

## Forest Psychology: Mental Health in Kanhgág Perspective

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(translation by Coletivo de Tradutores Berkeley-Brasil)\*

The elderly, our *kofá*, have a simple and accurate vision regarding what is happening to humanity, about the reason for the re-existence of so much violence, brutality, mutual indifference, and the absence of fraternity. The elders say that human beings have grown apart from their own hearts!

Civilization has gone down a mistaken, heartless path. The way of ego, competition and hierarchy instead of compassion, leading people to be ever more distant from their own hearts and removed from nature. This separation has made people forget who, essentially, they are.

When we look at a forest, we often see only what is at the surface: trunks, leaves, interwoven branches. However, behind this apparent simplicity is a complex and interconnected world that deserves our attention.

Climate collapse is here, we are literally fighting for our lives, and the pandemic showed us the total instability in which we are living. Traditional populations are essential to hold back climate change, and land demarcation is the way out of the climate crisis.

Indigenous Peoples represent less than 1% of the Brazilian population and 5% of the global population, but are responsible for preserving 80% of the biodiversity present in their territories.

Our bodies become instruments of struggle and resistance. Around the fire, we experience health and education. Around the fire we remember our umbilical territory, where everything is connected: body, mind, territory, and spirituality. The forest is our body; our body is territory.

Our health depends on the health of the forests. We hear the voices of the *jagrês* (guides of the forest). We are not from the forest, we are

the forest, asking for help. When our children are born, we bury their navels at the door of our home so that our children's spirits won't be captured by *vênh-kuprîg kórég* (bad spirits).

The bond with territory is so strong that when a person dies they need to return to their land of origin, because territory, for us, is where our navels are buried. Breaking this principle can cause pathological suffering, as the non-Indigenous say (Carvalho, 2020).

Global warming is going to kill us, "natural" disasters are not natural. We are hearing the sacred mother's cries for help, our *nân gâ* mother (land mother) is getting sicker day by day. Our territories suffer the impacts directly and indirectly: our traditional foods submerged by mud, ore and agrottoxins; our animals dying in fires and of hunger; and the spirits of the forest, our *jagrês*, holding up the sky so it won't fall on our heads.

Some impacts of this climatic instability can already be seen all throughout Brazil. The South and part of the Northeast regions suffer intense rains that leave behind the dead and homeless. In the Southeast, historic droughts cut off water supplies in hundreds of municipalities. In the North, there are historic floods in the Amazon Basin, and the transformation of the forest's natural vegetation may increase temperatures to fatal levels.

To disregard biomes and Indigenous rights is to leave Indigenous Peoples at the mercy of national governments like that of Jair Bolsonaro, who implemented an anti-Indigenous agenda in Brazil and constantly attacked us in the media (indians with bananas; indians eat grass; indians want to be equal to us — these were some of the nonsensical things the ex-president said).

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We, Indigenous peoples are the true guardians of the forests. The protection and preservation of biomes cannot wait any longer. This is urgent; it is now. Without drinking water, without air, we cannot live. Our health depends on the health of the forests, we hear the voices of the *jagrês* (guides of the forest) asking for mercy. With every root, every river that dries up, we die a little. As peoples of the forest, we feel nature in our bodies.

"Territory is very important for the *Kanhgág* (as we Kaingang call ourselves). Territoriality is composed of land, relatives and of the whole cosmos in order to produce health." (Carvalho 2023, p. 223).

When Davi Kopenawa speaks of the falling sky and white people's love of merchandise (Kopenawa & Albert, 2015), he is also denouncing the consequences of coloniality for Indigenous and traditional peoples' ways of life, and for the *fóg's* (non-Indigenous people's) own world, which threatens to collapse as it faces overlapping crises: political, economic, technological, epistemological, ecological, and imaginative.

