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Eliciting Self-determination: The Kayapo Mobilization Through Activism and Global Indigenous Media

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ABSTRACT

Exactly how do indigenous actors elicit the right of self-determination as inherited, and to what extent does such agency reconstitute or validate human rights norms? This essay proposes that within their unique project of self-representation and activism, the Kayapo indigenous society is indeed reformulating the concept of self-determination. I suggest that by denouncing injustice and human rights violations through self-documentation and use of global indigenous media, protests, and political alliances, this indigenous group is not only claiming reparations from the Brazilian government, but also reshaping the language of human rights. Moreover, this essay explores how the Kayapo communities engage in activism pertaining to the construction of the Belo Monte Dam, developing an international political identity in order to guarantee their right to self-determination and survival.

KEYWORDS: *indigenous peoples, self-determination, collective rights, global indigenous media*

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Introduction

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development (Article 3 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007).

Within the literature pertaining to collective rights, there is some consensus regarding the relevance of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a crucial recognition of indigenous groups as “peoples with collective rights.” As the literature suggests, however, the recognition of the right to self-determination for indigenous peoples (stated in Article 3 of the Declaration) has been strategically facilitated and redefined by indigenous peoples themselves. Such a phenomenon relates to the ability of this traditionally marginalized group to reconstitute and legitimate human rights law (Miranda, 2010) fundamentally through transnational activism (Wiessner, 2008) and engagement with human rights claims.

Exactly how do indigenous actors elicit the right to self-determination as inherited, and to what extent does such agency reconstitute or validate human rights norms? This essay proposes that within their unique project of self-representation and activism, the Kayapo indigenous society is indeed reformulating the concept of self-determination. I suggest that by denouncing injustice and human rights violations through self-documentation and use of global indigenous media, protests, and political alliances, the Kayapo peoples are not only claiming reparations from the Brazilian government, they are reshaping the language of human rights. Moreover, this essay aims to explore how the Kayapo communities engage in activism pertaining to the construction of the Belo Monte Dam, developing an international political identity in order to guarantee their right to self-determination and survival.

The struggle for recognition

Contrary to most portrayals, Indigenous peoples have not been the helpless victims of colonialism and globalization. (Flannigan, 2009: 17)

Adopted less than a decade ago, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is considered an initial triumph towards the protection and promotion of the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples. As an international instrument exclusively dedicated to “respect and promote the *inherent* rights of indigenous people”¹ the declaration assumes an extremely relevant role in mediating the recognition of the *human rights* of indigenous peoples by nation states. Likewise, it represents the culmination of collective efforts, namely from the international indigenous movement, over many decades. In fact, through the brief analysis of the literature pertaining to contemporary indigenous movements in Latin America, this essay suggests that such efforts were and continue to be constructed *by* indigenous peoples. Such an argument is sustained by the fact that contemporary indigenous struggles have been articulated through acts of so-called “domestic” resistance (i.e. defiance against an oppressive nation state, as well as political organization, two important principles entailed in the indigenous right to self-determination).

According to the literature concerning Indigenous movements in Latin America, since the 1990s previous ideologies that focused on and disseminated a discourse of invisibility of indigenous people were replaced by contemporary multicultural policies (Jackson & Warren, 2005). To a certain extent, these policies recognized ethnic differences and plural citizenries. Scholars associate this shift in the liberal discourse of systematization of individual rights with the growth and proliferation of the so-called “transnational indigenous organizations” (in many cases, non-indigenous NGOs representing certain indigenous peoples) and their role in articulating indigenous claims of collective rights. Thus, in Latin America the work of these organizations is said to have gradually gained attention and influenced many national legislative agendas. Such incomplete analysis, however, ignores the stigmatization and political subjectification² of the indigenous peoples still present in the liberal discourse of some states. It also gives an emphasis to exterior influences and Western manipulation that minimizes indigenous agency by disregarding the ongoing indigenous “struggle for greater political, economic and cultural autonomy” (Turner & Fajans-Turner, 2006: 3).

