

IN MEMORY OF TUTAWA

Kamutaja Silva ãwa

- *The struggle of the ãwa people* •

ABSTRACT

This essay is the product of the experiences of the ãwa people, to which I belong, following contact with non-indigenous people in the 1970s. As the teller of the stories of my people, I would like to emphasize that during my childhood I had painful, sad and stressful experiences, due to the continuous intense conflicts of the struggle, efforts to demarcate our territory and our longing for well-being. The methodology is underpinned by bibliographic sources, the identification report of the Taego ãwa Indigenous Land and in the memories and oral tradition of my people. In recognition of the importance of this story, this essay is a compilation of records of the ãwa people's fight for rights, including the impact of the pandemic. It brings the indigenous point of view to the issue of human rights.

KEYWORDS

Avá-Canoeiro | Land demarcation | Oral tradition | Indigenous people

1 • Introduction

I am Kamutaja Silva Áwa, daughter of Kawkamy Áwa and granddaughter of the chief and shaman Tutawa Áwa. I belong to a people whose first contact with non-indigenous people was during the military dictatorship, 1973 to be precise. The stories I am going to share arose from intense struggle and resistance interspersed with considerable pain, loss and sadness. Because I believe, like Walter Benjamin,¹ that “when collective experience is lost and when common traditions no longer provide a safe base, other forms of narrative become predominant”, and as a student of Pedagogy at the Federal University of Tocantins (UFT), I envision other mechanisms to lead us to other ways of interacting and behaving, by means of the written word. This is why I feel obliged to speak out to revive and update the social memory of my people.

From this perspective, as a teller of my people’s stories of struggle and resistance, I am certain of the importance of raising awareness and of the relevance of the social and cultural impact that the reverberation of my narrative can have as a strategy of struggle and resistance.

My people call themselves Áwa, but the non-indigenous people gave us the name of *Avá-Canoeiro* (Canoers) due to the skill and speed with which they retreated, using canoes to defend their territory. The Áwa are also known in the literature, according to Pedroso,² as people who put up the greatest resistance to the colonizers in the XVIII century. In the north of Tocantins, they are known as “*cara-preta*” (black-faces), because of the characteristic black face-painting, using the genipap fruit, representing the night monkey, to scare off enemies.

For years, the Áwa people have resisted in order to continue existing as a free independent people. The denial of my people’s rights by the Brazilian state, in its failure to guarantee our well-being and peace on our traditional land, has caused social, cultural and spiritual damage, and has left the Áwa people at risk of extermination.

On the backdrop of the historical conditions of a people who resisted contact with non-indigenous people more than any, this essay discusses three moments: a) the forced contact in 1973; b) the process of reclaiming the Taego Áwa indigenous land and c) the Covid-19 pandemic and the anthropological analysis of the Áwa people. The question/issue underpinning this work is how the Áwa people can escape invisibility given the historical atrocities and the denial of their rights which have prevailed for over 40 years.

In conversation with indigenous authors and indigenists of ethnological literature, who aim to reclaim the rights of the indigenous people, won by the indigenous movement, through history and the written word, this essay looks at the social, cultural and political issues involved in the experiences of the Áwa people, following contact in 1973. Through this memory, I will investigate the struggle for indigenous land and the study and defence of human rights related to this period in the country.

2 • Forced contact in 1973

Reliving the sadness and the tragic memories that have scarred my people for years is not just about telling the story of a people. It is about exploring deep wounds that will never heal, in an attempt to find ways to retrieve that which was stolen in such a cowardly and cold-hearted way. These people, who for years have survived constant persecutions, killings and ambushes³ by non-indigenous people, are my family. A small number of survivors who reached Mata Azul, in the municipality of Formoso do Araguaia, tried to live as free people, without integration into other groups, particularly not into the non-indigenous ones which had almost exterminated the Āwa people in the XVIII century.

The tragic forced and violent contact happened in December 1973 and was led by the *sertanista*⁴ Apoena Mirelles, during the rainy season. According to the memories of my grandfather, Tutawa and the survivors, Caganego was gathering firewood when Apoena caught his attention by whistling and waving. Caganego ran away from him and told the others that the non-indigenous people were nearby. The *sertanista*'s team followed him and entered the camp letting off fireworks and shooting.

