
Brazil: I am Kum'tum, I am of the Akroá-Gamela People

WRM spoke with Kum'tum, an indigenous man from the Akroá-Gamela people of Brazil. These are his reflections about their history and the current collective process that aims to rediscover and recover their roots, after having been dispossessed of their territory and community.

According to maps and information from the 18th century, the Gamela people, as the Portuguese called them, lived in Maranhão in the Baixo Pindaré region—which includes the municipalities of Codó, Monção, Cajari, Viana and Penalva. My grandmother was born and grew up in the village of Capibari in Penalva; and my mother was born in Monção, in a place called Jacareí, where I was also born. It is a large territory which was, and still is, inhabited by the Akroá-Gamela people.

I am the result of this process of violence and colonization. While she was still very young, my grandmother was taken from the village by a white family from the city. My mother was born away from the village. I was born away from the village. And because **the marks of ancestry are in the body, but also—and especially—in the soul**, there came a time in which I began to wonder about the marks that I bear. It is from this process of seeking, which I would call conscious return, that I made the decision to reconnect with those ancestral roots, to understand these marks on my body and in my soul. But it is not an individual search; it is always collective. **We are discovering that we are not alone in the world, and that these marks are not the marks of an individual; they are the marks of a people, with common and deep roots.**

For a long time, my grandmother and mother used silence as a strategy. In the face of the State's negation, the decision was to be quiet. My reading today is that silence is a form of resistance. It is a time in which we must be quiet in order to continue existing. So, contrary to what one hears, silence does not mean assenting to the State's violence. For our indigenous peoples, silence was—in general—a resistance strategy. **Understanding and feeling why a people do one thing or another is only possible when one accesses collective memory.**

Our grandparents say that today we are in Taquaritiua, which was the place where the indigenous people would come. The indigenous people would come from the rainforest, particularly starting in August. That was interrupted. A telegraph transmission line was installed, which began to break up the territory. And in the 1960s there was a violent process of "grillaje" (land grabbing), of fraudulent notarized documents. **The objective of all this violence was to negate that ancestry rooted in the land.** Our very existence as a people was negated.

That negation starts creating a separation. A separation from the land as a whole: person, forest, water, river, sacred places. As fences get put up, people also begin to separate from one another; a boundary and limit is placed between people. And relationships between people are also interrupted. When we do the work of action, rescue, and reconnection with our collective ancestral memory, that perspective is possible as we reconnect with the places that give meaning to our existence. These two things are always very closely linked. **The reference to places—even those that are still fenced off—is because they give meaning to our existence as a people.** That is what the work of accessing memory is about. It is a process that happens in the heart. It is something that is only

possible to wake up, or dust off, if it happens in the heart.

History, Territory and Land Reclamation

Documents appeared about a [land] donation made [to the people] in the colonial period, in 1759; which is a paradox because we were given something that already belonged to us. Now I am talking specifically about one of those lands: Taquaritiua, which is in the municipality of Viana. Those documents from 1759 speak of about 14 or 15 thousand hectares. It was a confinement.

In 1969, Sarney's land law (1) made public lands available for appropriation, and in the 1970s, Maranhão suffered a violent process of "grillage" (land grabbing). In the 1970s and 1980s, we lived through a process in which the territory donated in 1759 was partitioned and fenced off. The result is that now in 2018, all of the land that appears in that deed from the 18th century is registered in the name of individuals in the Viana municipal registry.

But by the end of the 1990s, an internal "*rumo*" movement began in the areas that had been grabbed, in order to guarantee survival. "*Rumo*" is when your family goes to work on a piece [of land] in areas that have already been registered in the name of other people. It is an old process of land recovery. There was a lot of pressure to evict the families recovering land. A decision was made: "No, from now on, invaders are not going to put up more fences; we are going to demarcate the plots." It was a very important resistance for the continuity of the people, even if it was on a very small piece of land. Other families were evicted and they went to the city; the people dispersed. **But a more recent territorial reclamation process was possible where there was greater force behind this movement.**

In 2015 we decided to reclaim some pieces of land, in particular those around and very close to the houses, in order to guarantee a place to farm. But there is an element to this recovery process that is fundamental for us, coming once again from a place of memory: reclaiming sacred places. **We do not reclaim land only for production. We reclaim the land because it is a sacred place; it is a place that gives meaning to our existence.**

It was significant when we decided to reorganize again and tell the world that we exist as a people. This is what I was saying before: there is a time for silence in order to exist, and there is also a time to speak in order to exist. We are in a time in which it is necessary—it was necessary and it continues to be necessary—to speak so that we continue to exist.

Organization, Hatred and Violence

From the beginning, we wanted our organization to be very circular. There is no figure who becomes a spokesperson: the voice is of the community. **We have to establish an ongoing process of conversations amongst ourselves to make decisions.** It is a permanent process of assembly, of building agreements amongst ourselves; and again, it is based on what elders tell us about how we were always organized—which for a time was silenced in order to continue to exist. But it was not lost, and we continue to say "this has always been our way."

In 2014 we started to get threats due to our reorganization as a people. That year, the energy company of Maranhão, Cemar, began to build a new power transmission line. We asked them to suspend construction in order to regularize the situation with environmental agencies. Cemar's discourse is that "alleged indigenous people" are impeding the development of the region. It is remarkable that many people who repeat this idea are never going to benefit from what they call

development; but they still say that we are preventing it.

