

# “BEING A LEADER, A WOMAN AND INDIGENOUS: THREE CHALLENGES, THREE BARRIERS”

• Interview with Angela Amanakwa Kaxuyana •

By Maryuri Mora Grisales and Arquias Sófocles Guimarães Soares Cruz

*For Angela Amanakwa Kaxuyana, defending indigenous territories means guaranteeing the survival of humankind. Angela is a leader from the Brazilian Amazon, of the Kaxyana people from the Kaxuyana Tunayana indigenous reserve located in the northern tip of the state of Pará, at the Brazil-Suriname border. She is a member of the executive coordinating team of the Coordenação das Organizações dos Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira (COIAB or the Coordinating Committee of the Organisations of the Indigenous Peoples of the Brazilian Amazon), a member organisation of the Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (APIB, or the Coalition of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil). In 2019, she toured Europe with APIB as part of the “Indigenous Blood: Not a Single Drop More” campaign.<sup>1</sup> During the tour, she denounced violations of socio-environmental rights in the Amazon and highlighted the criminal nature of the forest fires, acts of intimidation and the vulnerability of indigenous people living in voluntary isolation. According to Angela, the failure to demarcate indigenous land puts the lives of several isolated peoples in danger and weakens the territories, primarily because of the illegal actions of informal mining operations, hydroelectric dams and land grabbers. More recently, she denounced the Brazilian army for having spread the new coronavirus to indigenous peoples in her region.*

*In an interview with Sur Journal, Angela Amanakwa Kaxuyana discusses her personal experience as an activist and defender of indigenous peoples' rights, the different forms of violence that these peoples are exposed to in Brazil today and the importance of raising awareness among people in Brazil and abroad on the systematic violations of indigenous peoples' human rights committed directly and indirectly by the state, along with other issues.*



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**Sur Journal** • First, tell us a little about your individual and collective experience in the defence of indigenous peoples’ rights.

**Angela Amanakwa Kaxuyana** • I come from a struggle to reclaim a territory. Not only of my people, but of several peoples who were forced to move to another territory during the dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> I come from a history of struggle, of the fight to return to our traditional territory, from the fight for the defence and the delimitation of the Kaxuyana Tunayana indigenous territory. I always say that I have been an activist since I was born because being born an indigenous woman in the territories means you have to fight from the moment you first encounter the difficulties that we face here, the lack of access to policies, the lack of access to your rights as a people.

**Sur** • How is the historical violence against the indigenous peoples related to deforestation and other increasingly severe forms of violence currently being committed against the Amazon forest in the pursuit of a false notion of development?

**AAK** • Actually, the only motive for the violence against indigenous peoples has always been non-indigenous people’s greed for our land. So, the violence is directly related to recent events, such as the assassinations of leaders, which is linked to protection itself and to indigenous people giving their lives to protect our territories and the forests. And when we talk about forests, we mean forests with life in them. Because people often separate what is in the forest environment from the forest, as if there was no life

in the forest. Forests exist because we are there. We are part of the life of the forest. Therefore, we are totally connected.

Violence is the expansion of agribusiness, deforestation, the invasions of territories in the name of this development – a kind of development that bulldozes over people's lives, that does not take their existence into consideration. We ask ourselves: but all this to develop what? And develop for what purpose? Because for us, as indigenous people, development is well-being, preservation, respect for others, preserving our resources and guaranteeing that the population lives in dignity. This is what development is, and not that other version that knocks everything down so that only a few get rich and only a few have the privilege of having their lives guaranteed through death, deforestation and the spilling of indigenous blood.

**Sur** • How did the Coordinating Committee of the Organisations of the Indigenous Peoples of the Brazilian Amazon and the Coalition of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil emerge and what are their main demands?

**AAK** • COIAB turned 31 in 2020. It was born as the result of a movement that had begun way before indigenous leaders started participating in the process of the Constituent Assembly [of 1988]. Several leaders in the Amazon mobilised to defend mainly the demand for the delimitation of indigenous territories. Therefore, the main reason for creating the COIAB and its goal was to defend a strong agenda focused on the demarcation of indigenous land. But, at the same time, the debate on the Constituent Assembly was underway and these leaders got highly involved to mobilise and defend the indigenous agenda to ensure that the rights of these peoples were included in the Constitution.

