

Collaborative archival work and analysis of Munduruku resistance to gold mining in the Upper Tapajós River of the Brazilian Amazon

During June and July 2019, Rosamaria Loures and I (Ailén Vega) unexpectedly entered a routine: upon our return from our morning swim in the Tapajós River, we would join Lídio Karo at the then-unoccupied school in the village of Nova Trairão (Munduruku Indigenous Territory, central Brazilian Amazon). Lídio, an elder renown throughout Munduruku territories as “someone who knows how to tell stories well”, would faithfully carry a loose piece of paper into the schoolhouse, marked with a list of origin stories and their corresponding *cânticos*, or chants, that he planned to share with us that day. Once we all sat down, Lídio would begin telling us stories on how Daydu (the trickster armadillo) pulled people above ground and how it was out of Kaporú, an old woman, that crops grew, going back and forth from Portuguese to Munduruku, from story to song and dance. As the hours passed, Rosamaria and I recorded his words, tried to write them down, and at times, even tried to sing-along as others came in and out of the schoolhouse to hear and participate in the *cânticos*. The daily ritual, although commonplace, was wholly unexpected. We hadn’t gone to Nova Trairão to register Lídio’s words but somehow, from what we expect to be a mutual interest – ours, to hear his knowledge, and his, to have his words documented for future generations– we became his pupils for the summer.

When we left Nova Trairão, we parted with a collaborative goal in mind. We were to continue registering the stories and *cânticos* alongside Lídio the next summer, and together with other collaborators, we would produce a small book of his words that would be later distributed throughout Munduruku schools. After all, this was the request made by Lídio. In February 2021, however, the grounds on which our long-term project stood were suddenly turned upside down. Lídio passed away in his village after battling the cumulative effects of Covid-19 and malaria – both vectors that were brought into the region with the heightened circulation of *garimpeiros*, or illegal gold miners, within Munduruku territories. Lídio was one of over 30 Munduruku that had since passed away due to complications brought forth by Covid-19. As most of those were elders, there was a collective cry throughout Mundurukania that with the passing of older chiefs, storytellers, and historians, there would be a systematic “loss” or “burning” of “their libraries” (Rocha and Loures 2020). In light of our previous commitment to Lídio and demands from his family members as well as professors and other Munduruku leaders to return his words “on paper”, we applied to the Tinker Grant for financial assistance in our aim to systematize, transcribe, translated, and publish pedagogical materials containing hours of stories and chants uttered by Lídio on those summer days.

Rosamaria Loures (upper photo) and Ailén Vega (lower photo) with Lídio Karo at the schoolhouse in the village of Nova Trairão, TI Munduruku within the upper stretch of the Tapajós River of the central Brazilian Amazon (state of Pará). July 2019





We reached out to Honesio Dace upon receiving news that we had received the grant along with other Munduruku professors and Lidío's family members to verify that we could move forward with the process. Honesio, who had been present during our days at Nova Trairão, is a Munduruku linguist at the Federal University of Pará (UFP) and a long-term translator (both written and orally) for various Munduruku organizations

and movements. Once he agreed, Rosamaria took the lead in compiling endless hours of recording, videos, and photography that were then sent to Honesio through a hard-drive due to the size of the files as well as worries about internet reliability during the months of transcription and translation. During ongoing conversations, Honesio Dace has explained his process to us as the following:

I'm working this way. Because the majority of the chants have a very old language, I need a lot of concentration to hear the words and transcribe. For each video, I create a file, I put the video inside the file and I translate it into a word document... I don't listen to them just one time. First, I listen, then I transcribe, and when I translate, I have to listen another three times so that we can do good work.

I am very impressed by the sung Munduruku language. The majority cannot be translated into Portuguese terms. Look, they are like poetry but there is no way to translate "the lyrics" into Portuguese. But along the way, I began to observe better. There are those chants that I can easily translate— those that I can translate the ideas— but others that are incomprehensible.



Honesio Dace in the village of Nova Trairão, translating from Munduruku to Portuguese at the annual Munduruku Women's Assembly. July 2019.

Throughout the summer months and into the fall of 2021, Rosamaria Loures, Honesio Dace, and I reflected upon the process of documentation, transcription, and translation and the importance of such projects in the face of the ongoing pandemic and the renewed gold mining boom in the region, which not only has intensified the spread of the Covid-19 virus but has increased death threats, deforestation, and destruction of Munduruku villages throughout the past two years. Within our conversations, Honesio highlighted the pedagogical importance of such registration for the future generations to come:

Because what left [with Lídio's death] will never return. The knowledge that Lídio Karo took with him around the chants, no one will sing like he sang. In this sense, this material is really valuable to all the Munduruku peoples. It's a documentation of our millennial knowledge.

Honesio's emphasis on the preservation of the *cânticos* highlights their importance beyond their moment of registration at the schoolhouse during the summer of 2019. While each chant or set of chants corresponds to a story, it is through their very singing that the chants themselves can ward off enemies, seduce them, or otherwise trick them as well as provide safety for the Munduruku. Throughout the increase of conflicts brought on by the expansion of extractive projects in the region, members of Munduruku political movements – made up by chiefs, political leaders, women, children, warriors, shamans, and healers– utter these chants within moments of confrontation, during manifestations, and at the beginning of collective meetings (Loures 2017). While many sing, the lead “singers” form a pivotal part of this act. Amongst one of the most important was Lídio Karo.

Throughout our conversations, several questions rose – most of which we hope to think through together once we can meet in person within the next year: if stories and chants are part in parcel of Munduruku resistance against “projects of death”, like gold mining in the region, then what role does the moment of documentation, transcription, and translation take on? How are the stories and chants transformed throughout these moments? Although we had hoped to analyse these questions during the summer, we chose to focus most of our time on the systematization, transcription, and translation of interviews themselves during those months, noting the importance of having other Munduruku professors, intellectuals, and Lídio's family members present during these conversations.

During the last month, we have begun to embark on the last stage of our project – the compilation of these stories into a small booklet, printing a few copies of the booklet (with photographs), and buying USB drives to distribute both the physical and digital copy throughout Munduruku schools. Again, we will wait until we all meet in person during summer 2022 to distribute the booklet alongside professors, members of Lídio's family, and representatives from the Ipereg Ayu Munduruku Movement, the Pariri Munduruku Association, and the Wakoborun Munduruku Women's Association. Beyond this process of return and devolution, the Tinker grant has helped all three of us – Rosmaria, myself, and Honesio – advance in our academic projects within the relationship between strategies of resistance within the Ipereg Ayu Movement, especially within moments of heightened conflicts around gold mining for the former, the relationship between story and chants within Munduruku cosmology for the latter. It has helped us to come together as researchers during a time when we still could physically not gather – all in honor of Lídio Karo and his teachings.

Loures, Rosamaria S. P. 2017. *Governo Karodaybi: O Movimento Ipereg Ayu e a Resistência Munduruku*. Master's thesis. Federal University of Western Pará, Brasil.

Rocha, Bruna and Rosamaria P. Loures. 2020. A Expropriação Territorial e Covid-19 no Alto Tapajós, PA. In: Wagner, A. *Pandemia e Território. São Luís: UEMA Edições/ PNCSA*.