

Indigenous protagonism in the defense of their rights: the Katxuyana people, the ethno-education and museum objects

Abstract

The Katxuyana people, Karib Amerindians, account for 380 people who live in the north of the country, mainly in the state of Pará, Brazil. The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes the right of these peoples to be different, respected and to preserve their cultural heritage and memories. Demarcated in 2018, the Katxuyana territory is currently threatened by the proposed construction of a hydroelectric power plant. In 2019, on the occasion of the launch of the book^{1,2} on the reconstruction of the traditional Katxuyana house - the tamiriki - the Katxuyana from the villages of Santidade and Chapéu (Oriximiná, state of Pará) held an event in the center of the city where they were able to present their dances and talk about their culture to the public (students, teachers and other city residents). On that occasion they also spoke of the threats to their territory and their concern to defend it. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for more than two years, to protect themselves they stayed in their villages, avoiding going to the city. This article presents an account of the experience of ethno-education among the Katxuyana, where museum objects were appropriated by this indigenous people for the purpose of revitalizing their tradition and defending their rights.

Keywords: Katxuyana people, ethno-education, indigenous peoples, Brazil, museum objects

Volume 7 Issue 1 - 2022

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Received: October 20, 2021 | **Published:** April 29, 2022

Introduction

Based on the premise of the rights of indigenous peoples as guaranteed in 2007 by the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in this article we address the protagonism of the Katxuyana indigenous people in an ethno-education experience with museum objects. This experience occurred in 2014 and 2015 in the village Santidade, located on the banks of the river Cachorro, in the Brazilian municipality of Oriximiná, in the northern region of the country.

Since 2010, the Katxuyana have participated in educational projects about their knowledge of traditions and their appreciation of museum objects.³ They took part in the program carried out by Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) to train educators in cultural heritage and ethno-education.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁴ was a milestone in the history of the United Nations and an important development for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, bringing human rights to indigenous people. This development was built on the integration of the visions and interests of both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

Brazil ratified the Declaration in 2007. Since 1988, the Brazilian Constitution recognizes human rights in its fifth article and guarantees indigenous peoples' rights in articles 231 and 232. Despite this, currently in Brazil, the rights of indigenous peoples have been threatened by fires, illegal mining, suspension of the demarcation of indigenous territories and resumption of projects such as the hydroelectric power plant in the Trombetas river basin that will threaten the Katxuyana and a dozen other indigenous ethnic groups, as well as quilombolas and riverside dwellers.

The United Nations General Assembly, by way of the proclamation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, expressed concern about the difficulties indigenous people face

in exercising their rights to a development that follows their needs and interests. The declaration enunciates a set of rights that aims to protect, promote, guarantee and defend indigenous peoples. Such rights are considered minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of indigenous peoples around the world.

From that set of rights, we highlight those related to the right to indigenous cultural heritage, and the right to be different, respected and to preserve cultural memories, which are part of the common patrimony of mankind.

In many parts of the world, innumerable indigenous peoples play a leading role in cultural revitalization projects that act politically in the defense of their rights. Sahlins⁵ calls this "cultural resistance" or "cultural self-consciousness", a formula adopted by different traditional peoples to reinforce their identities as a reaction to the pressures of globalization and paradoxically not disappearing.

Museums as a place of preservation and education have commitments and responsibilities to society and specifically to the people related to their collections. Getting to know objects made by past generations that are now preserved in museums is an important goal for many indigenous peoples.⁶ In this regard, we can say that for at least three decades we have seen an increasing role of indigenous peoples in Brazil in initiatives in museums that preserve their objects.⁷

Such indigenous protagonism often derives from the multiple struggles of these peoples in different parts of the world. In many cases, social pressure has led to the creation of laws for the defense and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, especially those related to their cultural heritage, the seminal example having occurred in the USA in 1990: the formulation of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation (NAGPRA).