The concerns of Indigenous Peoples demand necessities like the training of mental health professionals equipped to discuss problems of suffering in Indigenous *aldeias* together with spiritual leaders and the community as a whole, since it is essential to take each ethnic group's territories and ways of living and being into account, as well as our cultural riches, which are still very much unrecognized by professionals from the forest of stone.

They wind up perpetuating the invisibility of Indigenous ways of being and living in the city. Being in contact with nature is synonymous with health, just as taking a river bath constitutes a therapeutic moment in our body-territories. In the forest of stones we get sick more.

As an Indigenous woman, body-science, I write down our history: now told and written according to our knowledge, comprising themes of health and education, and bringing in the importance of our ways of being and living for a mental and spiritual health and the territory-body.

I also bring important problems in *Kanhgág* cosmoperception to the academic space, as a way of also shedding light on worlds, knowledges and ways of existing that are little perceived in this space and threatened by colonial logic, thus promoting a political-ethical-aesthetic-cognitive rupture in everyday academic life and seeking

to articulate relationships of support to *Kanhgág* fights for ancestral territories in the process of being taken back.

Forest psychology involves all of these aspects that are much broader: body, mind, spirituality, ancestral knowledges and Indigenous ways of being and living — everything is connected.

In writing down our history my goal is to give visibility to the way of life, especially the "good living" that is interwoven between body-territory. I speak of forest psychology as a socio-historical continuity of these collectives' existence, based mainly in the lineage of the *jykrê* way of life (*Kanhgág*-thought) of which I've been part since before I was born, seeking to spread and construct a just society with Indigenous peoples.

When a *Kanhgág* child is going to learn the art of basketry, before beginning the complex weaving of taquara bamboo or the vine that will become a basket, they must enter the forest, look for a *sukrîg* (spider), touch its web softly with their hand and ask permission to use its weaving power.

With this gesture, they recognize the *sukrîg's* skill and the place of every being in the web of woven relations, into which they interlace themselves, like a large basket, between the beings that cohabit the world. Our relationship with the forest is one of extensive kinship — every animal, every leaf, the river that runs is our visible and invisible relative. Around the fire, our *kofás* (wise elders) transmit stories of cultural specificities from the knowledge passed down by their ancestors in our oral tradition (Domingos 2016).

Life and death for the *Kanhgág* is deeply linked to the araucaria. It is beneath this tree that our navel is planted and from its material that the *Konkéi* (cork cup) is made, in which *Kiki* (a fermented corn drink) is served during *Kikikói* (the ritual of the dead).

In *Kikikói* — a dangerous ritual, according to the accounts of the *tî sî* (the eldest), in times when the *aldeia*, or various *aldeias*, suffered from many diseases — epidemics — and frequent deaths, *kiki* was performed, in which the drink was consumed and the dead/spirits were invoked in order to purify the *aldeia*, and to aid spirits who may be lost and corrupting the village to continue to the world of the dead.

Following the interweavings of the *kiki* ritual is a rite in order to communicate with the dead and offer gifts. Along the way to the cemetery, roots,

leaves, fruits and flowers are collected. Ancestral songs, dances and prayers are performed around the fire, and everyone is served **kiki**, a drink that represents death, and makes the living as strong as death.

After everyone drinks from the drink that represents the soul of the dead, the **konkéi** returns with its rim facing down, thus closing another worship to the dead. **Kujàs** (spiritual doctors), **Kofás** (wise elders) and midwives, the **Kanhgág** spiritual leaders, lead the way and keep the two halves, **Kamé** and **Kairu**, united (Carvalho, 2020). The bond with land and territory is what fosters health in the **Kanhgág** people.

The **Kanhgág** people have been developing their own cultural activities since the beginning of their history, using various means, natural raw materials and creativity to make our art. Since our mother's tummy we are taught to follow the precepts of the mother earth. When we learn to weave, we enter the forest and ask permission from the owner of that space. When we weave we are in contact with the two worlds, visible and invisible. Our contact with the forest is umbilical. The **taquara** bamboo is one of the sacred elements which, when removed from the brush, symbolizes the respect between the beings of the forest and indigenous people.

