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# Autonomies today Indigenous peoples in Latin America

Working Group  
Newsletter  
**Indigenous  
peoples, autonomy  
and collective  
rights**



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# | Presentation

Indigenous peoples' demands for the recognition of their rights are becoming increasingly present in our continent. At this juncture, the struggle for autonomy has taken center stage as a strategy of resistance that articulates their cultural and territorial demands and their collective rights. These are peoples struggling to continue being peoples, making their autonomies unique and heterogeneous processes, legacies of their most diverse histories and geographies.

The Bulletin: "Autonomies Today", of the CLACSO Working Group Indigenous Peoples, Autonomies and Collective Rights, aims to bring together (throughout its issues) a diversity of autonomous experiences that permeate our Latin American reality. With the collaboration of brief articles and interviews, we seek to build bridges between indigenous peoples in resistance and researchers of the continent, enabling the creation of networks that allow us to advance in this long journey-questioning of human emancipation and decolonization. "We can already see the horizon," some of these comrades tell us.

The bulletin welcomes contributions from other Working Groups, in order to encourage the active participation of the academic community on the topic of autonomies, as well as from indigenous organizations that **c a n** collaborate based on their own experiences. Texts should be short (between 1,500 and 2,000 words) and the bibliography should follow APA + gender norms. CLACSO uses APA + gender norms, including the full names of the authors in the bibliographic citation (for example: Gómez, Fernanda instead of Gómez, F.), to make gender visible.

The CLACSO Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, Autonomies and Collective Rights invites you to read it carefully. For questions, criticisms and collaborations, please contact us by e-mail: [boletin.autonomias@gmail.com](mailto:boletin.autonomias@gmail.com)

In this our first issue, we feature reflections and analysis on Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico and Nicaragua.

The coordinators

# By way of presentation

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The CLACSO Working Group Indigenous Peoples, Autonomies and Collective Rights is a plural academic collective of researchers from 11 countries in the region that seeks to study, contribute and accompany, from perspectives of critical thought and action, the practices of the struggle for indigenous autonomies, as well as their daily life and the grounds of possibility, in different national contexts and from a Latin American perspective. It also seeks to identify and reflect on the challenges of the social sciences in order to understand the place occupied today by native peoples and indigenous movements within the anti-systemic movements that have emerged with the modern/colonial/patriarchal/patriarchal world system and capitalism as the dominant civilizational order.

Our Working Group, which is a continuation of the WG "Indigenous Peoples in the Struggle for Autonomy" (which later became the WG "Indigenous Peoples and Autonomy Processes"), has been working and exchanging experiences in the following areas

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collectively with the support of CLACSO since 2013, when it was formed with the objective of reflecting on the importance of indigenous struggles for autonomies in Latin America, highlighting their continuities and ruptures, their regional/national specificities and their current challenges. Giving continuity to this line of collective work and to the processes of research, reflection, discussion and exchange among different researchers, in an interdisciplinary and intergenerational dialogue.

This Working Group, which we have recently renamed the WG on Indigenous Peoples, Autonomy and Collective Rights, set out to renew and update the questions to continue analyzing the role of indigenous autonomous processes and their influence on broader social and political processes, whether because they represent an inspiration for other social struggles or a questioning of the persistence of some socio-political and territorial relations of exclusion and/or denial and the power schemes and practices of domination that sustain them. Similarly, the group undertook to continue investigating and accompanying the autonomous processes of indigenous peoples, as well as the demands for their recognition and exercise of their collective rights by the States - whether it implies their restructuring or refoundation- understanding that their struggles for autonomy can be a seed to build alternative societal systems to the dominant and hegemonic order. It is a matter of action from academia and social movements, accompaniments in a context of neoliberal capitalist expansion, favored by the States and global economic interests.

This Bulletin is an expression of the issues on the collective's agenda. It is a proposal to address the current situation of thinking and practicing indigenous autonomies in the context of territorial conflicts, extractivist policies, the violation of individual and collective rights, and the political and economic situation of the region and the world.

As coordinators of the WG we celebrate the publication of this first issue of the Bulletin "Autonomías hoy. Indigenous Peoples in America

We firmly believe that this publication will contribute to the materialization of our primary objective of promoting and consolidating spaces for debate around the processes and experiences of resistance and the challenges in the construction of autonomy. We firmly believe that this publication will contribute to materialize our primary objective of continuing to promote and consolidate spaces for debate on the processes and experiences of resistance and the challenges in the construction of indigenous autonomy in Latin America.

# Attention!

## CLACSO Working Group Indigenous Peoples, Autonomies and Collective Rights

### Mexico: A Journey for Life

The ship, christened "La Montaña", set sail in early May for the port of Vigo in Spain. The Zapatista "Squadron 421", formed by four women, two men and one other, will visit more than 30 countries, with the aim of getting to know, listen to and share experiences with the resistances and those from below in the old continent. After 47 years of voyage, they arrived at the coast of the Azores Islands, in Portugal.

For more information: <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/>

### Chile: For a new Plurinational Constitution

The new constituent process [underway] will put an end to the last constitution of 1980 [of the military dictatorship]. On this occasion, indigenous peoples will occupy 17 [for the nation's 10 indigenous peoples] of the 155 seats in the Constituent Assembly - in charge of drafting the new Magna Carta.



## Colombia: La Minga outward

The indigenous peoples of the country join the national strike [which began on April 28], against the policies and repression of the government of Iván Duque. Among their actions, on May 7, the Misak people pulled down the statue of the Spanish colonizer Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada [founder of Bogotá] and some months earlier [on September 16, 2020], they had pulled down the statue of Sebastián de Belalcázar [Spanish conquistador who founded the city of Cali] in the city of Popayán.

## Brazil: Amazonian gold and the Yanomami genocide

The Yanomami indigenous people - located in the extreme north of the Brazilian Amazon, on the border with Venezuela - have been suffering a new wave of permanent attacks by "gold prospectors", interested in illegally extracting the metal found in their territory. It is estimated that between 20 and 30 thousand prospectors have invaded their territory. In May of this year, there were reports of shots fired at the indigenous people and even at the Brazilian Federal Police, who were deployed to try to control the invaders.

For more information: <https://youtu.be/KmUZoWeNuSg>

## Brazil: More conflicts over gold - Munduruku indigenous people's house burned down

In May 2021, there was an escalation of the conflict between gold prospectors and Munduruku Indians in the state of Pará (in the Brazilian Amazon). The prospectors, supported by local politicians and the government of President Jair Bolsonaro, attacked the Munduruku indigenous communities with gunfire and burned down indigenous residences in the municipality of Jacareacanga. A study shows that all the Munduruku Indians have been contaminated with mercury from illegal gold mining.

For more information: <https://bit.ly/34LaaMY>

# Autonomies that actually exist

Raul Zibechi

A tour of various spaces carried out in 2018 with Argentine movements in Córdoba, both in the capital and in Traslasierra, as well as with collectives in the provinces of Santa Fe and Paraná, allowed me to listen to other debates and ways of working. One of them is the diversification of what is understood by autonomy, to the point that many collectives consider themselves truly autonomous, although they receive funding from the state. They separate self-management/self-government from their own space, from the financial contributions they receive.

Let us recall that in the 1990s, in the heat of the Zapatista uprising of 1994, which made autonomy a central demand, South American movements, and in particular piquetero sectors, declared themselves autonomous from the State, parties, churches and trade unions. It was a question of political autonomy, although more often than not it remained a matter of declaration, since from the beginning the territorial movements of the unemployed built their organization on the basis of social plans of the provincial governments and municipalities. After more than a decade of building organizations on the basis of social plans of the provincial governments and municipalities.

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In response to these policies, the common sense that was installed was to continue talking about autonomy (certainly for a reduced sector of the movements), while not questioning the receipt of funds from governments. This obvious contradiction was addressed with the aforementioned separation of the concepts of autonomy and self-management/self-government. They are not autonomous, although they wish to be, but can nevertheless govern each space according to their desires or political projects. Without being autonomous they can say that they are self-managing.

The main problem I find in this attitude, which seems to me to be honest and transparent because no one denies that it receives funds from the state, is the lack of reflection on the consequences it has on political culture. The inflection that took place shortly after 2010 towards the electoral field, while there was a tendency to abandon or weaken territorial work as a strategic bet, has it any relation with this policy of building organization based on social plans? What consequences have the plans had on the organization and political culture within the movements?

It is clear that the state has repositioned itself in societies with progressive governments, but it has also gained space in the thinking of militants and in the ways of doing things in organizations. Rather than questioning this, it seems to me necessary to debate it. I do not believe that it is positive to naturalize the role of the state, nor the participation in elections, a task in which the greatest efforts and many resources are invested, without measuring the long-term consequences of these decisions.

However, in spite of all the above, autonomous practices exist, have not disappeared, are sustained and reproduced in numerous collectives, beyond the definitions of each individual. I sense that autonomy as a political proposal enjoys greater sympathy than the capacity to be truly autonomous; that autonomous practices are much more than collectives that only depend on their efforts. I ask myself the reasons for this, and I find several.



The first is that autonomy enjoys social and cultural sympathies, as an idea-force that shapes emancipatory tension. Undoubtedly, Zapatismo has a greater influence than we usually imagine. This influence is indirect and not necessarily "political" (in the traditional sense of the term). The collectives that are becoming an anti-systemic reference in each country of the region, such as the Mapuche of Chile and Argentina, the Guarani peoples of Brazil and the Quechua resisting mining in Peru and the Andean region, practice varying degrees of autonomy and identify with it.

Autonomy, under various names, is the most prestigious political practice among peoples, social sectors and active individuals, among black communities in Colombia and Brazil (quilombos and palenques), among the urban peripheries of large cities that are being subjugated by real estate speculation and, of course, among native peoples who defend life and land/territory.

