

# Resistance and struggle in the Amazon: the Apyāwa re-territorialization process and the return to ancestral living space

Resistência e luta na Amazônia: o processo de re-territorialização Apyāwa e o retorno ao espaço de vida ancestral

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## Abstract

The study aims to understand, from a socio-environmental point of view, the process of de-re-territorialization of the Tapirapé people. At present, the Tapirapé occupy the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land, located in the northeastern region of Mato Grosso State, Brazil. Through bibliographic analysis and interviews with 27 Indigenous leaders, it was found that, in 1947, the Apyāwa were forced to abandon their living space, owing to expansionist initiatives and the resulting diseases. The people experienced displacements and formed villages in different places near their ancestral territory; however, they never forgot their land. After a long collective movement of struggle and resistance, the Apyāwa reconquered their territory in 1993, which had been degraded by the anthropic actions of large-scale farmers. Their experience teaches that, even in the face of state-capital asymmetry, the persistent struggle of a people constitutes a possibility of change in territory reconquest and, at the same time, of ecological reconquest through their living presence in the Amazon.

**Keywords:** Legal Amazon; territory; Tapirapé; indigenous lands.

## Resumo

O estudo objetiva compreender, do ponto de vista socioambiental, o processo de des-re-territorialização do povo Tapirapé. Na atualidade, ocupam a Terra Indígena Urubu Branco, localizada no nordeste do estado de Mato Grosso. Por meio de estudos bibliográficos e de entrevistas com 27 lideranças indígenas, verificou-se que, em 1947, devido a frentes expansionistas e doenças que trouxeram consigo, os Apyāwa foram forçados a abandonar seu espaço vital. Perpassaram por deslocamentos e aldeamentos em distintos lugares nas proximidades do território ancestral; porém dele nunca se esqueceram. Depois de um longo movimento coletivo de luta e resistência, no ano de 1993 eles reconquistaram seu território degradado pelas ações antrópicas promovidas pelos grandes fazendeiros. Assim, ensinam que, mesmo diante da assimetria estado-capital, a luta persistente de um povo constitui possibilidade de mudanças na reconquista do território e, ao mesmo tempo, de reconquista ecológica pela sua presença viva na Amazônia.

**Palavras-chave:** Amazônia Legal; território; Tapirapé; terras indígenas.

## INTRODUCTION

The existence of diverse socio-territorial and environmental conflicts are marks of the past and present in the Amazon and within it, in the Legal Amazon, in the state of Mato Grosso. The Urubu Branco Indigenous Land is one of these *loci*. For Pinto et al. (2014, p. 273), socio-environmental conflicts "[...] constitute threats to the way of life of traditional communities and to local ecological knowledge, acquired by the relationship between social groups and the environment, over the generations". They occur when different social actors, who occupy a certain territory, present different perceptions about their control and use.

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Regarding *territory*, Saquet (2006, p. 83) presents the following definition:

Territory is nature and society: there is no separation; it is economy, politics and culture; buildings and social relations; discontinuities; connection and networks; domination and subordination; degradation and environmental protection, etc. In other words, territory means heterogeneity and common traits; historically conditioned appropriation and domination; it is a historical and trans-scalar product and condition; with multiple variables, determinations, relations and unity. It is a space for housing, production, services, mobility, disorganization, art, dreams, in short, life (objectively and subjectively). The territory is procedural and relational, (i)material, with diversity and unity, concomitantly.

Nowadays, the Tapirapé call themselves *Apyāwa*, they live in the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land, located in the northeastern region of the state of Mato Grosso – a transition area between Cerrado and Amazon forest with approximately 168,000 hectares. They are distributed in eight villages that house around 1,000<sup>1</sup> people, belonging to the Tupi-Guarani language family whose mother tongue is Tapirapé.

Thus, the central purpose of the study is to present the territorial and socio-environmental history experienced by the *Apyāwa* people from 1947, when they were expelled from their ancestral territory, until their resumption in 1993 and the current struggle of resistance to remain in it.

The study is organized as follows: in the first section, the study methodology is presented. In the second, the causes of deterritorialization, in the third, a history of the causes of the reduction of the *Apyāwa* people and abandonment of the territory; in the fourth, there is the process of expulsion and territorial expropriation, promoted by government public policies, especially by the institutionalization of Sudam; in the fifth, political proactivity is shared for the way they resumed the traditional territory; in the sixth, the territorial conflicts still existing in the IL are presented and, finally, the final considerations.

## METHODOLOGY

As a methodology to present the process of de-re-territorialization of the *Apyāwa* people, the bibliographic and documentary survey and analysis and the case study were used, with a qualitative approach. Fieldwork began in November 2023 and was completed in January 2024. During the visits to the villages of the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land, direct observation and semi-structured interviews were carried out with 27 indigenous leaders<sup>2</sup>.

In order to guarantee the anonymity of the participants, their names were replaced by alphanumeric terms consisting of the letters EI (Indigenous Interviewee) plus a number, from one to twenty-seven, which corresponds to the total number of interviewees (EI1, EI2, EI3..., and successively). The interviews were recorded in audio, using a tape recorder, and later transcribed. The interviewees' statements were maintained as pronounced.

The content analysis proposed by Bardin (2016) was carried out, which is a systematic and objective technique that aims to describe the content of communications and extract meanings from them. When the triangulation between interview, observation and bibliographic data is used, the process becomes more robust and comprehensive.

The spatial-temporal cut is represented by the different territories occupied by the *Apyāwa* since they left the Serra do Urubu Branco in 1947, their resettlement initially with the Karajá and, later, in the villages constituted for them (*Xanypatāwa*, *Orokotāwa* and *Majtyritāwa*) and the transformations of the Amazonian territory due to projects supported by the Brazilian State during the period of the military dictatorship, the re-occupation of the traditional territory in 1993, until the current struggle for territorial re-existence of the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land.

<sup>1</sup> According to population data presented by the Cacique Geral, of the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land, in December 2023, there were 1004 people.

<sup>2</sup> The study was approved by CEP/CONEP (UNEMAT) through Opinion No. 6,581,595.

## TAPIRAPÉS, THE BEGINNING OF THE SAGA OF DETERRITORIALIZATION

In the past, due to several factors, including the territorial dispute, the Kayapó were pushed by the expansionist fronts, pressured the Tapirapé in their traditional territory and caused their displacement. Thus, in a movement of deterritorialization, the *Apyāwa* were also almost decimated by conflicts on the capitalist frontier, which always causes movement of populations, displacement of humans, alteration (for the worse) of fauna and flora. Within this context, violence caused by other peoples and diseases brought by non-indigenous people forced the *Apyāwa* (Tapirapé) to seek new places and constitute new villages; however, they always carry with them the hope of being able to retake their original territory (Canuto, 2019; Tapirapé, 2020).

