

Munduruku Letter, 8th June

History

The Munduruku are the most numerous people in the southern area of the state of Pará; currently there are 12 thousand of us. In the past, we, the Munduruku, were feared because of our reputation in the arts of war; we fought in bands and used strategies to attack our enemies. We did not easily give up the pursuit of our enemies and our trophies were human heads, which symbolised power. Rarely would we, the Munduruku, lose a single warrior in battle during a war expedition. We would attack our enemies by surprise and would in this way defeat them, we would leave nobody alive, except for children we wanted to take to our villages and who we would adopt and incorporate into our clan to keep kinship relations.

The *uksa* was considered a sacred house (the men's house), women were not allowed to stay in that environment, but their duty was to prepare food and serve them to please, out of respect. This is because important leaders were present there: tellers of stories, healers, singers, players of flutes and trumpets, shaman spiritual leaders, hunters, artisans, knowers of medicinal plants, (premonitory) dream interpreters, messengers, warriors (divided into five squads). Each person had an essential part to play in society. Women's chores were to look after house tasks, prepare food, wash clothes, weed gardens, make manioc flour, look after the children, teach the sons to become prepared and able to live in the world, so that from 12 years of age they could take responsibility for their own family, and in the same way, teach the girls to know how to look after themselves and their companions so as not to become dependent once adult age was reached.

On the kinship level, when the child is born, be they boy or girl, upon birth they are already committed. Therefore when they reach the age of 10 they can marry without a problem. This can happen upon the girl's first period, after going through a ritual. Only the mother has the right to commit the children because she's the one who suffers from the start of pregnancy. It is the mother's duty to administer all the treatments with medicinal herbs. The father has the right to hunt to feed the children and provide them with everything they need for their subsistence and for their safety. Until adulthood, we, the Munduruku, do not leave our children, they continue to live in the same house. When the parents want the child to go to the men's house, they decide the son's destiny to enter to follow the rules (norms), the Munduruku ritual. Even if the youngster does not have the capacity or ability in any art, the shamans teach them knowledge that is millions of years old. There they become wise and intelligent, knowledgeable about all medicines, cosmology, history, the sciences, shamanism, all the arts, beyond our capacity...! The shamans take care of the workings of the planet's ecosystem so that nothing can happen, they keep the balance of nature's perfect functioning.

We know how the laws of nature work though the teachings of the ancients and how we should respect it. And animals collaborate with us because they teach us things we do not know, and we can interpret the messages they transmit us, this is very important. For this reason we respect

them and they also respect us, this is how we live in harmony with nature. Animals teach us, they warn us of dangers that will happen, be these good or bad things. People who are not Indians would say this is a bad presage, but for us this is real. People who disrespect nature, they will suffer the consequences of their actions. Nature is not to be toyed with and this is dangerous for us, this is why we respect it. All animals have carers, therefore, they have mothers, be they fish, be they animals, birds, plants, fire, earth, wind, water, even spiritual beings, all have lives. They need respect and are sacred. We have sacred places all along our Tapajós River that we, the Munduruku, do not touch.

The city of Belém (Kabia'ip): for us, the Munduruku, is meteorology: it is a phenomenon that controls the summer season. It is a baton buried at the bottom of the sea; when a person manages to drag some centimetres this has an effect, climate change. It must never be dragged beyond its limits, otherwise a serious problem can happen with one of the seasons. We observe this phenomenon when the summer is very intense.

The city of Macapá (Mukapap): to us it means "passage", where our ancestors had to pass to the other side of the river where people were transformed into pigs; Karosakaybu transformed them because of negligence.

The Guanabara Bay (Murekodoybu): the Giant Snake, the ancient warrior who taught Karodaybi the art of war. Its agitation is observed with the tidal phenomenon, when the waves become agitated and the spiritual leader, the shaman, can hear its voice. Water craft cannot cross the bay at any time, carelessness can be fatal, leading to shipwrecks; it is also dangerous for planes passing over it.

Alter do Chão (Co'anũñ'a): a mountain from where the Munduruku would observe the presence of the Portuguese when these would arrive from the lower Tapajós, and from the peak of the mountain they would perceive and announce, using an instrument like a blow horn, they would make sounds to warn others that the Portuguese troops were moving in the direction of the Munduruku. In their first contacts with the whites, the Munduruku fought the Portuguese troops on the Tropas River, and in the first battles the Portuguese lost but, during a second moment, more troops were sent to battle the Munduruku and this time round the Munduruku did not overcome the troops and they agreed a peace treaty and the place of confrontation was on the river today known as the Rio das Tropas, in the mid eighteenth century.

