The Tuxá of Rodelas and the islands of the “river sea”: seeking justice among submerged worlds

Until the arrival of colonization and modernity, this Indigenous people of North-eastern Brazil lived around the Operá River. They lived on the islands they considered sacred, they found their recreation among the waterfalls, fished for their daily food and bathed among the rocks as a form of ancestral medicine. They were also expert canoeists and travelled from one area to another along the river’s tributaries. Everything changed with the arrival of the Itaparica hydroelectric plant: they were forcibly displaced to a territory with no river and the promised reparations were never delivered. The author asks what compensation they have had for losing such an important part of their lives and promises that his people will continue to fight so that future generations can enjoy their river.

By Felipe Tuxá - 1st May 2023

Our pajé (shaman) Armando told me how my people, the Tuxá of Rodelas in the state of Bahia, in North-eastern Brazil, had lost much of their ancient way of life. In the time of his grandfather, João Gomes, there were still some 30 islands in the majestic São Francisco River where the Tuxá people lived their lives. The pajé recalls the first conflicts of our people: “The strong man of the region was Mr. Hannibal, who arrived with many oxen. Suffering death threats, and with no weapons to fight back, the Tuxá had to rely on mere bows and clubs. Our people watched helplessly as their land was gradually lost. Even so, my grandfather continued to fight.”

The Tuxá people entered the official historiographic records in the second half of the 17th century, a period marked by Portuguese expansion into the north-east of the country. The colonizers coveted these lands for raising cattle with which to supply meat, leather and other products. This was the start of a systematic settlement process that affected the various Indigenous Peoples living there. The colonizers took over their traditional spaces and, when they did not kill them, forcibly removed them to
settlements, tiny parcels of their original territories. They had to move out of the way for the oxen to pass.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, most of what we “officially” know about the colonization of the Tuxá and other peoples of the region comes from missionary records and documents with little interest in depicting their cultural characteristics or history. And yet Indigenous memory continues to recall the colonial policies that governed their lives and attempted to erase their very existence through linguistic prohibitions, punishments, slave labour, sexual violence and land dispossession. Such experiences continue to be transmitted orally from generation to generation, a kind of historiographic cartography branded on their memory through songs, myths, narratives and teachings.

A river to live on

There is one recurring element in most of the narratives (official or not) about the Indigenous Peoples of this region: the centrality and vibrancy of Indigenous life around and on the waters of the Opará River. The colonizers baptized the river the “São Francisco River” but the origin of its native name, as we know it today, lies in a Tupi-Guarani linguistic root: *pa’ra* which means “big river” or even “Sea River”. Over time it became known as “O Rio-Mar” or “Opará”.

The lower-middle region of the São Francisco, between the states of Bahia and Pernambuco, is remembered for its extensive and innumerable waterfalls and through tales of the river bringing water to the *caatinga, an extremely dry region of the Brazilian North-East*. Indigenous Peoples recount that they used to travel in canoes and that they were linked by tightly-knit networks of symbolic, ritual, economic and marital relationships. The Pankararu, Truká, Tuxá, Tumbalalalá, Kariri-Xocó, Xocó, Truká-Tupã, Kapinawá, Pipipã and Kambiuwá peoples are just some of those that today make up the Indigenous ethnic mosaic of the Opará basin.

Tuxá territoriality was clearly dominated by its waterways. The people lived on islands and highly fertile (and therefore coveted) lands along the course of the river, ideal for
growing cassava, corn, sugar cane, squash, watermelon and onion. By the end of the 20th century, they were living along the river banks overlooking Bahia, on the mainland, where they had settled in a system of dual homes. Anthropologist Orlando Sampaio-Silva researched the Tuxá during the 1970s and 1980s, and emphasizes the centrality of the river to their daily life: “The Tuxá consider themselves river Indians. They speak with great pride about their knowledge of the art of navigating the São Francisco River, day and night, past its waterfalls, up and down the river or from side to side, navigating the islands.”

A few decades earlier, the American ethno-archaeologist William Dalton Hohenthal had undertaken an expedition through the São Francisco basin with the aim of recording the Indigenous presence in the region (or what was left of it). According to the author’s calculations, in 1702 the Tuxá numbered some 600 people; by 1852, 132; and by 1952, 200. “The Tuxá tribes, and the Prokáz nation, are canoeists, with an economy based on fishing. They make canoes out of tree trunks. They are excellent navigators of the treacherous waters in this part of the São Francisco River,” explained Hohenthal in his article As tribos indígenas do médio e baixo São Francisco [The indigenous tribes of middle and lower São Francisco].