Many indigenous peoples, who currently live in Brazilian territory, have an enormous capacity to resist different contacts. Indigenous

collections in museums have had many functions. Have access to museum objects (see in person the objects or see photos of them) for some indigenous groups and have contact with the objects of their ancestors has many meanings such as educational, symbolic, religious, among others. To know objects that they no longer do; to check the material changes of objects that they continue to make; to analyze the ancient technique of making an object and compare it with the technique used today. But it also has to do with symbolic and religious aspects in front of ritual and sacred objects. Numerous cases of handcrafted items anchored in traditional patterns are sometimes updated contemporaneously – either in the substitution of raw materials or in new formats for certain objects, or in the idealization of a mix of all that. The case of the Katxuyana people is one of these.

In this article we analyze the ethno-education method with the Katxuyana people in their project about canoe-making. They were stimulated by photographs of one of their canoes, preserved at the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. We followed the involvement of all villagers in that activity which took place between 2014 and 2015.

Materials and methods

In Brazil, there are around 305 indigenous ethnic groups, totaling almost 900 thousand people,⁸ equivalent to 0.47% of the Brazilian population. They are spread throughout Brazil, mainly in the 688 indigenous lands and in urban areas, such as in the cities of Manaus or São Paulo. These peoples have a long history since they occupied the territory that would become the Brazilian nation even before the Portuguese arrived in the continent in the year 1500. Currently, several indigenous groups in Brazil maintain partnerships with Brazilian civil society organizations.

For the UN, according to its rapporteur Victoria Tauli-Coruz,⁹ in 2016 indigenous peoples in Brazil have already faced serious risks since the adoption of our Constitution of 1988. Recently there are innumerable cases of violence against these people that we have been witnessing in the country and they range from discrimination against indigenous peoples, the invasion of their lands to murders.

The Katxuyana, Amerindians of the linguistic group Karib, live in villages scattered in the north of Brazil, especially in the State of Pará. According to data from the Socio-environmental Institute¹⁰ they are a people counting just over 380 individuals. The literature on the Katxuyana^{11–13} describes that they experienced a long migratory process in time and space, and returned to their territory, on the banks of the River Cachorro (Oriximiná, Pará), in the late 90s.

Our field work with the Katxuyana took place in two villages – Santidade and Chapéu – located in the municipality of Oriximiná. Between 2010 and 2017 we carried out educational projects in ethno-education method with the inhabitants of the village of Santidade and in 2015 we followed a project about cultural heritage and museum objects also with the inhabitants of the Chapéu village.

Their territory, the indigenous land Kaxuyana-Tunayana, was officially declared as indigenous land in 2018. It occupies an area of 2,184,000 ha, where approximately 575 people live (Katxuyana, Tunayana, Kaxyana and others indigenous people). Currently, these and other peoples are concerned about the threat posed by the construction of a hydroelectric power plant at Cachoeira Porteira, in the hydrographic basin of the Trombetas river.

According to the Pró-Índio Commission¹⁴ and other institutions, the federal government's initiatives for the installation of hydroelectric plants in the region belong to the National Energy Plan 2030, dated 2006, in which 15 hydroelectric plants are planned for the region.

In order to stand against the penetration of their lands and the threats to their rights, the indigenous peoples have used their cultural heritage as an important political element. The interest expressed by the Katxuyana to know their objects as preserved in museums is similar to the countless other cases of indigenous peoples in Brazil.^{15,16} The collections of Katxuyana objects preserved in European and Brazilian museums were described by Russi & Kieffer-Dössing.¹⁷

As Sahlins⁵ pointed out, we note that cultural self-appreciation also has been a political strategy among the Katxuyana. The experience in ethno-education is about learning the ancestral skill of making canoes. Through ethno-education, indigenous education among the Katxuyana has been developed with lessons at school and lessons in the forest.

A decade ago, the starting point of our experiences in ethno-education in the village Santidade originated in the desire of the Katxuyana people to ensure that their *Kwe'oh kumu*¹⁸ survives in future generations.

Since then, we have been listening, suggesting, learning, and working together in ethnographic field works with the Katxuyana leaders, teachers and students at the indigenous school. For that, they chose themes seek to emphasize aspects of the katxuyana culture itself (how to build the traditional house *tamiriki*¹⁹ for example). The ethno-education projects highlight the memories of the katxuyana tradition, whose people came back to reoccupy their homeland and became involved in the struggle for the demarcation of their territory in the late 1990s.