Thus, it was also the result of a dream to see the struggle to guarantee the rights of the indigenous population succeed. That was when the first main agenda was constructed, which defends the delimitation of and guarantees for indigenous territories. We often say that without guarantees for the demarcations, without the territories, it is impossible for us to discuss our life plans. You cannot discuss education and health policies if you have no guarantees for your security as an individual, as a people, which is what the demarcation of indigenous territories is.

COIAB was officially founded in 1989 but the coalition dates back much further than that. It began as a coalition of leaders who were strongly involved in this process of confrontation for the recognition of indigenous territories, in the struggle for the delimitation of land in the Amazon, but also in the process of debate in the Constituent Assembly.

**Sur** • You and other indigenous leaders have recently travelled to European countries for an awareness-building campaign. Can you tell us a little about the campaign and the discussions it raises, such as pressure to stop the ratification of the trade agreement between the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the European Union?

**AAK** • The goal of this campaign in Europe was to have indigenous voices heard there and

denounce the violation of indigenous peoples' rights and the increase in deforestation. The slogan or message of our campaign was "Indigenous Blood: Not a Single Drop More".<sup>3</sup> That was right after the fires. And, in the Amazon, most of the fires were in indigenous territories, many of which were started criminally.<sup>4</sup> They even tried to criminalise us, hold us responsible for acts that the state itself had organised. When we say 'criminal acts', we do not mean that someone from the government went in and set the forest on fire, as they claim. The criminal act began with the dismantling of protection policies. The crime is: you go and take apart an entire construction process where society was effectively participating in the monitoring of rights. Then, you dismantle the Funai, dismantle IBAMA [Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources], dismantle ICMBio [Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade or the Chico Mendes Institute]. This ended up generating a series of factors that allowed the fires to spread at an absurd rate in 2019.

That was also a year when several indigenous leaders were assassinated and agribusiness invaded indigenous territories. And it was the first year of the Bolsonaro administration, which came at us full force. And the first group, the first population that he declared an enemy was the indigenous people. So, the campaign focused on this too, but at the same time, we brought important issues to the attention of European society and made them see that they are directly responsible for guaranteeing our rights in Brazil. They are also responsible for stopping, for putting an end to many forms of violence and many rights violations that we have suffered.

We also talked a lot about how the market sells indigenous blood. And sells it to whom? It sells it precisely to Europe. We visited countries to take them this warning: the soy that you buy is irrigated with indigenous blood. Therefore, you are responsible because you buy products imported from Brazil, which come from areas of conflict, areas in indigenous territories. Your demand, demand from Europe, puts pressure on our lives, pressure to decimate our lives in order to supply your market. The warnings we shared, which are not only for society but also businesspeople and politicians, went along these lines. For 45 days in 11 countries, we brought many messages to alert them about the current moment. The European market is sustained by indigenous blood. The soy that you give your animals is watered with indigenous blood. The wood that is sold here and the corn that is brought over comes from invasions and areas of conflict, where many indigenous people lose their lives to hold on to their territories.

And we also warned people about the MERCOSUR agreement, as it contains several clauses that are not very clear in relation to respect for and the safeguarding of indigenous peoples' rights. The existence of a clause that says that these rights will be respected does not guarantee that our lives, our territories, our existence will, in fact, be respected. We often told them that if Bolsonaro does not respect international treaties and UN treaties that define and defend our rights as indigenous peoples, imagine a free trade agreement. We also pointed out that many demands dealt with in this free market created by the MERCOSUR agreement involve elements that have not been identified, such as the export of gold and other minerals, and that continue to be items that are not monitored or taxed. This puts our territories directly in the line of fire, as in the case of the draft bill on mining.<sup>5</sup>

**Sur** • What role do alliances with social movements, parties and non-governmental organisations play in the fight against racism in Brazil and abroad? How do you see the intersection of struggles against historical oppression in the country and the importance of the presence of black, quilombola and indigenous women leaders in the defence of human rights?

