
[A Struggle Lasting More than 40 Years](#)

Tupinikim indigenous leaders, in Brazil, share the experience of their people in the struggle against one of the largest eucalyptus plantation and pulp production companies in the world, Aracruz Celulose – currently named Suzano Papel e Celulose. They share the lessons of a struggle during which these Indigenous People recovered 18,070 hectares of land.

This is the first article in a series about the experience of communities that have taken back territories that had been invaded by monoculture tree plantations. In this article, two Tupinikim indigenous leaders from Brazil report on the experience of their people in the struggle against one of the largest eucalyptus plantation and pulp production companies in the world, Aracruz Celulose – currently named Suzano Papel e Celulose. They talk about the main learnings, challenges and difficulties.

In 1500 when the invasion of Brazil by the Portuguese colonizers began, the Tupinikim inhabited a stretch of thousands of kilometers along the Brazilian coast, from the Northeast to the South of the country. After centuries of confrontations, genocide and massacres, in the 1960s there remained only a small territory in the municipality now called Aracruz in the north of Espírito Santo state. They lived in 40 villages in an area of Atlantic forest. It was at that time that a group of indigenous Guaranis, migrating in search of the Land Without Ills, joined them.

In 1967, in the middle of the military dictatorship, Aracruz Celulose invaded this territory and destroyed almost all the indigenous villages, including the Macacos village, where later the complex of three Aracruz pulp mills would be built. The Tupinikim and the Guaranis were confined to just three villages. As well as seizing the territory, Aracruz knocked down most of the forest in order to establish eucalyptus monoculture plantations.

What seemed like a fatal blow turned out to be the start of a struggle lasting more than 40 years, during which the Indigenous Peoples in question recovered 18,070 hectares of land in three stages. The federal government recognized and demarcated 4,492 hectares in 1981, 2,568 hectares in 1998 and, lastly, another 11,000 hectares in 2007 as the Tupinikim-Guarani Indigenous land.

For this to happen, the Indigenous Peoples had to put pressure on the government to ensure the right of the Tupinikim-Guarani to the lands traditionally occupied, as provided for in the Brazilian Constitution. To this end, in 1980, 1998 and 2005, the Tupinikim and the Guaranis used the tactic they call “self-demarcation”. On the basis of lands previously identified by a technical group appointed by the federal government in conjunction with the communities, Indigenous People chopped down Aracruz’s eucalyptus trees to delimit their territory on their own account.

Despite violent actions by the police and Aracruz, which destroyed villages that had been rebuilt in the indigenous areas retaken, and despite a racist campaign promoted by Aracruz alleging that the Tupinikim were not indigenous, the Tupinikim and the Guaranis stood firm and continued to fight until the minister of justice signed the demarcation order officially recognizing their lands, in 2007.

But the struggle is not over yet. The anti-indigenous government of Jair Bolsonaro, in conjunction

with other anti-indigenous forces, is now seeking to adopt the so-called “temporal framework” that suggests that indigenous lands can only be demarcated where Indigenous Peoples were present in 1988. This could result in the annulment of the demarcation of most of the Tupinikim and Guarani lands in Espírito Santo.

WRM talked to Deusdeia Tupinikim, a female leader of the Pau Brasil village, and Paulo Henrique, Tupinikim leader of the Caieiras Velhas village and coordinator of the Indigenous People’s organizations APOINME – which fights for the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Northeast Brazil plus the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo –, about the 40 years of struggle for the Tupinikim-Guarani land.

WRM: In this 40-year struggle you had three moments of self-demarcation of the territory. How did this struggle begin and what is self-demarcation?

Paulo: First I’d like to thank you for the opportunity to talk to you and pass on a little of what we did to other communities that are facing this challenge of taking back their territory. Here in Brazil, the struggle for land is still a bottleneck and a challenge for many peoples, communities and social movements. We managed, though we know that these 18,070 hectares are not the full territory, but rather what was demanded at the time by the leadership from FUNAI [government agency for indigenous affairs] and was considered the minimum sufficient for the physical and cultural reproduction of the Indigenous Peoples here in the region. At the time of the first struggle, I was still a child. I took part a little in the second one, and in the third I participated more intensely.

