: Kaiowa (denomination used in Brazil, also known as Paĩ-Tavyterã in Paraguay); Nhandeva/Chiripa (also described as Ava-Guarani), Mbya (in the South of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina) and Chiriguano (at the foothills of the Andes in Bolivia). In Southern Mato Grosso [Mato Grosso do Sul], most indigenous areas are populated by Kaiowa (around 45,000 people) but often also have some Nhandeva individuals present; therefore, here the use of the expression Kaiowa-Guarani to capture both sub-groups.



Figure 1 – Present-day Distribution of the Guaraní Population in South America (2016)

Our departure point here is to acknowledge the long positivistic tradition and the colonial foundations of geographical knowledge, going back centuries, as part of the necessary effort to decolonise knowledge through a dialogue with other social sciences (MacDonald, 2017) and the recognition of the relational basis of indigenous knowledge and their environmental ethics based on reciprocity (Braser, 2010). As pointed out by Coombes et al. (2014: 845), “working with Indigenous peoples has stretched geographers’ presumptions about appropriate modes of engagement and representation... that challenge reaches the heart of the enterprise to question the very purpose of research.” Among other consequences, that means conducting research with and for the benefit of indigenous communities, allowing the expression of their own voices and their involvement in the interpretation of findings, rather than the conventional research on those communities for the benefit of non-indigenous scholars and government agencies. Similar to feminist, racial and queer movements, indigenous geography opens the prospect of decolonising and reimagining wider horizons and functions for/of geography

(Panelli, 2008). Geographers have demonstrated a growing commitment to embrace reflexive methods, deal with the politics of representation and the relational basis of critical research (Smithers Graeme and Mandawe, 2017). Our intention here was to jointly reflect on a transformative indigenous geography that combines the commitment implicit in participatory action research and, in addition, the need to make sense of fluid situations fraught with injustices and ongoing territorial disputes. It has been a challenging, but rewarding attempt to remove prejudices and learn together. MacDonald (2017) properly observes that the research process is even more important than the immediate outcomes.

The present case study is related to other two research initiatives, the first on the geographical and cultural features of Kaiowa, namely, the Newton Advanced Fellowship under the title “A Long-pending Indian Question: Consequences of Agribusiness Expansion and Ambiguous National Borders for the Guarani- Kaiowas in Mato Grosso do Sul (Brazil)”, supported through the British Academy (NAF2R2\100152) and, as the second project, the Research Network Scheme “Agro-Cultural Frontiers and the Amazon: Contested Histories, New Alterities and Emerging Cultures” (AH/R003645/1), funded by the AHRC. The objective of the Newton Fellowship was to initiate a collaboration focused on the indigenous geography of the Brazilian state of Southern Mato Grosso. The second project deals with questions of cultural identity, socio-spatial organisation, gender and intergenerational differences, and multiscale forms of mobilisation of indigenous groups affected by the advance of intensive agribusiness production. The main objective of the AHRC-supported network is to connect disconnected disciplinary discourses and disparate analytical approaches to culture, alterity and the history of agricultural frontiers.¹ It has involved a number of South American, British, North American and other international universities, as well as local public and non-governmental organisations, who are together developing new knowledge of the significance of agricultural frontiers in the contemporary world and set the agenda for future work in the interlocking, interdisciplinary study of the history of development and socio-cultural diversity in areas of agricultural expansion and economic intensification.

Over the last 150 years, the Kaiowa have been involved a dramatic process of land-grabbing, displacement from their ancestral lands, confinement to small, misplaced reserves, labour exploitation, widespread racism and systematic assassinations.² It has entailed the replacement of an existing geography based on common land, management of territorialised resources by extended families and regular movement around the region with a new spatial configuration associated with the commodification of labour and nature, private property of land, domestic migration and, more recently, drug trafficking and contraband from Paraguay. The Kaiowa-Guarani were only offered the backdoor of history³, which continued throughout the 20th century with the opening of farms in areas illegally expropriated with the endorsement of the federal government. It was a process of tacit ‘containment’ by the indigenous families in small reserves, where they were expected to be assimilated by the rest of national society (Brand, 1997). Among the 51 existing indigenous reserves and indigenous lands, only 24 have a reasonably regularised situation, although not always entirely pacified (Zelic, 2018). At the same time, Kaiowa groups have demonstrated a surprising ability to resist and even react against the loss of their ancestral lands. Indigenous peoples in the region have responded in different ways, including moments of rupture when dominant politics is subverted and indigeneity can emerge through “an insurgence of indigenous forces and practices with the capacity to significantly

¹ The details of those two projects can be found on the webpage of the Agrocultures network (www.agrocultures.org), coordinated by the author.

² Out of the total of murders (1,119) in Brazil between 2003 and 2017, 461 (41.19%) happened in Southern Mato Grosso (CIMI, 2018).

³ The situation has been seriously aggravated (during the implementation of this case study in October 2018) with the election of a significant number of right-wing politicians, with an anti-indigenous agenda, to the Brazilian congress (that includes the new president and many state governors).

disrupt prevalent political formations” that render “illegitimate the exclusion of indigenous practices from nation-state institutions” (de la Cadena, 2010: 336).

