

The Land of the Tapuya Kariri

A contemporary First Nation Story from Brazil



Imagine:

You live upon the land where you were born, where your parents, your grandparents and great-grandparents were born before you and then buried and now continue to live on as light and guiding spirits who are invoked and honored in special ceremonies.

It is the land that is like a Great Mother to you and your sisters and brothers and has been the same to all ancestors too. Because it is where your roots are and it is your daily source of physical and spiritual life.

It is the land where you hunt in the various woods and pick the wild fruits and natural herbs. It is the land where you plant manioc and corn and beans and squash. It is the land of which you take the clay to build your home and craft your utensils. It is the land where you take the natural materials to make your tools and jewelry. Since all memorable time.

And through this Motherland flows a river. The aorta of it all. Where water is clear and good for drinking. Where you and your brethren go fishing and bathing. Where you fetch the water you need for your cultivations and herbs next to your house. And it is also where children go to play mostly and where Good Spirits love to hang out and watch over the entire community and the Land.

One day unknown people begin to arrive and build houses and erect fences and start to clear all the forests by using heavy machinery on this Motherland of yours and the generations before you.

First you are confused, shocked and paralyzed, can't understand why this is going on.

Then you approach these invaders and ask them what they are doing. And they tell you that they are the rightful owners of your Motherland. That they have the land title on official paper and that you have to leave.



Text in white rectangle: "Reserved for Indians"

But you do not have any other place to go. Because the same kind of people who are now annexing and modifying your land in the Ibiapaba Mountains in Western Ceará, which in this region is the highest, over 1,000m above sea level, and thus the most difficult to access, have already occupied all other, lower lands that you either know or have heard of. So you tell them. And you tell them too that this land is your Motherland. Since uncounted generations. But the invaders only laugh or, if you dare to insist a little too strong, give you a smack or send gunmen into your house and have you either run or die.



Here the Kapuya Kariri once had their community agriculture –
Now they are prohibited to plant anything here

You and your brethren start to become hungry and thirsty. Since you are not allowed to plant anything anymore. You are fenced out of your own land, and the game has all gone after the invaders have killed it off and illegally but profitably cleared all the woods. You are not allowed to go to the river or the lake anymore. You are not allowed to walk the paths your great-grandfathers have opened. Since the invaders say it all belongs to them. And they are guarding access with armed sentinels.



Text on hat: "Agribusiness"

Then the invaders make you offers. Offers "of employment", as they put it. If you wish to plant you can do so on parcels of (your stolen and now occupied) land. But you have to sign a contract. That you have to plant the kind of crops and the way the invaders want it and with 50% of all you achieve going straight into the hands of the new "owners" for "land rent". That or, instead, work for a day's wage of (the equivalent of) three dollars. (In a country where a pound of rice costs a dollar and the cheapest pair of flip-flops three dollars fifty.)

So there you are. Working hard from sun-up to sun-down. On your stolen Motherland planting for the people who robbed you and in the middle of pesticides in order to fulfill your contract. But however hard you work it seems you never get something out of it. That the half of the invaders is always a lot bigger than yours. Or that the three dollars don't make it for food on every child's plate of your family. Since you have "to pay" for the pesticides and "rent" the tools. Yet headaches and other ills you do get plenty. So do your elder children who you took out of school so they can contribute on the fields to the (slave-) family income. And whenever you dare to question something they'll pay you with plenty of brutality.



Invaders' agro-enterprises on illegally occupied Tapuya Kariri land

And this is where you are now. Shortly after the turn of the century. From 20th to 21st.



Your Motherland almost completely occupied and devastated by the invaders' sugar cane monoculture mainly for fuel production and poison-rich sweet potatoes and tomatoes a few feet from your backyard, if not invading it at all. You doing slave-work and not getting out of it enough to survive on the little junk food you're forced to buy now from the very same people who took everything from you and exploit you and your children.

You and your people are down on the ground. Having lost everything in a time span of less than a decade, after the invaders had started their well-organized invasion-occupation.

But one man doesn't give up. He continues to resist in his thought world, keeping alive the dream of liberating the land and the people and get back to the kind of simple and harmonious community life bound into the territory's nature you and your people have lived for countless generations before. The man is the Chief Chico Paizé.



The Indigenous community school named after the late Chief Chico Paizé - On the right you see the dried out herb yard

Chief Chico Paizé knows that the way how things are now isn't right. And he believes that somewhere and somehow justice can and must be found. And he does what he can. To convince his people to not give in. To not accept the new situation as fatal and unchangeable. To keep up the spirit of resistance instead. To hold together. And who, although illiterate and inexperienced in such environments, starts to look for help with other more emancipated First Nation chiefs in unknown far away areas and people and organizations friendly to the Indigenous Cause and who, last not least, dares to go to the next towns, São Benedito and Carnaubal mainly, in order to inform the authorities of what has been going on upon his people's traditional land.



The authorities, yet, are not very helpful. Rather the contrary. Allied with the invaders, often from the very same towns (and families). But then, and after many threats against his life an official document from the year 1888 is found in the city archives of Viçosa do Ceará, some 100 kms north of the Tapuya Kariri's Motherland.

A document that proves the historical existence and the land right of the Tapuya Kariri People and that thus proves reciprocally the "land titles" of the invaders a fake.



Left: Instead of the National Anthem the school-day begins with an Indigenous chant
Right: Meeting of Elders at the Medicineman's house

So this is the happy end of the nightmare and everything is solved and dealt with like it is done in countries which ornament themselves with the adjectives "democratic" and "rule of law". Right?