In April 2017, in an interview with a local radio, [federal] deputy Aluísio Mendes called us "alleged indigenous people," rioters and invaders, and said that we were robbing orderly people of peace and calm. They held a "peace action," but we now know that from the beginning, this was an action to prepare an attack on the land reclamation movement. They went and attacked. (2) The participation of Assembly of God church leaders in this process [is] another significant factor. They were the ones organizing the action in the region, and—more than organizing—they were spreading discourse [about the] "invaders threatening the peace and order." All of this laid the groundwork to attack. On the radio people said that the "attacks" we were carrying out had already caused some elderly people to die and some women to suffer an abortion. So that was like gunpowder and fire for them to attack us. If you can imagine, they began to blame us for the deaths of people who had nothing to do with the situation. A climate of revolt and hatred was formed against us.

Organized Communities

In the Fabric of Traditional Peoples and Communities of Maranhão, we already have indigenous groups, quilombolas, riverside dwellers, fisherfolk, coconut cutters and peasants, with the support of state entities. It began in 2011, when the Moquibom quilombola movement occupied the INCRA (National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform) due to the violence, and to the 400+ quilombola community processes presented before this organization—about which no action had been taken (3).

On October 30, 2010, Flaviano, a quilombola leader from Charco, was murdered. The Public Prosecutor filed a denouncement against landowners, intermediaries and gunmen. We saw this as a very clear message to all the quilombola movements that were emerging. In June there was an encampment in front of the Maranhão State Court of Justice because of the habeas corpus granted to the landowners thought to be guilty of Flaviano's murder. That encampment later moved to the INCRA, because we understood that the paralysis in the quilombola land demarcation processes led to violence and death threats.

That year, over seventy leaders in Maranhão received death threats. **It would be impossible to resolve the threats and physical violence without resolving the land issue.** The occupation lasted twelve days. We found ourselves amongst quilombolas and indigenous peoples, and indigenous peoples and quilombolas; and we perceived we had something in common: **the struggle for territory based on a feeling of belonging.** Later there were other occupations, and in November 2013 we had a gathering in Santa Helena, in which seven peoples of Maranhão and many quilombola communities gathered. We then said "we have to formalize an alliance." It was nice, because we used the symbol that a single stick is easy to break, but if many sticks are gathered together, it is hard to break them. And that remained as the symbol of the willingness to continue uniting in the fight for territory.

We want free territories. For this, we need to free the earth and remove the fences that enclose the earth. But there are other fences that enclose our bodies. **Free the earth and free our bodies. We see the body as a node of relationships between ourselves and the land, water, plants and bugs.** In other places, this will mean a process of decolonization. When people feel the energy of the earth, that energy can reach their hearts to free them.

The Fabric is this project of alliance amongst those of us who are carrying out the struggle. Our perspective is not of what others are going to do for us. **It cannot be an associated or allied**

organization; it cannot be the State. It is ourselves. And from the inside. And again, those elements of memory are essential. When we tear down the barbed wire fence, we tear it down because it was not always there; rather, one day they put it there. **When we talk about tearing down the fence inside of us, we are talking about prejudice, racism, violence and patriarchy.** It is from this ancestry, from this reconnection with the energy of the earth, that we must carry out the struggle.

And there is no room for the idea of private ownership of land—be it large, medium, small or very small. One cannot divide a *juçaral* into lots (4). A *juçaral* is a space for common use. **To divide land into lots is, fundamentally, to reproduce on a very small scale the mentality that the earth can be like a thing, a thing which I can later sell. The earth does not belong to us. It is we who belong to the earth.** And it is in this relationship of belonging that our existence makes sense.

Let's talk about the methodology of the Fabric: We cannot imagine a meeting with a table to discuss an issue, as important as it may be. It has to be a space where people can talk. The amount of time to talk is the amount of time that each person needs to talk about their experience, their existence. Dance, singing, drums, maracas—all of this is part of what we might call the content. It is not accessory. It is part of the content.

If we do not come from our own ancestry, all that struggle will always end in violence. A government that does not respect these ancestries is a violent government—whether right-wing or left-wing. The same goes for movements, however well intentioned they may be: if they do not come from a place of ancestry, they will reproduce violence, because they would be reproducing the negation of that otherness, of the other, of that diversity.

(1) Law No. 2979 from June 15, 1969 put public lands up for sale and caused land grabbing and agrarian conflicts. The law is named after José Sarney, one of the biggest oligarchs of Maranhão, state governor at the time and Brazilian president between April 1985 and March 1990.

(2) On April 30, 2017 over 30 indigenous peoples suffered an extremely violent attack that left five people wounded by bullets (Kum'tum among them), two people with their hands severed (one of them beheaded) and another fifteen injured, including adolescents. [For more information, see here.](#)

(3) Quilombola communities are formed by descendants of African people who were subjected to slavery in colonial and imperial Brazil. Moquibom is one of the quilombola organizations of Maranhão, which is the state with the largest number of communities of this kind. INCRA is the agency responsible for registering quilombola lands.

(4) A *juçaral* is a group of *juçara* palm trees or fan palms, which provide food for the communities.