The feminist movement shows deep empathy with autonomous practices, and comes to reinforce the tendencies towards the autonomy of peoples, with its own characteristics and with a striking capacity for creative mobilization. The most important movement during the progressive agony, it recovers autonomism and gives it a remarkable projection, even in the struggles that demand from the states the right to abortion.

The second is that heteronomy (dependence on governments/parties/states) has a very bad reputation. The relationship with patriarchal and colonial structures can be analyzed as a necessity by a sector of the movements, but in no way does this attitude arouse enthusiasm or unanimous adhesion, nor does it wish to become subordination.

Let us take the case of the inflection towards the electoral field that took place in Argentina. Although its results were disastrous, in less than a decade, it is a policy that has been neutralized and is in the process of being delegitimized, because the institutional arena appears to be linked -in the conscience of our peoples- with corruption, personal advantages, and

reproduction of the worst practices of the old political culture. After the trials of Lula and Cristina Fernandez, the repression of Daniel Ortega's regime in Nicaragua and the misrule of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, state institutions are less and less defended as emancipatory tools. Only a handful of accommodating intellectuals and militants blinded by the right-wing offensive continue to defend progressivism.

The third is that the system in its financial/extractive phase, of the fourth world war, suffocates us, does not allow us to breathe, so autonomy is an essential practice for survival. As the Zapatistas point out, in the current phase capitalism is a system of war that proposes to displace populations in order to convert common goods into merchandise.

At this point I see a profound dialogue between feminists and the peoples who suffer from extractivism. Patriarchy and machismo are showing their genocidal facet, with a multiplication of feminicides that particularly affect black, indigenous and popular women. Colonialism and racism act in the same way, against the same peoples. Capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism are intertwined because they have in common the need to control the peoples of the color of the earth, who are their main obstacle to the continued accumulation of wealth.

Just as women need their own spaces to meet in confidence, safe spaces in which they can be united, the diverse abajos of different colors and peoples need to build their own arks to survive the storms of dispossession. These spaces/arks/territories that resist and create other worlds do so in an autonomous way with respect to capital and patriarchy. I want to interpret the hundreds of organizations existing in the most remote corners of our continent as those spaces of survival and creation that, even if they do not proclaim it, practice a minimum of real, rather than discursive, autonomy.

Among these autonomous practices of self-government that we can recognize in all Latin American countries, we find some common characteristics that I would like to break down. The first is that they are nested in very varied groups, not dedicated to what is understood as "politics", in the sense of disputing power in society, but focused on cultural activities (music, dance, free radio, independent publishing houses and magazines), social activities (popular education, fair trade, healthy food) and productive activities (making bread and other organic food, handicrafts and recycling). They do politics from below, without trying to "climb up" to the institutions. The second is that these groups often share environmentalist or ecologist ideas and practices, they refuse to be part of consumerism, they form networks of resistance to mining and monocultures such as soybeans, but also to urban real estate speculation.

Not all of them are totally autonomous, in the sense that they rely on their own resources, but they question participation in elections and manage their spaces and time according to their own criteria. Most have built spaces for self-training, which helps to enhance autonomous practices.

Thirdly, this is a very broad sector that is not usually linked to a stable organizational structure. The tendency is for collectives to group together for a specific activity or for campaigns over time, and then each organization follows its own course. In reality, there are stable links between many of them, but they are not subject to an organic apparatus that overlaps them. There are national, regional and sectoral coordinations. But each group that integrates them is, in this case it applies perfectly, autonomous when it comes to making its decisions without having to submit to the coordination to which it belongs. That is why I believe that autonomy covers many more areas than those that define themselves as autonomous.

Autonomy has been profoundly transformed since it emerged in the 1990s, influenced by Zapatismo, by the debacle of the old left-wing parties, by the neoliberalism that destroyed the states

and for a trade unionism that is functional to the system. Most of them are clear that the social policies of the states seek to domesticate the movements and seem to have learned to neutralize them.

In one of the various meetings in which I participated in the last two years, one of the working groups highlighted the importance of reflecting on "how we embrace each other from below". While they advance in recognizing the dependencies they maintain, not only from the State, but also from the market, they also grow in elucidating the ways to relate to each other, to expand resistances and struggles, while weaving the new. This is no small thing for such difficult times.



# Autonomy Multiethnicity is transforming the Nicaraguan State

Mirna Cunningham

In recent weeks, indigenous territorial government elections have been held in the Autonomous Region where I live: the Autonomous Region of the Northern Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. In 1987, the Nicaraguan State decided to transform the relations with the Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant and ethnic communities living in the former Moskitia, establishing a multi-ethnic autonomy regime. The governance system articulates levels of communal, territorial, municipal and regional autonomy.

In 1986, the Political Constitution recognized the communal forms of land ownership of the communities of the Autonomous Regions, the right of their inhabitants to the enjoyment, use and enjoyment of the waters and forests of their communal lands, and established that the State must guarantee them the enjoyment of their natural resources, the effectiveness of their rights, and the right of the communities of the Autonomous Regions to use and enjoy the waters and forests of their communal lands, and established that the State must guarantee them the enjoyment of their natural resources, the effectiveness of their rights.

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forms of communal property and the free election of their authorities and representatives.

Communal ownership and joint governance form the basis of the autonomy system. The legal framework establishes that the communal property regime is based on pre-European conquest rights and the Nicaraguan State's control over the Moskitia. Communal property was incorporated as a right in the Statute of Autonomy of the Communities of the Caribbean Coast, and was subject to the following provisions: a) Communal lands are inalienable. They cannot be donated, sold, seized, or encumbered, and are not subject to the statute of limitations, and, b) The inhabitants of the communities have the right to work plots of communal property and to the usufruct of the goods generated by the work performed.

- *Communal property consists of the lands, waters and forests that have traditionally belonged to the Communities of the Autonomous Regions.*
- *Territory is the geographic space that covers the entire habitat of indigenous and ethnic peoples.*
- *Communal land is the geographic area in possession of a community and/or ethnic group, whether under real title of ownership or not. It includes the lands inhabited by the community and those that constitute the traditional sphere of its social, economic, cultural, religious, spiritual activities, including hunting, fishing and agriculture, cemeteries and other sacred places of the community. Communal lands cannot be encumbered and are unseizable, inalienable and imprescriptible.*
- *Communal property is collective property, consisting of communal lands and the natural and other resources contained therein, traditional knowledge, intellectual and cultural property, biodiversity resources and other assets, rights and actions belonging to one or more indigenous or ethnic communities.*

Source: Law 28 and Regulations of the Statute of Autonomy.



Therefore, one of the transformations of the State was to incorporate the indigenous and Afro-descendant territories into its structure. An indigenous territory is made up of several indigenous communities with their own authorities and jurisdiction, who are organized in an Assembly in accordance with Articles 4 and 5 of Law 445, for the election of the territorial authority.

The Indigenous Territorial Governments coordinate their management with the autonomous Regional Governments and the respective Municipal Mayors' Offices. They receive an allocation from the General Budget of the Republic to carry out their territorial management and governance activities. In their structure, they have a territorial authority responsible for the administration of justice, known as the *Wihta*, whose function is to ensure the application of ancestral justice, and a Territorial Trustee who is responsible for the administration of the territory and resources.

Now, for Indigenous Peoples, the territory is the space where the life of their people develops, where human beings coexist with other living beings and spirits, which are present in everything. The territory defines their collective identity and belonging, it is sacred and cannot be sold or individually adjudicated. It is in the territory where they exercise self-government, complementing the riches of Mother Earth with spirituality, collectivity and practices of solidarity, equity and reciprocity, a fundamental principle for the security of families and the community. Respect for nature is fundamental to ensure life in harmony.

These visions of land and territory differ from the classic perception that tends to reduce a territory to a set of productive resources demarcated by political, administrative or property boundaries. For Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples, territoriality reflects the degree of appropriation, consolidation and linkage between a People and its territory, and refers especially to:

- The self-identification of the People with their territory, which is mainly by community where they practice social activities,

economic, cultural, environmental, conservation of sacred sites, natural boundaries, hunting, fishing and sustainable agriculture.

- Coherence between the territory and the community authority, expressed through governance structures.
- The collective right to use the natural resources in the territory, including actual control.

In order to achieve this fundamental basis for autonomy, the following steps have been taken: ensuring the legal security of collective ownership, strengthening and articulating governance structures, and defining and implementing territorial governance instruments.

For the legal security of collective property, in addition to the rights enshrined in the Political Constitution and the Statute of Self-nomy, the Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples promoted a broad consultation and achieved in 2002, the approval of Law No. 445, regarding the *Communal Property Regime of the Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua and of the Bocay, Coco, Indio and Maiz Rivers*.

Law 445 defines indigenous and ethnic territory as the "*geographic space that covers the entire habitat of a group of indigenous or ethnic communities that form a territorial unit where they develop, according to their customs and traditions*", and regulates and regulates the titling process of indigenous territories. The objectives of the law were:

- Guarantee to Indigenous Peoples and ethnic communities the full recognition of their communal property rights, use, administration, and management of traditional lands and their natural resources, through the demarcation and titling of these lands.
- To regulate communal property rights, use and administration of natural resources in traditional communal lands of Indigenous Peoples and ethnic communities.

The law also defined the procedure for demarcation and titling. A highly participatory methodology was adopted for its application, granting titles based on the communities' historically shared sense of territoriality, but also to accelerate the process.

As a result of the process, there are 23 indigenous and Afro-descendant territories in the Autonomous Regions and the Upper Coco and Bocay titled. The nine (9) Sumu Mayangna territories are articulated in the Government of the Sumu Mayangna Nation, and the three (3) territories of Alto Coco and Bocay make up the Government of the Special Regime Zone. In total, they correspond to more than 300 communities, representing 30% of the Nicaraguan territory titled in favor of Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples.