The recovery of land through reoccupation – called *retomada* in Portuguese – has been a major social and political mobilisation that has been able to disrupt the long established agrarian situation. The *retomada* is the spontaneous, autonomous reaction (decided by the indigenous collectives, independently and according to their own choosing and led by the shamans [*rezadores*]). A *retomada*, by definition, is the return to the original places where the older generations were expelled in the 1950s or 1960s (many still alive and able to testify their connection with the intended places), but it goes beyond that and expands into sites of intense spatiogenesis where traditions, new influences and articulation with other sites and other groups converge to create and consolidate the land recently seized (the terminology used by activists and indigenous peoples is ‘occupied’). The *retomada* is a type of political technique of peasant resistance that indicates the construction of material, organisational and ideological means for its utilisation (Ferreira, 2007). Through the *retomadas* “indigenous families reoccupy areas where they can carry out their community life, establishing their dwellings, planting smallholdings, and practicing their ritual and religious life” (Oliveira, 2018: 12). Figure 2 illustrates the political affirmation of Kaiowa identity and rights in a *retomada* area where they rejected the current spatial configuration and use road signs to affirm (in the Guarani language) ownership and the right to name their own land.



Figure 2 –Indigenous Name of the Land Written Over Farm Signposts

In a context of fierce disputes and widespread violence, this case study particularly focused on the challenges to make sense of the politicised evolution and contested production of new spatial settings, what are deeply influenced by socio-cultural factors, regional development pressures and also politico-economic trends. Both the land-based struggle and the production of space are lived, dramatic undertakings that encapsulate the contradictions of late Brazilian modernisation and national state reforms. Considered from a geographical perspective culture is more than material or immaterial, but it is projected into geographical action and place-based resistance. To inform and guide our discussion of those complex issues, the case study followed an engaged research approach which included visits and conversations with members of three Kaiowa communities (Panambizinho, Dourados and Pirajuí), interviews with Brazilian scholars with expertise in the history, society and geography of the indigenous group and a final

workshop at the UFGD in Dourados (12 to 14 of November) attended by indigenous academics and students, other academics and researchers from various Brazilian universities (located in the states of Southern Mato Grosso, Pernambuco, Paraíba and Rio de Janeiro). In addition, a number of visits and interviews were carried out with indigenous communities, especially those with previous experience and involvement in social sciences research. Interviews were conducted with Brazilian scholars (mainly via email and teleconference). Collected data were preliminarily analysed ahead of the Dourados workshop in November 2018, when the initial conclusions were presented and then extensively discussed. The event was recorded, comprehensive notes were taken and the participants were asked to articulate their views on participatory, engaged research methods. Finally, all primary and secondary information was analysed for the production of the present analysis, which is summarised next.

Challenges and Recommendations for Participatory Research with the Kaiowa

The deeply politicised geography of the Kaiowa, shaped by material practices, imagined spaces and religious beliefs, constitutes a very important field of research. It was encouraging to confirm, based on the qualitative data gathered during the case study, the relevance of emerging geographical questions and the interest of the participants in issues such as agrarian trends, place attachments, territorial disputes, the cultural basis of land management, etc. The Kaiowa repeatedly emphasised that from an original condition when large areas were available for the constant movement in the territory [*oguata*] and the organisation of *tekobas* (area where one or a few extended families live) their spatial condition was reduced to overcrowded reserves or encampments along the roads. Their socio-spatial marginalisation generates multiple reactions, including the mobilisation to try to recover the land lost to agricultural development. The Kaiowa live in a situation of great uncertainty and repeated aggression from farmers and the state apparatus, in a permanent mobilisation to resist and reoccupy their original areas (which, according to the legislation, they are entitled to claim back because it has always remained formally theirs).

Despite all the difficulties and the continuous threats, the accumulated knowledge and the ability to form stable networks across the different settlements are signs of Kaiowa resistance and indicate the manifestation of a latent geographical agency. Nonetheless, the idiosyncratic combination of intimidations, reactions and survival strategies represent difficult methodological, ethical and operational challenges for both researchers and studied groups. Our results suggest that those intricate issues should be approached from a fully engaged perspective with a focus on the contested interconnections between socio-ecological change and the inequalities ingrained in space. Geographical violence is a major, ongoing effect, not a singular event that happened in the past, that is, the oppression of indigeneity pervades the geographical present what justifies the call for ‘critical geographies of indigeneity’ (Radcliffe, 2017). Based on our engagement with indigenous groups, indigenous scholars and researchers from other Brazilian universities, we could summarise those challenges and opportunities to do research on Kaiowa geographical issues under the following four headings:

1) Research methods that are sensitive to indigenous landscapes

Despite the debate and the concerns about research ethics, there still remain important barriers that limit the understanding of indigenous landscapes affected by the pressures of economic development. Landscapes are part of what people are through everyday life experiences and meaningful relationships as a main source of survival (Ingold, 1993). But in the case of the Kaiowa, most places of great symbolic value and cultural meanings have been lost since the 1950s with the acceleration of deforestation and land privatisation. Of the thousands of Kaiowa in Southern Mato Grosso, the majority reside in the congested reserves and around a quarter live in urban areas or in encampments along the roads. This is a very unsettled and

painful geography that evolves through survival strategies of communities facing serious dangers of assimilation, appropriation and extinction. Socio-cultural information about the Kaiowa is, therefore, deeply contingent upon the specific space-making circumstances, exacerbated by the recurrent conflicts, the need to maintain family networks and external alliances and the challenge to make sense, and survive, in-between world situations. As a result, researchers often find themselves ‘in between worlds’ and are irrevocably transformed by the experience (Larsen and Johnson, 2012). The Kaiowa-Guarani skilfully mobilise their memories, imaginaries and cultural expressions towards acts of resistance and spatial practice (the *retomada* in particular), and their involvement in any research project is seen as part of the struggle and a search for allies. The researchers are dealing with accumulated tensions, hyperbolic discourses and are inevitably involved as part of the struggle. The simple fact that resources and time are allocated to study indigenous groups faced such acute threats reveal, almost automatically, an interest in their problems and reactions. It is a movement away from representing the Other and towards collective problem-solving, activism and advocacy (Coombes et al., 2014). The researcher occupies a specific location within the broad socio-political context of their research and must responsibly handle how this positionality and associated privileges shape knowledge construction (Smithers Graeme and Mandawe, 2017).

Ethics concerns are particularly relevant and must be sensitive, and creatively engage with the past trajectory, the currently situation and the aspirations of societies in the middle of land-based fighting with uncertainly prospects. That is clearly important in terms of the confidentiality of social and personal information, the constant risk of expositing leaders and their strategies, which could undermine action or influence public perception. It could likewise worsen internal divisions among indigenous families or groups, as well as between them and their traditional allies (churches, unions, NGOs, etc.). Riddell et al. (2017) list a number of crucial requirements for conducting ethical research, such as the informed and autonomous engagement of indigenous participants, recognise their ownership, control, assess and possession of knowledge, respect their intangible cultural property (i.e. language and traditions), reciprocity and inter-relational accountability. The study of indigenous life cannot be contained within the narrow boundaries of non-indigenous science and reasoning, as much as the basic terminology (i.e. indigeneity, aboriginality, etc.) is highly contested. In the case of the Kaiowa it is also necessary to have special sensibilities to capture their acute political situation and how they mobilise culture and religion to recover lost landscapes (see Figure 3 for an example of a participatory discussion of geographical trends where the indigenous families live). What is needed is more than the common Participatory Action Research, an engaged research approach that appreciates local systems of knowledge and practice as fully authoritative and the actors involved as sufficiently competent to design, conduct and evaluate the research they are involved in. That is to avoid what is happening with supposedly inclusive techniques, such as participatory mapping, are being subsumed into development policy by government agencies and multilateral organisations. The indigenous participants are more than informants or collaborators, but should be treated as co-researchers, co-ethnologists, co-creators.



Figure 3 – Kaiowa Describing Previous Locations and Places Where His Family Was Repeatedly Attacked by Neighbouring Farmers

At the same time, the researcher must establish trusted connections with real people, without romanticising events or political leaders, that is, avoid dealing with the ‘hyperreal Indian’ of many NGOs, a fantasy that reinforces the simulacrum image of indigenous people, supposedly pure, ecological, stoic, unadulterated (Ramos, 1994). Anthropological investigation has demonstrated that the notion of the Kaiowa person emerges from relations across wider categories of their society, it is an intense dialectic between the self and their collective condition (hence their discrimination against single adult males). Among other issues, it is problematic to think of clearly distinct epistemological differences between approaches loosely identified as ‘Western’ and ‘indigenous’, because in effect these are both polyvalent and polyvocal realms of discourse, at the same time that indigenous people live within the framework of Western cultures (Shaw et al., 2006). Indigenous cultures and identities are fluid, their narratives and engagement with place and space are mutable, not linear; all that invite and prompt experimentation, innovation, affection and partnerships (Coombes et al., 2011). There are many important political subtleties related to the construction of images and expressions, as in the case of the notion of *tekoha* used by the Kaiowa, which is a powerful political weapon that intensely demonstrates the attachment and need of places, but it has been consciously mobilised by the indigenous groups to suit their political agenda. One important mediator between non-indigenous scholars and indigenous peoples is the growing number of Kaiowa academics, as those associated with FAIND, the indigenous college of the Federal University of Great Dourados. Indigenous academics certainly help to avoid the so-called ‘hall of mirrors’ in which post-colonial theory reflects its own views rather than engaging with alternative ontologies and rethinking universals. The work of indigenous intellectuals triggers the reconsideration of century-old research practices, which raises further questions and provoke meaningful changes (Ramos, 2018).