While living in the vicinity of the Araguaia River and the Karajá people, they always returned to the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land (their ancestral territory) with the purpose of visiting the sacred sites, where their ancestors remain, as well as collecting materials that do not exist in the new place(s) of residence in order to make use of their ancestral knowledge for their objects of personal and community use, interaction with fauna and flora and with the sacred spaces of land and water (Tapirapé, 2020). However, they perceived changes in the space-environment: several farms, through projects approved and implemented by the Superintendence of Amazon Development (SUDAM), were overlapping on the *Apyāwa* lands.

Beltrão, Delgado and O'Dwyer (2017, p. 12) state that "The developmental projects implemented, with the approval of Sudam, especially from the 1960s, reached in full ways of being and living of traditional peoples and populations". The large landowning enterprises that had been implemented removed vast expanses of forest to introduce pasture cultivation to extensive cattle ranching. Deforestation occurred in an intense and voracious way, and the places that were considered sacred, such as water sources, streams and the Urubu Branco mountain range, were completely altered by the enterprises (farms) and by the suppression of the original vegetation.

The *Apyāwa* were not aware of the proportion of the expansion of the capitalist frontier that proposed to modernize the country and that, in an exclusionary and authoritarian way, affected them: "[...] they do not have the means to know or compete with the political, economic and social structure of a modern nation within which they are disorderly inserted" (Wagley, 1988, p. 48). This situation demonstrates a profound asymmetry of the Brazilian State with regard to support for capitalist enterprises, to the detriment of pre-existing populations.

The modernization of the sertões was achieved, making the indigenous invisible or obstacles to the desired economic progress. As a result, conflicts increased when, in actions of total contempt, on large properties, locks were placed on the access gates to the side roads, as well as guards (gunmen, *jagunços*) to prevent indigenous people from entering spaces they always visited. This posture accentuated sociocultural subjugation and constituted an advance of the social invisibility to which the *Apyāwa* people were subjected, as they were denied presence in ancestral territories.

The problems caused by latifundia occurred through the "[...] dispute for territorialized resources whose material and symbolic appropriation occurred by differentiated actors with equally differentiated forms of perception of these territories" (Sant'Ana Júnior; Silva, 2010, p. 164). Due to these excesses, the *Apyāwa* planned new ways of returning to the traditional territory as a way of remembering their spirituality and vigor of corporeality, accessing their cosmology, which is marked by the relationship of respect and balance they have with nature and vital space.

Viveiros de Castro (1996, p. 115), infers that in indigenous thought "[...] the world is inhabited by different species of subjects or people, human and non-human, who apprehend it from different points of view". Indigenous cosmology is a concept that refers to the set of beliefs, myths, values and practices that the various indigenous cultures have in relation to the world, the universe and their place in it. Cosmology is shaped by the deep relationship that indigenous peoples have with nature, with spirits, with ancestors and with the land. Each indigenous group can have its own cosmology, which reflects its history, customs and worldview.

Actions promoted by agricultural companies in the space-environment change the *Apyāwa* cosmology. The destruction of the Tapirapé territory in a violent way with the suppression of

forests, burning, insertion of a model of monoculture of pastures, insertion of exogenous fauna (cattle) caused slaughter, suffering and the material and symbolic destitution of the *Apyāwa* people. It should be noted that the implementation of large enterprises in the region inhabited by the *Apyāwa* people occurred during the military regime. Studies by Almeida (1996) reveal that military institutions, present throughout the planet, use colonialist techniques of "removal" and "isolation" of ethnicities; as a result, an exponential increase in numerous cases of non-institutionalized indigenous territorialities greatly favor large landowning properties.

In 1993, with great courage and determination in the face of the expansionist saga of capital in the formation of large farms that had been installed, they began the process of re-occupying their ancestral territory<sup>3</sup> with the physical presence of their people and returned to the space once occupied by their villages. From now on they were persecuted, threatened with death, however, they resisted in the struggle for the process of reterritorialization, remaining in their ancestral lands. The legal battles began, and in 1998 the IL was approved. The process of expanding the capitalist frontier with the implementation of cattle ranching properties brought great socio-environmental problems to the daily lives of the *Apyāwa* people, as the non-indigenous occupation was based on intense deforestation. Currently, socio-environmental conflicts persist in the IT, including the presence of invaders who still occupy the northern portion of the territory, practice agriculture and illegal forest extraction.

## REDUCTION OF THE APYĀWA PEOPLE AND DEPARTURE FROM ANCESTRAL TERRITORY

Contrary to the idea of many authors as to the causes of the great population decline of the *Apyāwa* people being related to diseases such as measles, chicken pox, influenza, malaria, after contact with non-indigenous people and that there was a great massacre, caused by the Kayapó in 1947, the interviewees EI3, EI9, EI12, EI14, EI17 and EI22 present in detail the history of the shaman called *Koro'i*, as one of those responsible for the death of hundreds of indigenous people.

*In fact, I use it, the truth, because the Apyāwa people were almost extinguished, by a shaman [Apyāwa] himself, a great connoisseur of Medicine. So, he was a person who drove the Apyāwa people to the brink of extinction, not the Kayapó people. Kayapó did the massacre only with women [they abducted women] and in the 1940s, when they burned a house here in Tapi'itawa village, then the remaining people went down to Araguaia, to survive. Because in fact, before the attack, the Apyāwa people had this consequence of an epidemic, which was created by the great connoisseur of Medicine himself, who was the *koro'i* root. So, he is a great person who made the tragedy with the Apyāwa people. After that, they were attacked by the Kayapó people (EI12).*

The history of the *Koro'i* shaman is known to 92.5% of the interviewees. According to the respondents, in the past, during a hunt, *Koro'i* harvested a root that was poisonous and took it to the village. Thus, the poison spread through the air and killed virtually every person in the village. This narrative, passed on from generation to generation, is an older event, prior to the attacks of the Kayapó and Karajá, but which is very much alive / present in *Apyāwa* cultural memory.

