

# Truka girls: Staging a history of resistance and struggle

## Abstract

This article tells the story of resistance of the young Truká against governmental projects that destroy the environment in which their tribe lives. For them, the land, the river, the forests, the people, the ancestors and the culture are one thing and are considered sacred.

This article is the outcome of a study developed in the Sao Francisco River area, hinterlands in Northeast of Brazil, between 2013 and 2016, where construction for the transposition of the river has been taking place. It is in this same area, known as the Marijuana Polygon, location of dangerous transit due to the violence imposed by drug barons, that the Truka tribe lives, threatened by the construction of plants and by the transposition of the river. We intend to demonstrate how indigenous girls play a protagonist role in this struggle for their land keeping and for their ethnic identity preservation through theater.

**Keywords:** Truka tribe, environmental justice, resistance, girl's agency, theatrical performance

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## Introduction

When we started this study, conducted between February 2013 and May 2016, the central core of the research was the gender relations and sexuality of the indigenous youth. However, when we realized that the Truká tribe's lifestyle and survival were threatened by the impact of the river's transposition, we decided to include in our research the history of the Resistance and struggle of this people.

We chose to highlight the voices of the young women, selected as informants those who participate in the theater group to better understand their culture, gender relations, and their perspectives in a context where their territory was violated in the name of a supposed 'development', promoted by a government that attained power with the rhetoric of the defense of excluded groups.

The Truka people remained in contact with the regional society for more than 300 years. Nowadays, they are a population of approximately 6,065 people who live in the municipality of Cabrobó, Pernambuco, within a territory that entails Assuncao Island plus an archipelago, more than 80 small islands scattered across the São Francisco river. In Brazil, even after 500 years of colonization, traditional populations from the northeastern hinterlands are seen as mere descendants, as 'caboclos', and not as a legitimate indigenous group, unlike the original peoples of Amazonia or Cerrado. Within the national movement for indigenous rights, the northeastern indigenous population faces discrimination.

In 1967, the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) was created and started to interfere with the traditional organization format of the Truka people, "imposing a hierarchical culture, overlapping the social organization format of this people".<sup>1</sup> FUNAI created a Tribal Council through the use of two criteria: one needed to be older and be a male. The Council also interfered with the process selection of a new Chief.

"The idea imposed by FUNAI did not make sense to the social organization our people had, since our leaders were chosen by Nature, under the following criteria: one had to belong to a traditional family,

had to participate in the *Toré*<sup>2</sup> and in the *Particular*<sup>3</sup>, and had to be referred by the *Encantados*."<sup>1</sup>

Amidst land conflicts and State interference, with its developmental policies of protection/submission towards indigenous peoples, the Truka tribe developed a history of struggle and resistance in the first decade of the 20th Century. The land struggle movement was started by the revelations of the *Encantos de Luz*<sup>4</sup> (light enchantment) and leadership actions.

People say that, between 1930's and 1940's, the *Encantados* taught about the Truka people and their "science". The revelations of the *Encantos* (enchantments) took place through the *Tore* and some dreams, allowing leaders to begin a new phase in their struggle for land regaining. However, it had not been on that occasion that they managed to get possession of the land.

The definite possession and its recognition by the State would only come in 1990, after many acts organized by the Truká people, the so-called Reconquests, the occupation of parts of a territory, which originally belonged to this people. The objective was explicit pressure for its legalization. The Reconquests were not only tools to claim the land but also an affirmation of ethnic identity. Between 1981 and 2007, five Reconquests took place. The most recent one, in 2007, took place to demonstrate against the government's imposition of performing the transposition of the Sao Francisco River.

The transposition of the river project, which was planned by the Ministry of National Integration, entails the construction of dikes for the flowing of waters towards the hinterlands in order to prevent the droughts in the semiarid region. The beginning part of this construction project is located on the boarder of the Truka land, next to Assuncao Island. This project is in the wake of developmental practices and was

<sup>2</sup>Tore is a sacred ritual were participants collect strength, receive guidance from the Encantados (the enchanted ones), and drink jurema tea (psychoactive plants of the Mimosa, Acacia and Pithecelobium kinds) which purifies and brings wisdom. People dance Tore on several occasions: battles, reconquests, mourning, and religious practices

<sup>3</sup>Secret Ritual

<sup>4</sup>Ancestors' Spirits

<sup>1</sup>half-breed

thought of to exploit nature as an economic resource. Moreover, it affects local communities in an aggressive and inconsequent way. The project in itself has largely affected the local population as well as has brought a high afflux of construction workers and of army personnel to the indigenous area.