2) Research that makes a significant difference in the lives of indigenous peoples

Research fatigue is a real problem affecting the relation between academics and members of Kaiowa communities, something that was denounced several times in our interviews and meetings. Because of long-lasting conflicts and repeated cases of extreme violence practiced by farmers and the police, the situation of the Kaiowa has attracted growing attention by graduate students and researchers. And although the indigenous families naturally welcome scholars interested in their culture and difficult socio-political condition, at the same time they complain about the lack of communication after the research is concluded. Many individuals expressed a deep frustration with the arrival of new researchers trying to gain their trust and inquiring about details of their family life, memories, knowledge and personal relationships, but that in the end take a lot of their time for no direct or indirect reward. It is therefore unacceptable for the Kaiowa that researchers would not give clear feedback and yield some concrete benefit back to them in relation to their struggle for recognition, rights and land. As pointed out by a local anthropologist in an interview, the research effort needs to recognise that their political demands are complex, multiple and constantly changing because of rising problems. Emerging issues affecting the Kaiowa include a rebellious youth culture (e.g. hip-hop bands in the Dourados reserve) as response to mounting frustration in the overcrowded reserves, gender inequalities, sexual violence and low paid jobs in non-indigenous households and industries.

The responsibility of the researcher is to conduct objective research, to the best of their capacity, while at the same time respond to the expectation of a supportive and worthwhile interaction. It should be recognised that a longitudinal research project can be a real burden on indigenous communities, such as the Kaiowa, caught in the middle of daily survival routines and time-consuming, uncertain land struggles, which means that their involvement in any investigation needs to be properly valued and somehow compensated. That is understandable because of the geographical trajectory of the Kaiowa both encapsulates disputes and reactions that are common to other indigenous groups and even peasant communities throughout South America, but have also experienced unique challenges related to their location, specific geographical settings and particular involvement in the wider process of modernisation through regional development. In that regard, they are highly representative of the contemporary demands and cross-scale strategies adopted by indigenous peoples to face the mounting pressures of market-based globalisation, commodification of land and resources, and cultural and linguistic changes.

At the same time that they expect support from the researchers, the Kaiowa are not desperately begging for help. On the contrary, they have shown a good deal in terms of resistance and ability to react. Despite sustained violence over almost two centuries, with different stages of land-grabbing and cultural obliteration, the Kaiowa have resisted and their population is actually on the rise. They consequently represent an uncomfortable presence in process of regional development based on agribusiness intensification in very large private properties (Ioris, 2017). The bare existence of indigenous peoples in the region, against all the odds, suggests that the socio-cultural landscape of Southern Mato Grosso is much more complex than normally considered in reductionist analyses that condense the interactions as forces in favour or against development. In fact, the survival of the Kaiowa reveals the surprising strength and the astute strategies adopted by them (obviously, in no way minimising the terrible pain and the long list of attacks and assassination). There are elements in their culture and value system that are not easy to capture and bring to the realm of academic assessment, but it is not too difficult to detect that their cosmivision, their religious beliefs and practices, their linguistic and artistic skills come together to form a coherent wisdom. As argued by the famous Kaiowa leader Ambrósio Vilharba (assassinated in 2013), retake land is not the end in itself, but it “will reinforce our way of being Kaiowa” (in Markus, 2013: 9).

This non-Western sensitivity results from the accumulation of long-term collective engagement with the landscape, reaction or interaction with non-indigenous groups and the state, and the ability to incorporate and metabolise elements of the new world that collapsed on them. The tortuous, fragmented process of resistance and reaction is, essentially, a perennial attempt to project indigeneity into a space that is itself highly dynamic. The Kaiowa have had to resist and wait, but – notwithstanding all the troubles and recurrent pain – have maintained alive the possibility (often translated into reality) of restoring some form of spatial indigenisation. The irony is that it is basically an effort to re-indigenise a territory that used to be theirs.

A genuinely committed indigenous geography needs to recognise the limitations of academic work (even more in the present neoliberal context where universities are increasingly managed as business and academics are seen as money-making labourers) and dislocated the centre of knowledge production: knowledge is creatively produced on the ground, through an open, horizontal engagement between different voices in which the academic researcher is merely a facilitator, a translator of what has been jointly learned. Indigenous co-researchers should be able to have control over collecting information about themselves, access and analyse information according to their own needs and goals, determining what and how it should be communicated. Likewise, there is a clear need to theorise the world from the perspective of the indigenous groups, rethinking universal concepts and search for alternative socio-economic and political paths. Kaiowa's geographical setting takes a strategical, long-term standing. It is a way of positioning themselves in the terrain – as a spatial spectrum – visibly denouncing the totally unfair expropriation of their land, but at the same time representing a weak, but nonetheless, perennial menace. It is an immanent space that is gradually and painfully realised. The Kaiowá consider the recovery of the large territory that was theirs the restoration of the *tekoba guasu*. The constant contact with relatives in other areas and the importance of 'movement' or 'wandering around' the territory [*oguata*] are customs that only reinforce the indigeneity of space, the crucial dialectics between lost space (memories of a better past), existing spaces (fraught with frustration and occasional victories) and the aspired, dreamed condition of social and spatial justice.