The process has been complex. Throughout the process, hundreds of negotiations have taken place to delimit boundaries, areas of common use, among other things. But they have also faced complex structural and political factors. One of the first stumbling blocks was the lack of respect from the Nicaraguan government when it initiated the establishment of autonomy in 1990. The national government, under the presidency of Violeta Chamorro, decided to hand over indigenous collective lands to unarmed soldiers from the various sides as a result of the peace accords. Obviously, the unarmed soldiers sold them, generating complications two or three decades later. Many of the current conflicts, with the presence of mestizo settlers in indigenous territories, are the result of the sale of land by unarmed indigenous and non-indigenous people.

Other factors, such as the increase in agricultural production, the boom in artisanal mining, and the impact of natural disasters on the forest, such as Hurricane Felix in 2007, have increased the presence of mestizo settlers in some indigenous and Afro-descendant territories. In the case of indigenous communities bordering Honduras, the advance of the agricultural frontier to the margins of the Wangki River in that country, together with the presence of drug traffickers who have been working in the area, have increased the presence of mestizo settlers in some indigenous and Afro-descendant

territories.

The fact that the area has been affected has also had an impact on past transboundary production practices.

There have also been internal problems in indigenous and Afro-descendant communities that have changed ancestral practices, either due to cultural contacts with different perceptions or market pressure. Thus, there have been cases of illegal sale and rental of indigenous lands with the complicity of leaders, lawyers, property registrars, which have affected communal cohesion and territorial governance. Cases of collective land leasing have multiplied, as a source of income for both families and communal and territorial authorities, although in some cases, such as the indigenous territory of Karata, it has been a practice for more than 100 years. On several occasions, there have been cases of tension and polarization.

To respond to these cases, the communal and territorial authorities, with the support of the regional and municipal authorities, have been working on a series of land governance instruments, which, on the one hand, allow the conclusion of the regulation stage, as defined by Law 445, to be carried out after titling and the application of traditional community norms. This process has been an opportunity for the communities and territories to advance in their governance and territorial planning process and improve their capacity to govern themselves based on their own institutional framework and jurisdiction, their cosmovision or cultural vision of development, their traditional livelihoods, and the use and conservation of their resources, all within the framework of their rights. At least three governance instruments have been identified, namely:

- a) Territorial governance norms, which are nothing more than a written version of the ecological norms that have been traditionally applied in the communities. They allow the identification of sacred sites, productive areas, areas of cultural reproduction, common use, among others.

- b) The land-use regulation or statute, which consists of defining the vision of areas of use, conservation arrangements, areas of conflict or inter-ethnic coexistence. These regulations define the relationship with third parties located in their territories.
- c) The territorial development plan or bio-cultural agenda, where aspects related to food sovereignty, protection of traditional knowledge, productive economic activities, free and informed prior consent procedures, livelihoods, conservation systems, closed fishing and hunting periods, among others, are included.

It is important to note that the governance instruments are the result of participatory and negotiation processes that are quite lengthy and slow, especially in cases of conflict, as they seek to apply conflict resolution procedures. There are some territories in which they have had to resort to the establishment of forest rangers to protect their boundaries or to establish agreements with the National Army to create Ecological Battalions for permanent protection and surveillance.

One result of these processes has been the strengthening of territorial and communal governance structures. Although the communal authorities were already recognized as part of the administrative structure of the State since the establishment of the autonomy regime in 1987, Law 445 reaffirms them, defines the territorial authorities and deepens the relationship mechanisms between them and the rest of the State. The law establishes that in addition to guaranteeing the right of possession and use, it also defines the fundamental principles of the administrative regime and management of traditional lands and their natural resources and defines the following bodies of authority, namely:

1. *Communal Assembly*: Members of the community, gathered to make decisions on matters of community interest, in accordance with their customs and traditions.

2. *Territorial Assembly*: Meeting of traditional communal authorities that make up a territorial unit, gathered to make decisions on matters pertaining to the territory.
3. *Traditional Communal Authority*: The authority of the indigenous and ethnic community, elected in a Communal Assembly according to their customs and traditions to represent and govern them: such as Síndico, Whita, Coordinator or others.
4. *Territorial Authority*: The intercommunal authority, elected in an assembly of traditional communal authorities representing a group of indigenous or ethnic communities that form a territorial unit, elected in accordance with the procedures they adopt.

The transformation of the Nicaraguan State to respond to multi-ethnicity requires continuing to strengthen the institutional framework of autonomous regional governments and the articulation between regional, municipal, communal and territorial self-government systems. We continue to learn as we go, while we build.

# Five thoughts on autonomies today

## Looking from Oaxaca, Mexico

Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado\*.

### Introduction

Oaxaca is one of the 32 states of the Mexican Republic, that is, of the Mexican nation state. The population of Oaxaca, made up of nearly four million people, is heir to the Mesoamerican civilization tradition. More than a third of the population still speaks an indigenous language and more people recognize themselves as indigenous because of their communal way of life.

The vast majority of the communities where Oaxacans live or with which they are still in contact, even from abroad, have a form of collectivist organization called communal, based on a communal mentality and lived in concrete spaces, which are the communities (of which there are about 3,000).

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Communities are members of peoples when they share language, culture, cosmovision, and history. There are 14 original peoples in Oaxaca, the most numerous being the Zapotecs, the Mixtecs and the Mazatecs. The strength and validity of their communal life can be perceived in four fundamental aspects: power (based on the assembly as the highest body and the system of public positions by direct election), work (collective and free for the benefit of the community or interfamily), territory (in most cases in collective property) and celebration (the constant festivities as a reiteration of the pleasure of being a community).

It is from communality that communities have resisted Spanish and Mexican colonial domination. This way of life has been progressively self-managing, but less and less so; and it has been relatively autonomous, also less and less so. As we shall see, this historical experience allows us to see that from self-management we can achieve self-liberation, that is, that from resistance we can cultivate liberation.

## 1. Autonomy and self-management

There is no way of thinking today of autonomy without thinking of self-management as its basic component. There can be self-management without autonomy (that is the history of community resistance), but not autonomy without self-management, because it would be a contradiction, a nonsense.

Self-management can be understood as the management and organization of activities from within, i.e., organization in the hands of the participants, collective control. The opposite is the imposition of an external conduction, which means controlling a collective with interests different from its own. The State, in its simplest definition, is a form of government that separates itself from society in order to promote the interests of the ruling class against the majority.

Therefore, self-management means taking the management of community life into one's own hands, as has traditionally been done in

Oaxaca since the

The same is true for the community, as the rebel community of Cherán, in Michoacán, Mexico, did ten years ago, or as the Zapatista rebel municipalities in Chiapas have been doing for the past ten years.

## 2. Self-management stories

Thinking about autonomies today from Oaxaca with our continent in mind necessarily means thinking about the histories of self-management, that is, recognizing the forms of self-managed life that have given meaning to the history of the peoples and communities of the continent. It is not only a matter of collecting testimonies or narratives, but of reconstructing the ways in which socio-cultural organization allowed people to generate the most sensible life possible.

Starting from the most visible, recognized and documentable experience that is present in all American cultures, which are the traditional self-managing health systems, research can be organized to recover the other self-managing systems: food, justice, spirituality, power, <sup>etc</sup><sup>1</sup>.

## 3. Autonomy towards liberation

Autonomy today as an objective of the indigenous struggle in Oaxaca and Mexico is a condition to be achieved within the scheme of domination, in order to continue being part of the Mexican State but reformed and in conditions of dialogue. In other words, the objective of the indigenous movement that strengthens the community is to create the conditions that force the Mexican State to dialogue on equal terms with them, which means to achieve an intercultural Mexico, to build it, to force the State to reform itself to that end.

<sup>1</sup> A brief text on this subject can be found in the great page for the diffusion of anarchism that Chantal López and Omar Cortés, unfortunately deceased, had in Mexico: [http://www.antorcha.net/biblioteca\\_virtual/politica/medicina/medicina.html](http://www.antorcha.net/biblioteca_virtual/politica/medicina/medicina.html).

Autonomy in Oaxaca and Mexico is not sovereignty, liberation is not proposed in terms of separation from the Mexican State but in terms of continuing to be part of that State but under a new social pact, in which autonomies are the new face of the nation, autonomies whose main, but not exclusive, basis would be the self-managing experiences of communal life that Mesoamerican communities have had during their history.

#### 4. From resistance to liberation

Autonomy means the generation of a space of emancipation that frees a sector from self-management, that is to say, that allows it to build socially and not to remain dedicated to defending itself, to resist.

Resistance has been the defensive history against colonial domination with the objective of preserving what is important to rebuild society on that basis, once liberation has been achieved, that is, when the resistance has triumphed and ceases to exist.

The historical self-management of the original communal communities allowed them to withstand the dramatic mortality caused by the viceregal epidemics, while at the same time having the strength to produce enough to support the Spaniards through the payment of tribute and to support their own families.

#### 5. Coloniality: destruction of self-management capacity

While capitalism continues to expand to exploit the air, water and subsoil of the continent, protected in its predatory task by the dominant left and right in Mexico, ethno-coloniality mainly attacks the motor of counter-hegemony, which is the capacity for self-management. The colonial struggle against self-management from the real and the symbolic has been based on institutions of domination.

or placed at its service, mainly the school, the media, the clinic, the market, the church, the court, the family. The colonial capitalist state has as its mission the generation of irresponsibility, in the face of which communality functions as a counter-hegemonic alternative, constructing daily and lasting forms of socio-political responsibility<sup>2</sup>.

From this perspective or locus, decolonization necessarily implies the recovery of the capacity for self-management, both in the real and in the symbolic.