The transposition of the Sao Francisco River places researchers, academics, national press, environmental movements, traditional communities at one side, and the government and entrepreneurs benefited by the project at the other side. Those who criticize the project claim that there is much more demand for water, for human and animal consumption, in the area where it presently is than in its future destination, and that the ultimate purpose of the transposition project is to provide water to the agroindustry and to the shrimp farming industry.

The 2007 Reconquest against the transposition was repressed by military and federal police forces. In contrast, the Truka people protested dancing the Tore in the middle of the highway. It was at that exact moment that the Truka youth realized they needed to take part in the land conquest in order to be able to live and work.

Those events, the high impact governmental projects, and the continuing struggle through the so-called Reconquest are indicators that the Truka people's history of fight for land, political recognition and autonomy, which started in colonial times, has been renewed due to the imposition of governmental projects that foment conflict plus the heroic resistance of a people who insist in keeping their traditional lifestyle.

The Truka people are placed within a context of interethnic relations, where the dynamics of ethnicities are perceived inside a universe marked by conflicts with development projects. We understand that the Truka identity is dynamically constructed, at first, in a double process: confrontation and alterity,<sup>2</sup> part of an external reality mediated by conflicts with partners (*quilombola* movement, landless peasants movement, NGOs and universities). At the same time, there are internal processes: the retrieval of myths, rites or practices that renew historical experiences of resistance present to keep cultural and territorial autonomy.

## The protagonism of the Truka youth

Considering the existing timeline between the beginning of the construction work of the Sao Francisco Transposition, which was simultaneous to the latest Reconquest of 2007, the indigenous youth who participated in that event are still participants in the indigenous rights movement. These youngsters gave support to the respective leaders and had a key role in the movement.

At the time of the Reconquest, the Truka people had organized the Truka Indigenous Youth Organization (OJIT), which, later, originated a youth organization called the Theater Group. The Truka youth, who had demonstrated in 2007, felt the need of a collective movement of identity affirmation as their identity is directly linked to the land, the river and nature.

The OJIT participants convinced the "elders" that they possessed a lived wisdom, and not knowledge acquired through books. Thus, the entire group started to value their youngsters. Besides being an interaction mode, the Theater Group, with its young components, militates in cooperation with adult leaders in the land struggle movement as well as participates in debates, presentations and all sorts of meetings. It was in the mobilization for the process of Reconquest that the Truka youth strengthened their identity.

Likewise, the Theater Group has an educational role, since the group mobilizes youth interests with an array of themes and with the possibility of getting to know other places and people, as members have to travel to take part in workshops and meetings with other community groups.<sup>3</sup>

There is integration between school commitments and participation in the Theater Group. Study schedules are arranged in a way that student participants in the theater group assignments are not in disadvantage in their school performance. It is through theater that these youngsters try to express values, which oppose competition and superiority among them. Within this scenario, theater presents itself as a model for a better society. We asked Mariana (15 years old, student) if the young people who live in the village are different from other young people:

"For sure! We have our own culture, we dance Tore... We have our river swims. Over here, everything is different from what happens in the city. Their culture is different from ours. When we wake up, we are able to hear the singing of birds... it's different."

After graduating, many youngsters become indigenous teachers in their own community. They become members of the Truka Indigenous Teachers Organization (OPIT). This organization's social protagonism is evident.

### Maurili, an indigenous teacher explains:

"I'm a Truka, I'm of indigenous heritage. I fight for what I believe in as this is natural for me. This feeling is rooted in me... it is nothing new. I didn't start feeling this urge just yesterday... this is an old feeling. The fight of our people makes me a firmer believer. If I died soon, I would die a happy man, fighting for what I believe in. Our fight is relentless, it doesn't stop, it continues. We are able to extend the life of many who have already died by cherishing their memories. Memories of the past allow us to reflect tomorrow's youth and be able to continue and show future youth that we worry about them and that we keep our people's old memories."

