The end of the world and the birth of the birds:

how the Omerê Kanoé and Akuntsú survived genocide

The last six members of these indigenous peoples from eastern Brazil have survived the genocide, the advance of the agricultural-livestock frontier, and the ecosystem imbalances generated by the BR-364 highway. In order to resist Western “development”, they had to establish inter-ethnic relations despite having different languages. The Akuntsu contributed their knowledge of wild agriculture and the Kanoé shared their hunting techniques and skills. With almost all their relatives now dead, the Akuntsu women care for their birds as if they were their children, while the Kanoé hunt the cattle left behind by landowners who evacuated lands they had invaded decades before.

By Luciana Keller Tavares – May 1st

The Omerê River Kanoé and the Akuntsú are two Indigenous collectives who have survived successive extermination attempts. They live in the Indigenous Land on the Omerê River in Southern Rondonia state. First contacted by Funai in 1995 on a tributary of the Corumbiara River, they now number three Kanoé and three Akuntsú. At that time, they lived in what became private lands after the Brazilian state sold them as uninhabited territory in the 1970s. Now, under the protection of that same state, the Omerê Kanoé and the Akuntsú have recounted how they outlived their attempted destruction.

It was dry season on the Omerê. Purá and I sat on a Funai truck waiting for the men to return from hunting the “wild oxen” left behind after the “landowners” had been expelled from the Indigenous Land. Purá stayed behind to keep me company on the truck because the other men said it was very dangerous for a young and inexperienced white anthropologist to participate in a hunt with guns.
As we sat there, Purá noticed and pointed at a scar on my leg. I told him that I got it when I fell out of a tree. He then went on to tell me about their own scars.

As he spoke, he went back in time to when his family lived in the jungle, escaping from contact with the *aparabia*, the Whites. He told me about his mother, *iamõe*, his anguish and despair when he saw her cry at the sound of a chainsaw, and the smell of smoke from burning trees coming closer to their campsite. Today, Purá is one of two Kanoé men who survived the genocide in the Corumbiara River valley.

**The coup d'état and the occupation of the Amazon**

Their first contact occurred in 1914, when the [Rondon Commission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rondon_Commission) passed through the Pimenta Bueno River basin. Some years later, the Indian Protection Service (SPI) built the “attraction” outpost (Posto Indígena de Atração, PIA) named Pedro de Toledo to lure and settle the surrounding Indigenous people. In 1947, to clear the way for the construction of the future BR-364 road on the trails opened up by Rondon, SPI moved these groups at Pedro de Toledo to the outpost PIA Ricardo Franco. Four hundred kilometres away from that outpost is the present-day location of the Rio Guaporé Indigenous Land. However, some Kanoé dodged these moves, probably including the forebears of the Kanoé who now live in the Rio Omerê Indigenous Land.

When the military took over the government in the 1964 coup, they chose the Amazon as their main target for development. They saw it as the alleged solution to most of the country’s problems, from droughts in the north-east to land concentration in the south-east. The rhetoric of Amazonia’s demographic void became the grand slogan by which to colonize it. Launching the first large-scale colonization project, the National Integration Programme (PIN), General Emílio Garrastazu Médici declared that the Amazon was “the land without men to men with land”.

Such voids were but a fallacy that brutally affected the local populations. It gave the governments *carte blanche* to produce real voids. For centuries, this fake reality masked the unencumbered annihilation of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil. In the western state of Rondonia, the Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) carried out most of the colonization of such “demographic voids” via the so-called Operation Rondonia. This project contemplated the hasty
occupation of the territory by means of two main strategies, namely, the completion of the BR-364 highway and the extensive distribution of land for colonization.

**The settlement of settlers and the arrival of businessmen from São Paulo**

The BR-364 was a watershed moment in the formation of Rondónia as a state. It cut diagonally through its territory. When paved, it became one of the few throughways by which to access the region. It was finished during the Juscelino Kubitschek government in the 1960s but only paved in the 1980s with World Bank funds through the Integrated Programme for the Development of Brazil’s Northwest (Polonoroeste).

Besides the completion of the highway, the arrival of settlers also expanded the western frontier. However, the intense propaganda carried by both official and informal media produced a migratory overflow that ended up of INCRA’s control. Thousands of smallholder families migrated to Rondonia with the promise of land good and plenty, only to find upon arrival that there was not enough land for everyone. To make matters worse, in 1975 INCRA changed its distribution strategy and launched the auction of large plots favouring big landowners. The territory was then parcelled out into four large plots. The choice morsel in that agronomic banquet was the Corumbiara Plot.

