

DAMSÕKĒKWA

Ercivaldo Damsõkĕkwa Xerente

(translation by Coletivo de Tradutores Berkeley-Brasil)*

[...] I am so happy for you my dear nephew Damsõkĕkwa, you have been a great warrior in this study, representing your people, our people. I am talking to you about the happiness, for you, who are making many sacrifices, leaving your family, children, wife, to get to know the system of the *ktãwanõ-man*, the non-Indigenous. Do not listen to those who are not happy about your success in your education and keep going. Pay no mind talks that do not add anything to you. Go ahead, Damsõkĕkwa, study to learn more about the *sromã nõrĩ* - white man's system. All they do is on paper writing.

— Speech by the elderly Altino Sromnĕ, from the Indigenous village Aldeia Morrão (*Wdĕkrãĩ kwasa hu*), June 2022.

I am Ercivaldo Damsõkĕkwa Xerente, son of Geraldino Wakmõpte Xerente and Maria Sipredi Xerente, from the clan Kbazi Tdĕkwa, associated with the group Dakrsu Krara. I was born by the Água Fria stream, on the right bank, in a community founded in 1960, known as Engenho Velho, which later on residents dismembered to form the Indigenous village Aldeia Aldeinha — founded around 1980 by Joaquim Kasuwamrĩ, married to Lucinda Sdupudi, one of the daughters of my maternal grandmother, Petronília Krattudi.

The *akwĕ* are organized in clans: Kbazi, Krozake, Wahirĕ, Kuzã, Krãĩprehi and Krito, of which the first three are the most numerous. The basis of our worldview is clannish, in a way in which the divisions and subdivisions of the clans are present in all domains of our lives, including in teaching and learning as we will soon see. Nowadays, we are spread across 91 Indigenous villages, most of them of small scale. All of them are in the *Terra Indígena* (TI, Indigenous Land) Xerente (*Akwĕ*) and TI Funil (*Sakrĕpra*). Some of the bigger Indigenous villages are Aldeia Funil (*Sakrĕpra*), Aldeia Porteira (*Nrõzawi*), Aldeia Salto (*Kripre*), Aldeia Brejo Comprido (*Kã Wrakurerĕ Krãĩnĩsdu*), and Aldeia Brupre. The remaining Indigenous villages are significantly smaller. The

following villages, among others, are located within the TI Xerente: Aldeia Porteira (*Nrõzawi*), Aldeia Salto (*Kripre*), Aldeia Brejo Comprido (*Kã wra Kurerĕ Krãĩnĩsdu*), Aldeia Brupre, Aldeia Mirassol (*Nrõ wdĕ pisi*), Aldeia Paraíso (*Kakrã Wdĕhu*), Aldeia Lajeado (*Kã Topkuze*), Aldeia Cabeceira Verde (*Mrãĩwahi*), Aldeia Riozinho (*Kakumhu*), and Aldeia Rio Sono (*Ktĕkakã*).

On May 10, 1979, after I was born, my parents got divorced. My father suspected I was not his biological son. So, my mother decided she would rather place me for adoption than care for me on her own as a single woman, as my paternal aunt Helena Sibakadi recounts. I was adopted by a farmer couple known as Francisco, Doctor Chiquinho, and Maria, Mrs. Tota, who lived on the borders of the Terra Indígena Xerente. During that time, my paternal grandfather, Bernardo Dabãzãrkwa, used to live in one of the old *akwĕ* Indigenous villages, by the Sono River — which gave its name to the Aldeia Rio Sono (*Ktĕkakã*) — located approximately 35 kilometers from the place I was born. When he learned about my parents' divorce and about my adoption by non-Indigenous parents, he spared no efforts to get me back. At this time, communication between Indigenous villages was difficult, and it would take a few days for a message to reach its final destination.

My grandfather went to Francisco and Maria's farm, alongside other men from his family. When they arrived at their house, in which I had been for 12 days, there was a great commotion and a lot of crying. The couple's children were already getting used to me and I had already been given a non-Indigenous name: Ercivaldo. The couple baptized me at the chapel in the farm Santa Clara, belonging to Mr. Custódio and Mrs. Dulce. This was the place in which people gathered for Catholic feasts at the time.