**AAK** • Talking about alliances is a process that we have adopted and we increasingly see a need to expand these alliances to include organisations from other segments – whether with women, as we did with the *Marcha das Mulheres Indígenas* (Indigenous Women’s March) which we linked to the meeting of the *Marcha das Margaridas* (March of the Daisies), or with the *Movimento Sem Teto* (homeless movement), etc. We have increasingly seen and perceived the importance of remaining strong, allied and aligned to continue to fight together. Not only indigenous peoples. The indigenous movement is a movement that appears in confrontations, that appears in the struggle. It was the first movement to come face to face with the Bolsonaro government, but other populations are also being directly attacked. Even though he clearly declared war on indigenous people, this does not mean that other peoples, such as quilombola and extractivist communities,<sup>6</sup> are not targeted. And when he talks about NGOs, this also includes us because our indigenous organisations, such as COIAB and APIB, are also non-governmental organisations. They provide a legal space that represents us and takes care of all our legal needs. And we have many allies in other NGOs, which have played a fundamental role not only now, but throughout the history of the defence of indigenous peoples’ rights.

**Sur** • Brazil is still one of the countries with the most people infected with the new coronavirus and the situation is even more serious for traditional communities. How do you see the relationships between racism, genocide and the pandemic in view of the actions of the Brazilian state in the current context?

**AAK** • Unfortunately, indigenous peoples have held this ranking of deaths and neglect related to the spread of the pandemic in indigenous territories. The numbers are alarming. In the Brazilian Amazon alone, as of July 6, there were more than 390 deaths. And there are no statistical data or references to back this number. No attention is being paid to the spread of the coronavirus among the indigenous population and when figures do appear, they are much lower than they are in reality. As of now, more than 8,866 people have tested positive and 99 indigenous peoples have been affected according to a survey by COIAB.

This isn’t completely disassociated with the genocide underway. Because genocide is not only when someone goes to bomb or gun people down. It begins with the absence of public policies. First of all, the Brazilian state has not presented any emergency plan capable of taking care of indigenous territories. Our territories are located along borders and are difficult to get to. And even so, the coronavirus made it there. In many regions, in many cases, state officials were the ones who brought it in. The lack of infrastructure, the lack of monitoring and the failure to follow the protocols to ensure that the new coronavirus does not reach our indigenous territories are what have led to such alarming numbers. Therefore,

we have been accompanying and monitoring information daily and we found that the virus is spreading throughout indigenous territories. And today, the state has adopted no measures, no structure, no emergency action specifically for the indigenous population. Unfortunately, this is the current scenario, the package, as we say – a package to dismantle policies precisely to affect us and to make us, the indigenous population of this country, disappear.

**Sur** • In the context of the crisis in combatting the pandemic in indigenous territories, what is your analysis of the gaps in government assistance and the reasons for this inefficiency?

**AAK** • The state shuns its responsibility for the chaotic situation that indigenous people are in, the extremely critical situation caused by the spread of the coronavirus. But there is no plan, no announcements, no dialogue, no effective emergency action to combat it. We end up depending heavily on the DSEI [Distrito Sanitário Especial Indígena or the Special indigenous health district], which is linked to the SESAI [Secretaria Especial de Saúde Indígena or Special secretariat for indigenous health], but this body has been completely sold to politicians who fill it with their people. The occupation of these bodies that are supposed to defend indigenous peoples’ rights, such as the Funai or SESAI, which politicians have been using as bargaining chips, generates a lack of infrastructure. Even for our enemies, as the Funai is today, full of missionaries, of people who are against indigenous people, agribusiness people, invaders of indigenous territories. Therefore, our rights are increasingly being dismantled and sold off to please the Bolsonaro government.

But all this has the same purpose. The main goal is to wipe out the indigenous population, make us disappear so they can take over our territories. Because that is where the resources that the greedy want are located. But why are the resources there? Because we have always fought, we have always lived and we even changed our lives to preserve our territories. We have never allowed our resources to deteriorate, be traded or sold. Therefore, the only territories that preserve the wealth of Brazil today are precisely indigenous territories, where the water and water sources have been preserved – resources that can, in fact, keep the climate balanced, that can guarantee the balance of human life itself. But people have a hard time realising this. When we talk about the delimitation of indigenous territories, it is not simply a matter of delimiting territories as physical spaces. When we talk about demarcation, it means delimiting the guarantees of our rights, our lives, because only then will we be able to do all this maintenance so we can continue living in harmony with nature.