That region, including the Tanaru, Pimenta Bueno and Corumbiara Rivers, appeared on maps of the Ministry of Agriculture in the late 1970s as having the highest agricultural potential in the state. The Corumbiara Plot, with one hundred plots of two thousand hectares each, was sold to a few entrepreneurs from São Paulo who, using relatives as mediators, accumulated at least 12 plots each. One of these businessmen was Antenor Duarte, the owner of Fazenda São Sebastião, where the Omerê Kanoé and Akuntsú had been relocated in 1995.

**An alliance to struggle against genocide**

The Akuntsú were the second collective Funai contacted in that year. They were seven individuals, including adults, the elderly and children. They spoke one of the Tupari language family (Tupian stock). Like many other Amazonian eponyms, Akuntsú is not a self-denomination. The Kanoé gave them this name when they first met at the Omerê in the early 1990s. They were both fleeing from contact with Whites and both shared a history of successive massacres. The Akuntsú used to call themselves Babawro (Woodpeckers) due to the habit of painting their hair with the red urucum
juice and dancing until dawn at the new moon, like those birds do. Now the Akuntsú number only three adult women, Pugapia, Aiga and Babawro.

Their own reports recount that, before the incursion of the agricultural frontier towards their territories, the Omerê Kanoé and Akuntsú just knew about each other’s existence. They lived in a contiguous area and respected its limits, but the colonial government did not. As the colonizing frontier intruded into their territories, they were pushed away to the few spaces still intact on the banks of the Omerê stream, where they actually met each other for the first time.

Speaking very different languages, at the beginning they communicated through trade. The Akuntsú were able to tend their gardens and still had seeds the Kanoé had lost in their constant flights through the forest. In turn, the Kanoé had developed ingenious hunting techniques and were skilled hunters. In no time, the two groups were making plans to trade spouses. Their alliance, improbable in the past, became one of their tools with which to face the threat of genocide.

This alliance was not their only tactic. Both the Omerê Kanoé and the Akuntsú describe various strategies by which to survive persecution and invasion. They adapted their way of life to resist destruction, scaling up their mobility for instance. Both cite a variety of cultivars they used to have in their gardens but which were lost in their constant efforts to hide from contact.

It is normal for Amazonian Indigenous Peoples to change dwelling places frequently in order to control resources or overcome dramatic events such as deaths and floods. However, group isolation usually indicates a greater mobility when the Indians are fleeing from external harassment. Forced mobility brought changes in food habits. As mentioned above, the Omerê Kanoé lost all their cultivars but developed resourceful hunting techniques. For example, the various types of arrows they now make follow a sophisticated engineering design that adapts them to the body shape and behaviour of each animal. In turn, the Akuntsú were able to maintain most of their cultivars precisely because of their mobility. They kept a garden to which they returned occasionally but, instead of settling nearby, they moved from shelter to shelter in the forest.

**Surviving to live well**

Nowadays, with most of their relatives dead, the three Akuntsú women live in the sole company of pet birds and a baby owl monkey. On my last visit, I counted 15 birds of different species, all kept in
a tightly closed miniscule hut to prevent them flying away, some 20 metres from the Funai outpost. In the last few decades, raising and caring for birds has occupied most of the three Akuntsú women’s time. They prefer the Maracanã parakeet (*Primolius maracanã*), which they carry on their shoulders or on a stick wherever they go. They refer to them as *u mempit peru*, literally, “my parrot son”. The importance of the birds in these women’s lives echoes a world with no new-born babies, a world devastated by genocide. The birds are the only beings that remained.

It is ironic that today the Kanoé can hunt the wild oxen left behind by the “landlords” expelled from the Indigenous Land, given that it was cattle raising that contributed to the destruction of their people. I remember once reading some graffiti in downtown São Paulo that said: “Surviving has never been about living” (“*Sobreviver nunca foi sobre viver*”). That phrase stuck in my mind like a message in a bottle found while diving in the sea. I thought of the Kanoé and the Akuntsú women. To survive is to have material conditions in order to continue living on the limits of being with a necessary minimum – health, food, land and a roof.

To live, however, goes beyond this minimum; it is the capacity to express all the essence of our being. To live, human beings need each other. We are a tangle of feelings and affects engendered by the relationships we create. From the Omerê, I learned that to live is to share one’s own existence, to create relationships and affects. I learned that living is Good Living. The colonizers tried to take not only the possibility of surviving but especially their own sense of living from the Omerê Kanoé and Akuntsú. They killed their relatives, their comrades, their affects. And yet those colonizers did not count on the survival and, above all, the capacity of these Indigenous people to create new relatives, new affects and new forms of Good Living.

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