About the *Encantos*, he explains: The "*Encantos da Luz*" are the lights we have, something very hard to be explained due to our private and cultural matters. They make us believe in the power of water, power of air, power of forests, and power of earth: nature's power. We believe that the *Encantos* come to tell us what is good or not for our people. During the Tore rituals, they warn us, they confirm our beliefs; they communicate what might happen to our village. They tell us when it is the time to resign or to be careful. That's what the *Encantos* do. We believe in nature's power and that gives us strength and trust, the belief in what they bring to us when they come in our dreams."

The *Encantos* are associated with the river, environmental matters, but especially with the cosmology of indigenous culture. Catholicism is mixed with indigenous culture. "We need the *Encantos* and the communion with Christ." They believe that they do not need to give up none of the two faiths, since the indigenous and the Catholic mysticism are complementary to each other.

The teacher continues: "when we are about to perform Tore or we need to bring in some water, we need to ask for permission to the mother of waters. She owns the waters. We need her permission for our own sake as well. We do not need to say anything, we only pay our respect. Respecting nature as we respect *jurema*, which is very important to us. Our history started with the *jurema tea*, the history of the Truka people. A time when our leaders, the elders, collected

leaves from the *jurema tree* to make a healing tea. During this ritual, they asked for permission to the forests. We ask for permission to collect the leaves.”

## Girls explain gender relations: “this is not a man’s job”

Our aim is to provide reminiscences of indigenous perspectives that honored native traditions and cultural practices after centuries of settler, colonial, patriarchal violence, and oppression. In evaluating production work about the indigenous Amazonia, Lasmara<sup>4</sup> highlights the invisibility of indigenous women, partially because of anthropology, geared towards male activities and narratives, and partially because of internal factors related to those societies. As a result of the social and spatial distribution of sexual roles, females were given domestic chores and males were given the task of having contact with foreigners.

Since the 1970s, the role of women in economic development has been prominent in the academic discussion and in international development agencies.<sup>5-7</sup> By the end of the 1980’s, research renewed studies about sociability, proposing an alternative view where females are not considered as residuals, but which reveal female voices who tell the story of their societies. Various thoughts<sup>9-14</sup> move forward giving voice to women so they can tell others about sex, work and differences. The aim is to give visibility to the female experience and to avoid the effects of stereotypical representation.

Here, we intend to hear about how Indigenous girls are resisting stereotypes and taking a stand in their communities, and participating in social, communal, and/or political action. We intend to observe how these young girls understand and elaborate their actions within an indigenous society marked by traditional relations and which attributes women the tasks of being wife and mother, the limitation of domestic spaces and the condition of being controlled by men.<sup>15</sup>

If colonization and development policies throughout the centuries impact indigenous groups, making them face many challenges for survival and for social and cultural reorganization, those same policies affect women more harshly. Women, in this context, who even participate in the fight for the land and in social movements, face prejudice based on gender asymmetry. Therefore, they face a multi-layer challenge: the fight for their village, the decision-making about their life trajectories, plus the overcoming of gender inequalities.

We now highlight the negative impact that the transposition construction work has brought specifically to the Truka women. Violence is everywhere... the damages caused by the transposition were enormous. Even though it is located in the Marijuana Polygon, nowadays, the city of Cabrobó deals with drugs it had never seen before, like crack. Some Truka youth are using crack... it brought in many outsiders... there has been much prostitution and some of the girls got involved with military men.” (Pretinha Pajeú).

Even though marijuana is an illegal drug in Brazil, in the Marijuana Polygon, it is soaked in an alcoholic beverage made of sugar cane and sold in bars and restaurants. However, the worksite saw types of drugs that were unknown to those who had always lived in the area. Besides, there were cases of unwanted pregnancies, as outcomes of sexual intercourse with military men or prostitution, making evident the fact that the new local scenario influenced the lives of those indigenous girls.<sup>16</sup>

Young women who were engaged in the indigenous movement and in the fight for indigenous education were interviewed. We found

out that they are normally very busy with intense workload and work commitments, which include trips and meetings with governmental representatives and with social movement partners.