## Final words

It is necessary to insist that the future of autonomies in Mexico is not only that of community autonomies, that of real existing communality or that of emancipations from rural communities. What we have said with respect to Mesoamerican communal life refers to the historical experience seen from Oaxaca and raises its characteristics, so that whoever wants to resort to that experience to promote emancipations, can find the logic of functioning, its constituent parts and from there the ways in which it could or could not function in different environments, such as cities. An interesting perspective in this respect can be found in the proposal of communalism promoted by the North American anarchist Murray Bookchin.

<sup>2</sup> On this topic, more ideas can be found at <http://cuadernosdelsur.com/revistas/34-enero-junio-2013/>.

# Revaluating health practices and knowledge in the context of the struggle for identity and the Diaguita territorial defense in Catamarca, Argentina

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The purpose of this article is to share some research <sup>advances</sup><sup>1</sup> on the processes of political reorganization and territorial defense.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the research projects "Salud e interculturalidad. Prácticas y saberes médicos tradicionales del pueblo diaguita del Valle de Yokavil y la Puna catamarqueña y su relación con el sistema de salud pública" (Beca Salud Investiga, 2018) and "Atención Primaria de la Salud en comunidades diaguitas de Salta y Catamarca. Practices, strategies and perceptions around health and interculturality" (Salud Investiga, 2019-2021), funded by the National Ministry of Health, through the Directorate of Research for Health.



The study of the health care system by Diaguita communities in the province of Catamarca (in the northwestern region of Argentina), specifically problematizing the issue of health care.

In Argentina, as in most Latin American countries, during the last decades, within the framework of indigenous emergence processes (Bengoa, 2016), several indigenous peoples have deepened their struggle for territorial recovery, the political reorganization of their communities and the recognition of their ancestral rights. This political and organizational revitalization was favored by the creation since the 1990s of a series of international regulations and treaties related to the cultural and territorial recognition of indigenous peoples, which were, in turn, the result of the historical struggle of indigenous peoples and communities for their rights.

In the south of the Calchaquí Valleys, more precisely in the northwest of the province of Catamarca, the Diaguita communities began to reorganize themselves as of the year 2000, with the impulse of the processes of institutional recognition of indigenous peoples at the national level. A great support for this reaffirmation on the part of the Diaguita communities of Catamarca was the experience of struggle and reorganization previously deployed by Diaguita communities in the provinces of Salta and Tucumán, who since the 1960s began to fight for ethnic recognition and their territorial rights as a people. There are currently eighteen Diaguita communities that have reorganized in Catamarca, most of which, in turn, are grouped in the Unión de Pueblos de la Unión Diaguita (UPND) as a provincial inter-community organizational body.

Each community is organized around the assembly, as a fundamental space for deliberation, socialization and community decision-making, which are defined by consensus. The community members who are registered in the community participate in the assembly, and it is they who collectively define the community authorities and community representatives (cacique, secretaries, delegates, etc.).



The community's authorities and delegates are subject to the decisions and wills of the community's assembly. In other words, the actions of the authorities and the community delegates are subordinated to the decisions and will of the community assembly. The communities, in general, define delegates for education, health, etc., who are the ones who follow up on specific issues and the link that the community establishes with other institutions, mainly the State, in reference to these areas.

Since 2013, the communities that are part of the UPND of Catamarca have been meeting periodically -approximately every 45 days- to discuss the issues and problems they are facing, whether they are related to territorial, educational, health, productive or other issues affecting the communities. Two or three representatives of each community (usually the cacique, secretaries and/or base delegates) and the community members who have the possibility to come to the assembly. The same is done in an itinerant way, once in each community, taking into account the needs and problems that afflict the different territories at each moment.

## Territorial reassertion and tensions with the official health system

We found that in the processes of community and territorial reaffirmation, the revaluation of certain traditional practices and knowledge assumes importance, which implies, in most cases, reversing stigmatizing and colonial imaginaries, and defending a way of life rooted in the community and belonging to the territory. One of the areas where this is manifested is in health care. The communal families mostly build their therapeutic strategies resorting to knowledge and practices, transmitted and re-signified from generation to generation, orally, both at home and through the consultation of "peasant doctors", who are entrusted with the diagnosis and treatment of the different ailments.

The state health system began to have a presence in the territories three or four decades ago, mainly as a result of the creation of roads and the improvement of roads; in particular, through policies related to Primary Health Care (PHC) through a health agent and/or a nurse, depending on the zonal hospital. Currently, only some communities have health posts or health centers (CAPS), in which health agents and/or nurses work, who, in some cases, are also indigenous community members.

From the research carried out, we found that the Diaguita families in the province of Catamarca face profound difficulties in accessing public health care. These difficulties are due to various reasons: geographic, due to the fact that they are settled several kilometers away from health care centers on mountain roads that are difficult to access; economic, due to the cost of traveling to health care centers in the nearest cities or urban centers; administrative, given that hospital appointments must be arranged at specific times and in ways that are certainly difficult for the population living in the hills; cultural or symbolic, due to the cost of traveling to health care centers in the nearest cities or urban centers; cultural or symbolic, being the lack of knowledge and cultural devaluation of their traditional healing and care practices one of the main problems identified; as well as a certain manifest distrust on the part of the communal families with respect to the mode of care of the official health system. On the other hand, insufficiencies and shortcomings in the implementation of health programs by the State were identified, including the lack of health professionals and workers in the territory; the lack of resources for prevention and care; as well as the lack of adequate work tools and infrastructure.

The incorporation of indigenous community members as health agents or PHC nurses has been a step towards bringing closer and improving the relationship between Diaguita communities and the official health system, which is generally perceived by community authorities and community members as an achievement and as something positive. However, this inclusion and health policy towards the communities has not responded to an intercultural perspective.

The work plan, as well as the goals proposed to the health agents working in Diaguita territory are the same as for the rest of the health agents in the province.

The greater presence of state health policies in the territory coincided with greater persecution of traditional medical practices. In the communities, they mention that the hospitals want to prohibit them from practicing certain ways of curing or caring for their own health, such as home births, which are traditionally attended by a family member, a comadre or a peasant doctor; or the use of homemade preparations based on different plant species (yuyos) from the area to treat different ailments.

However, despite the persecution, a wide repertoire of knowledge and therapeutic practices that are used and valued both by "peasant doctors" and by community families in their self-care persists and resists in the communities. Health practices are reproduced that constitute "a historical continuity of health care practice conveyed through knowledge and practices that are their own, derived from the historical interaction with the territory" (Cuyul, 2013:23). They make up a diverse set of therapeutic and ritual practices that show an important spiritualization of nature and, in some cases, a profound religious syncretism that combines the use of holy water, religious prayers and invocations to Pachamama or Mother Earth, which is a fundamental part of the Andean peoples' worldview and the symbolism they build around their ontological understanding and the special relationship they establish with nature. Depending on the case, they may resort to urine reading; healing with holy water with weeds; sahumos; alum; stone work; diet therapy; infusions and weed waters; and even the knowledge of "sortear" from the reading of the coca leaf. All of these therapeutic practices involve unspoken knowledge, kept in silence, like treasures, by the people who put them into practice, as well as by those who value them and turn to them in search of healing in the communities. These are ways of healing that work

mainly from the spiritual point of view, understanding health and illness in an integral way in a complex relationship of balance/unbalance between body/spirit/nature/cosmos.

Ancestral/traditional medicine is one of the spaces where it is possible to put into practice part of their worldview and reaffirm their cultural link with Pachamama. In this context, the revaluation of their ancestral practices is part of a broader struggle in defense of their Diaguita identity and territoriality, so that the search to recover and revalue their knowledge and traditional forms of health care is closely linked to the struggles carried out by the Diaguita communities for the recognition and exercise of their collective rights as an indigenous people. In this sense, the implementation of these strategies for the care of life and community health, as well as their revalorization, are expressed not only as a defensive resistance, but also as "r-existence", in Porto Gonçalves' terms; that is, as a way of existing, a certain matrix of rationality that acts, and even re-acts, from its own place, both geographically and epistemically (2006:165).

### Intercultural health in indigenous community territories

Reflecting on the implementation of intercultural health policies, we find that it is necessary, on the one hand, to problematize the monocultural matrix of health services and the hegemonic medical model. On the other hand, it is necessary to promote the participation of indigenous peoples, no longer in a utilitarian or tutelary manner, but through health policies of which they can be part from their co-management; their formulation, design, execution and territorial definition according to their own dynamics and cosmovisions, questioning the processes of racialization, inferiorization and subalternization to which they are subjected. Likewise, it is essential to understand the practices and strategies deployed around health in a situated manner,

contemplating the link with the territory and the territorialization processes that they involve.

It is necessary that public health policies generate actions that respect the popular/ traditional/ ancestral medicines developed by the communities, based on the existence of multiple ways of living and understanding health in the different territories, while combining processes of systematization and exchange of knowledge at the local and national level, opening spaces where it is possible to articulate and complement the knowledge of the different paradigms in tension, that of popular/ traditional/ ancestral medicine and biomedicine.

Meanwhile, the communities, in a permanent exercise of resistance, continue to build ways to perpetuate and share with the youngest members of the community this ancestral knowledge of healing and health care, reaffirming its value and importance for community life and self-determination in the territory.

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# 10 years building autonomy in Cherán K'eri, Michoacán, Mexico

A reflection on the  
analysis of  
community forest  
management

Mónica Piceno Hernández\*.

In Mexico, autonomy has been one of the key concepts in the debates, discourses and analyses on the self-determination of indigenous peoples, with greater emphasis since the 2007 United Nations Declaration (UN, 2007). This in turn has as its antecedent Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, published in 1989 (ILO, 1989) and which entered into force in this country in 1991. During

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In the same decade, in the Meseta Purépecha, a geographic and cultural region in the state of Michoacán, several meetings of indigenous social movements took place around the defense of territory and community forests, whose demands were interwoven with the defense of an indigenous identity and autonomy (Jasso Martínez, 2013).