Despite the baptism, I was not adopted. As an adult, I understood that among the *akwĕ*, the male

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Ercivaldo Damsökëkwa in 2012. (Photo courtesy of Joana Aparecida Fernandes Silva.)

children of a family are a reason of pride. This is justified, historically, by the fact that families with more men in their compositions were more respected in situations of conflict, either internal or with other people. Once the issue was resolved, my father decided to keep the name *Ercivaldo*, in homage to Francisco and Maria's family, whose children had names beginning with the letter "e": Elias, Elci, Edson, Eva, and so on.

According to an account, my arrival at Aldeia Rio Sono (*Ktêkakâ*) was at the end of that same day. It was a moment of great joy, with singing, baked *beijus* (tapioca flatbread), smoked potatoes, and meat, in celebration of the arrival of a boy in the family. Almost 8 months after this event, during which I was being cared for by aunt Helena Sibakadi, my parents got back together. When they resumed their marriage, they requested custody of me, which was only regained after a lot of back and forth between them and my grandfather.

My aunt says that when my grandfather placed his eyes on me he said: "this grandchild of mine will have the name Damsökëkwa", which translates as "the one who opens ways, who creates paths, who creates trails in the forests". As you will see, my trajectory is based on the meaning of my name, which I undertake through intercultural education, which is full of conflicts and tensions.

My grandfather was one of the great *pajés* (shamans) of our people. He was called Dahêwakurkwa. He was very respected among the *akwê*. He was part of the *Sekwa/Pajés do Sol* (Sun Shamans), who are currently extinct. For this, according to my aunt, groups of young *wapte* were chosen as recruits and they would spend around six months isolated in a patio called *warã*. She did not witness this ritual, but she heard accounts about it from her grandparents, who also said that very few recruits were able to complete the journey.

The knowledge received by these young men would usually be passed down during the summer, which is the dry season in the region. During these months, the recruits would always have their backs facing the sun throughout the day, and many could not stand the temperature. Every night, they were taken to spend the night in the *warã*, always in the company of experienced *pajés*, who passed on knowledge to them. The recruits would get sunburns on their backs, given the daily sun exposure throughout the months. *Babaçu* coconut oil and annatto were used as sunscreen, but really only to alleviate the pain and the wounds. At the end of the process, scars remained. It was in one of these warrior recruitments that Dabâzârkwá became one of the great *sekwa/pajés akwẽ* of his generation.

As for my father, he was one of the first students of the *akwẽ* school. This was possible due to the arrival of the Baptist Protestant mission, of Pastor Guethes Carlos, who was my father's teacher and a pioneer in training groups of Xerente bilingual teachers in the 1980s. My father was a teacher for approximately 20 years. As a bilingual Indigenous man, he worked in the implementation of *akwẽ* writing and also helped in the conceptualization of a few Xerente booklets. Unfortunately, most of the materials have not been published.

In March 1992, my grandfather, Dabâzârkwá, had a stroke and did not survive. This was an irreparable loss just a few months before I turned 13. At the end of the same year, my father accepted an invitation to teach as a bilingual teacher in the Aldeia Bom Jardim, approximately 40 km from the Aldeia Rio Sono. His family members were against the move, but he had made up his mind. We were sad, but there was no way back, and we moved.

My parents really wanted me to be taught to read and write by the teachers of the *Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas* (FUNAI, National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples). I had a few teachers during this time: Lúcia, who was the wife of the chief of the Indigenous post in Aldeia Rio Sono and other neighboring villages; Noemi Wakrtadi; and Ribamar Marinho Xerente. Among them, I believe only Noemi was a bilingual teacher for the state of Tocantins and not for the foundation.

At that time, I did not like to go to school. I wanted to become a fisherman, a hunter, and a great *akwẽ* warrior. I wanted to be by the river or in a canoe fishing with other boys my age. Fishing was a great joy, and when I would get home with

lots of fish I would be even more proud. This is what brought me happiness during childhood, not classes. With our move to another Indigenous village, I became quite unmotivated in everything. My father, as a teacher, tried to teach me how to read and write, but it did not work since studying was not my priority. I just wanted to work alongside adults in the neighboring farms. I really wished I could run away from my parents. For this reason, I spent sixty days working on a farm, still angry with the move. I was a child who did not speak any Portuguese and who didn't have any documents.

When I was 14, my parents arranged a marriage for me. My future wife lived in an Indigenous village called Brejo Comprido, 11 km from Bom Jardim. I went to spend a few days with her mother and brothers. We even spoke to each other a few times, without knowing the agreement between our families. At that time I was 14 and she was 15. The ceremony was scheduled for October 10, 1993. I tried to convince my parents that I did not want to get married at that age. I cried a lot, without being able to do much to avoid it. My parents said we could not dishonor the agreement our family had made with the older brothers and the mother of Juliana, my wife. For the Akwẽ People, getting married at this age was natural and common.