Caganego's alarm was the consequence of the persecution and violence our people had experienced for many years, as well as incursions by Apoena and his team onto our people's land in an attempt to make contact.

When they entered the camp, one of the four Xavantes who were with the *sertanista* was hit on the nose and Typyire was shot by the invaders who did their worst and captured the people (who had avoided contact for decades, preferring to die rather than give themselves up to the enemies) for private interests.

When Watumy and her baby Juaga, the most vulnerable people in the group, were captured, Chief Tutawa showed solidarity with his wife and child and gave himself up, asking for them not to be killed. When Tutawa handed himself over, his brother, Tuxi and his daughter Kawkamy followed suit. They were all taken to the Canuaná Farm, tied up and placed under the threat of the Xavantes, who vowed to kill the Āwa if the injured Xavante should die.

The other members of the family managed to escape, but the situation left them in a state of shock and vulnerable to food insecurity as they were fearful about what had happened. Typyire Āwa, who had been shot, soon died as she had been badly hurt.

On arrival at the Canuaná Farm, the Āwa were placed in a house surrounded by barbed wire. With the news of the capture of my people, the locals headed for the farm to take a look at the dreaded "black-faces", because for years the indigenous people had been the target of prejudiced racist stories as a strategy to justify violent actions to wipe them out.

Several times Watumy Áwa suggested they should return to the home they had been taken from against the will of our people, but this was not possible because of the constant presence of the non-indigenous people who guarded them.

In 1974, with the capture of some of our people, the National Indian Foundation (Funai) strategically used our leader, Tutawa to make contact with the others who were still free, leading them to believe they would keep their territory. Following this contact, my people set up temporary camps, first in Mata Azul, then in Capão de Areia, under the watch of indigenous soldiers of the Rural Indigenous Guard (GRIN) from the Inỹ/Javaé peoples.

In 1976, after the Brazilian state had left my people without their territory, the only solution was to transfer the Áwa people to the Javaé village, Canoanã of the Jê people. Following contact, some died from diseases as they did not have immunity. We still do not know what happened to Kapoluaga. Questions are still asked to this day because we believe he was murdered after contact was made. His photo appeared in the first official Funai bulletin, but there is no mention of him in the second one issued months after Kapoluaga had disappeared. Tuxi died of pneumonia in Goiania and his body was never returned to the family which led to great distrust and fear among my people who believed any decisions they took would surely lead to their being killed.

Ever since, we have lived on the land of people who have historically been our enemies. Although it has to be said that despite great humiliation and being ostracised on their land and in their villages, they have never evicted us.

We were forgotten by the state as were our rights and all the physical, moral and psychological violence suffered. The crime they committed against my Áwa people was dismissed. Of the survivors of the forced contact that changed the lives of the Áwa people forever, only Kawkmay Áwa is still alive.

3 • The process of reclaiming the Taego Áwa Indigenous Land

I draw comfort and hope from the awareness that we, indigenous people, have won the right to land through years of struggle within the indigenous movement. As guaranteed in the Federal Constitution of Brazil, in article 231: “The social organisation, customs, languages, beliefs and traditions of the indigenous people are recognised, as well as their original rights to the lands they traditionally occupy, with the state being responsible for the demarcation, protection and respect of their property”.

Thirty-six years after the forced contact carried out by officers of the Brazilian state, of the survivors of that violent atrocity that put the health and lives of some Áwa at risk, only Kawkamy Áwa carried her people on. She had six children on the Jê people’s territory.

Tutawa, who was the chief and shaman of the Ãwa people, ensured that his grandchildren, born after contact, had, under his care, love and dedication, the characteristics of the Tupi people, and the guarantee of returning to their traditional land, known as Taego Ãwa, with which we have the same physical connection we feel for someone we love.

Although my Ãwa people have always been aware of the place they traditionally belong to, since the time of the contact in 1973, we had not previously had help from professionals such as photographers, journalists or anthropologists in reclaiming our traditional land.

