

# Reviving Lídio's Words: An Unexpected Collaboration in the Brazilian Amazon

By Ailén Vega, Honésio Dace Munduruku, and Rosamaria Loures

During June and July 2019, we unexpectedly entered a routine. After our morning swim in the Tapajós River of the central Brazilian Amazon, we would join Lídio Karo at the school in the Munduruku village of Nova Trairão. The Munduruku people have lived along the Tapajós River Basin for centuries and call themselves *Wúyjuyũ*, which means “we are people.” The Munduruku have a population of 14,000, most of them residing in Terra Indígena Munduruku (Munduruku Indigenous Land) where Nova Trairão is located.

Every day without fail, Lídio—an elder renown throughout Munduruku territories as “someone who knows how to tell stories”—would meet us at the schoolhouse. He would come with a sheet of paper, bearing a list of origin stories and their corresponding *cânticos* (chants) that he planned to share with us that day. After we were all seated, Lídio would tell us how Daydo, the trickster armadillo, pulled people above ground and how crops grew out of Kapido, an old woman. He would switch back and forth from Portuguese to Munduruku, from story to song and dance. As the hours passed, we recorded his words and tried to transcribe them. At times, we sang along. Rarely was it just us in the schoolhouse. There seemed to be a constant flow of people in and out, with elders and youth coming to listen to and participate in the *cânticos*.

Although it became commonplace, our daily ritual was completely unexpected. Recording Lídio's words never figured in our original plan. We had gone to Nova Trairão as *assessoras*, informal consultants responsible for providing technical support for the first meeting of the Wakoborun Munduruku Women's Association. But somehow, from a mutual interest—ours, to hear his knowledge, and his, to have his words documented for future generations—we became Lídio's pupils for the summer.

When we left Nova Trairão, we had a future collaboration in mind. We planned to continue to work with Lídio the following



Lídio Karo in Nova Trairão.

summer of 2020, documenting the stories and *cânticos*. Then, as Lídio requested and with the support of other collaborators, we would produce a small book of his words that would later be distributed in the Munduruku schools.

In February 2021, however, the plans for our long-term project were suddenly turned upside down. Lídio passed away in his village after battling the cumulative effects of Covid-19 and malaria, illnesses that were both brought into the region with the increased circulation of *garimpeiros* (illegal gold miners) within Munduruku territories. Lídio was one of more than 30 Munduruku people who died due to complications from Covid-19. Because most of the deceased were elders, there was a collective grief throughout Mundurukania that



with the passing of older chiefs, storytellers, and historians, there would be a systematic “loss” or “burning” of “their libraries” (Rocha & Loures, 2020, p. 356, our translation). In light of our previous commitment to Lídio—and at the urging of his family members, as well as other Munduruku leaders and schoolteachers, to preserve and return his words “on paper”—we applied for a Tinker Grant, active from May 2021 to December 2021, with the help of the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley. With this financial assistance, we would be able to systematize, transcribe, translate, and publish pedagogical materials containing hours of stories and chants shared by Lídio on those summer days.

As soon as we learned that we had received the grant, Rosamaria Loures and Ailén Vega reached out to Honésio Dace and to Lídio’s family members to confirm whether we could move forward with the process. Honésio is a well-respected translator (both written and oral) for various Munduruku organizations and movements. We had all worked together during our days at Nova Trairão in 2019. As soon as Honésio agreed, Rosamaria took the lead in compiling more than 15 hours of recordings and videos, as well as many photographs, that were then sent to Honésio on a hard drive: the files were rather large, and we

were concerned about Internet reliability during the many months of transcription and translation.

The work that Honésio undertook was delicate and complex. Since most of the chants are sung in an older Munduruku language, a lot of concentration was needed to hear the words and transcribe them carefully. It was also more than doubly recursive: Honésio would listen to each video several times. He would first transcribe the text and then, at the moment of translation, he would listen to the clip yet again—as many as three more times. Most of the chants, however, could hardly be translated into Portuguese.