However, one cannot fail to consider that contacts with indigenous people of other peoples, who, indirectly, have inserted pathogens (measles, chickenpox and influenza), hitherto unknown to the *Apyāwa* people. EI12 states that, from the indigenous anthropological point of view, the *Apyāwa* people still have knowledge about nature, but this is the shaman who has the least knowledge. However, the *Apyāwa* sages claim that if you have a shaman with great knowledge of medicine, you can identify the plant [carried by *Koro'i*] that caused diseases, leading to a major epidemic and, as a consequence, the death of many people. Perhaps, this fact explains why they show so much fear of spells, for which sorcerer shamans are held responsible. Still in relation to the shamans and the reasons for depopulation *Apyāwa*, Tapirapé (2020, p. 42-43), describes that:

<sup>3</sup> In this study, the lands that today constitute the territory of the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land are considered as ancestral territory.

At that time [around the year 1900] there were several villages. There were many conflicts between the **Apyāwa** groups and other ethnic groups, especially with the **Karaxao** (Kayapó) warriors, including also the **Iny** (Karajá) and even among the **Apyāwa** themselves. According to the elderly, most of the abandonment of the villages was motivated by the deaths of the **paxē** (shaman), the spirits of the body, **ixemaka'iāwa**, **'opiwāra** and **emireka ixemaka'iāwa**; they are the spirits that caused many diseases in the villages, such as: akygay (headache), ma'eparaxokā (food that is bad for the stomach), takowa (fever), tyeay (diarrhea), tewekay (stomachache), wowora (boil) [...] this was a reason to abandon villages. The **paxē** (shaman) took on a very important role for the population of the village, their responsibility was to dialogue and protect the people from supernatural beings. [...] Another reason for the tragedy that contributed to the depopulation of **Apyāwa** was the maygiāra (root) **Koro'i**, who made the greatest tragedy with the **Apyāwa** population itself. This fact is not found in the books, it has never been revealed or recorded by the anthropologists and ethnologists who marked their presence with the **Apyāwa** people. (emphasis added).

In the interviews, it was found that all participants know the story of the last attack of the Kayapó, which resulted in the "departure" of the **Apyāwa** from the territory. However, several interviewees claim that their people were already reduced, that the Kayapó sought to plunder their property and kidnap children and women. They used raids as a tactic when men were absent from the village in activities such as hunting and fishing. This fact justifies the clarity they have about the number of people who were affected.

According to EI2, after the last attack of the Kayapó, in 1947, the **Apyāwa** left the area where the **Tapi'itawa** village is currently located. In this onslaught, the Kayapó killed three women (among them were their aunt and grandmother) and took/abducted another aunt and her brother. At the time, most of the remnants went to the banks of the Tapirapé River, in the place called São Pedro, others walked to the Post of the Indian Protection System (SPI) – at the mouth of the Tapirapé River, on the Araguaia River - and some went to **Chichutawa**, an old village that was abandoned (Wagley, 1988).

This removal can be considered a "compulsory displacement", because, according to Almeida (1996, p. 30), what defines it is:

The set of factual realities in which people, domestic groups, social segments and/or ethnicities are forced to leave their habitual dwellings, their historical places of immemorial or dated occupation, through constraints, including physical ones, without any option to oppose and reverse the effects of such a decision, dictated by circumstantially more powerful interests.

At the time, the transfer was due to issues related to social conflicts involving the enemy group Kayapó. Currently, the concept of "compulsory displacement" is used when the clashes involve the so-called capitalist "development plans", with infrastructure projects, which usually involve the vacancy of spaces, for the construction of roads, dams, power plants, etc., which cause catastrophic environmental changes.

According to EI1, EI2 and EI4, in the middle of the journey to the banks of the Tapirapé river, they were welcomed by Domingão, a sertanejo, who sheltered them at Fazenda São Pedro, owned by Lúcio da Luz. Domingão, because he had firearms, protected them from further attacks. Lúcio da Luz, a respected colonizer in the region, bought swiddens from squatters in order to guarantee their livelihood. The fields contained food such as cassava, corn, potatoes, among others.

EI2 states that Lúcio contacted SPI to inform about the **Apyāwa**'s living condition and asked for more attention to be paid to them. According to the interviewee, it was from that moment that the SPI started to aid them; "they called Valentin<sup>4</sup>, to take care of us". In 1948, they were taken to the Heloísa Helena Torres Indian Protection Service Station, located in Barra do Rio Tapirapé.

Thus, in the 1950s the remnants were led and resettled in the **Itxalá** village along with the Karajá people. In the 1960s, the **Apyāwa** founded the **Xanypatāwa** village (village of jenipapo),

<sup>4</sup> Valentim Gomes was the agent hired by the new Heloísa Alberto Torres Indian Protection Service Station, located on the bar of the Tapirapé River. He was a person known to the **Apyāwa**, as he had accompanied the visits of anthropologists Charles Wagley in 1939 and Herbert Baldus in 1947 to the **Tapi'itawa** village.

which was abandoned around 1983 due to the flooding of the Tapirapé River, then founded the *Orokotāwa* village (village of urucum). In this village, the population gradually increased; the fertile lands for the cultivation of the fields were very distant (10 to 20 km), reasons that led them to found the *Majtyritāwa* village (initially called *Tawyao*, meaning "new village") in the early 1990s (Tapirapé, 2020).

When they left their traditional territory (*Tapi'itawa* village), they were de-territorialized, but, as Saquet (2003, p. 39) states, the reterritorialization occurred simultaneously. For the author, both processes permeate the socio-spatial dynamics, since initially there was the loss of a territory that was appropriate and built, but, in the new place in which they were settled, they produce certain elements / characteristics that were contained in the previous territory. "The old is recreated in the new, in a movement that represents the social forces, in which one of the roles of the State is precisely the reterritorialization".

## **PLOTTERS AND SUDAM: PUBLIC POLICIES OF EXPULSION AND EXPROPRIATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT POLICY OF THE AMAZON**

Like all indigenous peoples, the *Apyāwa* also had / have problems with their traditional territory. The plundering of territories of indigenous peoples located in the northeastern region of Mato Grosso began in 1949 when the government of Mato Grosso created the new Land Code of the State, through Law No. 336 of 12/06/1949, which was amended in 1951 (Soares, 2004).

From the legal consolidation of this agrarian policy, the government assured the private sector the sale of the vacant lands that belonged to them. "The lands in the north of the state, and specifically between Araguaia and the Xingu, were cut up on the map in plots of no more than 10,000 hectares" (Canuto, 2019, p. 21), did not consider the existence of settlement nuclei and indigenous people.

Several real estate companies were created with the purpose of circumventing the size of the acquisition areas, which institutes in the region the expansion of latifundia by the junction of several properties. The negotiations included the territories occupied by the Tapirapé, Karajá and Xavante peoples. In 1955, Companhia Imobiliária do Vale do Araguaia (CIVA), through numerous powers of attorney, acquired an area of around 1,200,000 hectares from the state of Mato Grosso, where the lands of the current municipality of Santa Terezinha were included (Canuto, 2019).

