

“Because I don’t know if you will be able to understand what I bring to share”: exchanges between a Xavante leader and two Public Health researchers in times when better winds are expected in the public policies aimed at indigenous peoples

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Ricardo’s cell phone emitted a sound indicating a new message. He took a look and, next to Tsuptó’s name, he saw his image, in which his hair caught the eye, painted with the beautiful bright red urucum that the A’uwẽ (Xavante) are so fond of. Tsuptó is the *cacique* of the village Pimentel Barbosa, located in the Indigenous Land of the same name, in eastern Mato Grosso State, Brazil. Tsuptó and Ricardo have known each other for over three decades, since 1990. James was in Pimentel Barbosa for the first time in the early 2000s. During this period, Ricardo, James and other Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) researchers, in collaboration with colleagues from other institutions, participated in numerous research projects at Pimentel Barbosa, focusing on topics such as social determinants of indigenous peoples’ health, social organization, historical ecology, among others. In the early 1990s, there were only three villages in the Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land; currently, there are more than 20. The communities multiplied as the bonds of trust and partnership between *warazu* (“non-indigenous”) researchers and the A’uwẽ of Pimentel Barbosa.

It had been a few months since Tsuptó and Ricardo had last communicated. The intermittent internet connection in the aldeia did not always help. Perhaps this is why, in the few seconds involved in pressing the keys until reaching the audio message, so many memories flashed through Ricardo’s mind. “Hi, this is Tsuptó. I need to talk to you”. They started a dialogue that unfolded over the following days, dealing with issues such as creating a new logo for the Xavante Association of Pimentel Barbosa, preparing a text to raise funds for a meeting of dozens of leaders of both Pimentel Barbosa and the nearby Areões Indigenous Land, and reviewing minutes from a meeting that had recently taken place in the Tsuptó’s village related to health.

At first glance, these may seem to be local, day-to-day issues, but they can be seen as representative, on a broader scale, of the paths (and sometimes detours) of public policies aimed at indigenous peoples in Brazil. They also reflect expectations surrounding recent political processes, such as the creation – in the scope of the federal administration that recently took office in January 2023 – of the Brazilian Ministry of Indigenous Peoples; the fact that the Brazilian National Indigenous Peoples Foundation (FUNAI), the new designation for the former Brazilian National Indian Foundation, will for the first time have an indigenous leader as president; and the strategic position of head of the Special Department

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for Indigenous Health (SESAI), in the Brazilian Ministry of Health, will also be occupied by an indigenous person.

The Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land is located in the so-called Legal Amazon (a Brazilian sociogeographic division); however, it is not covered by tropical rainforest, as is common in the social imagination about the Amazon region, but rather by Cerrado vegetation, one of the biomes of Brazil that has suffered the most devastation. Nowadays, like many other indigenous territories in the country, Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land is a preservation enclave, which says a lot about the role of indigenous peoples when it comes to the pressing environmental and climate issues that are of global concern today. It is one of the largest areas of preserved Cerrado in all of the Central Brazil. It is circumscribed by lands dominated by soy cultivation and other monocultures. Extensive areas of the Amazon, a region pictured on the covers of the 2023 issues of CSP, are covered by Cerrado, and this biome requires greater attention.

In the days that followed the initial contact between Tsuptó and Ricardo, they also talked about how the last years in the aldeia had been. The COVID-19 pandemic, of great impact on indigenous peoples, reduced the frequency of researchers' trips to Pimentel Barbosa. Tsuptó spoke of the difficulties in health care, the many sick children and older adults, and the complexities of taking the most serious cases to health care units in nearby cities due to lack of transportation. He also mentioned his growing concern about hunting, fishing, and gathering resources in the indigenous land, perceived as affected by deforestation in the surroundings. But he also spoke with pride of the rituals, which remain central to the A'uwẽ social life.

Ricardo asked in one of the messages: "*Tsuptó, why a new logo, if you already have one?*". He replied that A'uwẽ leaders are planning to travel soon to Brasília to present their many demands, as well as to meet the new authorities at the head of the government agencies that deal with indigenist policies. For such, they are holding meetings to define an agenda of points for discussion. He spoke of his hope that the situation will improve, including the progress in the process of recognition, by the Federal Government, of the Wedezé Indigenous Land, a contiguous territory to the Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land, which was taken from them in the 1960s-1970s. Ricardo and James know this situation well, as they participated in 2009-2010 as specialists, along with Carlos Coimbra Jr. and Nancy Flowers, in the preparation of a report for the official recognition of the Wedezé Indigenous Land, a case that is still pending in the Federal Court ¹. The investigations that members of the research team carried out over the years, one of the products of which was a book prefaced by Tsuptó himself ², became an important source of information to prepare the report under appreciation in Court. Scientific research and social impacts in close dialogue.