“They are like poetry,” Honésio explains. “There is no way to translate these lyrics into Portuguese. But along the way, we began to observe better. There are chants that I can easily translate—where I can translate the ideas—but others are incomprehensible.”

From June to December 2021, the three of us reflected on the process of documentation, transcription, and translation. We also discussed the importance of such projects in the face of the ongoing pandemic and the renewed gold mining boom in the region. This boom has not only intensified the spread of Covid-19, but has also increased death threats towards Munduruku leaders,



Photo courtesy of Rosamaria Loures.





The aftermath of illegal mining operations on Munduruku land.

deforestation, and destruction of Munduruku villages over the past two years. During our conversations, Honésio highlighted the pedagogical importance of preserving Indigenous knowledge for future generations:

Because what left [with Lídio's death] will never return, the knowledge that Lídio Karo took with him about the chants. No one will sing like he sang. In this sense, this material is really valuable to all the Munduruku people. It's a documentation of our millennial knowledge.

Honésio's emphasis on the preservation of the *cânticos* highlights their importance beyond our storytelling days in the schoolhouse during the summer of 2019. While each chant or set of chants corresponds to a story or myth, it is through their very singing that the chants themselves can ward off enemies, seduce them, or otherwise trick them. Singing the chants provides safety for the Munduruku people. As Munduruku historian, Jairo Saw Munduruku explains, "the effect of the chants is to paralyze the actions of the enemies" (Loures 2017, p. 208, our translation). During the increased conflicts brought on by the expansion of extractive projects in the region, members of Munduruku political movements—chiefs, political leaders, women, children, warriors, shamans, and healers—have uttered these chants in times of confrontation, during protests, and at the beginning of collective meetings or assemblies (Loures 2017). These chants also help to maintain relationships with other-than-human kin; such relations are established by shamans. While many sing, the lead "singers" form a pivotal part of this act, and Lídio Karo was one of the most important of these singers.

During our time with him in Nova Trairão, Lídio emphasized the significance of passing on stories and *cânticos* to the generations to come, as they had been passed on to him by those who came before:

Cêm tu? Imên xee ağu? Imên ma! Kuyjen ma osodop ijebicat pit ġasũ it ibon ma kuy, wuyajêm pa'ore ace buxi jĩjã ap kay bit, ibo ma, ibo ma wuyju cucum, ijo'i e'em imênpit, omũyku imênpit itait cĩcã'ayũ ajêm, oba'ũm com ip omũyku subit'am oba'ũm co ip, itaybit ġu i je'e ip warêmtağ ma pibododom i, kuy juk òn e'em òn tak imênpit bekitkit ġu omũtaybin weajot'ũm topaok osũnuy...

Não é? Será que ao menos é assim? É assim sim! Antigamente que existia o [cântico] original, hoje em dia acontece assim, não somos mais capazes de realizar no nível alto, é isso mesmo, é assim mesmo que levamos, mas apesar disso fica bem feito, porém há de vir os mais sabidos, eles me observarão, vocês duvidam que me observarão? Dirão, ah como ele não sabe, canta todo errado... mas como eu disse, que eu também, não aprendi com crianças, quem me ensinou foi meu avô.

Is it not? Is it that it really is so? It is so, yes! In the old days, there existed the original [chant]. Nowadays, it happens this way. We are no longer able to perform at a high level. It's that way. That's how we do it. But despite that, it's well done. But the wise ones will come. They will observe me. Do you doubt that they will observe me? They will say, oh how he doesn't know. He sings all wrong... but like I said, I didn't learn from children. Who taught me was my grandfather.