The sale of this area is recorded in the diary of the Little Sisters of Jesus<sup>5</sup>: "Genoveva goes this morning to talk to the head of the SPI Post, as we learned that there is a project to build a city on the site of the Tapirapé and Karajá villages", and after a few weeks they received a visit from the chief engineer of the company that had bought the land (Irmãzinhas de Jesus, 2002, p. 185, p. 185).

The constitution of the large latifundia was accentuated with the creation of Sudam in 1966 (after the military coup of 1964). One of its purposes was the "development and integration" policy of the Amazon under the military dictatorship. With advantageous tax benefits, there was a rampant rush of companies with "development" projects, which covered the Legal Amazon. In the Araguaia Valley, northeastern region of the state of Mato Grosso and Southeast of Pará, there was a large concentration of projects (Canuto, 2019, 2020, Soares, 2004, Bampi et al., 2017).

Large companies were establishing themselves in the region, caring little for indigenous peoples and small backcountry communities that for decades had sought to make a living in the areas they occupied. They began to consider themselves owners of the entire territory and carriers of progress. Nothing could prevent them from exercising their programs of "development" and "civilizing" mission, starting to expel the sertanejo families, to occupy indigenous territories and to impose themselves on small urban centers (Canuto, 2020, p. 197).

<sup>5</sup> In 1952, the religious sisters, representatives of the Congregation of the Little Sisters of Jesus, took up residence with the *Apyāwa* people. Due to the near extinction of these people, they initially had the purpose of caring for the health of the remaining indigenous people. For 65 years they lived with them and defended their culture.

Unlike large companies, for indigenous and sertanejo people, “[...] the territory has an amplified conception, as the community is strongly rooted in its territoriality. In addition to the relations of power and the meaning of the nation-state, the ancestral land is a condition for the existence of the group” (Rabelo; Matos; Lima, 2022). With the materialization of their economic purposes, the large farms promoted a process of territorial exclusion, mainly determined in economic relations over the territory.

For the indigenous people, this situation caused the compulsory displacement that, as a result of the expansion of the capitalist frontier in a kind of synergy of different enterprises, brought impacts and consequences by the modification of the use of the territory. From an economist perspective, the large farms (local agents of capital), using power, appropriated *Apyāwa* spaces.

Thus, “[...] the materialization of the occupation and transformation of land use via colonization of the Legal Amazon, the advance of the capitalist agricultural frontier [...] altered the Brazilian socio-spatial configuration” resulting in profound environmental and social changes where capitalism continuously creates new fronts of modification and transforms more parts of nature into commodities (Silva; Bampi, 2020, p. 1486). In this case, in the area of land that the Tapiraguaia farm had acquired, two villages were located: one of the Karajá people and the other of the Tapirapé (Canuto, 2020). During the interview, EI2 recalled that the *Apyāwa* learned that people had bought the region of Furo da Pedra and Santa Terezinha and the lands of the village where they lived. Regarding the area of Fazenda Tapiraguaia Casaldália (1971, p. 23) describes:

As in all of Mato Grosso, this area occupied by the Tapirapé was also sold to the company Tapiraguaia S/A. The owners Dr. José Carlos Pires Carneiro, José Augusto Leite de Medeiros and José Lúcio Neves Medeiros spontaneously donated to the SPI (Indian Protection Service), in the person of Mr. Ismael Leitão, head of the Inspectorate of Goiânia, a gleba of just over 9,000 hectares. It happens, however, that the aforementioned donated lands, close to the village, are flooded practically from December to June in almost their entirety, the rest of the lands being composed of Cerrado or sandy forest of little fertility. The good lands, where the Indians already had their gardens, were owned by Tapiraguaia S/A.

Such situations corroborate Wagley's (1988, p. 48) statement that “[...] the process of economically and politically complex societies engulfing less complex societies began thousands of years ago, with the emergence of the State as a form of socio-political organization”. Actions of this nature are still present today. There are numerous cases of expropriation of the nature and lands of indigenous populations by expansionist capitalism. EI17 and EI17 recalled the history of the constitution of the *Majtyritāwa* village, in view of the problems they faced in *Orokotāwa* for being located in an area of varjão. Wagley calls indigenous societies of *less complex*, a concept that seems mistaken, what is perceived is an asymmetry of the power of the State together with the economic power of capital in the face of the seizure of the territory or squandering of possession.

Numerous projects approved by Sudam were installed in the northeastern region of the state of Mato Grosso in the same way that occurred with the villages of *Orokotāwa* and *Majtyritāwa*, the ancient ancestral territory that the Tapirapé had abandoned in 1947, in the vicinity of the Serra do Urubu Branco (today TI Urubu Branco) was also occupied by large farms. Sudam had approved a land purchase project of the Fazendas Reunidas Nova Amazônia S/A group (Frenova), consisting of seven farms: Frenova, Sapeva, Piraguassu, Codebra, Central Brazil, Campo Verde and Tapiraguaia, which occupied most of the territory of Urubu Branco (Canuto, 2020).

Regarding the subdivision of the area where the *Apyāwa* villages were previously located, EI1 says that “The government sold the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land as well as the Majtyri Indigenous Land”, configuring the expropriation (capitalist) of lands, often inhabited and used by indigenous populations, for the appropriation /exploitation of natural resources, altering the relations between society and nature, transforming it for its own purposes.

## RETURN TO DEVASTATED TERRITORY AND FIGHT FOR RECOGNITION OF ILS

After staying a few years in *Orokotāwa* and later in *Majtyritāwa*, they went to the place where the *Tapi'itawa* village is located today. "After we stayed there for 10 years there, then they started to get taquari here, which there was no taquari to make arrows. So, every year we come here. So, every year we always came here" (E11).

E26 and E127, also reported that when they were settled in the *Orokotāwa* village, the men always returned to the ancestral territory, as there were several sites that are considered sacred and to collect materials that did not exist in the village where they were. Among these materials is taquari (Figure 1), a kind of bamboo that they use to make arrows.

During the visits, they realized that the territory was occupied by large farms. "Many farmers have occupied this area. Farmer came here, started ravaging the territory and started ravaging the woods. And then this cattle ranching started. Planting of this grass in the region" (E13). Gorete Neto (2014) describes that, in the late 1960s, the lands were invaded and devastated by non-indigenous people.



**Figure 1.** Taquari foot. Source: Mara Maria Dutra's personal collection (2013).

According to E11 and E12, the farmers, realizing the presence of the *Apyāwa* on visits to the sacred sites and the collection of materials, began a process that consisted of imposing difficulties in accessing the territory.