On July 3, 1994 we had our first son: Daniel Tpêkru. As a 15-year-old, I felt a lot of responsibility to take care of my family. I started working hard in the fields and often I did not have the strength for many tasks. Some people would make jokes in bad taste, because I was not as strong as an adult to carry heavy weight. During that time, many services were community- or exchange-based and even with so many challenges and obstacles I would not get intimidated. I always wanted to show my ability and will to overcome challenges and take care of my family.

In 1994, we moved to my father-in-law's Indigenous village, Brejo Comprido, which became my permanent home. In the *akwẽ* tradition, when a man gets married he must follow his father-in-law, that is, he must move to the same village. This is an uxori-local residence. In April 11, 1996 my second son, Édino Tpêmẽkwá, was born. I felt like my responsibilities were increasing each day. Rivaldo Srãpte, my third son, was born on March 25, 1998. That same year, I became interested in learning how to read and write, at the invitation of missionary Esther Carvalho, who arrived with the mission of teaching young people and adults

in Brejo Comprido and neighboring villages. I audited her classes, which were a great motivation to me. I did not know how to read or write in Portuguese, which was a foreign language. I tried very hard to follow the teacher's words, who also showed a lot of interest in helping me learn. I spent this year learning how to read and write. I was 19 years old. My trajectory in education, which brought me here, was just starting.

My quick learning made my teacher optimistic. By the end of the year, I could write a school note, something modest, to thank the missionary for her caring and motivational words, which made me proud.

Still in 1998, one factor was fundamental for me to take off in my academic career. Esther Carvalho requested the *Delegacia de Ensino Escolar de Miracema do Tocantins* (Education Department of Miracema do Tocantins) that I take the *provão* (big test) with contents from first to fifth grade, according to the law number 9.394/96, article 24, proposition II, paragraph "c", which allows a student to enter the second phase, that is, the sixth grade in middle school, in case of passing the exam. Besides me, Manoel Sawrekmôzê and his wife Eunice Brupahi also took the exam. The results came out and we were successful. This event was a big step in my school life. I used to walk 22 kilometers a day, there and back, because I didn't have a fixed place to live.

The years of 1999 and 2000 were of great interest in school education among the *akwẽ*, mostly given the job offers that two local associations had for community natives, which began to provide services in the city of Tocantínia, which led them to invest in education, enrolling their children in the aforementioned city.

On September 7, 2000, my daughter Ercilene Krēdi Xerente was born. During this time, there was a lot going on for the *akwẽ*, given the *Associação Indígena Xerente* (A.I. X, the Indigenous Association Xerente), which offered jobs in the area of Indigenous health. In a partnership with the *Fundação Nacional de Saúde* (Funasa, the National Health Foundation), positions were made available in Tocantínia as well as in the *Terras Indígenas* (Indigenous lands) Akwẽ and Funil. The positions were for a boatman, a driver, a security guard, a general services agent, an Indigenous health agent, and an Indigenous basic sanitation agent.

At this time, another *akwẽ* association, the *Programa de Compensação Ambiental Xerente*

(Procambix, the Xerente Environmental Compensation Program), also established partnerships with FUNAI, implementing compensation resources for the environmental impact of the Luís Eduardo Magalhães Hydroelectric Plant. The positions were essentially the same, but some of them were not filled due to a lack of qualified personnel.

During this period, I got my first job as an *Agente Indígena de Saúde* (ASI, Indigenous Health Agent) through the *Fundação de Assistência ao Sudeste Amazônico* (FASAM, the Southeast Amazon Assistance Foundation). I was responsible for two Indigenous villages of the Xerente people, Bom Jardim and Morrinho. I felt obliged to get professional qualifications and I knew that the way to achieve this goal was through school education. I worked in the area until 2001, when I became a driver for the *Associação Indígena Xerente* (Xerente Indigenous Association), in partnership with the *Fundação Nacional de Saúde* (Funasa, the National Health Foundation).