The OPIT is one of the most active associations in its realm. With the large symbolic and effective results for indigenous education, its leaders, who in their majority are women, tend to have very busy lives. They need to adapt both their public and private life routines. Their narrated life trajectories allow us to elaborate reflections, which are related to the gender representations meaningful to the Truka people. It is possible to perceive changes in the organization of their politics and work. As a consequence, that brings changes to their social roles attributions and to the relations between sexes. When Mariana is questioned if she prefers to be a boy or a girl, she says she prefers to be a girl. She adds that indigenous young men do not see themselves as capable of engagement and action. To her, girls are much more active and, therefore, they attain better opportunities in life.

Mariana tells us that her mother did not have many opportunities because her grandparents did not allow their daughter to study. Instead, Mariana wants to be a teacher or a physician. However, this requires moving to another place, as Cabrobó universities only offer courses in History, Letters etc. After graduation, she intends to return: “I want to study and make my own money. I don’t want to depend on my husband. Not at all.”

To Mariana, working in agriculture is not difficult; however, she knows that it limits one’s perspectives in life and of dream fulfillment. Being financially independent is a priority in a not very far away future. On the other hand, to Josivania, 19 years old, this pattern of work gender division seems natural: “men go to the fields and women stay home”. Even though she naturalizes gender roles, Josivania sees participation in the Theater Group as a way that the young have to show the oldest ones in the group things that had never seen or perceived before within the island.

Janine, 21 years old, works at a health care center and wants to study Libras (Brazilian Sign Language). She is taking a computer technical course and, later, wants to learn how to play the violin. She and her sisters help their mother with domestic chores while the boys work in agriculture. The division of chores between men and women is common. Janine knows some men who work on domestic chores without complaints or without feeling that their masculinity is endangered. However, female financial independence is a much more sought and attained objective nowadays. In order to get what they want, women need to get away from the physical work performed in the fields. “It is very difficult and extremely rare that women work in agriculture, even so because agriculture is in extinction around here. Only the men still give the necessary value to agriculture and, therefore, work in the fields.” (Janine)

Marta, 24 years old, a teacher in the indigenous community, indigenous and black descendent, comments that being an indigenous woman means living their culture on a day-to-day basis. She is a member of the fight group together with the oldest ones and talks about the meaning of being a woman in their community:

“Women are importante. Besides being the majority in number, they try to provide for others all the time. What we dream of, what we want, we can get it... Women are strong individuals; however, leadership is for men.” Her mother continues: “But in these days, men are getting off and women are stepping in. Who knows, maybe, one day I might be a leader.”

Ana Carla, 25 years old, agrees that opportunities are offered to both girls and boys. Those who did not study made that decision because “they liked to party all the time”. As this is the case of some of her, friends who exchange money for sex: “I have a couple friends who did that... not many... maybe three.”

Kaline, 15 years old, student, criticizes discrimination in her community: “If we are just talking to a friend, people gossip saying that we are making out. We are in disadvantage if we decide to study at night. People gossip that we leave the house not to study but to go out with boys. They will say that we are making out”.

Kaline dreams about studying Law and becoming a police chief. However, her father disagrees with that idea. He explains that fathers should exercise some control over their families and should interfere with their children’s decisions. Kaline complains about the fact that there are no other cultural activities in their community. The only thing that is available is the social network. To her, participating in the Theater Group brought development to her reading skills, pleasure for taking trips and attainment of self-esteem: “more confidence when dealing with other people”.

Kaline is focused on her future, on her work and studies. Yet, she comments on the fact that there are no colleges available next to where she lives. She wanted to continue living in the same area, though:

“My dream is to study to be a lawyer or a police chief. My father does not want that. I wanted to study engineering, but it would be difficult because there are no colleges around here. I would have to go to Paulo Afonso to study. I prefer to stay here in the village over having to travel. I can study in a nearby college.”