*Then this farm he wanted to close with a chain, so as not to enter here, so as not to pass because this one was not ours, it was from the farm. Why are we coming in? So as soon as we got in here? The things we needed were here. Then the farm doesn't let us in to get it, so we said no, this one is ours, this one is not yours, this one is ours. So as soon as we enter here (E11).*

Faced with the situation imposed authoritatively by the farmers and their subordinates, it was often necessary to talk to the farm manager so that they could have access to the places where there were the materials they needed for their survival, that is, to maintain their traditional culture.

*That's when people reflected more, right? I don't think we're going to go in any more from now on...They will close everything, and then we will no longer have this access. Then the people started thinking about the resumption, right? How were you going to resume? Then they thought, and concluded, right? And in this period that we were discussing resumption, once again, they allotted the territory, right? Then they authorized the entry of a prospector in this region, but there was nothing. [...] Then we came only the men, right? To see what's*

*really going on. On the road there were several groups of prospectors, we were talking to each prospector, each prospector had a different boss, and we were talking to these people, who could not, because this was our traditional territory, and they could withdraw. Then they said they didn't know it was ours. We did this operation for a week, everyone left, right? [...] Then it was time for us to resume, we will have to do the same, because here is a land, a traditional territory of ours. This is where the people stayed, right? I was, right? We had several other territories, but we had already built a city, a municipality... we managed only this main one, here (EI2).*

From their testimony, it is clear that, previously, the territory occupied by the *Apyāwa* people had a much larger extension, their great mobility allowed them to access, control and use the natural goods that were necessary for their material reproduction. According to Wagley (1988) and Baldus (1970), they were a numerous people, distributed in several villages, which were located south of the state of Pará and northeast of the state of Mato Grosso.

It should be noted that, initially, the *Apyāwa* fought for the territory where they lived (*Orokotāwa* and *Majtyritāwa*) to be legalized, as it had been sold. According to EI2, Dom Pedro Casaldáliga had a relevant role in the official recognition of the two areas (TI Tapirapé/Karajá and Urubu Branco):

*At that time there was no law to demarcate, I fought a lot, Bishop Pedro helped a lot. He helped to pay for tickets to solve the land problem, he helped to buy medicine, because SPI did not buy it, he explained it to his little sister and then little sister explained it to us too, he helped to pay for a lawyer. He was going to the village. And even to demarcate it, he paid a grimoire to sting it. [...] Then when FUNAI went to make a demarcation, they did it according to the demarcation that had already been requested by Dom Pedro. Majtyri's area has approximately 66,000 ha (EI2).*

In 1982, there was the official recognition of a demarcation sting that the *Apyāwa* had made between 1977 and 1978, and in 1983, the decree was signed that approved the demarcation of the Tapirapé/Karajá Indigenous Area (in this territory were the *Orokotāwa* and *Majtyritāwa* villages). However, the Urubu Branco area had been left out and, as of 1990, the *Apyāwa* made no effort to recover this territory (Comunidade Tapirapé, 1998).

About this epoch/period of history, Anaya (2010, *online*) describes that, at the international level, there was a situation of change in relation to indigenous peoples. Henceforth 1960, they began to draw more attention to the demands of their survival as distinct communities with historical land rights: *"In the 1970s indigenous peoples extended their efforts through a series of international conferences and direct appeals to international intergovernmental institutions"*.

In Brazil, it was no different, because, according to (EI2), *"[...] after white people created the Indian statute in 1973, many indigenous people and representatives of the Apyāwa participated in meetings for the constituent assembly in 1988"*. According to reports, the constituent meetings discussed issues related to indigenous peoples, as well as issues related to the demarcation of ancestral lands. He recalls that there it was said that the area that belonged to the indigenous people should remain theirs, even if there were already cities in the place.

*So, I talk to myself, so I can go back to Urubu Branco? Because the white man they brought, unintentionally, who we could not speak, could not explain and they carried us. So, what if I can go back? And they said I have a right, that I have to go back. And if there is a municipality nearby, you have to take it too, he said, when we return from Brasília, from the meeting, then we explain it to the people, at night, to the community. Then the person cheered them up, so let's go back, as there is a law that says we have the right to go back, let's go back then (EI2).*

The explanations and planning of the entire resumption process occurred mainly at night, in meetings held around *Takāra*, which counted on the participation of the entire community (EI1, EI2). *Takāra* is considered the ceremonial house of men, where all festive rituals are performed, it is considered a place of space for political decision-making where everyone participates and has a voice (Silva, 2019).

Then, contrary to the assumptions of the capitalist logic of occupation of the territory by large enterprises that expropriated the indigenous territory, in 1993, the *Apyāwa* collectively organized themselves in a movement of empowerment and struggle for the resumption of

their ancestral territory that was occupied by large farms with state endorsement and Sudam financing. Among them were the Codebra, Santa Laura and Sapeva farms (EI1, EI3, EI, EI14).

They found an environment of tension, where violence predominated, which acted through pistolage, frightening the indigenous people, who found heavily armed men, distributed in guardhouses, who had orders to curb access to the indigenous people (IE17). Among the henchmen, the name Luiz Bang was mentioned by several interviewees, as the head of the area. According to data from the State Public Prosecutor's Office of the state of Mato Grosso, in the ranking of the most dangerous gunmen in the country, bang has already occupied the 5th place (Mato Grosso, 2006). *"Here was the prospector, there was Luiz Bang, who was a prospector, the gunfighter, he was the mastermind here [...] the gate was closed with a chain so that no person could enter, but even so we came"* (EI1).

*In 93 we came to retake the territory and stayed. The politicians, right? They protested against us, went to Brasília, Vila Rica, Confresa, São Félix, Porto Alegre, gathered and went there. And they lied so much, right? And then I was threatened. At the time I had to run away because the gunman was after me, right? The late Luiz Bang who was famous here, Joaquininho and the boy too, Fernando. [...] I was threatened. They even sent a gunman to shoot at my house and my wife was worried, right? What did we do? [...] When I came here [TI Urubu Branco] I was even more threatened, right? I'm going to have to run away, I went to the Xingu where there is another relative of mine, right? Because I had brought the family, they pointed out my name, then they persecuted me* (EI24).

The Apyāwa settled in the place where the *Tapi'itawa* village is now located, but there was a guardhouse and a cowboy's house. Due to the interests in land use modification, large farms have transformed vast areas into pasture for cattle (EI14, EI1, EI17, EI3). Policies for the implementation of large works (in this specific case, large farms) were established over territories that had traditionally already been occupied (Almeida, 1996).