Between 2001 and 2005, I finished my studies in the second phase of the *Educação de Jovens e Adultos* (EJA, Education for Youth and Adults) at the *Fundação Fé e Alegria Frei Antônio* (Faith and Joy Freier Antônio Foundation). During this time, on November 1, 2003, Regivaldo Sirnãwẽ Xerente was born, my fifth son. In 2005, I went back to Aldeia Brejo Comprido. I also registered for the course *Magistério Indígena do Tocantins* (Indigenous Teaching of Tocantins), in the town Pedro Afonso. I gave up my job as a driver to start a position as a Xerente Indigenous teacher at the *Escola Estadual Indígena Suzawre* (Indigenous State School Suzawre). I taught the first grade in multi-grade classes. It was a new experience. In the multi-grade system, and feeling inexperienced, I did not yet know how to plan a lesson, for example. But day after day I made myself stronger to overcome the challenges of an *akwẽ* Indigenous teacher.

My first year as an Indigenous teacher was tough. I was placed to teach the lower grades, first and second at the time. I did not get any guidance from the people responsible for *akwẽ* Indigenous education. I faced a few problems, including institutional ones, but I overcame them and was able to continue the work. I clearly noticed the importance of training *akwẽ* teams for work in education, people who understood the codes of the clan and the city. Understanding this relationship still drives me until today and is at the center of this dissertation.

On December 2, 2006, my youngest daughter was born, Érica Tpêdi Xerente. During this time, I dreamed of being an *akwẽ* Indigenous professor and researcher, that is, my wish to attend college only increased. Until 2007, only two Xerentes had an undergraduate degree: Edite Smĩkidi Xerente and João Kwanhã Xerente, who were my references to keep going with academic studies. At the end of 2007, two extraordinary things happened. The first was that I finished the *Magistério Indígena do Tocantins*. To finish the course, I had to drop out of regular high school. The second thing was being approved to study *Licenciatura em Educação Indígena* (professional degree in Indigenous Education) at the *Universidade Federal de Goiás* (UFG, Federal University of Goiás). Finally, I would get to the university. My entrance to the university was my biggest accomplishment as an *akwẽ*. This accomplishment allowed me to expand my knowledge and to continue to pave the way.

In the beginning, I faced some difficulties. I attracted the attention of some professors, the degree coordinators, and even some peers, because I questioned everything. I was not happy with the texts discussed, which often romanticized Native people. I ended up silencing myself and stopped asking questions. I remember, as if it were today, when some peers and also professors asked about my silence in class. In a few moments, I asked them: "Whether I question or remain silent, I bother you equally. After all, what do you want from me?" The entire classroom remained in total silence.

In 2008 I joined the *Educação Escolar Indígena do Estado do Tocantins* (Indigenous School Education Department of the State of Tocantins) as a tenured teacher, and I took office on December 19. This was an unprecedented accomplishment and the result of arduous struggles by the Indigenous leaders in Tocantins in partnership with the *Ministério Público Federal do Trabalho* (Federal Ministry of Labor) and the *Ministério Público Federal* (Federal Ministry). Thanks to the work of prosecutors Dr. Antônio and Dr. Mário Lúcio Avellar, legal actions were fundamental for the Native peoples of the State. The *Secretaria Estadual da Educação do Tocantins* (State Department of Education of Tocantins) opened 45 positions to the *akwẽ*, which were not all filled because some people did not have their documents. 36 teachers participated in the selection process and 33 were hired.

Through my work as an educator, my interest in politics grew. In 2008, I ran for a position in

the Tocantins parliament through the *Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro* (PMDB, Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement). I had 90 votes and was not elected. This was a difficult time, in which I was persecuted. Although I was not elected, after the election I received many invitations to serve terms of office, which I declined. I realized that I preferred to engage in party politics behind the scenes. One thing that I can say about elections among the *Akwẽ* People is that they always generate some kind of conflict between the candidates and the community, which also suffers from external influence in our territories, often leaving Natives in vulnerable situations, especially in the face of non-Indigenous candidates, who arrive in the villages through connections with people who put their own interests above those of the collective.

I continued with my studies and, in 2010, I was recommended to direct the *Centro de Ensino Médio Indígena Xerente — Cemix Warã* (Center for Xerente Indigenous High School — Cemix Warã). Balancing my studies and the center's management was challenging. I was almost not able to finish the year as the director. There were some political obstacles, since I did not agree with some of the local government's maneuvers. I requested that the regional director transfer me to the *Escola Estadual Indígena Suzawre* (Indigenous State School Suzawre) at the Aldeia Brejo. This was not an easy time. There were many conflicts that mobilized those people who were in my favor and those who were against me. Amidst all this, in 2011 my father passed away. I received the news during a class taught by Professor Elias Nazareno. I said goodbye to him and my peers and went back to my Indigenous village in Tocantins. Still in this same year, three other family members passed away: my sister and two cousins. This was a challenging time, which, alongside everything that was going on in my professional life, almost made me give up on my coursework — which I did not do due to the support of family and friends.