Francilania, 14 years old, student, describes her routine and her roles at home:

“My sister, my mother and I stay at home. My father and my brothers go to the fields, work a little, come back home, take a shower, get dressed and we all go to school. Later, tasks are also divided: my mother cooks lunch, my sister and I clean the house”.

When there is a lot of work to be done, women are asked to do things “out of the house”, like harvesting fruit. When men help with house chores, they choose to start the wood fire. It is possible to notice that some house chores, like cooking or cleaning, are not done by men. Refusing to do them is actually “prejudice” on their own part. When her brothers do not want to help at home, Francilania considers that an “old-fashioned” attitude on their part.

Juliana, 23 years old, agrees that her brothers are all “sexists” and “as there are women in the house, the females should take care of everything”. She used to be a house cleaner in the city and used to work in the fields carrying rice. It was through the Theater Group that she learned the history of her ancestors. Tania, 23 years old, teacher, lets us know that her mother used to divide the house chores among her four daughters while her father and brothers worked in the fields. Even so, sometimes women were needed in the fields to plant bean, rice, onion and corn: “everybody participated and helped a little bit”.

Ana Carla, 15 years old, lived in Minas Gerais state for a year. She went back to Cabrobo and intended to stay home but her father did not allow her to do so. Among valued female social roles are the occupations of midwife and teacher. Ana Maria, 21 years old, teacher, says: “I was born at home, on Assuncao Island in Redencao village. A midwife, whom I call “mother”, helped me come into this world. Here in the countryside, people are used to calling “mother” the one that held them first.”

Ana Maria is a graduate student in a Portuguese Language and Literature course. Her memories about her childhood games with other children are marked by separation between sexes:

“The boys were always playing apart from the girls. The boys used to play with cars and the girls with dolls. The only games we used to play together were singing songs and rhymes and hide-and-seek”.

Pretinha reports that it was only in 1994 that her father told her and her siblings about their indigenous ancestry. Until then, she had always believed that there were indigenous people only in Amazonia. Things changed after Pretinha participated in her first Reconquest.

With the Indigenous School Project, it was possible for the indigenous population to get to know some traditions and rituals. Teachers served as tools in the fight for the people’s identity. Education, therefore, “is a tool, as were the Reconquests, for the reinforcement of indigenous identity. Female teachers are key instruments in the fight for the people’s identity”. Pretinha adds that “school is power. So, having school autonomy means giving away power: power to face the government, power to free ourselves a little from things that come already formatted. This way, we will be able to say: it is not like that! For us, the indigenous community, it is different.”

Research in the area of Gender<sup>17-19</sup> shows that human societies may have concomitant models and representations of gender relations and that there is not one single discourse about sexual roles. Within the Truka community, we observed a variety of models and discourses that are interconnected, and that are conflictive or negotiatory to the indigenous movement. Life trajectories allow for the visibility of social and political changes and, at the same time, highlight the co-existence of old and new discourses about the role and the place of women in society.

The predominant pattern within the distribution of activities between sexes maintains the traditional model. Nonetheless, the respective roles sometimes are inverted or sometimes meet societal expectations. Under special circumstances, we encountered families where the women were the ones who worked on the “harder jobs” and in the fields while the men took care of the house and the kids.

***Sexual Freedom, a complex relation: “that one over there is not worth of anything anymore!”***

The sexuality of the Truka youth is not much different from the sexuality lived by any other Brazilian youngster, especially in the rural Northeastern region, where young females have less freedom than young males.

“When a girl advances as fast as a boy... people will call her names ... they will call her “easy”. She will never catch up with a boy. You know, boys have more freedom than girls. Girls are more reserved, more introverted.” (Filipe, 14 years old, student) .

Mariana has a busy schedule: she is a student, a trainee, a participant in the Theater Group, second coordinator for the Pernambuco Indigenous Youth Coordination (COJIP, in Portuguese). Between being proud of herself and tired, she comments: “I do theater; I’m a missionary and an instructor”. When she had reached puberty, she noticed her body changes and her mother gave her some advice in that regard. The interest for boys started when she was at school. However, she did not want to date anyone at that moment because she knew that a relationship would limit her availability for her other activities.