The injustice committed against my people, including both physical, emotional and moral violence and being abandoned by the Brazilian state which led to the invisibility of the Ãwa in the state of Tocantins, only started to be redressed with the start of the demarcation of the Taego Ãwa Indigenous Land.

During a study to identify the Javaé/Avá-Canoeiro⁵ indigenous land, in 2009, two researchers, Patrícia de Mendonça, an anthropologist and Luciana Ferraz, an environmentalist perceived how fragile our people are, living on foreign land and our need and longing to return to our mother land and to tell our story to people other than those living in the region.

The greatest paradox of all in this lack of humanity was when we had to convince Funai of our existence and of the need for us to return to the Taego Ãwa land. This was necessary for a Working Group specific to my people to be approved.

During the Working Group we experienced moments of considerable pain, suffering, hatred, sadness and hope, as we listened to the memories of the experiences of the three survivors of the time of the forced contact – our grandfather, Tutawa, my mother Kawkamy and my uncle Agaéky, as they told us their painful memories about what they remembered of the persecutions and their inquiries into the different killings of our people when we were still free. Our connection to the land during the interviews intensified this pain. We started to believe that there could be a way we could legally and fairly return home, because we were following the protocols set out in the 1988 Constitution.

Something that particularly caught my attention during the Working Group was the connection between the Canuanã Farm and the history of my people, my family. At the time, I was a pupil at the Bradesco Foundation school in Canuanã. My admiration for the school I had been attending since I was seven years old abruptly ended when I discovered that Funai had issued a document denying our presence on the land where we had lived. This document referred to the private interests of the Farm in negotiations with Bradesco Bank.

The Working Group report was finally delivered to Funai in 2012 and appeared in the official government publication. After publication, we came up against a number of obstacles, such as Bradesco's contestation. As a form of strategic fortification and with a view to creating visibility for our struggle to reclaim the Taego Ãwa Indigenous Land,

we accepted an invitation to make a full-length film with the Borela siblings (Henrique and Marcela), film directors,⁶ telling the story of the Taego Áwa struggle. We also started to participate in the indigenous movement with the help of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI) and in meetings with the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF) about the Taego land proceedings.

Our tragic story was published in important places, for example: The Truth Commission, being highlighted as one of the most emblematic cases; the Senate's Human Rights Committee; at the 6th Chamber of the Public Prosecutor's Office; the Amnesty Commission and in academic settings. The report was also sent to the Tocantins Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, sparking the beginning of judicial actions for reparation and the demarcation of the indigenous land.

Delivery of the identification report for the Taego Áwa indigenous land was a great victory. On 11 May 2016, one day before the coup d'état suffered by former president Dilma Rousseff, the justice minister, Eugênio Aragão, declared the Taego Áwa Indigenous Land permanent possession of the Áwa people, by means of ordonnance no. 566.⁷ Sadly, on this day our Chief, also our grandfather and an important reference in resistance and humanity, was not physically with our people, but our ancestor wept through us in joy and gratitude.

4 • The challenges of the absence of territory in facing the pandemic

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic saw the lives of the indigenous peoples being attacked on a number of fronts: by the genocide caused by the novel coronavirus; by the anti-indigenous policies of the current government and by the paralysation of non-essential services, like Funai, the main body responsible for the process of demarcating indigenous land and protecting territories.

Nowadays, due to the historical context in which we completely lost our territory to landowners in the 1970s, the Áwa people are spread out across the Iny people's territory in Tocantins, more precisely on the Ilha do Bananal. Not having our own land has had a huge impact on us in facing the pandemic and the effects of the anti-indigenous threats during this period. As we do not have demarcated land we cannot act independently in taking special precautions against Covid-19 nor do we have special access to public health services unlike other indigenous people who live on their ancestral territory.