Estreito (Dajekapap): this is the passage of the pigs; it is a sacred place. This place exists below the old Capuchin mission of Bacabal, called Montanha. In this place, in the summer, it is possible to see the traces sculpted onto the rock, these are the traces of the foot of Karosakaybu, when he arrived there soon after his son was taken to the other margin of the Tapajós by the pigs and he gave up looking for his son. On the right margin of the Tapajós the rock can be seen, split in the

shape of a ditch, this is the passage of the “pigs” it is the way by which they came down. Karosakaybu, in distaste, resented the loss of his son and decided to leave a snake there so that nobody could pretend to be god. He left a *surucucu* snake to bite anyone who passed that place. In this same place, there is an image of a saint, and this was discovered by an explorer of the time, but he did not know the place was sacred and was bitten by the snake and died, and up until today it can be very dangerous for anyone passing by there. The same phenomenon happens on another place on dry land, called Cintura Fina. It lies between the 180th km of the BR-230 Transamazon Highway and the small mining village called Vila Rabello. In that place, for this reason, various accidents happened because non-Indians violated that sacred place.

São Luiz do Tapajós (Joropari kōbie): Ancient place of Munduruku existence, who lived at that rapid. The whites know nothing of this place. There, a hole exists in the middle of the rapid where some ancient inhabitants, who are not Munduruku, say there is a huge hole known as the devil's throat, anyone who passes by there will be sucked in to the current and if they are sucked in they will disappear and no one will see them again. The rapids are not to be tampered with, otherwise a disaster can happen. The mother of fish is there in the shape of a river dolphin and people who live there have seen this animal. The fish rejoice in seeing her and the tapir often leap into the water there where the mother is. The spiritual leader, the shaman, warned that here, under no circumstances, can alterations be made. If that sacred place of the mother of fish is changed or destroyed, terrible things will happen to people's lives; this is a risk to all societies. This is something the non-Indian will never understand.

The Cobra Grande (Large Snake) (Sarakaka): located at the old FUNAI base in Itaituba, at the mouth of the Bom Jardim stream. There lived Munduruku at the time of the *regatão*¹ when they would go to Belém to fetch their goods, and then they would camp there. The Sarakaka was the great spiritual leader who possessed many riches and goods, he would not approach anyone who was not a shaman and was deeply respected. Until today the remains can be seen there and the crops, which are banana trees planted by him, can still be observed. There are backwaters here where the Sarakaka used to go under water.

The Remanso da Anta (Yukpitapodog'ap Dicōđ): These backwaters are where, when he was a person, Peresoatpu went to cross the river to the other side of the Tapajós River. He had to transform himself into a tapir to cross the river. His nephew would hunt with his uncle when he was not transformed into an animal. Every time Peresoatpu invited his nephew to hunt and left him alone, he would tell the boy he was going off to defecate. He would distance himself from the boy and transform himself into a tapir, and the boy on seeing him would shout to his uncle, but he in turn would not reply. When the boy reached the village and told his grandmother, she would ask him why he had not speared him. One day the grandmother told the boy to hunt with his uncle and

¹ Trade boat introduced during the nineteenth century rubber cycle used to transport goods to be sold to distant communities along the river, often through a system of debt.

that, this time, he should not call out for him. The grandmother instructed the boy saying, if he saw the tapir this time, he needed to hold onto it with his own hands. The only way to catch it was by putting his hand inside its anus and taking its guts out. This is what the boy did. But the tapir latched on to the boy's hand and, holding onto him, dragged him towards the river. When it went into the water, the boy didn't have much breath and his uncle (the tapir) said that if he needed to breathe he only had to bite his ear so it would emerge.

The Montanha dos Macacos (Deko Ka'a): This is a rocky mountain beside the Tapajós River, it is considered sacred, the house of the monkeys. They procreate in the holes on the rock face, it is impressive. It has to be seen to be believed. It lies above the Crepori River (Kerepodi), which in our language means Japu² River.

Muraycoko writing (Surabudodot), on the Crepuri River. The writing is sculpted on the walls at almost a hundred metres height. It is an enigma drawn and left by an able warrior of his time. One of the very interesting things he left was the following: the person who deciphers this enigma will become very intelligent and wise and will be gifted with knowledge, honour, riches and power. Even the maddest Munduruku keep this secret and none of them risks his divine treasure and for a man to approach this secret he first needs to close himself off and purify himself from all filth, we call this "Diõrewat".