Our living is made from the **taquara** when we practice basketry, especially the **peneira** (a woven sieving basket), which is not just an object of art but is also spiritual. Our children are free within the territory to play, to swim, to constitute themselves as subjects. Sometimes a child may get scared and fall into the water, so we go to the river and ask Mother Water for permission, and with great respect we put the **peneira** in the water and ask: "**goj inh my inh kósin pére kotíg**" (Mother Water give my son back), "**kónêg ta ni ver**" (he is still small).

Otherwise, the child gets sick: in the simplest of cases, the child may have speech difficulties; in more serious cases, it may lead to death. In addition, this activity involves the whole family in their day-to-day life, from entering the forest with a request for permission, the songs on the way to the forest, the stories told around the fire together with the making of handicrafts, as well as the making of food to share.

In this way, the youngest learn by observation, following the **kofá** (wise elders) and learning the value of each art, its graphic designs, colors, its

meaning and history in **Kanhgág** culture. These lived experiences are essential for our constitution as a collective subject.

In our conception, there is no division between people in communal environments, especially children. Here, I share the relationship that we have with our children because we believe they should participate in the same environments in which we move, as it is through these experiences that they acquire knowledge day by day.

Our children live freely and it is in this way that they learn, from exploring places on their own in the community to learning how to handle tools such as machetes and fishing rods. This represents the appropriateness of our world and our experiences. We don't force children to do activities they don't want to do.

We can see them participating in community meetings, sharing **chimarrão** tea with the elders, and participating in festivals and community events. These spaces are also important for socialization, and interaction between all generations is part of the process of passing on knowledge in **Kanhgág** education.

One way of facing the acceleration of the processes of the coloniality of knowledge is through the cultivation of a mode of attention that is open to the interaction between those beings in existence and the worlds that emerge from these encounters (Dooren et al., 2016; Tsing, 2019), and through a posture of care with the knowledge thus produced (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012) — weaving a politics of relation between multiple worlds (Haraway, 2016).

When a **Kanhgág** child weaves **taquara** bamboo to make a basket, they recognize that it is the **Sukríg** and its spirit that confers upon them the knowledge of weaving. When the navel of a **Kanhgág** person is planted alongside the araucaria tree, the **aldeia** recognizes that their life is deeply intertwined with a world of multiple agencies beyond the human.

This form of relation with beings reveals an attention to the many worlds that exist, and a bond with the territory that is radically different from those that constitute the supposedly universal knowledge of coloniality.

"The bond with the territory is so strong that when a person dies, they need to return to their land of origin, and therefore territory for us is where our navels are buried" (Carvalho, 2020).

We perceive in these approaches a potent articulation as much for observing the encounters between knowledges and producing interventions that are capable of causing ruptures in the coloniality of academic knowledge upon experiencing encounters of such distinct worlds, as for accompanying the relations that derive from the encounter, in the logic of contagion of the psychology of the forests, mental health according to ancestral knowledges.

The struggle of Indigenous Peoples is comparable to the struggle of a bee: we are only a third of the population, but when we are poked, we are millions to defend our sacred territories.

Even so, prejudice feeds the expansion of the dominant society and of colonial capitalism, which is the primary cause of spiritual illnesses for the **Kanhgág** People and causes ethnic discrimination and the hyper-exploitation of manual labor.

It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we are still seen as animals, without souls, as alcoholics and vagrant scoundrels; we are violated in the most diverse ways since forever, as if the ways of Indigenous being and living were a regression for the dominant society, which denies contact and opportunity to Indigenous people, and renders unviable the ancestral way of Indigenous being and living.