Wrong! At least in Brazil. And most definitely wrong when the rightful owners are Native First Nation.

Because this story is not a fairy tale. It is a real story. And it neither is a tale of remote historical times. It is a contemporary, 21st century story. Taking place in post-dictatorial Brazil for the last two decades or so.

And today, in 2014, after Chief Chico Paizé has passed away, it are other leaders who have taken the front stand of the brave struggle of the Tapuya Kariri people for the recovery of their Motherland and the integrity of their basic human and special indigenous rights. (The respective international charters were all signed by Brazil's leaders, yet not even the so-called Ministry of Justice nor the Federal Police, obey the laws when it comes to First Nations rights.)

A country that has managed to become the sixth economy of the world continues to be one of the worst countries (not alone) for Native First Nations. With its oligarchies' historical dislike and distrust of forests (the home of the Natives-turned-slaves), its structural inequality and violence, its thought-slaughtering schools, its institutionalized racism and all-penetrating corruption and last not least its leaders predilection for agribusiness. Brazil, apart from its constitutional nicknames "democratic" and "rule of law" ("Estado Democrático de Direito") is an electorate feudal system of to-the-bone rotten and all-controlling oligarchies which have made their fortunes with big-scale land robbery and slave labor and/or environmental destruction. That is the one and only core line from the first anchor of Portuguese seafarer Cabral in 1500 to today, more than fourteen years into the 21st century.

And nobody knows that better than the First Nations still, and against all odds and "development plans", around. After 514 years of continuous genocidal efforts by the historical invaders and their contemporary offspring turned "elites".

Ever since the Tapuya Kariri's land title of 1888 was found they have been claiming official recognition as an Indigenous People of this northeastern region of Brazil and an up-dated official land title of their ancestral territory as an unsellable Indigenous Territory in the possession of the Federation. (In Brazil so-called Indigenous Territories are constitutionally not in the possession of the First Nations but owned by the Federation and supervised by the federal Ministry of Justice and its respective organs. In theory that is!)

If Brazilian authorities and governments and lobby shadow governments would function and work by the law everything would indeed be settled already for

many years. Yet the appearance of the land title from 1888 and the obvious invasion of third parties on the “basis” of fake land titles (so-called “grileiros”, a thing so common in Brazil that we even have a proper name for such chronic and endemic proceeding) haven’t changed anything until now, September 2014, when I arrived and learned about the real situation in loco.

Quite the contrary. The invasions continue. And the long-time invaders continue to modify evermore the occupied Indigenous land. And the new invasions are not “only” carried out by private criminals anymore. Now it is even municipalities invading and constructing on Indigenous Land. One dares to affirm that General Custer would love to be reborn in 21st century Brazil where anything illegal against First Nations and the miserable in general goes!



Municipal Invasions into Indigenous Lands of the commercial and the religious kind
(perpetrated by the Municipality of Carnaubal)

And since the Tapuya Kariri are becoming more “rebellious” the “punishments” are on the rise too.

Only a few weeks before I arrived one of the invader landlords [whose real name none of the Tapuya Kariri could specify], a notoriously violent one who among other niceties either orders elderly women to be beaten up or does it himself whenever the women dare to look for firewood on “his” lands (which reach almost into the houses of the Tapuya Kariri people), had his bulldozers destroy the small ritual caves that have been serving the Native People for their religious ceremonies throughout time. As a “warning measure”. It is just like burning down synagogues of unworthy Jewish life.



The "Wolf's Lair" of a notoriously violent invader just outside the Kapuya Kariri Territory

Also they have managed to dry out the river that has crossed the Motherland of the Tapuya Kariri. While I was there I saw their well-succeeded efforts. They drill into the riverbed (which is just one more among so many ecological crimes the invaders commit without any trouble with the Brazilian "legal system") a few hundred yards from the river's source with heavy machinery in order to make sure the water solely serves their toxic agribusiness enterprises and have the entire First Nation condemned to depend on captured rain water for immediate survival.



Killing a river on stolen land and strangling a people. Any crime goes – Especially when it happens on Indigenous Lands

Also it is a "normal" night by night occurrence that those Kapuya Kariri families who lead the struggle for the recovery of their land and insist in their Indigenous Nationhood are deprived of their sleep throughout all night by paid sound terrorists. Who either park their car turned into a sound system next to the houses of these families or endlessly drive up and down through the village as a form of community punishment. (I witnessed the Tapuya Kariri call the police in São Benedito. I heard a policeman say that they were going to send in police. Nothing ever happened.) One can easily imagine the impact on the health of especially the elders. And what's most disturbing and sad: some of

the acculturated “assimilated” (bribed) Tapuka Kariri have started to do likewise.



The road that crosses the Tapuya Kariri village is the ideal entrance door for paid hooligans and gunmen alike

The objective is clear: Either you “give up” being Native First Nation and integrate (= subordinate) as ordinary Brazilian (slave) laborer or you will have to leave. One or another way. (Already today almost half of all Indigenous People in Brazil dwell in shanty towns of the big cities.)

“Rule of Law”?
Justice?
Authorities?
Media (outcries)?

Forget it!



IF there is any chance for the Tapuya Kariri to finally get justice and their rights and land (back), than only and exclusively through strong OUTSIDE pressure supporting their uphill struggle.

And that is exactly what is needed! What ALL Native First Nations (caught) in Brazil in fact need urgently: YOUR help. YOUR pressure. BEFORE there is no one left to tell you these REAL stories anymore.

Please: IDLE NO MORE – On a One World Scale!