In our case, we live according to the political rules of the Javaé and Karajá, and in the emergency years of the pandemic, we followed the preventative measures established by the leaders of these peoples. One serious problem we faced during this period was the arrival of *retireiros*⁸ who lease land on the Ilha do Bananal, possible carriers of the virus and other diseases. As Funai's activities have been inactive throughout this time, we believe it is possible

that there have been land invasions and illegal practices, like fishing, hunting, logging and other unnotified activities that constitute a contamination risk. If we were on our own land, we would be able to create our own strategies of self-protection against these threats.

In the context of the pandemic, we feel our independence and leadership concerning the right to health have been violated, as our ancestral understanding of medicine would be an important ally in preventing the disease and other risks and damage.

This has all led to increased suffering among our people since the beginning of the pandemic, making it unbearable for us to continue to be separated, fragmented and away from our ancestral home, distanced from ourselves. In spite of this we have never stopped fighting, participating in events to raise awareness about our cause, articulating and getting political support, as well as attending meetings with indigenous organisations like CIMI, indigenous movements like COIAB and the Public Prosecutor's Office, about our territory.

In this work we count on the *Comissão Memória de Tutawa*,⁹ created in mid-2020 to strengthen us as a movement and which has the support of professional people from different areas (psychology, biology, environment, anthropology, linguistics and cinema) who contribute to our actions.

5 • Anthropological analysis of the Ãwa people

Another important role of the Committee in this period was the support given to carry out an anthropological analysis, the product of articulations and many meetings. The analysis is the phase of the demarcation of land in which the judge who is in charge of the case requests an investigation to answer the questions of parties interested in the land and, on the basis of this, makes the final ruling on whether or not the demarcation will take place, depending on his/her decision. The team, made up of an expert and auxiliaries nominated by the judge, carried out this work with our people in July 2020 in a Javaé village. It took almost one month and involved a range of activities from interviews to ancestry. Photographs and videos were recorded. We had been anxiously awaiting this moment as it gave us a sense that our struggle was making progress.

However, one of the challenges we had to face in making the analysis happen was when Funai came out in opposition, using the pandemic as an argument for not going ahead with it. They had also stopped the land ownership investigation that should have been concluded in 2019.

Another issue was the difficulty in raising money to pay transportation for everyone to get to the location of the analysis as well as food and hygiene materials needed for protection against Covid-19, like hand sanitiser and masks. Through the Committee and CIMI we were able to raise funds to cover these expenses, remotely. The Brazilian justice system did not contribute to the six thousand reals raised nor did Funai. So,

without the Committee and our own indigenous organisation we would not have been able to participate in the analysis. Someone from the Committee was also with us taking photographs and making videos, helping to record this memory of our struggle, while we concentrated on answering the expert's questions.

Finally, on the chaotic backdrop of the pandemic and with the Áwa population doubly vaccinated, the anthropological analysis started on 15 July. This stage of the demarcation process was challenging, because for the first time we had to relive the past of the people without our grandfather, Tutawa. With our mother Kawkamy we had to relive sadness, pain, loss and the sense of injustice that scars our lives to this day, going back to the XVIII century and culminating in our resistance to white people in 1973.

Even in the face of all this suffering and the resistance of our Áwa people we have never stopped using the word *Namagaw*, which means "good", "to be well" or "well", because we are hopeful that we will return to our ancestral land.

Finally, carrying out the analysis was of enormous importance for us, Áwa, because we felt cared for, hopeful and strong. Since our capture, the pandemic has been one of the worst moments of our captivity and for a moment, at the analysis, we felt closer to a sense of freedom, health and life. The best way for us to protect ourselves from Covid-19 until now has been fighting for Taego. We cannot think about prevention, treatment and promoting health in a situation where indigenous people are separated from their territories.

It should be said that with suspension of Funai's activities, the demarcation process has ceased. It is also at risk with draft bill of law 490¹⁰ and the timeline thesis. This is a draft bill that makes demarcation processes impossible, removes Funai's autonomy to carry out new demarcations and allows for the review of indigenous land that has already been demarcated.

The interest of the rural benches are behind this bill,¹¹ and they have received support from the current government. It is worth noting that during his electoral campaign, President Jair Messias Bolsonaro publicly announced that he was against demarcation.