This colonialist practice is not restricted to the past, but continues under neocolonial forms. Contemporary development, mining and agribusiness projects often replicate these dynamics, displacing indigenous communities and destroying local ecosystems. The logic behind these actions remains the same: maximize profit at any cost by treating nature and its inhabitants as mere obstacles to be removed or sources of wealth to be exploited.

*Tapi'itawa* was very degraded, but it remained vital to the survival of the Apyāwa people. When they resumed it, they faced intense deforestation, experienced difficulties in finding suitable and fertile places to make their gardens, which were carried out through traditional sustainable management practices (EI12). They faced serious difficulties in the first years of the resumption of their territory, as they did not have fields from which they could remove the foods that were part of their usual diet. Once again they had the support of Bishop Casaldáliga, who was a great ally in the planning of food sovereignty:

*I asked Bishop Pedro to help for 2 years, because here there was no swidden, nothing. He got money for all Apyāwa to live here. That was very good for us. With this money we can handle it. 1993 started to grow crops, in '94 it burned and planted and in the end everything was ripe and you could live with it, and so it worked* (EI2).

The first family returned to *Tapi'itawa* on November 20, 1993. Just as it was a moment of great achievement, it was also recorded in the memory of the Apyāwa, because, initially, in the face of the danger of life faced by the presence of the gunmen, only the men came to retake the territory. According to the reports of EI1 (who returned to *Tapi'itawa* in late November 1993), his wife stated that *"I don't want to become a widow. I have to die together, you have to kill together, if not he kills you, I'm a widow here, and it gets bad for me, I have to die also together with you, so I have to die also together with you"*. In addition to the danger to life, the farms that had settled in the territory (Santa Laura, Codebra and Sapeva) promoted great environmental degradation:

These farm facilities caused extensive devastation of the Amazon rainforest, converting our land as agricultural pasture. The **maira** society does not respect, does not know the sacred knowledge of the **Tawaxāra** (indigenous people); for the **maira** the sacred is **ywyrapé** (money). Our sacred knowledge was destroyed, in particular: **ipirakwāri** and **ipirakwāroo**, springs of the two streams and the fish. Still, over time, we have

recovered some sacred spaces, such as: the **Towajañwa** mountain range, where the **taxão** (pigs) reproduce, **Xani'áona** (a mountain range) and **Yrywo'ywāwa** (the urubu branco mountain range, where vultures drink). They are all houses of spirits, owners of animals, owners of the spirits of children, **Karowāra** (thunder), so they are sacred to us, **Apyāwa** (Tapirapé, 2020, p. 48, emphasis added).

The increase in deforestation, due to the expansion of agriculture, is seen by Oliveira, Faria and Murta Júnior (2021) as a predatory action on the Amazon Forest and its biodiversity. They report on the invasion of farmers and land grabbers and mention that the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land is in the 7th position of the most deforested Indigenous Lands in the Legal Amazon between 2019 and 2020. Silva (2019) states that deforestation (Figure 2) and the depredation of water resources promoted by farmers in the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land influenced the cultural and environmental history of the *Apyāwa* people, as actions of this nature impact the fauna and flora with which the people lived.

Figure 2 is composed of images, from 1985 to 2021, that prove the advance of pastures over the IL: in 1985, the IL already demonstrated to be a pasture mosaic region, with open clearings, which, according to MapBiomass, are considered exposed soil, which corresponds to the occupation and deforestation promoted by the farms. The images prove the statements of the interviewees in relation to the devastation of the forest promoted by the farms that occupied it.

The map also reveals that, even with the resumption of the territory, from 1994, several points for pasture still emerged, which were certainly not carried out by the indigenous people, but by the constant presence of land grabbers in the IL. Another aspect that draws attention is the large extension of the area destined for pasture in 2003, especially in the northern and northeastern region of the IT, where the entire area is occupied by this class, and this type of occupation/ devastation intensifies especially in 2021, when many areas of agriculture and pasture arise.

The images (Figure 2) prove that the forest formation was replaced by planted pastures or mosaic of agriculture and pasture. For E4, the felling of native vegetation brought several problems to the *Apyāwa* people, related to hunting. Several species of animals and fish, which were part of the diet, no longer exist. In addition, important elements of the *Apyāwa* worldview had been destroyed as places where springs and small streams existed.

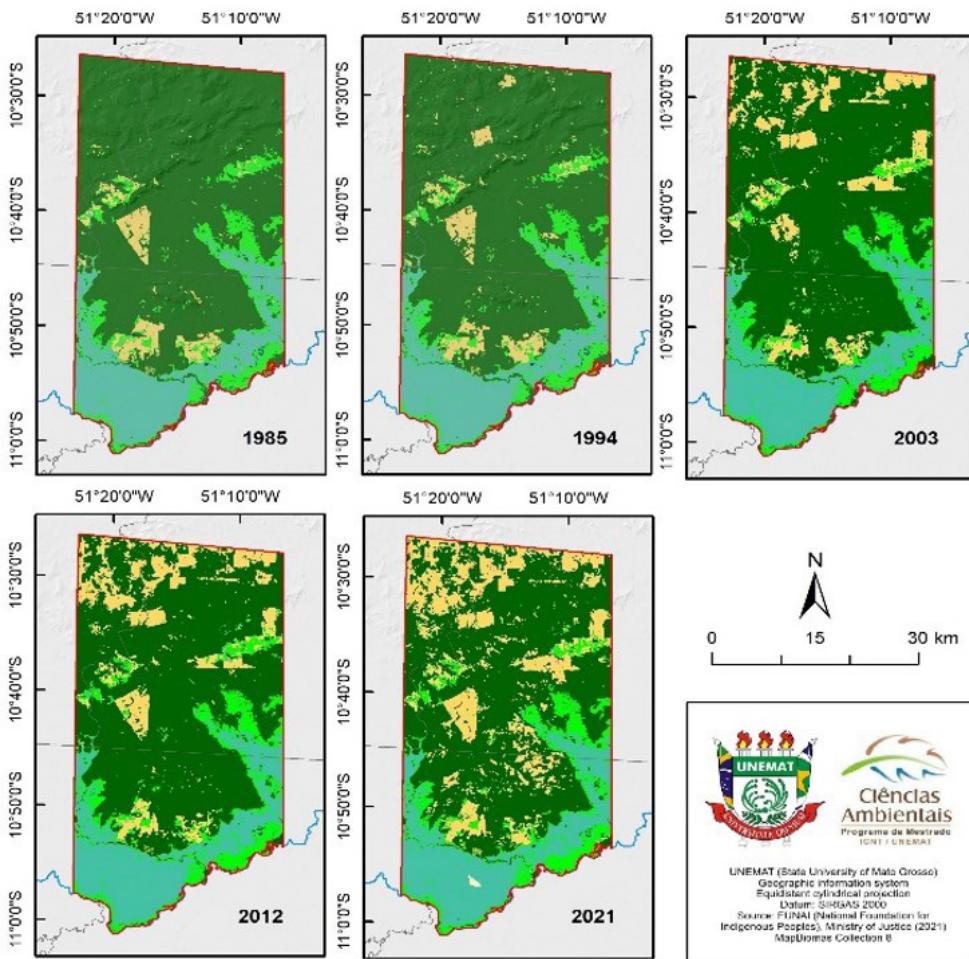
However, the retaking of the territory was a very important moment and, in order to survive, they had to adapt to the new environment, the new landscape that was left to them and fight for territorial rights. The struggle of the original peoples for the defense of their territories and ways of life represents a form of resistance against the destructive advance of expropriating capitalism in the Amazon.