The subjects in exchange of messages encapsulate much of the despair with what has happened in recent years, marked by the dismantling of public policies. But they also express the expectation for a more efficient performance by the Brazilian State regarding indigenous peoples. In these conversations, the issue of producing written minutes for a meeting about replacing indigenous health and sanitation agents, demanded of the Xavante by the Special Indigenous Health District (DSEI) attends to their primary healthcare, can be seen as a critical and, at the same time, illuminating, example. It is a pointed example of how self-centered the State apparatus can become in its daily routine, even when public policies are explicitly focused on contexts involving otherness. As *cacique*, Tsuptó had to type the text of the minute on his cell phone and asked the *warazu* researchers for help in reviewing it. The legal apparatus of the Brazilian National Policy for Health Care of Indigenous Peoples is filled with references to concepts such as interculturality and respect for cultural differences ^{3,4}. So, it may not even be necessary to emphasize how iconic a minute

is as a symbol of (Western) bureaucracy. Why not implement more culturally sensitive (and accessible) ways of recording the decisions of indigenous communities in the operationalization of public policies? It is one example, among many, of issues that need to be rethought regarding the day-to-day implementation of health policies.

Assurance and reparation of social and environmental injustices, expectations for more structured and efficient health services, concern for the protection of territories, perception of food insecurity... The list of concerns is long and, by the way, not recent. But Tsuptó also turned his attention to thinking about a new logo to have in a period when a process of reinvigoration of public policies aimed at indigenous peoples is expected. He wants to use it in documents to be sent to Brasília in preparation for trips he expects to take in the coming months to discuss the demands of Pimentel Barbosa's A'uwẽ.

The situation of the A'uwẽ, since permanent contact in the 1940s, has always been difficult, marked by the usurping of areas, unfairness, even involving abrupt population reductions and loss of territories. In practice, the A'uwẽ, like other indigenous peoples from the Central Brazil, had already been experiencing the harmful effects of "contact before contact" for many decades, as epidemics of infectious diseases, among other consequences, arrived even before the first more direct interactions ². But the A'uwẽ's pride did not falter.

The new logo of the Xavante Association of Pimentel Barbosa is a bridge of meanings between past and present. Having as a frame the representation of a *danho'rebzu'a* (a ceremonial "tie" worn by men), the main image is of a Xavante leader named Sere'wã'rã, who was the brother of one of Tsuptó's grandfathers. He was recorded in a photograph taken in the years following contact. Sere'wã'rã has one of his arms stretched out in front of him, while his lips seem to articulate a word. Tsuptó says that he was speaking, in the A'uwẽ language, something equivalent to "stop". In the new logo, such a powerful image, while representative of colonial violence, communicates the vicissitudes of present times. As Tsuptó commented, it can be understood as the statement "respect us".

Without a doubt, it is a past-present in which the Brazilian nation remains very indebted to indigenous peoples. Tsuptó mentioned in one of the messages his sadness of learning about yet another tragedy, resulting from illegal mining and other forms of violence, befalling the Yanomami. Moreover, he stressed that it is important to pay attention to the difficult situation faced by many other indigenous peoples in the country. Illegal mining and logging are not problems in the region of the Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land, but the widespread use of pesticides in the extensive monocultures in the surroundings ⁵, as well as the very tendency to become an "island" of Cerrado, with limited ecological corridors, have direct effects on the environment.

The sentence that gives title to this editorial is from Sereburã, a very respected elder of the Pimentel Barbosa community, who died a few years ago. It is in a book, authored by the A'uwẽ themselves, in which they tell their story and their myths ⁶. For Tsuptó, the expectation is that the winds of transformation that are signaled from Brasília will reach the edges, the communities. That Brazilian society be able to understand the demands brought by indigenous peoples in their struggles for respect, social justice, guarantee of their territories, and more effective public policies. The 1988 *Federal Constitution* states these rights, but they remain far from being translated effectively into everyday life.

Contributors

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