Much more than an economic resource

While researchers did realize how important the river was to the community, they only understood this importance in terms that were familiar to them, typical of Western societies. They saw the river as something alien to the human experience, something to be used on purely utilitarian terms. They viewed the river as an economic asset, just as they saw land only in terms of what it could produce. But this was not how the Tuxá people related to the Opará at all. The river was essential to them not only because water was a vital resource but also because it formed an inseparable part of their identity and worldview.

Their ancestors lived on those islands, were buried there and bathed in those waters. Their rituals were performed preferentially on the islands, where they could isolate themselves from the presence of non-indigenous people. It is no coincidence that,
culturally, they associate the health and physical, bodily and mental well-being of the Tuxá with drinking and bathing in the river water. This is the testimony of Cacique Bidú, one of the oldest leaders of the village: “At a time when the river was still flowing, the waters were very beautiful, healthy, there was the roar of the waterfall, the singing of the waters. Bathing in the waterfall was a medicine for us Indians, it was good for the nervous system. We would dive among the rocks, the water would pass through our bodies. This is where we found our cures.”

It can thus be seen that perhaps the most life-changing phenomenon in the contemporary history of the Tuxá people was the construction of the Itaparica hydroelectric plant in the late 1980s by the São Francisco Hydroelectric Company (CHESF). The community was forced to abandon their homes in 1987 due to the flooding of the dam and the formation of the dammed lake. While their traditional territory had once comprised more than 30 islands, with the dam in place only one remained: Ilha da Viúva. Finally, their whole world was flooded.

The Tuxá were resettled on the Nova Rodelas Indigenous Land, in the north of the state of Bahia. No longer on the banks of the river but in a village built by the company. More than 30 years later, the agreements signed promising compensation for the flooded lands have still not been fulfilled. There is no resolution in sight and the community remains landless.

Intangible heritage, forms of violence and reparations for the past

The author of this text is also a Tuxá but a Tuxá born in 1990 and who, therefore, has not been able to live on the islands as previous generations did. He would often listen to his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives talk about the Tuxá way of life. But this Tuxá has not been able to paddle among the islands, he scarcely sees the river still, let alone with the rapids that were so characteristic of his people.

It is difficult to see how justice can be served in cases like this. How can you compensate a community for the sacred islands that were taken away from them? How can you compensate them for an entire river that was blocked by a concrete barrier in the name
of the “progress of the nation”? How can you compensate past generations, those that came after the dam and those that are yet to come? How can you quantify the value of the submerged ancestral cemeteries and the material and immaterial heritage that was lost and can never be transmitted to future generations? How can you teach the cultivation of rice in flooded lands when, even in the rainy season, the river does not flood any more? How can you quantify the pain of loss and calculate the burden of delay in such compensation?

When we talk of the multiple forms of violence to which an Indigenous people may be subjected, we are generally talking of assassinations, massacres and murders but, in Brazil, the stories of Indigenous Peoples are, for the most part, very similar to the experience of the Tuxá people. While suffering specific moments of physical violence, they are more generally marked by long-lasting acts of violence, more subtle perhaps but the disruptive potential of which is ever present. They gradually destroy known worlds, Indigenous worlds that we want to leave to future generations so that our children can live as the Tuxá like to live.

To write about the violence affecting Indigenous Peoples means coming up against the inventiveness of these genocidal technologies, technologies that are specific to the territories claimed by European colonialism to this day. To talk of genocide and justice always means talking about providing reparations for the past. And yet it must mean, above all, talking about the ways in which we can ensure that which is essential for each Indigenous people to flourish as a people, in their own particular way.

Back to being river people

Anthropologist Nássaro Násser, who spent time among the Tuxá and, in 1975, wrote a book called Tuxá Economy, ended his dissertation by warning that a new threat was looming on the horizon for the community. He was referring to the hydroelectric plant. Given the long history of plundering and attacks suffered, the researcher concluded: “Especially now, when they are under threat of their territory being submerged in the waters of the São Francisco by the dam to be built by the hydroelectric company, who knows, it may be the last and final blow that surrounding society will deal them.”
It was not the last blow because new generations keep on coming. And they arrive eager to demand justice for their relatives who left without seeing the land promised in the agreements made. Eager also to build, gradually, a dignified future for the Tuxá people. In 2017, the community organized and recovered an area on the banks of the Opará known as “Aldeia Avó”. This territory is located next to lands that had been flooded. Since then, we have occupied this space, demanding that the Brazilian State take appropriate measures in favour of our rights.

Our pajé Armando used to say that “an Indian without land cannot live”. This is curious when we consider that, for three generations born in the new village, the Tuxá people have reinvented themselves to live in a world without islands, in a world without land. So when we recovered Aldeia Avó, we also recovered the river, we reinvented the present in order to recover the future. The children can once again swim in the waters of the Opará, and the very notion of person, of Tuxá person, has been recreated. We have returned to being people of the river, to being Opará, and here we have been inspired to grow stronger in the struggle for rights and justice.

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