Although the neoliberal rhetoric of an enlightened pluralist state, in some cases, certainly opened space for constitutional reforms based on recognition of ethno-racial identity and sociocultural structures within nations in countries like Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Peru (Jackson & Warren, 2005), it did *not* cease to discriminate against indigenous people in the so-called “new wave of democratization.” Thus, overall so-called “recognition” perpetuates traditional power structures, provoking indigenous resistance. Issues of stigmatization and subjectification of indigenous peoples by liberal discourses, along with massive displacements in the name of economic development, can (and very often *do*) act as key triggers to indigenous resistance and transnational activism – as the Kayapo defiance through global media performance, the main subject of this essay, illustrates. The influential role of NGOs as well as other non-indigenous organizations, such as environmentalist ones, in bringing attention and influencing legislative agendas in Latin America that benefit indigenous populations at times is

¹ UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People - Annex (2007, Page 3).

² Subjectification (French: subjectivation) is a philosophical concept coined by Michel Foucault and elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It refers to the construction of the individual subject. In Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation, subjectification precedes the subject in the same way as the process of individuation precedes the creation of the individual. While the classical notion of a subject considers it as a term, Foucault considered the process of subjectification to have an ontological preeminence on the subject as a term. See Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Vol. 1. Les Editions de minuit, 1972.

not denied here. However, the emphasis given to such influence overshadows the equally important indigenous political agency within the strategy of alliance-building.

Moreover, outside the internal reforms, recent transnational activism associated with self-determination claims of nationhood within state boundaries has begun to reshape UN norms pertaining to intervention within domestic jurisdiction (Falk, 2013). In fact, indigenous peoples' claims and mobilization were strongly responsible for the activities and adoption (at last) of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (1994):

The general character of the declaration shows the degree to which the mobilization of indigenous peoples within the United Nations has reshaped standards and the overall normative climate, in which it is now widely agreed that indigenous groups qualify as a "people" within the legal meaning of the right of self-determination. (Falk, 2013: 142)

Although the "contingent, flexible, and opportunist dimensions of indigenous leaders in their involvements with national society" is often unappreciated (Warren & Jackson, 2002: 26), the opportunities provided by the rise of NGOs and indigenous and human rights conventions (along with their impact on official policies) are not completely denied here. According to anthropologists such as Turner & Fajans-Turner (2006), different forms of indigenous resistance are closely connected to the need for internal unity as well as outside support, i.e., non-indigenous allies, national and foreign governments, and organizations. Nevertheless, it is important to make clear that such ongoing collaboration has not always been stable and free of conflict. In regards to influence of NGOs, for instance, we must not ignore that ethnographic research concerning organization of indigenous populations has suggested that the pressure imposed by international NGOs political agendas negatively affects indigenous peoples' self-representation and weakens their political demands (Tilley, 2002). Likewise, the literature concerning environmental protection of the Amazon forest and indigenous rights reveals the occasional clash of incompatible discourses between Western environmentalists and indigenous groups such as the Kayapo (Turner, 1999) produced by different interpretations regarding the notions of environment and environment preservation.

Thus, as the example of the Kayapo's political resurgence fostered by claims of territorial rights illustrates, grassroots, transnational movements, and alliance-building between indigenous and non-indigenous groups should not be disregarded. These very forms of contemporary political and cultural alliances and their role in the international visibility of indigenous claims could help us answer fundamental questions regarding indigenous rights, such as "Who is entitled to represent indigenous populations?" or "Who makes the decisions about who is entitled?" (Warren & Jackson, 2002: 27)

Undoubtedly, through the use of indigenous media, the Kayapo *themselves* evoke the claim of self-determination pertaining to development projects involving their land while building transnational networks of support among NGOs and human rights organizations. The following section shall contextualize the way the Kayapo indigenous society makes use of contemporary global indigenous media³ as key mechanisms for building autonomy, identity, and international visibility.

³ According to Wilson & Stewart (2008), global indigenous media refers to "forms of media expression conceptualized, produced, and/or created by indigenous peoples across the globe" (2008:2).

Eliciting and reformulating the right to self-determination

The literature pertaining to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples suggests a symbolic significance of the term “self-determination” within all the indigenous rights it implies. Among the most relevant rights associated and negotiated within the notion of self-determination are “the right to preserve cultural identity, to have collective authority over decisions related to the land and territory in which they live, and to determine the nature and scope of development activities within that territory” (Eide, 2009: 45). Such notions belong to the core of the Kayapo’s claims and transnational activism.