**Sur** • Despite all this, what motivates you to keep fighting? What would you say so that people, like you, continue on the path of resistance?

**AAK** • I say that our first struggle as indigenous people in this country is to resist. Resist and guarantee our lives in our territories, which is where our whole way of life, our entire existence, our whole essence as indigenous people is. Fighting for my territory motivates me to be even more resistant and increasingly empowered to make my presence felt and ensure that my contribution as an indigenous woman leader is valued. Because this makes all the difference:

being a leader, being a woman and being indigenous. These are three challenges and three barriers because people tend to attribute leadership to male figures. But we, indigenous women, have shown just how fundamental our role in the struggle and resistance for our territories has been. We have been at the forefront of the processes of resistance, of victories. This is because we are the first ones to be affected by different forms of violence, by losses of rights.

Society needs to make a commitment to fight – a commitment to care about the lives of others. This disregard for indigenous people only shows that it is not a matter of not caring about our lives; you do not care about the lives of human beings in general. It means you have no humanity. In other words, humanity needs to be more human. People have seen so many massacres, so much violence, so many murders of indigenous people, but they don't react. In a history of colonisation, this is connivance. I say that it is complicity because if society reacted and responded to all these attacks and yet another attempt to commit genocide against the indigenous peoples of Brazil, our strength would be much greater and we would have another other way of fighting for our rights. More people would care about the loss of lives. This is why we must look inside ourselves and care more about the lives of others. We need to be more humane to truly embrace this sense of closeness, of solidarity.

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*Interview conducted on June 16, 2020.  
Original in Portuguese. Translated by Karen Lang.*



Photos: Angela Amanakwa Kaxuyana's personal collection.

## NOTES

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1 • Rafael Belincanta, "Nosso sangue irriga a soja consumida na Europa", denuncia comitiva indígena em Roma." *Brasil 247*, October 21, 2019, accessed on July 9, 2020, [https://www.brasil247.com/mundo/nosso-sangue-irriga-a-soja-consumida-na-europa-denuncia-comitiva-indigena-em-roma?fbclid=IwAR0X5qAVKvxJmt\\_GE52bazz0-32fjZG7dd8MOu6gt2dfonjl2YB-zZhSqb0](https://www.brasil247.com/mundo/nosso-sangue-irriga-a-soja-consumida-na-europa-denuncia-comitiva-indigena-em-roma?fbclid=IwAR0X5qAVKvxJmt_GE52bazz0-32fjZG7dd8MOu6gt2dfonjl2YB-zZhSqb0).

2 • The civil-military dictatorship in Brazil that lasted from 1964 to 1985.

3 • "Comitiva," *Nenhuma Gota a Mais*, 2019, accessed July 9, 2020, <https://www.nenhumagotamais.org/comitiva>.

4 • Karla Mendes, "Estudo Indica que Queimadas na Amazônia Ocorreram em Áreas Desmatadas em 2019." *El País*, September 28, 2019, accessed July 9, 2020, <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2019/09/26/>

[politica/1569456980\\_698387.html](politica/1569456980_698387.html).

5 • Paula Batista, "Mineração Predatória Como Política de Governo." *Nexo Jornal*, February 14, 2020, accessed July 9, 2020, <https://www.nexojornal.com.br/ensaio/2020/Minera%C3%A7%C3%A3o-predat%C3%B3ria-como-pol%C3%ADtica-de-governo>; see also Camilo Rocha, "O que Há no Projeto que Libera a Exploração de Terras Indígenas." *Nexo Jornal*, February 8, 2020, accessed July 9, 2020, <https://www.nexojornal.com.br/expresso/2020/02/08/O-que-h%C3%A1-no-projeto-que-libera-a-explora%C3%A7%C3%A3o-de-terras-ind%C3%ADgenas>.

6 • Translator's note: In Brazil, the term "extractivist communities" is generally used to refer to traditional communities who harvest forest-related products, such as fruit, nuts, rubber and timber, for a living.



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