In order to start a fight for land, the main thing is knowing what you want and having concrete proof, so that you can enter the struggle with some grounding. We had historical documents proving our traditional occupation of the territory, including a document of 1610 that shows that the Portuguese Crown had donated a *sesmaria* to the Tupinikim, in the lands later invaded by Aracruz Florestal.

We self-demarcated three times, in 1980, 1998 and 2005. This means demarcating our territory ourselves. At each moment that we did that, we knew that we had to do something, to head into the struggle, because the government had paralyzed, had filed away our suit. We had to force the government for them to take up again the suit and recognize and demarcate our territory. We did the self-demarcation with all the communities participating.

Deusdeia: We went into the fight for land because for us the question of water was very important: the shoals, the water sources, the springs. We also started to identify and set aside some lands for nature to have the freedom to come back. We also needed more space because today, just here in the Pau Brasil village, we have more than 200 families. So our biggest dream was to have this space for our children and grandchildren to be able to build their homes, have the freedom to go out, have the freedom to go fishing, the freedom to farm and to look after the environment, because up until then, Aracruz used to plant eucalyptus even in valleys, on the banks of rivers and streams, and even in them. Owing to our fight, several streams in places where there is no longer any eucalyptus have started to come back.

WRM: What were the main lessons you drew from such a long struggle?

Paulo: The first lesson I draw is that nothing is impossible. We fought against a multinational corporation. We were heavily criticized, we suffered retaliations on the part of the government, we suffered persecutions, prejudice and discriminations, but we didn’t lower our heads.

The second lesson is the unity of the peoples, leaving aside the differences that exist between some, coming together to fight against a bigger enemy, which at that occasion was Aracruz Celulose. And nobody was bigger or smaller, we were all on the same boat. If you took a bullet, everyone would take a bullet, if one could eat, everyone would eat. This equality was very important.

The third lesson is the importance of having a single objective. Our objective was the conquest of the territory and at no time did we deviate from this objective. We could draw up different plans to reach our objective, but the objective was clear and only one.

Deusdeia: This struggle was a major learning process and over the years we grew, we saw how we could improve the fight. Each fight we had, the chiefs together with the communities had more knowledge of the laws, of how we could come together and strategize. The struggles of 1998 and 2005 left their mark on me because it was when we, women, got involved as well.

WRM: What were the challenges for indigenous women entering this fight? How did you find the courage to be there at the occupation, with the men?

Deusdeia: I remember when we gathered [on the first day of the self-demarcation in 2005, when the police was coming], when the chiefs and leaders, for whom I have much respect, said that whoever wanted to go home should go home, and that they were going to stay until the end. There were many of us. What made us take the attitude of not leaving the chiefs alone, I don't know. I think our god Tupã, he encouraged us very much, to be courageous together with our leaders. And when you're sure that that thing [the land] is mine, you go ahead unafraid of making a mistake. So, that was when we women said we've come here and that we were only going to leave with everyone else when we conquered the land.

I remember when we occupied Aracruz's factory, we the women and children stayed more toward the front. They said that the men were not harmed because of the presence of the women and children, and that strengthened us as women. In all the actions, we were there, with our bows and arrows, with our headdresses, and when we'd put ourselves in front we could see that they [the police] would not fight us. When they got to Olho d'Água with that tractor to destroy the village, the prayer house, we weren't there at the time.

Even to this day, in the meetings in the communities, we have a voice, and we speak. And this strengthened women. What used to happen in times gone by, of women staying in the background, today doesn't happen any more. Today we are side by side, here in the struggle. And if we have to fight again, I'm sure to be there if I can. Those youngsters that traveled to Brasília now to fight against the "temporal framework", they sent me messages: "look, woman, you're a warrior, we are here because we were inspired by you". This to me is an honor, to know that from our struggle – not just mine, but the struggle of many women, some of whom have already left us, while others remain in struggle – the youth of today take inspiration.