Mariana shares that, among her friends, the girls are always “together” or pregnant. Boys and girls are adolescents that have

relationships with each other or with young adults. Sexual activity begins at an early age among them. Despite suffering significant peer pressure, she considers herself an exception.

“When sexual activity starts early in life, girls get pregnant and people start gossiping.” However, pregnancy at their age is not uncommon. Losing one’s virginity is seen as natural and, not necessarily, requires affective attachment or plans for a future together. They add, “Parents are more liberal with boys.” About the fact that her friends got married or “lived together” prematurely, Mariana agrees that doing that too early in life disturbs one’s study plans:

“The people over here like to date... I am going to be 16 years old and I have never had a boyfriend... To me, my studies are important. They are on the top of my list of priorities and objectives. I like traveling, I am involved with theater, and with church activities... if I commit to a serious relationship now, something is going to go wrong. I only want a boyfriend when I’m done with my studies.” At puberty, Janine noticed some changes: “I started to see the world from a different perspective, to be interested in boys... However, things did not change much because I had never been much interested in dating; it has never been my priority... Girls are more timid and boys are more forward. Over here, you see boys touching girls’ parts... and girls don’t like this... I myself don’t like it. And boys don’t want a serious relationship”.

Boys are in advantage over girls because they are given freedom to date. Besides, they do not have to hear malicious comments from their friends. Conversely, girls are always talked about and criticized. “There is a lot of gossiping! ‘That one over there is not worth of anything anymore!’ Boys do things and are the first ones to gossip afterwards. They are the ones who spread rumors, who point fingers at us, girls.” (Janine). When she talks about dating, Marta likes to repeat her mother’s words, which compare the differences between the past and the present times. Marta insists on the fact that her mother “blindly trusts her”:

“Dating nowadays? My mother says that things have changes a lot in that respect... There was actual physical distance between the couple, one partner here and the other over there... they were not even allowed to hold hands. Nowadays, I am committed to someone, we’re actually engaged. We have permission to go out together; I go to his house sometimes. I believe that each one of us is responsible for defining how we want to be treated when in a relationship, with respect, I mean. If I respect myself, others will do so as well. My mother trusts me and I feel I am worth of her trust.”

At 11 years old, Josivania started to go to the get-togethers in the village area, where there were music and dancing: “Then, I was growing up... at the same time, I didn’t go out much. I went from school to my house... to the get-togethers with the other girls”.

Another fun activity is to take part in the Theater Group. Her dream is to enter college, find a job and have a career. She does not intend to move away. She wants to continue living in the village.

Ana Carla has already had a couple boyfriends and is used to going out at night: “I live with my mother and I just let her know that I’m going out. I normally return home late or the following morning.” At 12, she dated two guys who worked at the Rio Sao Francisco transposition project. She comments on the deception events and the sexual harassment experiences she went through in her life and that had to do with her brother-in-law and her stepfather.

“My brother-in-law, my sister’s husband who lived in Minas Gerais state, tried to rape me once. My mother’s husband also tried it at a different occasion [...] my mother’s husband when I was 7 or 8 years old. My brother-in-law, when I was about to turn 12.”

Ana Carla did not tell her mother about her ex-husband’s behavior and the episode took place a couple more times, until her mother found out.

To Francilândia, puberty brought the sense of body changes and the interest for relationships with boys. Her godmother was the one who answered all her questions about the issue. She tells us that some of the girls got pregnant from boys that do not belong to their community and, for that matter, both have to face their families’ resistance against it. The first sexual encounters are accepted by some, but not without some warnings. Moreover, parents do not completely approve of it.

Francilândia refers to puberty as a turning point in her life, an event that separates the before from the after. Before puberty, playing with boys was no problem, there were no worries. However, after puberty, girls are required to watch their behavior. Moreover, they start being reprimanded and pressured about how to act when dealing with an individual of the opposite sex. They hear about how to demand respect from others after they act with respect towards their own selves, a matter of attitude that is potentially transmitted to others. On the other hand, social interactions among girls are frequent and take place with a lot of freedom.