Thus, in parallel with the ethno-education projects, we have done research on their ethnographic collections.^{17,20–22} From photographs found in museum archives – both of museum objects and of Katxuyana ancestors – some actions have been taken, many of them in the bilingual school that works in the village of Santidade. The educational experiences with the Katxuyana have been constituted as interdisciplinary practices, always invested with objectives aimed at the cultural appreciation of these people.

The ethno-education approach was consolidated over a decade of the Oriximiná Heritage Program, within the framework of the actions at UFF. In the exercise of formulating educational practices integrated to the realities of the indigenous, quilombolas, riverside, and other communities in the municipality of Oriximiná, UFF teachers and educators of the communities committed themselves to develop projects that aim the local traditional skills in a contemporary way. Ethno-education is a formative process aimed at the continuing education of elementary school educators. Such theoretical-methodological approach takes the perspective of learning and training as a process of research-intervention. In the term “ethno-education”, the prefix “ethno” refers to ethnography.

In this way, the projects are designed in the form of intervention research and follow theoretical-methodological premises in which the educator starts from the construction of a problem, forged through the collective analysis of real and concrete situations, involving students and their families, as well as the school community. The centrality of ethnography in intervention research contributes to the establishment of relationships aimed at strengthening a common cultural heritage.

Results

In the village Santidade the project “*My canoe comes first, my dream is to know how to make it: we are Katxuyana from the Cachorro River*” took place in 2014 and 2015 and reverberated in many ways. For the University, it was an opportunity to learn from the

Amerindians and realize the potential of ethno-education projects from different backgrounds. The canoe project was sparked by the image of a museum object - the photograph of a canoe from the collection of National Museum (Denmark) - which became an inspiration for this teaching-learning project of know-how.

As a result, the object of a museum collection acquired a new meaning - it aroused memories among the elders of the village about a particular artifact and sparked in them the desire to teach young people an ancestral technology. In this way, the canoes project started from the motivation of some elders who have seen photographs, presented by us, of their museum objects.

With the theme of canoe chosen, the boys began to put into practice the project's idea. Thus, at first, the elder guided the boys to the forest to choose the most suitable tree to build a large canoe. A large canoe has dimensions about 12 feet long and 2 feet wide. Its manufacture takes place in the forest itself and is a difficult and time-consuming process until its conclusion.

A few months later we returned to the village to follow the development of the project. Due to the slowness of the process of making the canoe, at that time, the elder decided to show, in a single step, how a canoe is made. So, he suggested a trip to the opposite side of the river where he could demonstrate the whole process of making a katxuyana canoe, using softer wood. In this class, the old man taught the boys to collect the wood and the whole process of producing small canoes.

In the end, they prepared a project closing ceremony at the school. The whole village was gathered to the traditional *tamiriki* house to hear the reports of the boys and the girls.

Conclusion

The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes a set of rights for these peoples, which must be ensured by member countries. Cultural heritage is one of these rights. Cultural self-appreciation for many peoples has been an important political strategy in defending these rights.

The educational practices in ethno-education is an interesting course for indigenous education and cultural self-appreciation. Getting to know objects preserved in museums is an important aspect to indigenous people and their protagonism in projects to preserve their own cultures and defend their rights.

The elders take part in the activities not just providing information but also as teachers who share their knowledge in different ways students visit them at home or follow them in out-of-school activities, like field classes).

Nowadays we are experiencing times of retreat and threats to the rights of indigenous peoples in Brazil. There are still many challenges ahead and education projects on cultural heritage can contribute to the defense of the rights among these peoples. We have been deeply touched by the young Katxuyana's interest in learning from the elders and by the mobilization of the village population in appreciating the transmission of knowledge and the making of things, updating such skills for present times.

The canoe preserved in the Danish museum collection proved to be a powerful element to awake memories. The process of teaching the young was conducted by the elders and, in the case of the canoes, it produced miniatures that became toys in the hands of the children, thus giving new meaning to the museum objects.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

Funding

None.

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