3) Understanding indigenous geographical agency

There has been a long debate among critical geographers and associated scholars over the last half century about the relational production of space, as an attempt to breach the obstructive binaries of Western culture and recognise both the politicised basis of spatial dynamics and the spatialisation of politico-economic injustices and differences. It has been recognised that every society produces its own space according to social relations and reflecting the balance of power and the intervention of the state. Human geographers have been dealing with cultural landscapes, non-material culture and intersections between representations, material things and practices. However, there remains a clear gap in terms of understanding the geographical agency of so-called subaltern groups beyond urban and peri-urban studies in the Global North. Indigenous geographical agency continues to require appropriate conceptual, methodological and interpretative approaches. That is necessary to fully recognise that indigenous groups are not passive geographical players, but have actively intervened in space production. This ongoing academic debate had major relevance for the present case study. The Kaiowa, despite all their troubles, have written one of the most successful stories of contemporary Brazil, continue to defy a perverse assimilationist (peasantification) policy introduced from 1910 (after centuries of enslavement and sheer brutality). They have resisted an antagonistic rationality imposed on the Kaiowa and that forced the fragmentation and privatisation of space, promoted and coordinated by the national state (Barbosa and Mura, 2011). The simple fact that the Kaiowa persevere as an active, relatively large group, with strong association with valued places and traditions reveal an acute ability to protect their cultural heritage and to mobilise social networks of support. The little, but recurrent, territorial victories and state concessions in recent decades are in effect translations of cultural strength into

geographical agency, defined as the capacity to not only take part, but influence socio-spatial changes. The demonstration of geographical agency, according to concrete institutional circumstances and against the hegemonic vectors of regional development, is basically a way to 'put culture to work' in their favour.

The acknowledgement of the indigenous groups and individuals as conscious and autonomous producers of space, despite all the adversities, directly converts an investigation into the geographical features of indigenous peoples into also a study of their political initiative and plan of action. The interface between culture and politics, in the case of indigenous groups in particular, is expressed through spatialised disputes and territorial ambitions. Without essentialising identity and culture, we identified at least three key dimensions of Kaiowa knowledge and culture that inform their geographical agency: 1) a deeply relational identity based on family ties and community connections; 2) existential attachment to land and place, beyond and in contrast with western systems of value and capitalist agriculture and environmental management; and 3) pronounced and sustained ability to resist to pressures and tragedy resulting from the production of highly adverse spatial configurations. Those cultural elements, combined with the accumulated experience of displacement and desperate resistance, have been translated into multiple survival strategies through the fragmented, piecemeal reconstruction of the Kaiowa space (obviously different, but inspired by the images and memories of their ancestral places).

The Kaiowa have a unique, cultural-specific relation with their land and the production of space (it has been partially changing, but the cultural value is still strong); there is a qualitative association with their ancestral land, where the ancestors were buried and still are, both the living and the dead reside in that land; their life, identity, existence depends on that land, at the end of their life they become land themselves. Indigeneity is certainly a relational construct and, because of the incomplete erasure of colonisation, indigenous and non-indigenous identities co-constitute each other (Coombes et al., 2011). Kaiowa groups reject the private land property, as it is in directly in conflict with their tradition of common land [*tekobakuaaba*], although there is growing pressure and uneven acceptance of the privatisation of land and resources (exacerbating internal disputes, but also crating new fields of struggle with the state). According the Kaiowa institutions, people don't 'own' or dominate the land, but live there sharing it with other creatures and permanently have to negotiate the landscape with spiritual entities; creatures and ecosystems hold, or belong to, spirits [*jaras*] and access or use depends on the relations established (Pereira, 2010).

Because of the organisational, behavioural and demographic problems in the original eight reserves created between 1915-1928 (the main one on the border of the city of Dourados, which is considered the most problematic indigenous area in Brazil), a significant proportion of the Kaiowa-Guarani population prefer to live in encampments along the roads. Such encampments can be a temporary campsite in anticipation of a movement back to their lost land or it could be a more permanent point of residence (there are cases of families who live in such dreadful conditions for many decades). These groups maintain close connection with relatives in other encampments and in the reserves, but also form a particular spatial structure, which is certainly informed by their cultural values and social hierarchy (Morais, 2017). Despite the very precarious conditions in these encampments, these groups foster an expectation of a better life and the hope to return to the areas where they, or their descendants, used to live. The Kaiowa geography is rapidly changing, but only part of it is visible, while the rest is veiled behind memories, aspirations, astute mobilisation and crafted discourses. The Kaiowa cannot conceive of a land with rigid, artificial physical limits, constraining social mobility and disturbing agricultural practices, but understand that the space needed to live [*tekoba*] is permanently actualised and reconfigured, as much as necessary to full their way of life, habits and customs [*ava reko*] (Barbosa and Mura, 2011). The space of the encampment, regardless of the atrocious conditions and evident risks, is also the space of anticipation and potentiality. It is generally from these encampments that the indigenous groups, under the efficient coordination of their political and religious leaders, plan and organise the retaking of ancestral land lost to the pressures of

development. The initiative to reconquer their legitimate land is described as *retomadas*, which are basically the struggle to reassert their position in contemporary politico-economic matters and try to shape their own future.