According to the "Terras Indígenas no Brasil" (2024) website, the first legal act on the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land is from 1994, when an order was issued on the delimitation of the area; in 1998 the area was approved through Decree s/n. Constituted of the Amazon and Cerrado biomes, it comprises an area of 168,000 hectares, located between the municipalities of Confresa, Porto Alegre do Norte and Santa Terezinha. According to information provided by the general chief, in December 2023, 1,004 indigenous people lived in 8 villages distributed in the IT. Each village has a representative, the chief, and there is a general chief in the larger village called *Tapi'itawa*.

The non-indigenous regional community, because it does not know the history of this people, considers the size of the homologated area absurd and mediatically disseminates its antagonism. But certainly, for the *Apyāwa* (people who, in search of survival conditions, moved freely in a wide territory), the limits defined in the approval of the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land do not meet their cultural and spiritual needs, mainly due to the degradation they inherited from the expansionist process of the agricultural frontier.

## BILL NO. 490 AND OCCUPATION OF THE NORTHERN PART OF THE IL BY SQUATTERS AND RANCHERS

Many were the environmental changes that occurred in the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land and the issue of territorial conflict is still posed. At the time of the field research, the northern part of the IL was still illegally occupied by squatters and farmers, in an evident context of arbitrary appropriation.



#### Legend

Forest Formation	Agricultural and Pasture Mosaic
Savanna Formation	Exposed Soil
Planted Forest	River and Lake
Flooded Fields	Soy
Grassland Formation	Other Temporary Crops
Pasture	

#### Other Legends

TI Urubu Branco (Indigenous Land "Urubu Branco")
Drainage Network
Municipal Boundary

**Figure 2.** Deforestation data in the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land between 1985 and 2021. Source: Organized from data from MapBiomass Collection 8.

The territory was approved in 1998, but, so far, the area has not been completely vacated (Conselho Indigenista Missionário, 2021). Thus, the Apyãwa continue in a movement of political and legal action for the de-intrusion of a portion of the territory located in the northern region of the IT, where approximately 10,000 hectares are still under the control of farmers and squatters. The latter almost always act as “oranges” of the large landowners. This situation promotes a situation of plunder and degradation, with the exploitation of forest resources and fauna, creating traces of devastation that directly affect the indigenous people who depend on these lands for their livelihoods.

This is a worrying situation, which is known to all interviewees participating in this study. Beltrão, Delgado and O'Dwyer (2017) state that the process of occupation of Amazonian lands produces conflicts due to political connivance, which still insists on thinking of the region as a demographic void that must be occupied, forcing the displacement and expulsion of pre-existing communities. Regarding the occupation of the northern part of the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land, the Supreme Court gave a favorable opinion on de-intrusion; however, according to EI3, so far it has not been carried out because “[...] there were these four years of

*President Bolsonaro, who was against these situations, but today with President Lula elected, the Apyāwa people are hoping to solve this situation".*

A similar situation is verified by Costa et al. (2020, p. 62) on the process of reterritorialization of the Potiguara Monte-Mor indigenous people, in the state of Paraíba, who in 2000, in a new wave of occupation, had portions of their territory occupied with encouragement from the State. As with the *Apyāwa*, the authors also realized that the State subsidizes capitalist companies in IT, highlighting the challenges of indigenous peoples "[...] especially from the federal government elected in 2018, which explicitly supports interest groups contrary to indigenous rights".

Anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (2023) refers to the Bolsonaro government and the resumption of the assimilation discourse, that is, to suggest that indigenous people should look like us. This government considered that the indigenous people "[...] are our brothers, that they have the right to be like us and that we must let them become like us, this type of thing, is not only retrograde or openly outdated, but is very ignorant". This discourse does not consider the way of life of indigenous peoples, which is completely different from the way agribusiness uses territories.

Regarding governments, Ailton Krenak (2015, p. 39) says that "We lose social control over our representatives, they do what they want", including trying to make changes to the Federal Constitution in order to serve particular interests and their groups. Studies by Rapozo (2021) reveal the intentionality of the Bolsonaro government in not recognizing the territorial rights of indigenous peoples. It should be considered that this study was written at a time of real threat from the far right connected to agribusiness and one of the elements of the agenda is the non-demarcation of ITs (Indigenous Territories), and the non-removal of productive activities even if they are farms located in ITs.

This situation reminds us of the writings of Oliveira (1995): "A lot of land for a little Indian? An introduction (critical) to indigenism and the updating of prejudice", when in Brazil it is sought to propagate that the size or excessive number of indigenous areas reduces the number of areas for agribusiness and, consequently, leads to a reduction in economic activities related to the production and trade of agricultural products.

This prejudiced view, still colonialist, makes it possible to better understand the dynamics of power, exploitation and resistance of the squatters who invaded the northern region of the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land. In this case, deterritorialization has generated conflicts over territory, as the *Apyāwa* resist and fight to protect the right to their lands.

"Indigenous peoples are not a mere reality of the past, but a fact of the present, with unfolding and perspectives for the future" (Oliveira, 1995); however, the inefficiency of the State and a set of contradictions makes violence and socio-environmental conflicts evidence the violation of indigenous people's territorial and human rights. For Beltrão, Delgado and O'Dwyer (2017, p. 13), "[...] the policy of reoccupation of the Amazons generated and generates social and environmental effects, resulting from the purchase or land grabbing of public lands and/or traditional peoples and populations, which generated conflicts".