With a lot of effort, I graduated in 2012. The defense of my thesis took place in the *Escola Estadual Indígena Suzawre* (Indigenous State School Suzawre) at the Indigenous village Brejo Comprido, with the participation of the entire community and also of neighboring villages. It was a historical and moving moment, in which a film of my trajectory played in my head. In this

work, I investigated fire management among the *akwẽ* (*Kuzã, Akwẽ kunmã nã krsipi mnõzê*). And I understood the significance of dialogue among the elders.

Research findings suggest the necessity of re-livening ancient, millennia-old readings by the *akwẽ* themselves, that is, how were the Xerente techniques of fire usage, in order to enhance new cultural perceptions regarding fire management, with the aim of revitalizing these skills culturally carried out by the *akwẽ*. Fire management (*kuzã*) has a valuable significance, for warmth as well as for long distance communication. There were various usages of fire by the Xerente, such as: smoking wild meat and cleaning the surroundings of the village to keep harmful animals away. I realized that, nowadays, very few of our people still practice the knowledge transferred generation by generation, which motivates me to continue to open paths within education.

In 2014, I sought to enter the master's program in Social Anthropology. Despite the fact my project was the most well-evaluated, and that I'd dedicated myself to reading all the classical texts for the written exam, I did not pass the English test — my second language choice for the selection process — nor the theoretical essay test, a genre that I hardly knew. According to professor Alexandre Ferraz

Herbetta, supervisor of the present dissertation, from this failure onwards the PPGAS-UFG (Postgraduate Program in Social Anthropology, Federal University of Goiás) began to reexamine its selection process and mobilize itself to introduce affirmative actions at the University. The following year, the institution approved a resolution making spaces for Indigenous and Black students possible in all of its postgraduate programs.

This same year, I persisted in my intention of doing a master's degree and joined the Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Program in Human Rights (PPGIDH) at the same University, with a research project about my people's Indigenous educational system. Perhaps because of my name's meaning in Portuguese - Damsõkëkwa, meaning he who paves the way - I became the first Indigenous person in the program. And finally, in 2016, I was also the first *akwẽ* to obtain a master's degree.

It was not an easy process. Adapting to a new city was difficult, as was keeping up with classes and having gone without a grant for a few months. Missing my family was also difficult to deal with.

At the end of 2017, thanks to intensive studies and even with minimal material resources, it was possible to participate in the application process for the doctorate in Social Anthropology at UFG.

The author and examining committee members for his 2016 dissertation defense for the Interdisciplinary Master's course in Human Rights. (Photo courtesy of Camila Mainardi.)



Finally, the result was positive, and was received with unconditional joy shared by my family. But I felt that the responsibility had increased. Now I was the first *akwẽ* to begin a doctorate — the first of many kin who would come after me. In March 2018, I went to Goiânia to begin my doctoral studies. Meanwhile I faced problems in my work with *akwẽ* Indigenous education, as the Tocantins Department of Education (SEDUC-TO) alleged that I had still not completed the license replacement waiting period in order to take the master's course. The consequences were very serious: I was not immediately informed by the responsible office, and I despaired upon notification that I would be abandoning my work as an Indigenous teacher.

My struggles in pursuit of academic study were always arduous. Because I wasn't familiar with the law supporting and backing civil servants when they request leave for professional development in their field, I was off of the State of Tocantins's payroll for two months. Thanks to two vacations that I was entitled to, I did not lose my public tenure as an *akwẽ* Indigenous teacher.

The year of 2018 was also when I lost a great instructor of mine since my graduate degree studies. On December 16, the elder Getúlio Darêrkêkwa Xerente, of the *Īsake/Krozake Tdêkwa* Clan, passed away. It was a great and irreparable loss for the *akwẽ*, which left me shaken for months. Everything was happening at once: party-political persecutions, because I did not agree with my kin's maneuvers on behalf of their own interests; the issues at work; among many other things, that always made me search for the strength to overcome the difficulties and obstacles that I faced from the beginning in this social and academic trajectory.