4) Dealing with groups facing constant threats and structural violence

Considering the idiosyncratic fusion of hyperbolic violence and the willingness of the Kaiowa to pay a high human price in order to have their land back, the research effort should be extremely careful to neither undermine ongoing mobilisations nor put people and leaders at risk (our visits to road encampments and *retomada* areas were certainly moments of high tension and conspicuous apprehension for both the indigenous families and research partners). This is not a trivial logistical question, given the recent history of the Kaiowa marked by record number of murders and suicides. Almost half of the assassinations in Brazil between 2003 and 2014 occurred in Southern Mato Grosso (687 assassinations), the majority of atrocities (377 cases) especially involved the Kaiowa (Zelic, 2018). These macabre statistics include land-related disputes and fights among indigenous people (associated with sexual abuse, alcohol or drug trafficking), aggravated by the depressive conditions of the precarious reserves.

The state of Southern Mato Grosso has the second largest indigenous population in Brazil, but the worst allocation of land; the population density is 10.18 inhabitants/km², what is 40% more dense than among the non-indigenous population, and in the case of the Kaiowa 34 inhabitant/km². There is no other way to describe the situation of the Kaiowa under the advance of soybean and sugarcane production (among other crops) than genocide. Short (2016) rightly proposes a broader, more sociological understanding of genocidal practices than just the physical elimination of a determinate group of people, but including also cultural destruction, social death and ecological devastation (ecocide). This is extremely relevant here. The Kaiowa-Guarani have been suffering from the convergence of all those genocidal processes, aggravated by the political arrogance of export-based agribusiness farmers, national and international land-grabbing investors, and the dishonest movements of a powerful regional elite (who have been illegally appropriating land from the Kaiowa for several decades). Recurrent violence against the legitimate land proprietors – the Kaiowa-Guarani – is in direct breach of the elementary principles of the Brazilian constitution (Articles 231 and 232, in particular), but the local judges, civil servants and politicians have firmly decided against the Kaiowa.

In that context, the spatiogenic rationality of Kaiowa's *retomada* is to contain the advance of private farms, cattle ranches and agribusiness monoculture farms through the coordinated retaking of the land expropriated in the last half century. It is a risky and extremely uncertain undertaking. Landowners react against indigenous claims and take violent initiatives to protect their assets, helped by the protracted and biased court proceedings. The consequence is the perennial difficulty of the Kaiowa to retain reoccupied land due to the constant threat posed by farmers and paramilitaries (professional companies hired by farmers and rural companies, normally employing retired or even active policemen). Despite recurrent cases of aggression, the police express limited interest in finding those responsible for the crimes and the judicial system is quite unwilling and unprepared to punish. These forms of treatment only fuel resentment and, paradoxically, leads more individuals to join roadside encampments ahead of future *retomadas*. The typical situation is a prolonged struggle through the various layers of the judiciary, with endless appeals and explicit political pressure exerted on local judges (normally themselves large-landowners and members of regional wealthy families).

Since 1978, in the final phase of the regrettable military dictatorship in Brazil, the Kaiowa started to organise regional meetings [*aty guasu*, 'the great assembly' in Guarani] to discuss issues of common concern, which are marked by religious rituals, used to voice their demands and discuss strategies to retake their lands. Participants identify mutual needs, share tactics, make collective decisions, and prepare documents for public dissemination. The political articulation of the indigenous groups in Brazil was enhanced with the approval of a new national

Constitution in 1988. The Kaiowa felt empowered to demand back areas significantly larger than before (now with around 10,000 hectares). They also underscore the cultural importance of much larger territories [*tekoba guasu*] connected through networks, instead of fragmented setting offered by the isolated reserves (Barbosa and Mura, 2011).

Scholars have used the concept of 'dwelling space' (held and lived by a community), but in the case of the Kaiowa it is perhaps better to think about 'spaces of confinement'. The confinement of the Kaiowa is not only place-based (as in the case of the overcrowded reserves) but captivity due to efficient racist practices of socio-economic exploitation, political exclusion and interpersonal abuse. Basic elements to justice, such as the native people's inherent domain over their territories, the international principle of 'free prior and informed consent' (FPIC) and the International Labour Organisation's 169 Convention, signed by Brazil, have been overlooked in the case of the Kaiowa. In addition, the Kaiowa have been normally depicted by the mass media and political debate through a moralising tone in which they are presented as guilty of their own condition, because constantly judged against criteria and values that are fundamentally foreign. It is an *ex post facto* construction of the fate of the indigenous groups. Even the use of internet by the Kaiowa to promote their cause has much less visibility, for example, than national and international NGOs because of internet algorithmic filtering, which purposely excludes some kind of political speeches, segregates social groups and suppresses divergent perspectives (Ochigame and Holston, 2016). Another difficulty that affects both academic and general perception of the indigenous peoples in Brazil is the idealisation of their image, that is, the requirement that only those complying with concepts of racial purity and geographical isolation could be considered 'genuine Indians'. This is an ideological construction of the 'Indian without history' that denies the existing groups any space and protagonism in current affairs. It obscures the fact that their contemporary condition is not only shaped by constants attacks and the pain of losing their land, but also the resolve to resist and react, informed by their culture, religion and cosmovision.