The evolution of the demands of the Purepecha can be seen from the Decree of the P'urhépecha Nation against the reform of Article 27 of the Constitution -promulgated in 1992 and understood as a process of privatization of communal lands. Later, in 1994, the P'urhépecha Nation Organization (ONP) brought together communities of the region in solidarity with the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). In 1997, the booklet *Juchari Juramukua* (Our Autonomy) was published in which the Purepecha referred for the first time to the autonomy or self-determination of their people, emphasizing the defense of the land, their right to elect their own authorities and determine their forms of development (Jasso Martínez, 2013; Ventura, 2018).

Based on a review of the territorial dynamics of the forestry sector, particularly community forest management, it is possible to identify the gap between the discourse on indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and its implementation in practice. These legal instruments can remain only on paper and the conditions for the realization of self-determination rights can be overtaken by contextual factors that lead to various types of conflicts, making the exercise of de facto autonomy crucial. In Mexico, these contexts have been given by the threat posed by the agro-industrial business and development schemes based on forest exploitation, such as changes in land use (Klooster, 2000; Pérez-Llorente et al., 2019) or the endless granting of forest concessions to foreign companies (Carrasco & Barkin, 2014). It is also the case of conflicts associated with the control and use of land and forest by organized crime groups, which through their operations damage the social fabric and livelihoods of communities (Guillén, 2016; Velázquez, 2019).



In the State of Michoacán, in the last decade, both the avocado agro-industry and the violent territorial deployment of organized crime have caused serious social conflicts and have boosted the deforestation and/or degradation of forests owned by indigenous communities, so that their counterpart is expressed in the emergence of community self-defense groups and the strengthening of their political demands (Aranda, 2012; Gasparello, 2016). In this context, the Cherán community, and others such as Nurio and Ostula, have led the indigenous movement at the state level, reestablishing security in the localities, achieving a territorial reappropriation and a recovery of community control over resources (Guillén, 2016; Jasso Martínez, 2013; Ventura, 2018). Therefore, it is possible to understand the emergence of grassroots indigenous movements and organizations as a collective response in defense of the territories and resources that sustain the native peoples of our America (Navarro, 2012; Velázquez, 2019).

The community of Cherán, in particular, has been governed since 2012 by *usos y costumbres*. This particular political situation was made possible after several months of the movement in defense of their community forests, which erupted on April 15, 2011, in a confrontation between local inhabitants and loggers. The socio-environmental conflict derived from the increase in clandestine logging<sup>1</sup> accompanied by violence by organized crime that, between 2007 and 2011, damaged approximately 9,000 hectares of forest, including sites of high cultural and environmental value. Both the damage and the threats were denounced since 2007, however, the inaction of the municipal authorities evidenced the collaboration of local governments with organized crime. Between 2008 and 2019, violence in the area claimed the lives of at least 21 people who participated in community defense (Gasparello, 2018).

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the research projects "Health and interculturality. Prácticas y saberes médicos tradicionales del pueblo diaguita del Valle de Yokavil y la Puna catamarqueña y su relación con el sistema de salud pública" (Beca Salud Investiga, 2018) and "Atención Primaria de la Salud en comunidades diaguitas de Salta y Catamarca. Practices, strategies and perceptions around health and interculturality" (Salud Investiga, 2019-2021), funded by the National Ministry of Health, through the Directorate of Research for Health.

After several months of <sup>popular</sup> organization<sup>2</sup>, Cherán managed to reterritorialize itself and regain control of its forests through a process of political subjectivation that took up indigenous autonomy as a claim in response to the violence and long-standing forest extractivism in the Purepecha region (Lariagon & Piceno, 2016). The community, working together with allied sectors, took up and innovated the indigenous tradition of governments governed by <sup>councilors</sup><sup>3</sup>, making a counter-hegemonic use of law by getting rid of political parties and instituting the *K'eri* Government<sup>4</sup> (Aragón, 2013).

The political structure of participation and decision-making at the local level was reorganized, and with it the institutions and mechanisms in charge of the forests, a task for which the role of the Council of Communal Assets and the Council of Honor and Justice is crucial. Despite the debate about the functioning of decision-making in <sup>Cherán</sup><sup>5</sup>, the management of the territory and forests are elements in which the community makes autonomy a reality through daily practices in different dimensions.

In a territorial dimension, Cherán has perpetuated its territorialization in the face of two social entities: organized crime and the State, as it has retaken the indigenous delimitation dating back to 1533, which is a direct reference to the Purepecha origin of the community (Lariagon &

<sup>2</sup>In the legal file of the Cherán case, a total of 15 operational commissions were registered, formed by community members from the four neighborhoods that make up the community, and which were active mainly between May 2011 and December 2012. The commissions were: general; bonfires; honor and justice; press and propaganda; food; finance; education and culture; forestry; water; cleanliness; youth; agriculture and livestock; trade; identity; and health (IEM, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>For this reason, the spelling used by the community when referring to "councils" is also respected.

<sup>4</sup>The insurrection commissions were transformed and are an antecedent of the *K'eri* (Purépecha elder) Government. This comprises a Major Council and eight operational councils: 1) The Council of Local Administration; 2) The Council of Civil Affairs; 3) The Coordinating Council of Neighborhoods; 4) The Council of Social Development; 5) The Council of Procurement, Surveillance and Mediation of Justice (or Council of Honor and Justice); 6) The Council of Communal Goods (CBC); 7) The Council of Women; and 8) The Council of Youth.

<sup>5</sup>Some internal criticisms identified through participant observation throughout this analysis discuss the democratization and horizontality of participation, as well as the predominance of power elites in the councils.

Piceno, 2016). They have also regained territorial control through self-defense and community security strategies such as the ronda and forest rangers (Guillén, 2016).

In a socio-environmental dimension, it is worth mentioning the recovery of damaged forest areas through reforestation with pine seeds germinated in the community nursery and planted through community work. The role of the forest as a common good to be defended and an axis for overcoming political, cultural or economic differences, which has articulated old Purepecha demands such as indigenous autonomy, respect for traditional forest knowledge and management, should be emphasized. The defense of the forest is a point of convergence for the recovery or reinvention of societal values such as mutual aid, voluntary and collective work, it reinforces the conception of the forest as the sustenance of the community as it is a source of water, food, firewood, medicinal herbs and a place of rituals and sacred sites. The defense of the forest is also associated with aspects such as the recovery of the Purepecha cosmovision, language and culture.

In a socioeconomic dimension, and from an autonomous perspective, the community has implemented self-managed social relations of production. It has taken over old enterprises, such as the sawmill and the resin mill, for collective benefit, taking care that they are managed without interference from private companies (Ramírez, Concejo Mayor, 2014, among- vista). However, since the damaged areas were reforested, the community election of a form of forest use is still pending, which is expected to be achieved through neighborhood assemblies; also pending is the updating of the register of community members that would give clarity to community forest management and the future distribution of its benefits.

Ten years after the Cherán uprising, the autonomy process in the Meseta Purépecha continues to be threatened, but its strengths point to the continuity of an indigenous autonomy at the regional level, as other communities have achieved legal recognition of their indigenous rights (Aragón, 2018; Ventura, 2018). Among them are

These experiences illustrate, through their practices and autonomous strategies, the current debates on the reality of indigenous peoples in the continent: the discussion on the role of the State, citizenship and its relationship with the granting of rights. These experiences illustrate, through their economic practices and strategies, the current debates on the reality of indigenous peoples in the continent: the discussion on the role of the State, citizenship and its relation to the granting of rights, as well as the debate on development and sustainability from the perspective of indigenous peoples.

Both the reorganization and the development of the community government in Cherán have revealed criticisms inside and outside the community. However, 10 years later, it is possible to visualize some terms in which Cherán addresses the questioning of practices that, in different dimensions, require revision, such as the case of power relations, mainly in the issue of land ownership and access to the forest; in gender relations that imply a reflection on the role of women in the struggle as well as the persistence of machismo within the indigenous customs and traditions; and fundamentally, a questioning of the type of development that the community desires.

At the time of going to press, the Cherán community jointly faced an arson attack that lasted almost 5 days (April 23-28, 2021) and devastated at least a thousand hectares, which shows the potential of reactivating collective memory in critical moments that threaten livelihoods.

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# Community reconstitution and autonomic processes

## Two decades of indigenous policy in Guatemala

Santiago Bastos Amigo\* Santiago Bastos Amigo\*  
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After the genocide suffered in the 80s of the 20th century, the signing of the peace agreement meant the possibility for the indigenous political actors of Guatemala to resume the path initiated in the 70s towards self-determination and the struggle for their rights. The turn of the century meant the insertion of the economy into the global circuits of extractivism, and the defense of the territory from a community basis became the beginning of a new cycle of mobilization for the search and construction of self-determination in a context of economic precariousness and degradation of the political system.



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Once restricted democratization had begun, even before the signing of the peace accords, in many places community authorities began to recompose themselves, after they had been badly hit by state violence. Community structures were being reassembled, both through the communitization of state structures at the submunicipal level - such as the Community Development Committees, COCODEs - and through the rearticulation of structures and the public reappearance of figures such as indigenous mayors, religious specialists, therapists, and other authorities of very different types who were in charge of reassembling the corporative logics of communities that had been badly hit and disarticulated.

These re-articulated authorities conceived and carried out their work within the arguments of the collective rights of indigenous peoples and the autonomous logics that were deployed at that time around the figure of the Maya People. From this perspective, processes of active recovery of Mayan law, Mayan spirituality or Mayan therapeutics, for example, are set in motion in the communities.

When, at the turn of the century, extractive activities began to take hold, these community processes converged with those of questioning neoliberalism, and in 2005 a series of "community consultations in good faith" began to take place, self-organized by the communities themselves and based on the municipal code and, above all, on Convention 169 signed by Guatemala in the midst of a process of peace and multiculturalism. Consultations are held in 100 municipalities and almost one million people are involved in this civic mobilization. Everywhere it is held, the opposition to the implementation of extractive activities in their territories is overwhelming (MAPA).