Losing the elder was not only impactful for me as a researcher, but for the community as a whole and for the other *akwẽ* researchers. Faced with what happened, I had to look for other members of our people in order to continue my field research in the context addressed. These obstacles made me understand that research is no easy thing. There are many difficult situations that life imposes on us. There are many contexts we can tread, and for a Native these paths are even more complex, both in internal relations with the community and with the surroundings.

Remembering dialogues with Getúlio brought me quite vivid recollections:

[...] do not be afraid to face arduous challenges, especially in the fight on behalf of our Akwẽ People [...]. You are all the youth of tomorrow, of the future... use knowledge from school as an instrument to survive among the white man [...]. They are very shrewd and greedy in everything they do, they don't like our people [...]. The problem is our land: they want to take everything from us.

These words gave me encouragement, renewed my energies and strengthened my psyche, making it possible for me to carry on and finish the doctorate.

Along the way, I heard many questions of the type: "Damsôkêkwa, are you wanting to *inricar* [get rich] with these studies? I heard that you want to get rich." My answer was always "I don't want riches. My academic studies are just instruments, I don't have the slightest interest in accumulating riches," or "The dream I have within me is to leave a documented, recorded legacy, based on my research." I don't have any interest in competing with my kin, as some of them judge. My competition is only with myself, to see how far I can go. Academic studies and the knowledge acquired will not make me cease to be an *akwẽ*.

My experience in the vocation of chieftain for the period of one year was a groundbreaking apprenticeship. On December 11, 2020, I myself was chosen as responsible for a community of 33 families and 145 people, from children to adults. By my own free and spontaneous will, I completed my vocation one year later on December 11, 2021, a great responsibility to the local community of the Aldeia Brejo Comprido. The families didn't want me to leave the vocation but to stay for another year or more. However, my goal was to have and live out this direct experience of untransferable learning and not to remain as chieftain for however long I could. I am grateful for the life that the great spirit of creation, *Bdâ/Waptokwa Zawre*, has provided me with.

The choice of my successor as local chieftain began early in the first months of the following year. The process was somewhat troubled, and some attitudes and actions were not well received by some families, which led to an internal conflict between the *Īsake/Krozake* and *Wahirê Tdêkwa* Clans. Initially, the young chieftain had difficulties with the 37 families and their approximately 160 people, but through much dialogue with the eldest in the community, agreements were reached that he would remain until the end of the year 2022 — these agreements stipulate that taking decisions

about the community without prior consultation will not be tolerated.

The *awkẽ* traditions of the old generation say that positions should pass from father to son successively and that, before, they designated themselves as captains and chieftains. Today still, some maintain the succession of the vocation of chieftain between closest relatives or between clan lineages, but very rarely. In certain villages, they began to choose literate people with high school diplomas, university or postgraduate degrees, seeking changes, even from the notion of chieftainship that indicates how education is perceived among my people. Currently, in the educational field, internal conflicts occur between Natives from certain villages disputing the status of chieftain, which the *awkẽ* rarely witnessed.

Internal conflicts are often the result of external interference. Some Native leaders serve as pawns for the maneuvers of cunning politicians on behalf of their own interests, which leads some, for leftover crumbs, to oppose the movements of those who don't agree with the maneuvers for private interests of those who have always sought the support of the Xerente on the eve of elections — which currently makes the *awkẽ* pay a high price to recover their struggles freely and without the interference of the “whites”.

The elders' accounts indicate that after the Portuguese invasion, faced with the colonizer's violent attacks and massacres, the Natives of certain peoples instituted the figure of the guardians or protectors of the forests, fields and scrublands, a strategy that would help in getaways and counter-attacks. Even more so with the enslavement of Black peoples, and the emergence of the figure of the *capitão do mato* (bush captain). With the passage of time, seeking to survive, Indigenous and Black peoples fought with similar strategies against the colonizers' ferocious attacks.

The captain of the *awkẽ* Natives was designated *kapto* and henceforth received the name of chieftain or *Dakmãdkâkwa*. Those chosen to be leaders were normally people recognized for their ethical stance, who cohabitated harmoniously and who were peaceful, essential characteristics to occupy the vocation of chieftain of a determined local community.