Overall Conclusions

The previous pages have examined how the straightforward image of modernity and innovation that underpins contemporary development frontiers needs to be replaced with a much more complex picture. Frontier making, which has been a central politico-spatial driving force of capitalist modern development, remains a highly paradoxical phenomenon, in which progress and abundance are repeatedly promised, while the reality on the ground continues to be shaped by the old practices of exploitation, exclusion and racism. The landscape of the frontier seems simultaneously logical, organised and chaotic, out of place. In the case of Southern Mato Grosso, agribusiness appears novel, but in fact it recreates elements of the colonial past, particularly in the context of violence against local indigenous groups. The Kaiowa-Guarani, among other peoples, are commonly depicted as living examples of stone-age savages, although their geographical practices demonstrate a sophisticated ability to comprehend and creatively react to socio-spatial pressures and economic changes. It is a situation fraught with puzzles and ambiguities; to a large extent, it is the Kaiowa who are offering innovation, while agribusiness encompasses inbuilt obsolescence. Agribusiness seems new, but it mobilises and is justified through practices introduced in colonial times, while indigenous people are historically old, but their reactions, creativity and aspirations are closely connected with contemporary debates on alternatives to development, market globalisation and cultural homogenisation. All this is happening in a highly politicised landscape where indigenous groups, despite all the tragedy, suffering, humiliation and severe neglect by the state, are in effect securing small, but precious, territorial victories. To the surprise of some urban and business groups, the Kaiowa have shown latent geographical agency shaped by religious practices, strong family ties and the ability to internally negotiate the return to their original areas. The wisdom and resistance of Kaiowa-Guarani groups derive from the simultaneous ethnicisation of space and spatialisation of culture. Far from any sentimental

romanticism, we can learn that for the last forty years the Kaiowa have been able to regain confidence, mobilise their language, culture and religion, and form strong networks between families and localities to both resist the trend of violence and, when opportunities arise, retake their long lost land (see an indication of that in Figure 4).



Figure 4 – Kaiowa-Guarani Woman in a *Retomada* in Southern Mato Grosso

Different indigenous groups will have diverse levels of association with the Westernised model of economic development, but the manifestation of indigenous culture represents a challenge to the prospects of frontier making and reveals its ingrained contradictions in terms of socio-ecological violence, social exclusion and inequalities. Contrasting with the narrow rationality of agribusiness farmers and their political allies, the cosmivision of the Kaiowa encapsulates multiple layers in which the material and spiritual terrains converge in a way that allows them not only to labour in the areas currently occupied, but also to almost touch the spectral space that will be returned to them one day. The land of their ancestors belongs to the living descendants and the return to those areas depends, fundamentally, on the initiative and courage of present generations. Because Kaiowa land has a purely qualitative value, which is absolute, perpetual and beyond monetisation, the only logical attitude is to continue the struggle to the last drop of blood. From their perspective, they are witnessing a ‘territorial pulse’, that is, their lands are only temporarily lost and are there to be reconquered; the Kaiowa never gave up their land; they could not, because it is part of their existence to be returned to the ancestral land. There are many lessons to be learned here, in particular the talent of the Kaiowa to absorb the increasing and dissimulated brutality of frontier making and, at the same time, voice their political demands, form solid strategic alliances and coordinate land-recovery initiatives. It is the case that the affirmation of indigenous identities and the pursuit of long-pending rights are relatively recent phenomena in Brazil and other South American countries, directly associated with the progressive strengthening of democratic reforms. In that context, the resistance and agency of indigenous groups, who are

increasingly trying to restore valued elements lost to national development, are crucial components of a wider mobilisation for social and environmental justice.

This results of this analysis endorse the growing importance of indigenous geography in the early decades of the 21st century, a period characterised by sustained attacks on many of the important social and political achievements of the last two centuries (such as universal equality, rejection of racism and discrimination, basic human rights, etc.). The territorial and agrarian struggle of the Kaiowa-Guarani constitutes an emblematic chapter of a geographical mobilisation in the Global South of the planet, which challenges the conventional, Westernised narrative of modernity or post-modernity. The survival and expansion of groups like the Kaiowa actually represent an ‘inconvenient’ reminder that other worlds are possible and, quite conceivably, necessary. As social, ethical and political tensions increase, perhaps Brazilians can find helpful responses from those traditionally ignored: the descendants of the early inhabitants of the continent, who may hold answers to some of the problems accumulated through a highly uneven process of national development. Indigeneity is a relational construct and, because of the incomplete erasure of colonisation, indigenous and non-indigenous identities co-constitute each other. The Kaiowa, other Guarani populations and the more than 300 first nation peoples have a lot to offer in the collective search for a more meaningful way of life. Perhaps a biblical analogy can even be invoked in this context: non-indigenous Brazilians are the prodigal sons and the indigenous the wise fathers. A huge dose of humility and willingness to learn will certainly be needed in order to move beyond the tragic geographical trends that continue to mark the lives of indigenous groups such as the Kaiowa.