WRM: What were the main challenges and difficulties you faced in this struggle?

Paulo: The main challenge to start the last fight in 2005 was getting it into our heads that the territory was more important than an agreement that had been reached in 1998 with Aracruz Celulose. The leaders, the communities, they were attached to this agreement that demarcated a piece of our territory and gave money and some other benefits to the communities, and in return left much of our lands in the hands of Aracruz. It was a huge challenge and I felt it directly because I was one of the few to question the agreement. But we did the work of talking to people in the communities until we

got leaders in all the communities that understood that our fight was for the territory.

Another challenge, related to this agreement, was to detach ourselves from the things we'd achieved in 1998. They were places in university, agriculture projects, money sent to families from the sale of eucalyptus planted on indigenous lands for Aracruz Celulose – to let go of all that and go forth to the struggle for the territory. We were very much criticized, people said we were destroying everything, that there would be nothing else, but we remained firm and managed to show that the territory was extremely important.

This led to an even bigger challenge, which was to bring together all the communities to be able to start the fight. We held a general meeting and, above all else, the speeches made by the elders were extremely important because they managed to show people the importance of the struggle for land, and then we managed to bring everyone together and convince all the communities to join in this fight.

Of course we had many other challenges. I remember right in the middle of the struggle people saying: "Why are we here, fighting for this land? Let's leave them with Aracruz and live off the money made with eucalyptus" and trying to influence people's minds to give up. So we had to work constantly to raise the community's awareness about being together with the leadership in the struggle.

Another challenge was in January 2006, when the police invaded our territory (retaken) and took down our Olho d'Água village that we had rebuilt. I remember being the first to get there, trying to talk to the police commander who was heading the group, for him not to do that and trying to mediate. In the end there was all that violence that happened there. But we are indians, we are stubborn and we went there and rebuilt Olho d'Água once again and there it is nowadays, thank god.

WRM: It was in this last demarcation that you not only demarcated the territory, but decided to occupy it, rebuilding some of the old, defunct villages like Olho d'Água. Why did you think it was important to occupy the territory?

Deusdeia: According to our elders, there were about 40 indigenous villages before the company got here. When we started the struggle, we went round with the elders, like Mr. Antonino from my village. He took us to where he lived before, Cantagalo village. Back when he lived there, there was a big river, and for this reason we found an immense amount of oyster shells. Those shells were like our identity that was there, showing the place had been home to Indigenous People. Nowadays there is no more eucalyptus there, fortunately.

When we decided to take possession of this territory, it was for the world to see these defunct villages, to see this big territory that belongs to Indigenous Peoples, and when these villages were rescued, such as the case of Olho d'Água, there is a history. I talk about Olho d'Água like a child asking for help. Because when eucalyptus was planted there, that little spring [*olho d'água* in Portuguese] never dried up, it continued alive, but crying out for help. Even with the eucalyptus plantation, it did not fall silent. The rescue of that village was like a dream.

Paulo: Even though unrecognizable in the eyes of some, those old villages in the eyes of the indigenous elders were not unrecognizable. They had an intimate relation with that space. So it was important to rebuild them in order to be able to restart the occupation of the territory. In other words, demarcating is not the only important thing. We decided to occupy to be able to show that we weren't only fighting for land, but fighting for our sacred spaces, where our ancestors lived. A third

point is that the three villages we rebuilt, Areal, Olho d'Água and Córrego d'Ouro, were strategic points within the retaken territory for us to maintain surveillance, the monitoring of our space, for us to know who was entering and leaving our territory.

WRM: Was there a learning process over the course of this 40-year struggle?