The Awkẽ People themselves have always sought to maintain the millennia-old cultural tradition of choosing two leaders from two partner clans. Following the description: *Kuzã* and *Wahirê*;

Kbazi and *Krozake/Isake*; and *Krito* and *Krãĩprehi* are the partner clans that can form the vocation of chieftain, culturally well regarded by the elders and other leaders of the People. Currently, in certain communities, the *awkẽ* cultural tradition is trampled over by private interests, that because of jealousy or status choose their leaders within the same clan, which is not well regarded by the elders. In some cases, rivalries are the main reasons why the principles of tradition aren't followed, leading to only those from the strongest clan in a determined community being chosen.

On this path of an *awkẽ* researcher, I've come to understand some contexts that I didn't recognize before. A school education better prepares an individual. My kin cannot understand the scale of what the perception of Native peoples as marginal and incapable, as inferior human beings in relation to non-Indigenous society in general, means.

At times, I even heard that I would be serving as an instrument for UFG. Many didn't accept my intellectual capacity. Such attacks were the expressions of the non-Indigenous, principally of politicians from Tocantínia, who do not see the advancement of the *awkẽ's* studies as achievements and who view Xerente intellectuals as intruders in non-Indigenous society — often because we do not agree with party-political maneuvers on behalf of their own interests. Such was the case in the centralization of control over education by a municipal administrator who had been in the role for 13 years, orchestrating fights, with the support of a minority of Xerente leaders who take complete control of their communities and generate internal conflicts serving the interests of a non-Indigenous person.

Training and valuing Indigenous intellectuals is essential for our struggle. On August 16, 2018, I began the first stage of my field research. I had to stay at the university without earning credits for a semester, and I returned immediately to Tocantins so as not to lose my position as an effective state civil servant. They were difficult months for me, but thanks to the institutional support of the Postgraduate Program in Social Anthropology (PPGAS) at UFG, I didn't have any problems continuing in the course. I dedicated myself to the fieldwork at the weekends, as during the week I would have to be in my teaching job from 8 am – 12 pm, and 2 pm – 6 pm.

In the first weeks, I considered myself valueless in the sector, where I was working as an advisor in

akwẽ Indigenous education. Some people looked at me as an exotic specimen in the workspace, but I didn't lose my humor, persistence, determination and, above all, the desire to maintain my humility before my colleagues. I cannot generalize, but some were glad of my presence in the pedagogical sector, and my focus was on creating strong ties, so as not to leave enemies in the environment I was in as a public agent of *akwẽ* Indigenous education.

I was always an observant person and as the days passed I noticed that my presence made some colleagues in that space uncomfortable, simply because of the fact I was an *akwẽ*. Sometimes, when I welcomed my kin who came in search of information or materials and we conversed in *akwẽ*, some couldn't help themselves and asked mocking questions. One colleague from that sector even asked me to speak in Portuguese so that they could also smile and understand, but my answer was that the non-Indigenous should learn the *akwẽ* language, like I had learned Portuguese as a second language. I never allowed anyone to humiliate me because of my language or the *akwẽ* customs.

From this opportunity, I obtained a broader view of how the *akwẽ* are treated in the field of Indigenous education, and also how they themselves have come to interact with the environment. My presence in the pedagogical sector made my *akwẽ* kin glad when they found me there, because as a speaker of the mother tongue, our communication was simplified. Nonetheless, not everyone was happy. Some, allied with the municipal administrator of Tocantínia, tried all they could to harm and defame me, but I stayed firm and determined to conclude my work in that sector with professionalism, which did in fact happen.

This work brought answers to some of my assumptions. I was surprised when I encountered the demands that the majority of professionals in *akwẽ* Indigenous education brought before the professionals from that area: developing jobs; filling out individual applications; or publishing grades, both on the school administration system (SGE) and in the class diary, for example. The lack of understanding of small details by the most part of Xerente Indigenous education professionals made it urgent for the Department of Education to provide training oriented towards Indigenous *akwẽ* professionals.

This work also made it possible for me to demonstrate that many *akwẽ* teachers are

prepared to play a part in the field of Xerente Indigenous education. We also need public policies so that more Xerente professionals occupy other areas of the Department that cover Indigenous issues — we have many professionals prepared for this — which would also facilitate communication between kin in certain sectors of institutional fields. As long as we do not assume protagonism in the development and implementation of public educational policies, such actions will continue to be limited.

Between 2019, when I completed my doctoral credits, and 2020, I faced some health problems that rather limited me, including in relation to my dissertation. In July 2020, I began the first attempts at writing, and even with joint pain I continued to develop the text of my dissertation. They were difficult months, facing problems that rendered me dependent on my family — and I'm grateful to my family, who were at my side when I needed them most, as well as to the great spirit *Bdã/Waptokwa Zawre*.