Despite the denialism levied against Indigenous Peoples, we have been re-conquering spaces of power, those that were stolen and annihilated. We are in various places, re-existing — as professionals decolonizing bodies; as a movement reclaiming spaces of power; as a university, coloring with the dyes of the jenipapo and uruku fruits, that bring ancestral knowledges; as artisans, sharing the visible and non-visible world of our **jagrês** (forest guides). We are, with basketry, adornments and traditional medicines, overcoming a space of invisibility — we are many, we are originary, we are 305 Peoples, with specific languages and customs; we are like the small thrush that, with its small beak, gathers water to try to put out the fires in the forest.

I thus will begin to describe some rituals carried out in **Kanhgág** culture, in order to improve the understanding of the importance of taking into account our cultural specificities, as well as the centrality of our traditional medicine in the production of mental health from the Indigenous **Kangág** perspective. I would warn that, after a ritual with the **kujá**, we

must follow a diet that includes only traditional foods; fire, smoke, ash and water are of extreme importance in **Kanhgág** cooking, as well as fish roasted within the shoot of bamboo (**krakufär kénpu**), cake in ash (**êmi**), for a decolonizing **Kanhgág** Psychology, a psychology that is ours, constructed within Indigenous spaces and ways of being and living. This territory is Indigenous, for wherever there may be an Indigenous person is Indigenous territory.

Union between peoples is the only chance we have to save life. We Indigenous Peoples have echoed for a thousand years the voices of the territories, the voices of the spirits of the forest, we call upon all peoples to save and preserve the health of the forests and our health.

We are being murdered, disdained, and cheated. They stole our territories, they are killing our **kofá**, and they steal our children; even still, we are fighting for all life, animals, leaves, fruits, roots, even for the life of our aggressors.

We resist, fight and survive, for we struggle for something greater than material goods, we fight for life. After a few catastrophic episodes, the gaze of the world returns to the words of native peoples and recognizes that we have always been right. We cannot get complacent — the call continues, and joining Indigenous Peoples is the only alternative so that the sky does not fall on our heads, so that we don't eat mud, ore and poison; the mother earth longs for that day, where colors and loves join forces for the planet, for our children and our elders.

Known as PEC (Constitutional Amendment Proposal) 48, or the PEC of Death, the 'temporal framework' is the proposal that alters Article 231 of the Federal Constitution by affixing the period for the occupation of lands by Indigenous people to the date of October 5, 1998. This temporal framework is an anti-Indigenous, ruralist proposal, given that it violates the originary right of Indigenous Peoples to our ancestral territory, recognized in the Constitution of 1988 that PEC 48 attempts to change.

Moreover, the proposal ignores the violence and persecution that Indigenous Peoples have suffered (and still suffer) for more than 520 years, especially during the military dictatorship, which prevented many of our people from staying in their territories in 1988. Although to think of Indigenous territory is to think of practices of planting and harvest, many ethnicities migrated

behind the birds in search of fruits, leaves and roots, fleeing from large ranchers in order to save their lives; to be Indigenous is to not have gates, to not have borders or limits; kin is kin no matter where.

We are threatened since forever — by *grileiros* (people who steal land through false legal documents), ranchers, agrobusiness, amongst many other destroyers— and the life of Indigenous Peoples will be even more threatened if the PEC of Death is approved, facilitating entry into territories and incentivizing invasions and violences. This is due to the fact that the temporal framework has an impact on all Indigenous territories in Brazil, regardless of whether they were already demarcated or not, just as we see so many leaders being killed, children being murdered and violated, spiritual leaders burned alive in their prayer houses, and Indigenous lands being brutally decimated.

What's more, Indigenous lands are the areas with the greatest biodiversity and with the best preserved vegetation, as they are protected and managed by Indigenous Peoples. Approving PEC 48 means preventing the true protectors of biomes, Indigenous Peoples, from caring for and preserving the environment. The health of Indigenous Peoples is the health of the territories: we are the rivers that run, we are the roots that sprout, we are the animals that roar.