The context surrounding the Kayapo claim of territorial rights

The formal state recognition of the Kayapo territories did not prevent this indigenous group from suffering massive intrusions by development projects fostered by the Brazilian government (Turner & Fajans-Turner 2006). Thus, the very origin of Kayapo performance as political actors relates to their transnational activism and engagement with human rights claims through the Altamira Gathering. Organized by the Kayapo in the early 1989 under the leadership of Paulinho Paiakan, the Altamira Gathering was the culmination of “Kakapo’s campaign against the Brazilian government’s secret plan to build, with World Bank support, a series of hydroelectric dams on the Xingú River” (Turner, 1999: 151). Strategically staged at the planned site for the first dam in Altamira, Pará, the demonstration lasted several days and drew media attention worldwide, bringing significant pressure upon the Brazilian government and forcing the World Bank to withdraw the development loan.

I argue that the complexity and partial success of the Altamira Gathering in focusing local and international attention to Kayapo’s rights was not only remarkable, it was the consolidation of the Kayapo’s fight against Western epistemic violence, i.e., conquest and invisibility. Likewise, it gave momentum to the Kayapo peoples to construct an international political and autonomous identity. Therefore, when the Brazilian government, in 2006, attempted to revive the Belo Monte hydroelectric project with minor changes, the sign that the Kayapo were fully aware of their visibility and the power that such visibility carried was reflected by a new orchestrated meeting, which this time took place in Piaracu, a village on the Xingu River. The 2006 meeting was made possible by previous alliance-buildings, and had for strategy the unification of the Xingu’s peoples, including indigenous and Amazon settlers, as an updated political movement of inter-ethnic resistance against human and environmental rights violations, as Turner & Fajans-Turner illustrate:

It is against this developmentalist climate of opinion in the Lula government and its disregard for Brazilian law, as well as human rights and environmental values, that the Kayapo have taken their stand. Although few in number and only marginally integrated into the national society, culture and economy, *they have been able to make themselves the center of a wide and ethnically diverse network of alliances with Amazonian peoples*, including both indigenous and national Brazilian

communities, and to attract support from an equally diverse assortment of groups from national and international civil society. (2006: 9).

Thus, these historical gatherings are the irrefutable proof of the Kayapo's agency and engagement with human rights through denunciation of rights violations, as well as claims of rights to self-determination. Far from being the end of their transnational activism, these events marked the rise of the Kayapo as political actors.

Kayapo self-representation through global indigenous media as political leverage

We are learning the Brazilian culture, the things of the Brazilians, in order to hold our land and protect our own culture. – Megaron, Líder Metuktire-Kayapo (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001: 64)

In order to address the primary questions proposed by this essay regarding the way the Kayapo elicit the right of self-determination as inherited, it is necessary to analyze the way that video, a contemporary Western technology, has been appropriated by indigenous people around the world through the so-called “global indigenous media,” allowing groups as the Kayapo to be “creators of their own representation.”

This project of indigenous media made us understand how the Kayapo reconstructed their cultural identity by combining elements of their traditional practices with appropriations from modern culture. The video camera adds itself to corporal painting. Whereas the televised and printed media illustrate the modernity of the Kayapo, they – masters of their own history and creators of their own representation – are leading us towards a strategy of pluricultural audiovisual representation, characterized by the diversity of voices (Frota, 1993).

The central theme of the United Nations' 2012 International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples was “Indigenous Media, Empowering Indigenous Voices.” According to the UN press release, the aim of the theme was “to highlight the importance of indigenous media in challenging stereotypes, forging indigenous people's identities, communicating with the outside world, and influencing the social and political agenda.”⁴ Indeed, scholarship indicates that contemporary media technology (such as radio, documentaries, TV, mobile phones, and the Internet) has become an important instrument of political leverage among indigenous peoples. In the particular case of the Kayapo, the appropriation of media not only challenges mainstream liberal discourses about indigenous identity and representation, but also fosters and validates international debates concerning human rights principles.