The timeline thesis is part of draft bill 490, which encompasses the interests of those who have wanted to occupy indigenous land since the violent arrival of Pedro Álvares Cabral in 1500. The timeline thesis holds that indigenous people who were not on their land on 5 October 1988 when the Brazilian Constitution was enacted, will not have the right to claim their ancestral land.

Clearly, our story did not start on 5 October 1988. We, indigenous people, occupied the whole of the Brazilian territory and the right to demarcation was won by means of the indigenous movement. We have a constitutional right to reclaim what was taken from us, in the Brazilian justice system. In order to confront these bills of law that are a direct attack on our well-being, the indigenous peoples of Brazil have been meeting in the city of Brasília,

asking the Supreme Federal Court (STF) to take a humane stance concerning our rights and asking them to vote against the timeline thesis.

This situation has caused our Āwa people intense suffering which shows, in the defence of human rights, the central place of territory in guaranteeing the health of the indigenous peoples. The Committee in Memory of Tutawa, along with supporters of the cause, have been working hard to conclude the demarcation process, creating new ways of publicising the violence suffered by our people. One example of this is the blog "*Nossa terra, nosso chão! Povo indígena Avá-Canoero*"¹² that aims to raise awareness of the Āwa cause. Another important function of the blog is as a means of ongoing contact with people and organisations interested in our cause who want to help us.

Information is provided on this page about how it is possible to help financially. Fundraising is fundamental for the association to continue organising, participating in meetings, creating physical structures and producing material for publicity and denouncements. We have definitely managed to increase visibility in this way.¹³

During the pandemic, it became clearer to us, through our contact with the Committee, that when our rights are violated or we are violated we cannot keep quiet. Visibility is central to the indigenous path towards territory, justice, demarcation and even for our very survival. It is not natural or normal that we are treated badly and neglected, and it is the memory of the teachings and warm-heartedness of Tutawa that underpin every action of the Association of the Āwa People (APĀWA) today. Our greatest memory is our struggle and our ever-deepening awareness of the need to continue resisting and existing.

This history of our people raises many questions about land and territory as a right, not only constitutionally but also at an essential level. Without our territory we indigenous people cannot live well and we are not healthy. To a non-indigenous person, land is just a piece of ground and has no symbolic or spiritual value which is why articles 231 and 232 of the Federal Constitution are so often undermined, come under threat and are regularly overridden. So, our history is painful for us, but it can also serve as a lesson for non-indigenous people on the value of memory and ancestry, on the human right that land is and that the forest is, where different types of humanity can exist, with nature intact and memories alive.

6 • Final considerations

This essay is the tale of a storyteller of the Āwa people, daughter of Kawmaky and granddaughter of Tutawa, articulator of the struggle for the demarcation of the Taego Āwa Indigenous Land, together with other leaders, for example, Chief Wapoxire. I bring memories that are not just mine. They belong to my people and are memories of our resistance to the colonizers.

We were captured in 1973 during the military dictatorship and are still suffering from serious social, vital and spiritual harm until this day. The only way for the Brazilian state to make it up to our people and repair the damage caused by this trauma is by guaranteeing the demarcation of land and the possibility for us to live according to our customs and traditional ways of socio-cultural organisation as set out in articles 231 and 232 of the Constitution.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the demand for demarcation has intensified and the absence of our territory is generating increased suffering which should be a red flag to the authorities and people working on indigenous causes regarding the well-being of the *Áwa*. The difficulties we are facing are putting our existence under duress, but we have a strong characteristic of finding joy in the toughest resistance.

The demarcation of land and the well-being of the indigenous people are at the centre of all ethno-cultural life, but the closure of Funai during the pandemic is indicative of the lack of awareness regarding the indigenous condition. Even within the context of the defence of human rights it is possible to identify the concept of who is and who is not human in the eyes of non-indigenous, elitist and Eurocentric society, which continues to marginalise my people.

Little by little, at the Committee, however, we are strengthening our desire to continue our struggle, along with those who support the cause, who contribute to awareness raising projects, fundraising and political articulation, helping our people to feel they are part of society, i.e. to feel like people with a legitimate cause.