Kaline had no information about the menarche when she had her first period at the early age of 10:

“I started to gain weight, to form breasts, and to see other body changes. When I had my first period, I didn’t say anything to my mother because I thought it was something else. My mother saw the blood stains on my clothes and, then, she decided to tell me what it was. And only then I learned about what I was going through”. Once puberty had started, there was a huge change in group behavior among girlfriends, as some of them started in prostitution. Family commitments also grew and education became a priority. As mentioned earlier, in most cases, education was their only means of liberation and of gaining financial independence.

Kaline had her first contact with the opposite sex in a dream and not in a romantic relationship. She said she had dreamed about a wedding ceremony in a church. However, her own perspectives started to change after new experiences and interaction.

“My dream was to get married at 15 years old. My worst fear is to gain weight, since my entire family is obese. I like the way I look right now.” In addition, she continues: “today, girls have a more forward behavior towards boys. To my surprise, there are girls who have dates and they are only 10 or 12 years old. When I was younger, things were very different. My sister always says that she only wants to go out with boys and not necessarily get married. I tell her that she will have to get married in the future, if she wants to have a family, a house or a job... I want to have kids.”

To those girls, sexuality is part of the search for freedom as well as it is part of the self-affirmation process as women in a society that tries to frame them within the domestic universe which controls them. In Cabrobo, indigenous and non-indigenous women live in a patriarchal and chauvinist society where there is violence against women in the city and on the Island. Likewise, it is common to find broken families, as some fathers leave their homes, and to find women who take care of their kids all alone: “they do all sorts of male and female jobs”.

Some of the Truka young girls were impacted by the presence of the military people in their community. That has increased the level of prostitution, as expected to happen in any vulnerable cultural, economic and social context. “The indigenous women came to realize what was going on and decided to discuss and resolve their situation. We have always guided them... however, for the girls who did not belong to the movement, things have never really mattered to them... many became single mothers... some became HIV positive... and some others became drug users...”<sup>20,21</sup>

### Environmental justice: river waters, Truka blood

In an attempt to mitigate the conflicts, which came up with the transposition of the river, the government has taken some palliative actions. Among them, the community had the opportunity of taking courses and workshops about the environment, which, in fact, did not bring a satisfactory outcome, as those courses were not given by professionals in the area of Education or Health.

There are no policies geared towards youth needs, especially in key themes like sexuality, alcoholism (alcoholic drinks sale is not allowed in the villages) and drugs, even though there are police operations in the areas where marijuana is cultivated. Their participation in theater permitted the political engagement of these young people. So much that they are in the process of creating a group whose major focus is political activism. Their leaders are ageing are these youngsters learned that they are the ones who need to continue their resistance struggle.

To young people, the act of understanding environmental conservation goes through issues like the adequate garbage disposal in the village, the proper way of raising domestic animals plus the necessary cleaning of the environment where they actually live. Understanding ecology contemplates preservation besides the co-existence with nature.

“There are those who destroy nature just for the fun of it. We need to conserve nature because we are a group, a village. How could we show our culture if there was nothing to be shown?” (Josivania)

Josivania tells us that the Theater Group put up some plays that discussed the issue of garbage disposal in their community as a warning sign for reflection about the topic:

“Over here our reality is different: we don’t see a garbage truck coming to us to collect trash. When we collect and pile up debris, what should we do with it? Just leave it there? Some people burn their garbage, some others don’t. And that practice, for sure, impacts our village and the river with the pollution it brings to our surroundings.”

Janine agrees: “there should be garbage collection... our leaders should complain about that to the City, but they don’t care”. After 7 years of struggle, Janine believes that the people “got used to it all because they don’t even talk about the transposition anymore.” She adds that:

“However, I believe that this will affect our indigenous community... maybe not only our community but the city as well. Many city people are in favor of the construction work because they don’t like us and believe that the damage will be only ours. When I was in school, there were occasions when I had to argue with other students. I hated when they badmouthed our indigenous community and culture. They used to say that indigenous people wanted to own everything and wanted to control everything that did not actually belong to them. I had a teacher who hated us because she believed that the indigenous community had taken away her property. She used to

look at us and say: ‘I despise your indigenous community and people.’ We protested through a sign-up list and made her be sent away from our school”.