Chacorão (Nomũ): On the Chacorão rapids there is a tree that is a hundred years old, in the middle of the island, according to the oldest warriors this is a sacred, untouchable place. This is where Karosakaybu used to fish. A little above that rapid there is a water swirl, we call it hearth (waën). River craft that pass by here risk being swallowed up by it. It is a beautiful and interesting phenomenon. On the same rapid there is a place known as "Marakace", Karosakaybu used to visit this place to spear fish when he would search for wild cane arrows and then he would spear fish.

São Benedito (Topaõa Duk'a): This is a mountain on the left margin of the Tapajós River, where there is a saint is on top of the rock. If, on passing by him, a greeting is not offered or a promise is not paid, the boat may get into trouble. On passing nearby, a greeting must be offered. It is a question of the passengers' safety. Those who would climb up there could go: but if someone is impure, they cannot reach the top and neither can they look down, otherwise they risk falling all the way down.

The Cachoeira de Sete Quedas (Paribixexe): These are beautiful falls, containing seven stages in the shape of steps. It is where the dead live, the sky of the dead, in other words, the world of the living, the reign of the dead. It is a sacred place to the Munduruku, Kayabi and Apiaká, where the fish procreate and several species and all sizes, where the mother of fish exists. On the rock face there is rock art left by the Muraycoko (father of writing), the writing left for the Munduruku through

² A type of bird.

the surabudodot writings, in a very remote period. There are also funerary urns buried there, where our ancient warriors are buried. A portal also exists there which cannot be seen by common men, only by spiritual shaman leaders, who can travel to another unknown world without being seen. The falls are beautiful, by the way, considered one of the seven wonders of the world, Brazil's greatest cultural heritage. They are on the Teles Pires River, the place where the hydroelectric dam is planned, in the state of Mato Grosso.

Cachoeira do (Kerepoca): These rapids are on the Cururu River, close to the Santa Maria village. One of the most beautiful rapids, the phenomenon of the *piaba* [fish] happens there between the months of April and May. Besides the *piaba* other fish species – *matinchãs*, *pacu-açú*, *pacu*, *piau* and other species – live there. The rapids are 30 metres high and the sparrows make their nest in the rapids; they have to cross the wall of water and the falls are beautiful. It is not possible to detail all the sacred places that exist in Munduruku territory here. Many others exist.

Near the Serra do Cachimbo the existence of isolated indians has been observed, the inhabitants of the village by the old army landing strip communicated that there are signs of isolated indians in that area, because they saw larger signs and during the dry season they saw signs of them because there was smoke, which made them realise they had lit part of a savannah area. This happened by a tributary of the Cururú river.

Another place where isolated Indians live is in the Kabitutu River area. During a hunting expedition they captured a Munduruku hunter. He remained with them for around three days. He was not able to identify them. According to him, they resembled Nambikoara Indians; they had their noses pierced with wooden splints. On freeing him, they painted him and made him return to his village. The captured Munduruku said he had offered them a lighter, which he lit, but they refused it and showed him their older and more advanced techniques when they simply rubbed a baton and fire lit immediately. These isolated Indians live between the Tropas and Kabitutu Rivers, an area less explored by the Munduruku.

All the Munduruku possess knowledge within themselves. This knowledge has been passed down orally by their ancestors so that the cultural value and millennial knowledge will not disappear. All elderly people possess great knowledge, for the young to acquire knowledge it is necessary that they rigorously obey Munduruku norms, nothing is impossible when perfection is sought. We know when people lie, when they trick us, when they are treacherous, ambitious and greedy. We know what their interests are, economic interests, they have no love for life. For we have love for people, we know how to respect them, we know how to share, there are no poor people among us, we are all equal, we know how to share with those that have nothing. Rich and poor do not exist in our indigenous society, we do not favour or discriminate people. In our world, this does not exist, we only have love, respect, peace, humility, sincerity. We live happily without having money, without mansions to live in, without material goods. Life is more important, money does not bring us

happiness, only misery. When we have money, we forget our relatives, we become selfish, we don't care for anyone. This is how disrespect towards people begins, individualism. When we say we do not depend on others, it's pure lies. Money is a curse; this makes us forget to look to ourselves and to others. People do not have time for their families, they are only concerned with their tasks, their job. They become stressed, worried, they do not sleep properly, they are not able to talk to their family. It is because they forget those near them, their relatives, because they are only concerned with their business. When we stop to think, we start looking towards our interior and this makes us open our eyes and start to see before us, bringing relief to our spirit, which is so pleasant. We, the Munduruku, are like this: we value that which surrounds us.