The anthropological analysis in July 2021 was a decisive step in the process of land demarcation and it was possible thanks to this network of the Committee in Memory of Tutawa. The defence of our territory is the defence of nature, the environment and Mother Earth and this is why the struggle belongs to all of us, *Áwa* and non-indigenous people.

In this sense, it is necessary that the Supreme Court ministers come out in favour of the right to life of the indigenous peoples by voting “No” to the timeline thesis and ensuring the survival of the few indigenous people that are left in Brazil. And ensuring that this country is fair to those whose land was stolen from them and whose culture was changed by the colonialist thinking that devastated the existence of a number of peoples who used to live here.

Given the history that directly affected my people during their time in the camps at Mata Azul and Capão de Areia and still affects us today, I believe that the memory I am recording in this text is very important because it brings an indigenous viewpoint to human rights, touching on a human need that has been invisible in the pandemic and has not been recognised as a legitimate human demand. By fighting for our visibility and for our territory we are actually fighting to be recognised as human beings by the Brazilian state.

Without our territory we are not even able to look after ourselves or protect ourselves from threats to our existence because Ãwa and Taego are one and the same and while Taego is unprotected, the Ãwa people also are. The indigenous view of our people regarding human rights salvages the humanity not only of human beings, but of all that makes us who we are: the memory of Tutawa.

NOTES

- 1 • Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: reflections on the work of Nikolai Leskov", in *Magia e técnica, arte e política: ensaios sobre literatura e história da cultura* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994): 201.
- 2 • Dulce Madalena Rios Pedrosa, *O povo invisível* (Goiânia: UCG, 1994).
- 3 • The act of hiding to attack someone or to hunt.
- 4 • A person in the sertão looking for riches: a bounty hunter.
- 5 • Patricia Mendonça Rodrigues, *Relatório Circunstanciado de Identificação e Delimitação: Terra Indígena Taego Ãwa* (Brasília: FUNAI, 2012).
- 6 • "Estreio documental produzido com VHS encontrado em UFG", Universidad Federal de Goiás, 2017, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.ufg.br/e/19173-estreia-documentario-produzido-com-vhs-encontradas-na-ufg?atr=es&locale=es>; or Sessão Vitrine, Facebook page, May 8, 2017, accessed December 21, 2021, https://m.facebook.com/sessaovitrine/videos/taego-%C3%A3wa-11-de-maio-nos-cinemas/1340250719401969/?extid=SEO---&locale=ms_MY.
- 7 • "Portaria nº 566, de 11 de maio de 2016", Diário Oficial da União, 2016, accessed December 21, 2021, https://www.in.gov.br/materia/-/asset_publisher/Kujrw0TZC2Mb/content/id/22805509/do1-2016-05-12-portaria-n-566-de-11-de-maio-de-2016-22805458.
- 8 • People who lease land on the Ilha do Bananal for cattle rearing.
- 9 • The Committee in Memory of Tutawa has a partnership with the Student Centre for Indigenous Matters (NEAI) at UFT; *Amazoniza-te: Construindo Redes de Afeto*; the directors Henrique Borela and Marcela Borela; the linguist Dr. Mônica Veloso; lecturer and psychologist Carmem Hannud (CRP 23/1373); the anthropologists Patricia Rodrigues de Mendonça and Paulo Santilli; the environmentalist Luciana Ferraz and CIMI.
- 10 • "Draft Bill No. 490 of 2007", Committee for the Constitution and Justice and Citizenship (CCJC), 2007, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://static.poder360.com.br/2021/06/Parecer-PL-490-2007-CCJC.pdf>.
- 11 • A parliamentary group made up of 200 members of congress from different parties who defend the interests of agribusiness, large producers and land owners.
- 12 • "Identidade", Blog Povo Indígena Avá-Canoeiro, December 2, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://avacanoeiro.blogspot.com/?m=1>.
- 13 • In one month, we had over one thousand views on the blog.



KAMUTAJA SILVA ĀWA – *Brazil*

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