According to Janine, the disadvantages of the transposition are many:

“Others criticize indigenous individuals because they believe that the financial compensation that was offered would be enough and somewhat rewarding. Besides that, they also think that we would be happy to live in one same designated area. Those people are not us and, for that reason, they have no idea of how damaging all these changes will be. A big disadvantage would be not living near the river any longer. This would be a huge change to us, as the river is our treasure... this indigenous community has always lived here... we have always been in close contact with nature”. However, the connection between an indigenous individual and nature goes far beyond, as explains the young indigenous teacher:

“With the transposition of the Sao Francisco River, the so-called “small river” may disappear. It will somewhat change this river stem, it will no longer be a small river and this water will disappear. This is the water that would enter the canal. Therefore, for us, this would be of huge impact, especially because of the *Encantos da Luz*. It is very easy to say: ‘you’ll have to leave Assunção, you’ll have to go somewhere else.’ However, they don’t know that this is what motivates us to keep up our fight... to believe in our own fight due to the *Encantos da luz*... because we know that if we go somewhere else, the *Encanto* will not come along. Therefore, we are suffering. They can take us away, we can move away on our own, but the *Encanto* will stay here in this land, a territory of wisdom. So, if we lose the waters to the transposition, the waters we call small river, we will lose the *Encanto*. It will disappear. To us, the *Encanto* is what we experience... And what gives us positive results: the waters. The waters of the old Sao Francisco are sacred to us, they have power. It is very easy to move away and lose you indigenous identity. What will my bonding with the wisdom of my land and of my people be? What kind of wisdom will I receive from my ancestors? What kind of roots will flourish from me? The new roots. We’ll lose anyway. We can move away, like any other people, to any other place, but the *Encanto* cannot. And it is not only the transposition, but they also think of constructing a nuclear plant nearby, and that bothers us a lot, that deeply affects us, besides affecting Mother Nature. We are the ones who cherish, who take care, who think about survival, because this is from where we get our daily bread, it is where our elders fish from, where our parents water their land and plants, with all that beauty. Maybe we would no longer exist if they did that. If they take the waters from us, they might say: ‘but we are not taking all the water’. The Sao Francisco, looking at the small river, constructing a dam, they are going to transpose it, so it is going to be very difficult to us. If the government thought of a project of revitalization for the Sao Francisco River and later thought of its transposition...until today, we see people who have high hopes about the project: ‘in the future, the water will run on my property and I will be entitled with my share of water.’ This is pure illusion; there will be no running water. You’ll not get a drop of water out of you home tap. This construction project is for large entrepreneurships, for other things... it’s a real mafia, if I might say so. Because these people have never really suffered from thirst... and those, who are in Paraiba and Piaui states have never had any relation with the river. And, then, comes the government and think that they are improving our area, but they are not. When it’s done, if the transposition truly comes to an end, if there is water and if there is one family living in the *caatinga* area in need of water for their plants

or their animals and there is no running water available, there will be war. No one can think of seeing water running inside pipes at the back of their yard and having no access to that water to quench the thirst of one's own family members, animals and plants. The final aim of the government plan is not to see the local inhabitant grow his/her plants. They have other plans. There are people in the communities who think that water is coming to serve them. We would be very happy if they received water in their homes, but, we know, that this won't happen and that there will be a lot of suffering. We compare this situation to taking a breastfeeding baby away from his/her mother's breasts. They are taking away our waters and our experience with the *Encantados de Luz* is being damaged as well. We can be Indians anywhere, but we'll lack some of our strength, of our fighting spirit, of our warrior spirit because the *Encantos* might not follow us".<sup>22,23</sup>

The Truká youth identity is based on their respect towards nature and that gained political connotation. To them, the transposition of the Sao Francisco River represents violence because they are "moving", "taking away" and "dividing" the river. Those indigenous youngsters are aware of the impact that the construction work will cause to the villages and their inhabitants and, for that matter, they oppose the whole event. However, they keep their fighting for the fulfilling of the promises they were made about improvements for their land and people. Summing up, they are able to express their wishes through their theater.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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