Within nature lies the knowledge that humanity seeks for millions of years. So much research is done, involving scientists, intellectuals, people who possess scientific knowledge, but they do not discover anything and the precious things that interest us remain hidden. Nature distances itself and hides increasingly from us because we are destroying it. People want to transform our precious wealth into business. What do they want to reach with this destruction, when we preserve and the destroyers tell *us*, who are keeping the balance in nature, that *we* are destroying it. This is opposed to our way of thinking. We never destroy our natural heritage, we are concerned about keeping it so as not to be destroyed ourselves. Man is not only destroying nature, he is destroying his own human nature. This they do not understand, they are destroying themselves. This is why we see disasters happening here on the planet, we see climate change, floods, droughts and many miseries in the world.

All our villages are by the riverside, so are our fields, the lakes we fish in, in winter it is difficult to catch fish. Only in the summer is there an abundance of fish, because the lagoons are formed. There are 120 villages along the banks of the Rio das Tropas, the Rio Kadiriri, the Rio Tapajós, the Rio Teles Pires, the Rio Cururu, the Rio Anipiri and the Rio Waredi and their many tributaries. The ancient Munduruku lived on higher areas, on the savannahs, but because of difficulties at the time we had to move to the banks of the Tapajós. Only one traditional village exists, the Kaboro'a village, the rest are by the side of rivers.

Dear sirs,

In the face of the facts related about our situation, we communicate that we are outraged by the way in which the Brazilian government has been treating us. We see the disrespect to our people, the Constitution is being torn, it's being nullified, we do not have our rights guaranteed by it. Now, our own territory has become a battleground, where we are being exterminated, assassinated by the government's armed forces. We no longer have the right to call out and be heard, no one is coming to our rescue while we plea for help. The Armed Forces police should ensure our safety and protect us. We see that this is not happening, everything is the opposite of what it should be. The government is using violence to undertake research studies so it can build its developments in indigenous territories. We were never consulted, nobody told us about the government projects in

our areas. And when the government talks about dialogue, it is already building hydroelectric dams on our rivers. When we positioned ourselves against the government's decision, it says it does not accept our decision, it's the government's decision that counts. This is what the Minister Gilberto Carvalho said during the meeting on Tuesday, 4th June: "Whether you agree or not, the hydroelectric dams of São Luiz do Tapajós, Belo Monte and Teles Pires are going to be built". So what is the point in us being consulted if our decision is not considered? Where are our rights, the right to respect?

Not even the law that protects the environment exists any longer, the environmental licences are being issued even when it is known that the projects are going to impact peoples' lives, this is not considered, the risk they suffer, and life for them will never be the same. The life of animals, in danger of extinction, the fish and the life of biodiversity. The Munduruku population and other inhabitants who depend on natural resources, whose subsistence comes from the river and the forest. We want our rights guaranteed, the respect for our lives, the respect for our land, the respect for our culture. What institution is this, which authorises the licence for operations, when it is supposed to be the body that protects the environment?

Why do they want to destroy us, are we not Brazilian citizens? Are we so insignificant? What government is this that is declaring against us? It is declaring war to finish us off so that it can hand our land over to big landowners and to agribusiness, hydroelectric dams and mining. The government wants to take our land away because we do not produce profits for it.

We already know that the Teles Pires River's course has been diverted with the construction of the Sete Quedas Hydroelectric Dam. We are calling upon the government to stop this illegal work in Munduruku territory.

We ask the authorities to speed up the process in trying the legality of the Belo Monte River on the Xingu, the Teles Pires and also São Luiz do Tapajós, in the state of Pará. We have never been consulted about this, but studies are already underway in our territories. If studies took place, we were not informed. We ask that our demands be answered, with great urgency:

- That the Armed Forces leave our lands
- That dam-related research is stopped
- That hydroelectric dams stop being built
- That everything that is going to happen in our lands is explained to us, that we are listened to and that our decision is respected.

Signed:

The Munduruku Leaders

Brasília, 8th June 2013