Paulo: Yes, and I'd like to stress that between one demarcation and the next, there were processes of co-option of leaders who were at the forefront of the struggle, especially in the period of 1998 to 2005 that I followed more closely. Because I think that we had the conditions at that moment, in 1998, to have concluded the demarcation of the territory. But unfortunately, during the self-demarcation, the leaders were pressured and taken to Brasília, they were co-opted and decided to accept an agreement exchanging land for money and stopping the fight. But in 2005, we decided to take the struggle up again because we felt that the land was more important than money. This is why I talk about the importance of the objective and that it has to be common to all. We learned a lot from that, the struggle for land was like a school that equipped us for other fights. And our struggle is not over yet. It will continue because there are new threats to our territory.

WRM: In what way does the struggle for land have to do with the fight to rescue and strengthen the Tupinikim cultural identity?

Paulo: The struggle for land is part of this struggle to rescue our culture. Firstly because it is traditional Tupinikim land, but above all, I wanted to say that the demarcation of indigenous territory should be seen by our peoples as their main fight and by our rulers as the main public policy for the Indigenous Peoples. This is because the territory is the beginning of everything. If I don't have the territory guaranteed, I don't have education, quality health care, I don't have an environment that ensures my survival, my subsistence, I won't have space for my traditional practices. So when we demarcated, occupied and rebuilt the villages for us to be able to have our practices, our rituals and ceremonies, it is because our indigenous territory provides this possibility. We need to have this relation with the land, with the elements of nature.

Deusdeia: When we started this fight to re-conquer the territory, there also started growing a wish to have our own indigenous education, with our educators, and to recover our language. We met a professor from São Paulo called Navarro, who does this work, with different peoples, of language rescue, and we managed to meet an indian of the Potiguara people, who rescued the language, similar to ours, and today it already is the mother tongue of this people. We managed to bring these people here and have classes with them. Our older folk also helped because they knew words here and there. We started doing research about the language and my grandmother at the time first said that she wasn't going to tell us what the language was like in the past because she didn't want to happen to us what had happened to her. She married a non-indigenous person who used to hit her to make her speak 'properly'. That was sexism trying to shut women up for them not to speak their language. But we managed to write down these loose words of hers. Then there arose the need to take this rescue to our classrooms, with indigenous students and teachers. All of this was a major advance and it took place at the same time as the struggle for land.

WRM: During the last struggle, from 2005 to 2007, Aracruz launched a racist campaign saying that you weren't Tupinikim, suggesting that you were not indigenous. What was the impact of this for you and for the struggle?

Deusdeia: Aracruz tried everything to show the government, the world, that we weren't from here, and also that we weren't indigenous. But this didn't intimidate us because we were sure we are from

this territory. Our certainty comes from the stories of the elders. We were very firm in our stories. We really questioned the company and continued to fight. For example, in 2006 we occupied the company's factories. Nothing could harm us in there, on the contrary. We sat down there with children, with women, even the elderly were there. And when we'd leave and go to a confrontation, we were sure we wouldn't die, but that we were going to a conquest. And Aracruz kept bringing its reports, and we were always sure, with our feet on the ground, that this mother earth, it was there sustaining us and that our children's children would be buried in the ground here.

Paulo: I remember once going into Aracruz, the town, to do some shopping at the supermarket, I had my body painted and my daughter too – this in fact was some time after the struggle, but just for you to see how this still reverberated in people's minds here in the municipality. I was in line to buy meat among other people, but nobody wanted to take my order. I said: "just because I'm an indian, just because I'm painted, nobody wants to serve me?" I gathered my things and left. Many things like that happened. There were kids going to school outside of the village, and if they were painted they weren't allowed in, they'd send the kids home because they were indians. We also suffered persecution and criminalization for fighting in defense of our territory. One time, a leader was followed by an armed security guard at the service of Aracruz. Me and another leader confronted and disarmed him, then handed the gun over to FUNAI. Also, we had to go to court, we were sued for theft of a vehicle, conspiracy, kidnapping etc, as if we were the criminals, while this security guard could have killed our leader in the middle of the highway.