According to Lídio, the very reason for documenting his words is precisely to strengthen the ability of children and youth to learn that which was passed on to him. With Lídio's demand in mind, several questions arose in the course of our conversations during the summer of 2021: how has the role of storytelling changed as territorial conflicts have intensified? If stories and chants are part of Munduruku resistance against "projects of death," such as the proliferation of gold mining and the construction of hydroelectric dams in the region, then what role does the moment of recording, transcription, and translation take on? How are the stories and chants transformed throughout these practices of documentation? What is the significance of witnessing and listening in these moments? We hope to think through these questions together once we are able to meet in person.

And while these questions are guided by our collective engagement with struggles on the ground, they are also in conversation with recent debates at the intersections of anthropology and science and technology studies regarding the multiple, expansive, and often untranslatable ways that communities care for and from their territory. Opening the concept of "care" beyond commonplace narratives of resistance allows us to center storytelling and all the practices associated with it—gathering, listening, singing, retelling, transcribing—as powerful ways that the Munduruku

challenge the extractive logics and projects encroaching on their ancestral lands. These practices become even more important as tensions with garimpeiros intensify and protests, occupations, or public acts of resistance become the source of ever-growing death threats to the Munduruku people.

Taking a step back, for Rosamaria and Ailén, the project also brought up another set of questions regarding the role of non-Indigenous academics in projects of documentation, transcription, and translation. The most expansive set of writings on Munduruku origin stories was published in 1958 in *Mundurucu Religion*, a book written by the late anthropologist Robert F. Murphy. Although Murphy spent most of his career teaching at Columbia University in New York City, he was also a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, where some of his and his wife's archeological findings from the Tapajós remain to this day in the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology.

Despite his extensive ethnographic writings and his documentation of 58 Munduruku myths, Murphy's book was never translated into Portuguese, let alone Munduruku. In the summer of 2019, during a visit to another village in Terra Indígena Munduruku, a group of teachers and elders approached us, asking if Murphy's writings had ever been translated, and if so, whether they could get their hands on a copy. At the time, neither of us were anthropologists,



Photo courtesy of Movimento Munduruku Iperêg Ayú.



but our presence alone entangled us with ethnographers past and their debts. Together, we began to think of the specificities of our own politics of care as they pertain to the preservation of Lídio's words—a project whose core objective is for internal use by the Munduruku, rather than external academic consumption. Guided by the provocations of critical Indigenous studies scholars throughout the Americas—particularly those concerned with politics of ethnographic refusal (Simpson, 2007)—we continue to reflect on the relationship between the extraction of Indigenous knowledge in the name of scholarly research and the physical extraction of minerals and resources.

Although all three of us had hoped to analyze these questions during the summer of 2021, we chose to focus most of our time on the systematization, transcription, and translation of the interviews themselves, noting the importance of having other Munduruku teachers, scholars, and members of Lídio's family present during these conversations. In the course of our conversations during the summer of 2021, we further realized that these questions needed to be approached with careful, unrushed reflection. In

Lídio Karo looking over his notes of stories and chants.



Photo courtesy of Ailén Vega.

November 2021, we embarked on another stage of our project: we compiled these stories into a small publication, printed a few copies, and bought a small number of USB drives to distribute both the physical and digital copies in Munduruku schools. Today, we look forward to meeting in person in the summer of 2022 to distribute this document with all those who took part in the process: teachers, Lídio's family, and representatives from the Ipereg Ayu Munduruku Movement, the Wakoborun Munduruku Women's Association, the Da'uk Association, the Arikico Association, and the Pariri Munduruku Association.

As we write, we are exactly a year into Lídio's passing. We can't help but feel a great sense of loss but also immense honor in helping to keep Lídio Karo and his teachings alive for generations to come. Honésio says that "no one will be able to sing like he sang," yet somehow, we believe that in listening to his words, hearing them over and over again in recordings, and printing them out, his teachings reach well beyond our computer screens and pieces of printer paper and persist in the struggles to which his stories and chants were inextricably connected.

Lídio Karo Munduruku: Presente, hoje e sempre!

Lídio Karo Munduruku: Present, today and always!

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