These consultations are carried out at the municipal level, but the process of organization is always community-based, carried out by community authorities and institutions, following community logics and, at the same time, re-forcing the re-articulation of the community fabric that had been so badly affected. When the companies and the public authorities ignored these participatory exercises one by one, it was the community that was the main reason for this.

civic, the exercise of consultation is being reclaimed as a proper practice of decision making as indigenous peoples.

In this way, the consultation became both an emblem and an autonomous practice in itself, which is being carried out through the communities' own capacities and possibilities.

Despite this demonstration of opposition, successive governments supported the arrival of transnational companies which, allied with local capital, began to implement extractive activities - mining, hydroelectric and agro-industrial crops above all - which were resisted by the communities, leading to widespread socio-environmental conflicts throughout the country. Given the way they arrived, resistance to extractive activities was organized in practically every place where they were initiated.

Continuing the logic of the consultations, the defense of the territory in Guatemala is carried out from renewed community instances. The same happens with other processes such as the search for justice through trials of those responsible for the genocide of the 1980s; or the resistance to the privatization of electric energy. All this mobilization is met by the State with criminalization, intimidation, repression and death.

All of this community mobilization had an impact on Mayan politics, inaugurating a new cycle of struggle. Since the second half of the 1970s, indigenous struggles had been led mainly by organizations of a national character and scope. The communities mobilized in support of peasant, revolutionary or indigenous organizations, and later human rights and Mayan organizations that emerged in the wake of the peace accords. All of these lost prominence once peace was signed and the Guatemalan version of multiculturalism was implemented.

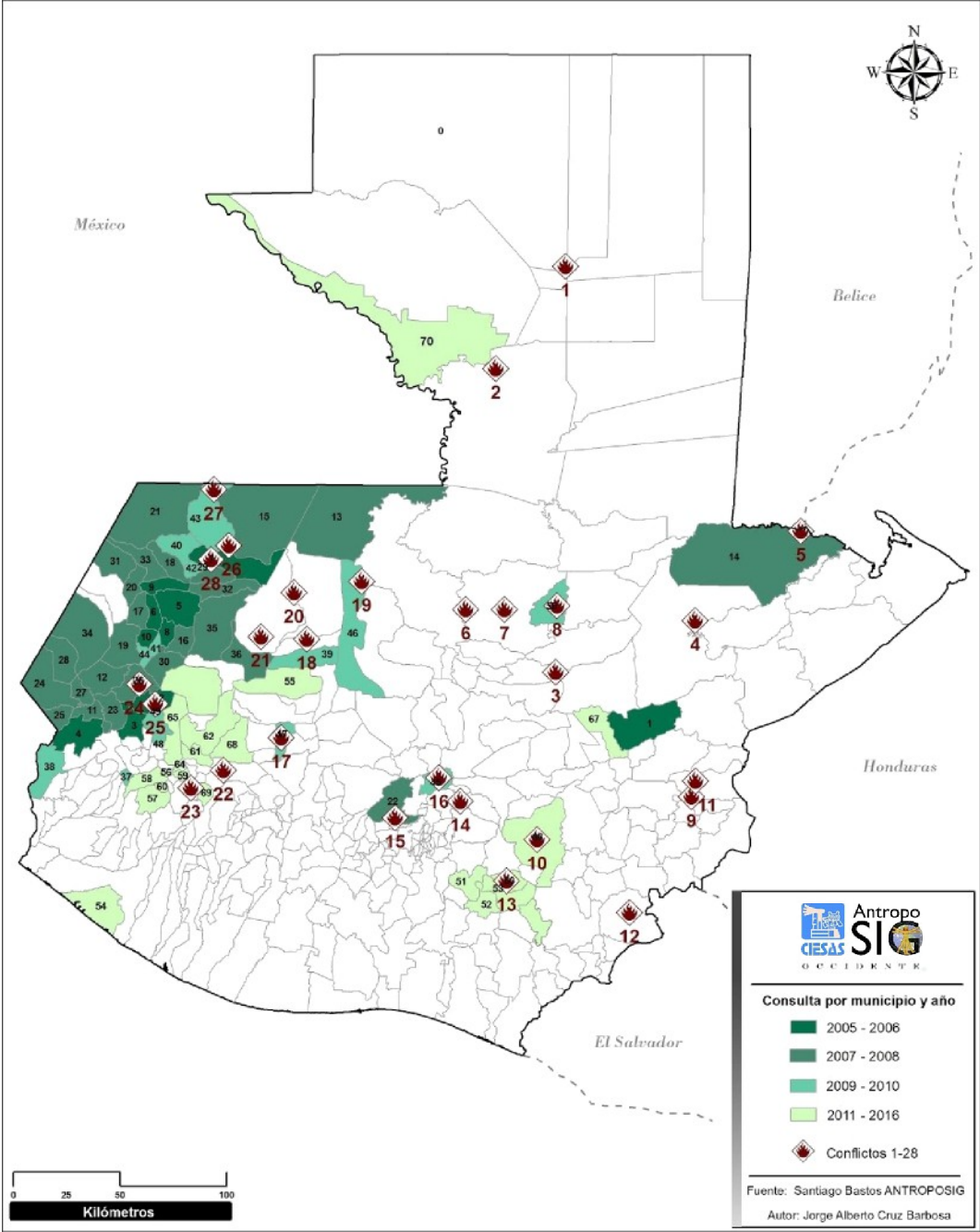
The discrediting of this model of recognition and its supporters among the Mayans; the reconstitution of community authorities and the

The forms of territorial defense that we have seen made organized communities become the driving force of the struggles for the rights of indigenous peoples in Guatemala from 2005 and especially in 2010.

As a consequence, of the indigenous political actors that had been active during the previous years, only those linked to this community mobilization remain with strength and real presence, such as the CUC - Committee of Peasant Unity, active since the 70's and reconstituted as the axis of the National Mayan Coordinating Committee 'Waqib'Kej'. The force of the repression forces the communities organized through consultations to initiate territorial coordination processes that are the basis of the new regional and national actors. A group of them are grouped in councils that unite in the Consejo de Pueblos de Occidente, later Consejo de Pueblos Mayas -CPO-, which seeks to be the representative of these communities in struggle at a national level. But at the same time other territorial groupings of communities that act on their own emerge. Thus, in the east of the country the Xinka Parliament and in the extreme northwest the Ancestral Plurinational Government of Akateko, Chuj, Popti' and Q'anjob'al. On the other hand, the Comité de Desarrollo Campesino - CODECA - after many years of regional work, decided to oppose the privatization of electricity by not paying for the service and achieved an active presence in communities throughout the country.

Finally, another actor emerging from this process of rearticulation based on community mobilizations are the self-styled ancestral authorities, community authorities of diverse origins and backgrounds, who are also grouped territorially and, through the Association of Ancestral Authorities, acquire an important presence in indigenous politics.

Community consultations and conflicts between communities and businesses



Thus, in 2015, indigenous policy is very different from the turn of the century. In these 15 years, the communities have become basic subjects of the autonomous processes and have advanced territorially, generating coordination as peoples. This political figure has not been developed due to the pan-indigenous attempt to create an identity as a Mayan People. Faced with the difficult operationalization of this proposal, the peoples, formed from the articulation of communities, appear as subjects of identity and struggle with a more real basis.

In these dynamics, autonomous processes advance in practice and discourse. The forms of re-organization and struggle from the years of the first community authorities, through consultations, resistance and articulation at different scales, involve the generation of self-management and self-government capacities among people of different generations, ideologies and origins.

At the same time that these de facto autonomous constructions are developing, the approaches are also taking on an increasingly clear autonomous character, freed from other approaches. On the one hand, the demands for a plurinational state are present in the agendas of actors such as CPO and Waqib K'ej, abandoning the multicultural formulation of Guatemala as a "multiethnic, pluricultural and multilingual" country and advancing in the political realization of the self-determination of political subjects that assume themselves as nations. On the other hand, the anti-neoliberal character of the struggles incorporates more and more questions about capitalist development and proposals to re-found models of life based on the relational ontologies of indigenous peoples.

The year 2015, with the impeachment and impeachment of the President by popular pressure, could have been a turning point in Guatemalan politics, but it only served to deepen the degradation of the system with more impunity and impudence. In the face of this, indigenous actors and organizations also deepened their autonomous bet while increasing their public presence.

The marches and demonstrations of 2015 were preceded in the previous years by a strong presence in the streets of indigenous and peasant organizations questioning the effects of the extractivist model. At the height of 2015, they added to the demand for presidential impeachment a questioning of the entire political system inherited from the post-war period. From that moment on, the different indigenous actors have maintained a critical attitude towards the political development of the country and the institutionalization of the looting of public goods during the last two presidential terms.

As a result of this process, CODECA developed the proposal of the need for a Popular and Plurinational Constituent Process to face the necessary re-foundation of the Guatemalan State and free it from its racist and oligarchic base. Since then, more and more actors have taken up this claim and this path of political transformation, thus supporting the normalization of Guatemala's plurinational character, always a very conflictive issue.

In addition, since 2015, the indigenous presence in the electoral struggle has increased. Since peace, the political options that defended the rights of the peoples had been those linked to the left, especially the former URNG guerrillas; and in 2007 Winaq emerged as an openly Mayan political formation. But for 2015, the novelty was the incorporation of actors arising from the community struggle into the electoral process. CPO presented itself allied to the Convergence formation, while the Plurinational Government Q'anjobal presented itself on the lists of Winaq. And from those days, CODECA decided to create its own political instrument, the People's Liberation Movement -MLP, with the basic claim of the Popular and Plurinational Constituent Assembly. In the 2019 elections, its candidate Telma Cabrera mobilized many hopes, although in the end she did not manage to reverse the trend of political decline in which we are immersed.