References

- Barbosa, P.A. and Mura, F. 2011. Construindo e Reconstruindo Territórios Guarani: Dinâmica Territorial na Fronteira entre Brasil e Paraguai (séc. XIX-XX). *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 97-2, 287-318.
- Benites, T. 2014. Recuperação dos Territórios Tradicionais Guarani-Kaiowá: Crónica das Táticas e Estratégias. *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 100-2, 229-240.
- Blaser, M. 2010. *Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond*. Duke University Press: Durham and London.
- Brand, A. 1997 O Impacto da Perda da Terra sobre a Tradição Kaiowa-Guarani: Os Dificéis Caminhos da Palavra. PhD thesis. PUC/RS: Porto Alegre.
- CIMI. 2018. *Violência contra os Povos Indígenas no Brasil: Dados de 2017*. Conselho Indigenista Missionário: Brasília.
- Coombes, B., Gombay, N., Johnson, J.T. and Shaw, W., 2011. The Challenges of and from Indigenous Geographies. In: Del Casino, V.J., Thomas, M., Cloke, P. and Panelli, R. (eds.), *The Companion to Social Geography*. Blackwell: Oxford. pp. 523-542.
- Coombes, B., Johnson, J.T. and Howitt, R. 2014. Indigenous Geographies III: Methodological Innovation and the Unsettling of Participatory Research. *Progress in Human Geography*, 38(6), 845-854.
- de la Cadena, M. 2010. Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes. *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(2), 334-370.
- Ferreira, A.C. 2007. Tutela e Resistência Indígena: Etnografia e História das Relações de Poder entre os Terena e o Estado Brasileiro. PhD thesis. Museu Nacional/UFRJ: Rio de Janeiro.
- Ingold, T. 1993. The Temporality of the Landscape. *World Archaeology*, 25(2), 152-174.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2017. *Agribusiness and the Neoliberal Food System in Brazil: Frontiers and Fissures of Agro-neoliberalism*. Routledge: London.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2018. Amazon's Dead Ends: Frontier-making the Centre. *Political Geography*, 65, 98-106.

- Ioris, A.A.R., Benites, T. and Goettert, J.D. 2019. Challenges and Contribution of Indigenous Geography: Learning with and for the Kaiowa-Guarani of South America. *Geoforum*, 137-141.
- Jackson, P. and Penrose, J. (eds.). 1993. *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation*. Minnesota University Press: Minneapolis.
- Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. 2012. In Between Worlds: Place, Experience, and Research in Indigenous Geography. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 29(1), 1-13.
- Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. 2017. *Being Together in Place*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.
- MacDonald, K. 2017. My Experiences with Indigenist Methodologies. *Geographical Research*, 55(4), 369-378.
- Mariátegui, J.C. 2007 [1928]. *Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana*. Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho: Caracas.
- Markus, C. (ed). 2013. *Kaiowá: Um Povo que Caminha*. ISAEC/DAÍ-COMIN: São Leopoldo.
- Morais, B.M. 2017. *Do Corpo ao Pó*. São Paulo: Editora Elefante.
- Murton, B. 2012. Being in the Place World. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 29(1), 87-104.
- Ochigame, R. and Holston, J. 2016. Filtering Dissent: Social Media and Land Struggles in Brazil. *New Left Review*, 99, 85-108.
- Oliveira, J.P. 2018. Fighting for Lands and Reframing the Culture. *Vibrant*, 15(2), 1-21.
- Parson, S. and Ray, E. 2018. Sustainable Colonization: Tar Sands as Resource Colonialism. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 29(3), 68-86.
- Panelli, R. 2008. Social Geographies: Encounters with Indigenous and More-than-White/Anglo Geographies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(6), 801-811.
- Pereira, L.M. 2010. Demarcação de Terras Kaiowa e Guarani em MS: Ocupação Tradicional, Reordenamentos Organizacionais e Gestão Territorial. *Tellus*, 18, 115-137.
- Quijano, A. 2008. El Movimiento Indígena y las Cuestiones Pendientes en América Latina. *Cotidiano - Revista de la Realidad Mexicana*, 151, 107-120.
- Radcliffe, S.A. 2017. Geography and Indigeneity I: Indigeneity, Coloniality and Knowledge. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(2), 220-229.
- Ramos, A.R. 1994. The Hyperreal Indian. *Critique of Anthropology*, 14(2), 153-171.
- Ramos, A.R. 2018. Por una Crítica Indígena de la Razón Antropológica. *Anales de Antropología*, 52(1), 59-66.
- Ribeiro, D. 2015. *O Brasil como Problema*. 2nd edition. Global: São Paulo.
- Riddell, J.K., Salamanca, A., Pepler, D.J., Cardinal, S. and McIvor, O. 2017. Laying the Groundwork: A Practical Guide for Ethical Research with Indigenous Communities. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 8(2). DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.6
- Shaw, W.S., Herman, R.D.K. and Dobbs, G.B. 2006. Encountering Indigeneity: Re-imagining and Decolonizing Geography. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 88(3), 267-276.
- Short, D. 2016. *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide*. London: Zed Books.
- Smithers Graeme, C. and Mandawe, E. 2017. Indigenous Geographies: Research as Reconciliation. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 8(2). Retrieved from: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/iipj/vol8/iss2/2>. DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.2
- Zelic, M. 2018. Um Genocídio em Curso em Mato Grosso do Sul. *Cartografia de Ataques Contra Indígenas*. Fundação Rosa Luxemburgo/Armazém Memória/InfoAmazonia. Available at: <http://caci.cimi.org.br>