All of this discrimination and persecution lasted for a long time after the fight was over because Aracruz had fomented it, that we were here to invade land, to take over the whole municipality, that we were even going to invade people's homes, that was how people used to talk about us and started to feel revulsion against us. This generated a very bad, embarrassing situation. Our children went as far as saying that they didn't want to be indians. But we were able to overcome it, to work things through among ourselves and here we are, to be able to show that we are a resistant people, that we don't run away from a fight. They didn't manage to break our resistance, because we were determined in our objective and this objective we kept until the end.

WRM: What were relations like with supporters of the struggle, and why were these supporters important?

Deusdeia: The importance of supporters was great, because they believed, because they were committed to us. They were organizations, movements, other communities, professors, students and also some politicians. They helped a lot in revealing to the world that the indians aren't lying, that they originate here. Together we produced brochures about us and our struggle that were sent across the country and abroad, and this made the support grow. Our conquest came about also because of the support from outside Brazil that reinforced the repudiation of Aracruz. Even though Aracruz had a lot of money, much power, its money did not silence us, it didn't manage to buy off people and organizations in the countries that bought their product, and they joined us. This was a major victory for us. We confronted the company from the edges and when it noticed, it was already being surrounded by our supporters from the outside and by us with the mobilization inside the communities. If it hadn't been for these supporters I believe we still would have conquered the land, but it would have taken longer.

Paulo: People were touched by our fight, by the fight of Indigenous People, they were crucial, those who decided to join the fight with us and at no time to give up. And this goes to show the importance of networking, that a big fight like this one we had here we can't win alone, but requires people and organizations in Brazil and outside Brazil that are on our side to be able to achieve what we wanted.

WRM: What would you say to other communities that want to start fighting to take back their territory? What is important to take care of and what is best avoided?

Paulo: Beyond the importance going into the struggle with some grounding, of putting pressure as we did by doing our self-demarcation, it is extremely important also to be organized. It is no use wanting to go into a struggle when you're disorganized. You need to be organized. If you go in disorganized, your struggle will not be successful.

Another thing is that if it's more than one group, community or people, is to have a common objective. It is no use me wanting to go in with an objective of conquering a territory with the understanding that it is important for my survival, subsistence and existence, while others are wanting to go in with individual interests, of wanting to get rich, not interests that contribute to the future, the collective interests of communities. Because we know that there's a lot of that in our midst.

Last but not least, it is important to think about strategy. You need to have a strategy of struggle. How can you go into a fight without a strategy? When we started the self-demarcation we already had everything planned, agreed, we had a strategy.

Deusdeia: I think one of the first attitudes is unity. A union for me is one thing. Unity is another, it is something that mixes people and there's no way of separating them. It means everybody thinking the same, having a strategy, seeking support that truly helps in this organization of the community itself to demand its territory. It was through unity that we were able to organize ourselves and also rescue and strengthen our culture. We rescued much of our culture that had been lost, like our crafts and dances and the language, that I've already talked about.

We also need to unite with other communities. Today, all over Brazil, we are uniting to defend our territory, Indigenous Peoples, *quilombola* communities, riverine populations, the MST, against the discrimination and persecution of our communities. We must strengthen our identity like the MST does in its settlements. They prove their identity by planting the crops that go from their fields to people's tables, even to the tables of the rulers who want to take away their right to survive.

So you have to get organized, sit down with everyone and have a strategy, take care. For example, not letting outsiders go into the community and grab someone, no. You have to say who you're going to talk to, that was how we organized ourselves as well. Even in this regard we have to have strategy, we have to be careful. But with wisdom, and with the traditional knowledge of each people, we can make the struggle grow even more.

WRM: If the Bolsonaro government manages to impose the "temporal framework", and this might imply losing part of your territory, are the Tupinikim and the Guarani going to surrender their lands?

Paulo: We are not going to surrender our lands, we're going to fight, we're going to die until the last indigenous person, because it's our land, our territory, and we're going to defend it at any cost, nobody can take it away from us.