In spite of this, the interest of these indigenous actors in an increasingly discredited electoral route and a political-parliamentary life that is increasingly devoid of content, show how the autonomous and

The reconstitution of self-government capacities from the communities and peoples is not at odds with the concern for the political future of the country - State, society, economy - in which they are inserted. It would seem that the construction of autonomous capacities strengthens them for their performance in formal politics, whether municipal or national, but this de facto autonomy is of no use if the context in which they move continues to be one of dispossession and impunity.





# Interview with the division of communication of the "Loom of the Peoples" (Brazil)

Fábio M. Alkmin\*  
Waldo Lao\*\* Waldo  
Lao

São Paulo, Brazil, April 2021

First of all, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to conduct this interview. To begin with, could you explain to us what is the Loom of the Peoples?

El Telar de los Pueblos is an articulation of communities, peoples, territories and organizations in struggle for Land and Territory. We are not

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Credits: Bárbara Lara, VI Jornada, October 19, 2019.

a political organization in itself, but an experience in a network, in a federation, a community of the different in a larger struggle, to conquest autonomy for the territories. There are different experiences of places within the Loom, there are those who are working on their autonomy from the most radical foundations and there are those who are looking to the State as a possibility of emancipation. Here, unity is in practice, in concrete, community action, in collective work. "What unites us is greater than what separates us"; the phrase attributed to the geographer Milton Santos welcomes us to build a great day of struggle, with different times of our paths.

### **How does the articulation arise?**

It arose in 2012, during the Agroecology Day in Bahia - at the Terra Vista Settlement of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), in the municipality of Arataca (Bahia), in a meeting that brought together various indigenous peoples, such as the Pataxó, Pataxó Hã-hã-hãe, Tupinambá, quilombola groups and various peasant movements. At the beginning, the idea was to create an agroecological network to disseminate native seeds, but there was already a territorial perspective and a perspective of confrontation against capitalism. However, in the last few years, the road to autonomy has been consolidating in the face of reflections on our history. After the 5th Conference held in Porto Seguro, the articulation began to expand its alliances with urban movements. Today we count on movements such as the Homeless Movement

of Bahia (MSTB) and peripheral quilombos such as *Reaja ou sera morto* (React or you will be *dead*). As Telar, we have many births and they keep happening. As we write, another Telar is being born in Rio Grande do Sul and another one in the State of Ceará. There is a foundation prior to our own articulation in Bahia, which is the Loom of the Traditional Peoples and Communities of Maranhão, a sister Loom that follows its own path, but which is united in the same struggles.

### **How do they organize themselves and how do they manage to unify their struggles?**

The main basis of the organization is the division of the articulation: on the one hand, who is the "Base Nucleus", on the other hand, who is the "Loom Link". The Base Nuclei are the territories, that is, the communities, peoples, organizations that dispute the territoriality, for example, the Quilombo of Lagoa Grande (in Feira de Santana, Bahia) or the Land Settlement of Santa Cruz (in Santa Luzia, Bahia), because people live there, have an organized community and participate in the activities as a collective that are on the land. On the other hand, the Loom Link is an organization or collective of deterritorialized subjects, people who are not organized in a community, who do not deal with the land, nor participate directly in the retaking of the land, who do not build their own territoriality, for example, a student collective such as the Interdisciplinary Action Group in Agroecology (GAIA), from the Federal University of Bahia (UFRB), a research group such as "Autonomies", from the Federal University of South Bahia (UFSB) or the Association of Rural Workers' Lawyers (AATR). In the Loom of the Peoples, the territorial policy or the direction of the struggles can only be defined by the Grassroots Nuclei. The Enlaces participate by giving their opinion, but they cannot determine the strategic path. They can give their opinion within the tactics, but they cannot dictate the network. This was a mechanism so that our walk would not be taken over by intellectuals of the middle classes, who almost always end up supplanting the grassroots leaders, more than that, we start from the assumption that a new society can be built by those who already know, by what they know, that they can build a new society.

How is it that someone who has never dealt with the difficulties of community life can lead the construction of a society based on the autonomy of the territories? So, before we can set out what the struggle will be like, it is necessary to learn how to build communities.

**You work permanently with concepts related to "land", "territory" and "autonomy". What do they mean to you and why are they important?**

Land is the basis of human life. Without control and possession of the land it is impossible to have any hope of ending or diminishing inequality. The latifundia is our longest enemy, so to break with its power means the retaking of the land. Territory is that which is beyond the fence, so when a peasant movement takes back a farm, it is still a landed property, it will take time for it to become a community, but it may never become a territory in itself, if those people do not understand the dimension of territory. Because the territory is beyond the foundational demarcation, because it is the symbolic field associated to the land, to the cultures, to the way of living with that bush or that river, with a mountain range. For the indigenous peoples this is clearer, because they have been on that soil for so long that they recognize the time in which the birds go and return, they know the winds and the rains and even where they go; they know the paths that the tapirs travel and which are the favorite plants of the *jupará* (a mammal that lives in the trees). But for the peoples who are retaking the land, it is necessary to have the territory as an active task of construction, that is, the meaning of the spaces, the places, the contours necessary not only for us to live, but also for our future generations and all the beings that inhabit it. Now, autonomy is the way we walk the Earth. We do not want neither the tutelage of the State, nor the order of the parties or the blackmail of the market. We want to walk this hard road on our own legs, with our successes and mistakes as our responsibilities. Once conquered in this way, to cultivate autonomy in the territory is

to maintain the determination on the use of that land for those who live and work it. It means to build their forms of education, their technologies for the use of water, energy, their paths for the society of overcoming capitalism. For us, this is autonomy.

### **How have these autonomies been built?**

The older ones - and those older than our oldest - have explained to us that you have to start everything with food and water. Therefore, the first tactical action of network formation was through the seed. Beyond the symbolism of starting with the Creole seed, there is a fundamental reason: whatever struggle we are going to carry out against capitalism, food will be fundamental. Because there are no warriors without food, but also because through food it is possible to understand the agro-florest, the forest, the agro-ecological fields that will protect the land from the destruction of the capitalist society. So, we have spread native seeds, planted forests, organized retaken, defended our comrades when they are attacked. Today we know that there is a historic crisis in many parts of the country, especially in the peripheries. This is a war that is not won in the cities, but in the countryside, by raising the forest, protecting the nascent ones, preventing the mega-projects of destruction. And it is here that our struggle is lengthening, because we are working to plant water, forests capable of generating wealth to maintain communities, but also of generating abundant food. So, we have expanded the Black, Indigenous and Popular Alliance through the retaking of the land, the planting of the forest, the distribution of native seeds, the protection of water. This has been our way of walking at the beginning of this journey.

### **Could you mention some autonomous experiences in Brazil or elsewhere in the world that have inspired you?**

The struggle for the territorial autonomy of indigenous peoples has always been a bluff for the construction of a journey against racism, capitalism and machismo. The struggle for the autonomy of the Mapuche,

in Chile, the Indigenous Guards in Colombia and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas have inspired us. But the closest and most powerful examples are the Loom of Maranhão or the Tupinambá Indians in the south of Bahia. We always remember that the Tupinambá confronted the army, the federal police and the national force in the last decade, all wanting to expel them from their territory. The State lost the war with the Tupinambá and they are still there, in their ancestral territory, planting, harvesting, dancing, singing, protecting all the beings of that fantastic biome that is the Atlantic Forest, this garden of native peoples.

**Currently, what do you consider to be the greatest difficulties in deepening autonomies?**

Our peoples still do not deal so well with the autonomy debate. The truth is that despite the fact that the majority of the peoples of the literally live without protection or dignified care from the national State, we spend a lot of time with a leftist policy, in which all struggle should be enclosed in the conquest from the State. Worst of all, a State that is bourgeois, racist in nature. Even if we reach the federal government, we have no way to change its nature. So

Does the rule continue to be the dispute of the State? When we say that we will not do that, there are many people who do not understand, who do not like it, but we are talking based on the experiences of our most rebellious peoples. They confronted the State, the Balaiada, Canudos, the holy cities of Contestado, the Malês, the Tamoyo Federation, so we believe that we need to learn from history, which is even older than our own history. And it is history that has shown us this path. Only that autonomy is a decision where our successes and mistakes weigh on our backs, we cannot blame anyone for our eventual failures. And in politics, people often want someone to blame for failed projects. A final aspect is labor: land alone does not generate wealth capable of confronting capitalism. To have conditions for a great struggle, you have to work hard, with discipline, with attention to the collective, and there are many people who want to fight, but they do not understand that before they can do so, they have to work hard.



of a great struggle there is a great cultivation. So the time of silent planting, the time of the tasks without tradition of conventional politics, is undervalued, but this is the foundation of the struggle. If we do not plant our own food, how can we say that we are going to build a society without capital? So, the left still needs to advance in this aspect, they need to recognize the importance of the land and the biomes of life. Protecting life in its natural expression is a great task, which cannot be left for after conquering Brasilia, that is a mistake.

**In this sense, do you consider that the struggle for autonomy is becoming generalized among social movements?**

What we can say is that we feel disillusionment with the strategy of the conquest of the State, through the parties. We feel that many people have become worn out with the relationship of the political institutionality, even those revolutionary organizations. This does not mean that they are embracing the path of autonomy. But there are many people from within the social movements saying: look, you are certain and this is the way. The social movements have not yet awakened to this question, but there are many militants who think this way, including grassroots leaders who are on this path; the general strategy of the movements is still to make signs for party politics, in order to be part of the general strategy of one party or another. And we believe that there is room for everything in this immense Brazil. So we are not saying that this path of institutionalism is a mistake, we are just saying that we do not follow this path anymore. We feel that currently the native peoples are expressing an increasingly powerful word of autonomy, and this is spreading, moving, mobilizing people from other movements. We hope that this path will expand.