According to EI4, the northern region of the Urubu Branco Indigenous Land was occupied by small producers, farms, and large farms. And this situation becomes very worrying, especially when discussing Bill (PL) No. 490/2007. In this case, the Bill affects the rights of *Apyāwa* indigenous peoples, as it defines a time frame, in which indigenous peoples are only entitled to the territory they occupied in 1988, that is, on the date on which the Federal Constitution was promulgated.

However, by that date they had been expelled from their traditional territory, and today these squatters occupy their ancestral territory. Thus, the legal struggle can be understood as one of the political actions for the recovery of ancestral territories. A similar situation occurred in the recent history of the Xavante people, also located in the northeastern region of the state of Mato Grosso. Bampi et al. (2017) describe that "[...] the Xavante suffered a process of forced deterritorialization when, in 1966, with the support of the Brazilian federal government, they were removed from their ancestral territory" and, in 2014, after a long judicial process, they had the right to return to their former territory.

For the authors, judicial delay in the demarcation of ILs is justified by political groups linked to agribusiness having a great interest in the value of land and production. However, they describe that the return to the territory does not imply that the process has ended, as "[...] the space is strongly altered by the intense environmental devastation constituted by irregular logging, deforestation, implantation of monoculture crops (pastures for livestock and soy)" (Bampi et al., 2017, p. 361).

Respondents EI1, EI2, EI3 and EI4, EI13 stated that, when they returned to the territory, they found a deforested area, used by invaders for the cultivation of extensive cattle farming and soybean planting and that, in that place, there was the seizure of many trucks of illegal wood. The map in [Figure 2](#) proves this situation, as there is an increase in the pasture area of 93% from 1994 to 2003, a quasi-stabilization between 2003 and 2012 (13%) and a significant increase of 51% from 2012 to 2021.

The action of these invaders follows the logic of Eurocentric colonialist looting, with the cover-up of the other and subalternization of the indigenous, in a system based on racial and social division (Dussel, 1993; Quijano, 2000). They simply carried out the invasion of the IL and still remain in it, as they see the indigenous as individuals who present a primitive and backward culture, and based on an inferiority they do not respect them as citizens who have territorial rights.

Agrarian conflicts in the IL are intrinsically associated with the violation of indigenous rights, to their ethnic territory, as a process of de-intrusion of farmers and land grabbers in the northern area of the IL persists in court, which, through the use of "judicial loopholes", seems to deafen ethnic rights by increasing the level of tension in this territorial conflict.

In the IL in question, the capitalist logic of the State is replicated, as it previously allotted the Urubu Branco IL area and sold it to large landowners, a situation that caused and still causes numerous land conflicts. Studies by Silva and Bampi (2020) on the Amazon reveal that neoliberal policies encouraged deforestation, the introduction of livestock and agribusiness on the lands of traditional communities.

In the absence of public policies that promote de-intrusion, the *Apyāwa* community develops educational actions that aim at the continuous awareness of members of the indigenous community about this problem, as well as the degradation of IL, which is discussed in the different social spaces between them and in the family nucleus, on the *Takāra* land, in meetings with the community and in the school space (EI3).

According to data from the *2021 Field Conflicts* report, 97% of conflict areas are in the Amazon biome (Silva, 2022). However, for Brito (2017, p. 119), "Traditional peoples and communities do not have the political strength to stop these advances on their territories and, as a consequence, see them being degraded" and the State, instead of mediating and curbing such situations, often assumes the role similar to that of neoliberal policies, that is, actions are carried out in the absence of traditional groups.

Given the current political context that threatens indigenous lands, there is an urgent need to resolve such disputes, as the question is: *How long will the Apyāwa people resist land conflicts motivated by state and capital actions, by farmers and land grabbers?* Another (utopian) question is: *From when will the State make use of constitutional ethnic rights, to support the mobilization of traditional communities, and solve territorial and socio-environmental conflicts?*

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Historical circumstances indicate that, in 1947, the *Apyāwa* people were compelled to move from their ancestral territory in the context of the integrationist frontier. Concerned about the group's survival, the SPI resettled them in a new territory, close to the *Karajá* people. However, the sacred place they had to abandon was always present in their memory and they sought their return.

After a long collective movement of struggle and resistance, in 1993, they regained their territory, which was degraded in the face of environmental changes that had been implemented with public resources financed by Sudam, promoted by large farmers.

Nowadays, the current political circumstance promotes a dismantling of the rights of indigenous peoples to land recognized by the Federal Constitution of 1988. Bill No. 490/2007, known as the Temporal Framework Law, is a project that, if approved, will promote attacks through political connivance, endorsed by the Brazilian State which, among the numerous damages to indigenous peoples, hinders the demarcation of ILs. Far from trying to promote social justice, actions of this nature contribute to intensifying socio-spatial inequalities. In addition, power relations are reinforced in issues involving territoriality, expanding conflicts that become a permanent problem.

Many were the changes promoted by the power of capital in the ecosystem where the ancestral lands of the *Apyāwa* people are located; the great ecological destruction brought serious consequences to the community. A people that, according to Darcy Ribeiro, was on the verge of extinction, made social ties, reconstituted themselves and collectively built a struggle against the power of capital and violence. Almost extinct, they counted on the remarkable presence of the religious sisters of the Congregation of the Little Sisters of Jesus since 1952 and Bishop Dom Pedro Casaldáliga, who, with their exchanges of knowledge and teachings, contributed to the maintenance of their survival.

The *Apyāwa* people present us with a transformative perspective, because, while they were fighting for revitalization, they were also seeking the right to land. In his worldview, man and nature are inseparable, they are considered nature. In the symbiosis between human life and other non-human lives, they seek the balance to meet their individual and collective needs. Perhaps actions of this nature can be seen as an alternative to capitalist modernity that, by perpetuating the expropriation of indigenous territories, sees and converts the elements of nature for its own purposes and causes profound socio-environmental changes.

The *Apyāwa* people present us with a lesson, and aware of the changes promoted by capitalist environmental degradation, they make use of the various forms of education inserted in the family, community and school context and, through the dialogue of knowledge, they remain in a struggle to restore part of the degraded territory ecologically.

With their history and experience, the *Apyāwa* offer us a legacy of socio-environmental teachings. Thus, even in the face of state-capital asymmetry, political proactivity and persistence as a people constitute possibilities of changes for the reconquest of the territory and at the same time of ecological restoration and care for the life of all species of a portion of the Amazon. Through their ingrained presence in Nature, they live together and build a culture of ecosystem cooperation that can be a beacon in the face of the environmental crisis and the global climate emergency.

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To the *Apyāwa* People.

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MMD and ACB: Elaboration of the project, Execution of the research jointly (theoretical and field part), Written production.

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