In the present text, I present my doctoral research together with PPGAS-UFG. In my capacity as an *akwẽ* Indigenous teacher, leader and intellectual, I intend to approach the educational situation of the Akwẽ People of the Xerente Indigenous Land from the perspective of intercultural education and interdisciplinary studies, focusing on the Aldeia Brejo Comprido and the Suzawre Indigenous State School located in the Municipality of Tocantínia, 42 kilometers from the city, in Tocantins.

The general objective of the research is to describe and analyze the existing educative process in the aforementioned Indigenous village, seeking, through ethnography, to interpret both my Akwẽ People's own traditional education processes as well as the scholarly educational processes introduced by the surrounding society, that are currently experienced by the Xerente People daily. With the intention of perfecting their processes, I produce a critique of intercultural Indigenous education such as it is currently put into practice, in an anthropology of interculturality (Herbetta and Sartorello, 2023).

With the purpose of understanding these processes in all their complexity, I intend to situate *akwẽ* education within the wider context of this people's traditional education as well as Brazilian educational policy, which must guarantee the right of Indigenous Peoples to a

differentiated education in accordance with their sociocultural experience, as stipulated in the Constitution of 1988, the citizens' constitution. For my relative Gersem Luciano Baniwa (2014), however, the country does not understand or respect Indigenous citizenship.

In addition to direct and participatory observation, the information will be complemented by informal conversations ("great conversations"), open and semi-structured thematic interviews with teachers from the Suzawre Indigenous State School, as well as their life stories — in this case, the privileged interlocutors are the elders (*wawẽ*), those responsible for the education of youths and children according to *akwẽ* tradition.

The relevance of the proposal lies in the possibility of contributing to the Akwẽ People, to our schools and their teachers, in the sense of constructing our own pedagogical projects that consider not only the necessity of access to educational knowledge, which every Brazilian citizen has the right to, but that also contemplate the Akwẽ People's own knowledges, sciences, pedagogies and their own forms of education.

On the other hand, I intend to make an important contribution to the recovery of aspects of traditional processes of education/socialization that don't already form part of current educational practice, based on the memories of the elderly. Many of these practices fall into oblivion due to the intense contact with non-Indigenous society experienced by the *akwẽ* and the impositions resulting from this contact. Recording and systematizing this knowledge and these traditional practices, as well as the *akwẽ* experience of school education, are of fundamental importance for understanding the current educative reality of my people, and can serve as a reference for teachers in the construction of their own pedagogical proposals for our schools.

In the first chapter I told my life trajectory, which led me down the path of intercultural education. In the next chapter I will discuss fundamental aspects of *akwẽ* life, like our clan organization and features of our culture. In the third chapter I will dedicate myself to the analysis

of laws around Brazilian education policy in view of the differentiated rights of originary peoples, thinking especially about traditional education and school education of the Akwẽ People. My focus is on the state of Tocantins.

I am especially concerned with the idea of Indigenous protagonism, the basis of what I think will advance intercultural education policies. In the fourth chapter I focus on ethnographic investigation with a focus on the school in my community. I seek to think the relationship between *akwẽ* traditional education and its dialogues with Xerente school education - that is, in the concrete contexts of the school in which they relate, observing the importance of understanding between these two concepts which are distinct, but which dialogue with each other.

The last chapter is dedicated to an exploration of the eldest's perspective on this situation: the relationship between *akwẽ* education and the school. I then reflect on intercultural policies, which are relevant for inclusion in educational public policy, turning school education into an instrument of the Native community.

Closing the text, in its final considerations, I seek to synthesize this dissertation's themes: to what extent are the Akwẽ People's own processes of learning and social organization related to school education?

Based on these themes, I intend to contextualize the times at which such concepts relate to one another, seeking to put emphasis on the words of the wise *wawẽ* elders and their teachings to the young *wapte*. I will also present the words of *akwẽ* teachers, who are primarily responsible for shaping Xerente children into full citizens, and are critical for the exercise of their *akwẽ* Indigenous citizenship.

For me, the meaning of Damsõkẽkwa guides my steps along the paths of education. Just like my grandfather, *o Pajé do Sol* (the Sun Shaman), saw me, I continue seeking to blaze trails on tense and tortuous paths. I understand that this is a struggle of my people.