**You recently launched a book called "Por Tierra y Territorio". Can you tell us a little about that experience? How was it developed?**

The book addresses the general theses of Master Joelson Ferreira, who has more than thirty years of struggle with the Landless Workers Movement (MST) and is one of the co-founders of the Loom of the Peoples. He presents the meaning of land, territory and the path to autonomy. In the middle of the book, there is a small manual for some of the fundamental sovereignties in the formation of the territories (related to water, food, pedagogical, labor and income, energy, etc.) and a deeper reflection on the care with militancy, active work for participation - women's leadership and ancestry, which we would say is the fundamental difference of the Loom's form with the left struggles. The book was written with the help of the educator Erahsto Felicio, who with many phone calls and a visit throughout the pandemic, managed to write down the ideas of Master Joelson, who later revised the text, changed it, criticized it, improved the wording... thus the book has emerged. The theses show a way to fight and build the revolution of the peoples of Brazil, arguing with the materialistic lefts that misinterpret the peoples of our country and fail to turn a great struggle against the latifundia, which is the main guarantor of any government in this country.

### **Where and how can it be obtained?**

It can be purchased directly from our website [www.teiadospovos.org](http://www.teiadospovos.org). This purchase helps us to finance part of our political struggle, and above all it helps Master Joelson to continue talking about this road to other geographies, far from Bahia.

### **How can researchers or other interested parties collaborate with the Peoples' Web?**

We have a critical reflection on the participation of researchers in the articulation. Many communities are distrustful of researchers, because they do not leave any minimally concrete contribution to the struggle. That is why we always insist on saying that it is the people in the territories who confront the movement. Also, the older ones tell us that the struggle we are waging is not the same as the one we are waging in the territories.

is a great struggle, that without the mass movement there is no victory against the latifundia. In this way, everyone can come and join in this great journey. However, we say to the researchers: you need to ask how to collaborate and not believe that collaboration is your own research. We can give you the example of the book: we do not need someone to do research and publish a book, we need researchers to detach themselves from intellectual activities and put their hands in the dough. There are many topics, reflections, knowledge in the territories and among the peoples.

But are researchers interested, beyond writing about some subject, producing a book, printing, selling, taking to the courier, checking the mails, generating wealth with this knowledge and not just treating it as an intellectual work? There is a community kitchen being built on the periphery, with the alliance of intellectuals. We do not need articles published in magazines about cooking, but perhaps we need someone to help us in the daily communication of that action, or a cook, or someone to deliver the food. The middle class has many skills that were only developed because society prevented others from developing their own skills. The middle class needs, therefore, to give back with that. Finally, another example: we have an important speech from a cacique or a traditional teacher. Can the researchers translate this message so that our Andean brothers and sisters can hear us? Can they use their networks to help in the protection of attacked territories? Can they be with us in those hard moments? We do not want to argue with the researchers, as researchers only, but as comrades in struggle. That is our learning in this relationship.

**To conclude, without first thanking you for your words, is there anything, a topic that you would like to add?**

Without a deep knowledge of our peoples it is not possible to build a way to make alliances with the peoples in the mega-diversity that exists in our continental country. The left does not know the peoples, does not believe in their cosmovisions, does not converse with the en- sined, does not listen to the warnings of the voduns. Even so, the great

rebellions in this country have both feet in the ancestry and spirituality of our peoples. Without going deeper into these issues, the conversation always remains burdened by the paternalism of European anti-capitalist traditions. We must break with this, we must go deeper into the knowledge of the peoples, into the wisdom hidden in their memories, in their manifestations. Within these cosmovisions there are fundamental lessons to correct individual and collective vices and political errors that we continue to commit. Without a good individuality - cultivated in good values with the collective or with nature - there is no powerful collectivity, capable of overcoming the racism that strikes us squarely.

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Translation: Waldo Lao



# Tribute to Guarani indigenous leader Marçal de Souza The Fire of our Memory

On November 25, 1983, at the age of 63, the Guarani Indian Marçal de Souza - of the Guarani-Nhandeva ethnic group - was brutally murdered in his home, in the Campestre village in Bela Vista, state of Mato Grosso do Sul (Brazil). Five shots were fired at close range by Líbero Monteiro de Lima and Rômulo Gamarra, two large landowners who occupied his land (who were brought to trial ten years after the crime and acquitted of the charges by the State).

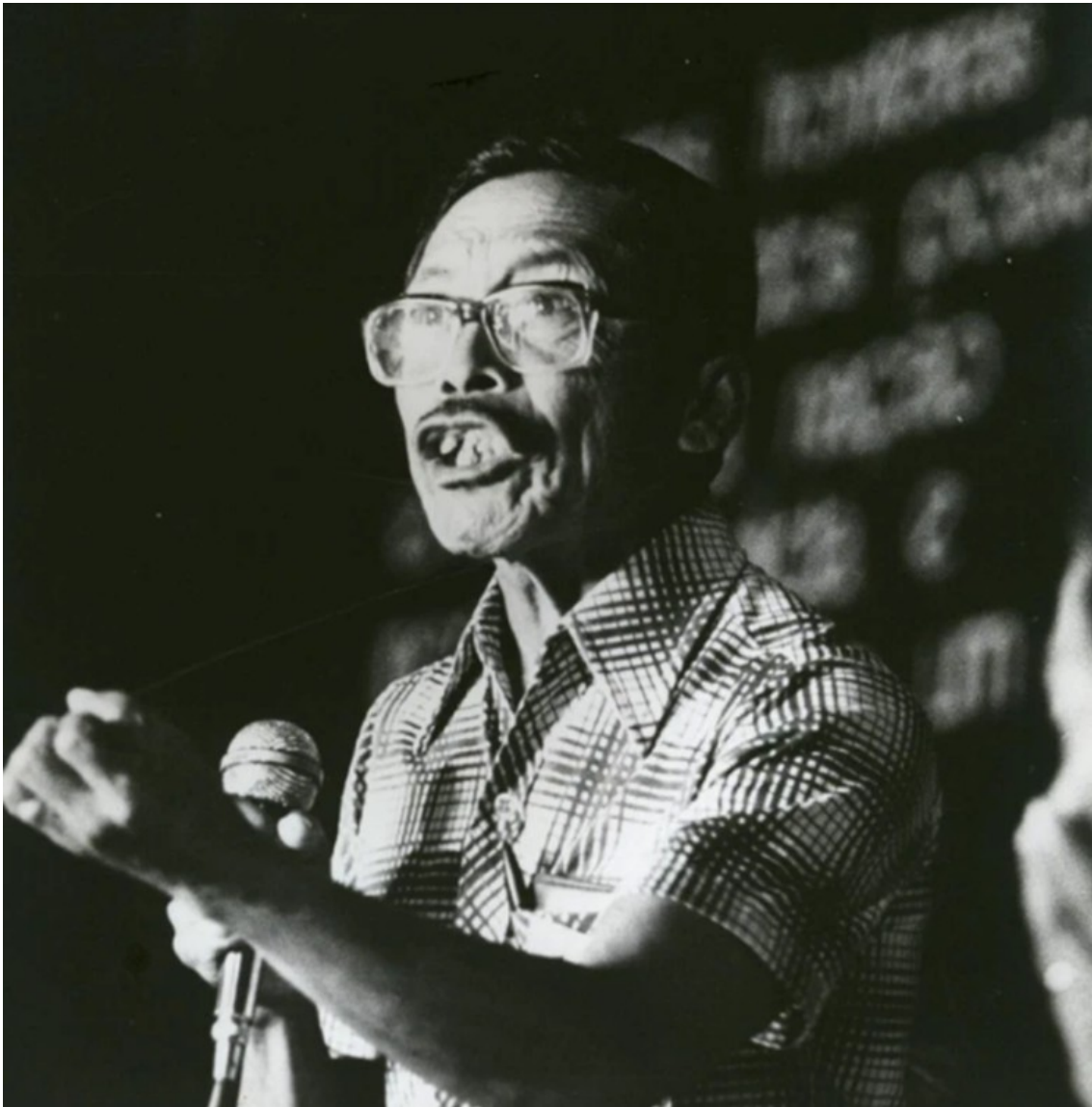
Marçal de Souza was baptized as Tupã-í (Little God, in the Guarani-Nhandeva language) and became one of the most important indigenous leaders in Brazil. He fought for land demarcation in the Dourados region (in his native state), denounced the illegal exploitation of maderá, the enslavement of his people and the trafficking of Indian girls. He was one of the founders of the National Union of Indigenous People (UNI), founded in 1980.

For his struggle in favor of the rights of indigenous peoples, he was persecuted by large landowners, loggers and even by the Directorate of the

National Indian Foundation (Funai), the Brazilian State's indigenist body,

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Marçal de Souza (Marçal Tupã-i)  
Born in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, on December 24, 1920.



Credits: Roberto Higa

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that expelled Marçal from the Dourados region in 1970. His international recognition led him to meet Pope John Paul II during his visit to the country in 1980. In his speech, he denounced the grave situation in which the indigenous people in Brazil live: *"Our lands are*



*invaded, our lands are taken, our territories are invaded. They say that Brazil was discovered. But Brazil was not discovered, no, Brazil was invaded and taken from the indigenous people of Brazil. That is the true history.*

After his death, Marçal de Souza was decorated as a National Hero of Brazil.

Source: <http://memorialdademocracia.com.br/card/cinco-tiros-tombam-o-grande-cacique>

**For more information:**

Documentary: "À procura de Marçal", year 2016, 24 mins.

Direction, shooting and images: Caroline Cardoso and Natália Moraes. Link: <https://youtu.be/GHVUGNmE4o0>