In echoing these voices we warn of the end of the world, but we also point towards a possible future: the demarcation of territories, areas occupied by Indigenous Peoples is, in fact, the answer to confront the environmental crisis. Thus, the paradox presented here is one of the mixture of visible and non-visible beings — between those that don't wish to hear and those others who tell their histories around the fire, who dance in the rain and ask permission to remove a fruit from the forest, and who continue postponing the end of the world, stopping the sky from falling upon our heads (Krenak, 2019).

The *fóg* have an unhealthy desire for material goods. We long for the day when they can hear other words beyond those associated with these goods — if only they could hear the duet of the waters that meet in the rivers, the sound of the *joão-de-barro*, the red ovenbird that sings and builds its house, of the kin cicada who cries and laughs at the same time in their song, knowing

that at the end of summer they will need to choose a beautiful tree where their body will rest, songs that enchant lives that fight for their ways of being and living.

If the *fóg* could hear and live for life itself they would not want to eat so much of the forest. In a special form of critical constructive writing I reinforce that even though there is an abundance of internet antennas and radios in their jungles of stone, the *fóg* use them to listen only to themselves. In bringing in this thought, I mean to say that I am fearful for the survival of the non-Indigenous, given that we, the original inhabitants of the land, considered 'animals,' know how to survive these impacts, resisting as we have for more than 524 years — which is to say quite a while — while unfortunately the non-Indigenous eat canned clay and drink bottled poison.

They say that there is a lot of land for few 'indians,' but in reality it is the few 'indians' protecting life for the whole world to survive — we are persecuted, we are killed, and even while dead we are fighting for life, of those who will come after us, sewing seeds. Even the most powerful guy in the world will not survive in the forest eating money; only nature, the forests, have the power of life and of death.

The cultural impact of the European colonial model reminds us of a dark past that brought forth historically innumerable violences, to the extermination of languages, peoples and the myth that Indigenous Peoples constitute a threat. Remembering this cruel past, I cannot help but include the so-called 'pacification' carried out by the Jesuits, for whom adoring a God would mean salvation for the territories, given that for them 'the indians are animals without souls.'

Our *kujá* (spiritual doctors) were compared to witches and hunted until death. Science did not recognize our mother tongue, being thus annihilated in many ethnicities. A past of extermination demonstrates and reaffirms the re-existence of cultural specificities. Despite the deconstruction of our 'institutions' — including the complex systems for the training of new specialists, forms of social organization, systems of marriage, practices of care of the body, cosmological conceptions, rules of family relations and other institutions historically deconstructed or annihilated by external impositions — the practices of care of health, of body-territory,

mind and spirituality specifically passed on by the ancestors still exist and resist in Indigenous traditions, being the pillar for the survival of the **Kanhgág** people.

Forest psychology brings forth a reflection of its base in ancestral roots where the cure is in our body-territories, with the light of the sun and the light of the moon, heal yourself. Heal yourself with the melody of the rivers and the waterfall, with the coming and going of the sea and with the light fluttering of the birds.

Heal yourself, with the oil of basil, fennel and leaves of mint. Rosemary, chamomile and lavender are delightful ingredients for your bath. A touch of cinnamon, honey and cacao bean will embrace you. Put love in the tea, no sugar, and take a sip as you observe the stars. Heal yourself with the kisses of the wind and the embraces of the rain.

Share bad thoughts and dreams with stone, a kin, so that they remain stagnant and so that the wind does not hear. Become strong, with the feet bare upon the mother earth and all that she produces. We are not part of nature, we are nature itself, we are our own medicine; listen to intuition and be intelligent.

Forest psychology is psychology long before psychology itself was consolidated. In the end, there is a need to integrate western psychology with ancestral knowledge. Before the intervention of the **fóg**, mental suffering was already worked on and treated through Indigenous spirituality in our communities, allowing the benefits of these practices to be noted today and, therefore, these dimensions should not be separated or ignored.

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