It is imperative to emphasize that the term *appropriation* as a phenomenon created by the globalization of telecommunication and availability of visual media has been largely used by anthropologists such as Turner (1992), who since 1962 has done ethnographic work and

⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/events/indigenousday/>

conducted a recognized media project *with* the Kayapo communities. Hence, the use of technology such as video recording by indigenous communities for their own purposes i.e., preservation of cultural identity or particular strategies of representation and advocacy, has been the focus of discussions among scholars (from anthropologists to media theorists) since the 1980s. Much of the debate evolved from issues with essentialism in the 1980s to later concerns about authenticity. In this regard, the inversion of roles that permeates the idea of *Other* is rather striking, as the Kayapo, once the object of research, have now enabled themselves to be the “creators” of their own representation and visibility while the anthropologist, for instance, no longer holds the exclusive control over such representation. Equally curious is the inversion of discourses and values that dismisses the empowerment of such indigenous agency in the name of a Western idea of authenticity. Despite the paradox regarding the risks of assault and deterioration of indigenous culture, traditions, and habitats posed by globalization and new modes of indigenous technologies of representation, cases of media appropriation such as the Kayapo video documentation occur in a particular context of indigenous resistance. Therefore, proclaiming media technology as yet another “invader” is undermining the motive behind indigenous appropriation: that of self-determination.

In the last twenty years, scholars have in fact recognized the indigenous peoples’ contemporary attempt to recover their narrative and reshape public opinion through the crucial agency of political compromise, i.e., the willingness of collaboration for the sake of cultural preservation, as well as recuperation of their collective stories through indigenous media, particularly film and video. Hence, the recent debates go beyond issues of traditional or authentic indigenous identity threats related to indigenous media production. Moreover, it is not only clear now that indigenous peoples have the right and the ability to represent themselves, but also that such appropriation of technology is unmistakably directed to a project of preservation and political claim, as Ginsburg (1991) notes: “[a]lmost always, the initial activities engaged in with the camera are simultaneously assertive and conservative of identity: documenting injustices and claiming reparations, making records of their lives and knowledge of elders”(Ginsburg, 1992: 104).

The case of Kayapo video practices reinforces the indigenous media claim of preservation, by recuperating narratives while negotiating with the dominant culture: “[o]ur children and grandchildren will be able to look at these images. Even the white people will watch the images of our culture, and that is how we will remain Kayapo (Megaron, leader Metuktire-Kayapo; Gumucio-Dagron, 2001:64).

Such protection of traditional values and, most importantly, the re-appropriation of inner stories and self-expression implicate the incorporation and adaptation of communicative technologies as tools to resist dominant cultures – mainly by raising awareness and recognition. The risk of cultural attrition, nevertheless, is not completely ignored by the Kayapo. Scholarship has pointed to the Kayapo willingness to sacrifice their culture to a certain extent through the use of indigenous media for the sake of advocacy. The first Kayapo media project, for instance, developed in 1985 in collaboration with independent filmmaker Monica Frota, is a fair display of the Kayapo’s own idea of representation. Entitled *Mekaron Opoi D’joi* (He Who Creates Images), the video uses archival as well as the Kayapo’s footage and illustrates the political implications and repercussions of indigenous self-representation in relation to public opinion. In the video the Kayapo initially made use of the new technology (video cameras) to record rituals and practices, aiming to preserve memory and culture for future generations, while eventually connecting all the Kayapo villages through the exchange of video messages. Nevertheless, the Kayapo

understanding of media gained a remarkable political dimension when videos subsequently were turned into tools to denounce human rights violations such as the Altamira Dam (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001). Thus, it is important to understand the overall agency of the Kayapo in reinforcing their identity and resisting oppression through a conscious use of media to elicit self-determination as inherited.

Furthermore, since the Altamira gathering the Kayapo have used video as a weapon of visibility and advocacy against social and political struggles. The “ability to interact with Western society while maintaining their own culture” (Flannigan, 2009: 17) displays the Kayapo desire to defend their rights and ways of life and confirms their political agency and strategies of alliance-building, contrary to previous portrayals of indigenous people as helpless and incapable, whose only salvation rested upon organizations like FUNAI (Brazilian National Indian Foundation) and NGOs alike.

Channeling solidarity

Since the 1989 Altamira Gathering orchestrated by the Kayapo, the fight against the construction of the Belo Monte Dam has gained national and international visibility, allowing the Kayapo to tune in to a variety of channels within its allies, environmentalist and human rights movements. Such political strategy aims at publicity, and thus global awareness and solidarity in relation to the Kayapo current battle against the human rights violations pertaining to their displacement and the profanation of their land. The Kayapo people understand the impact of such visibility, i.e., the political implications of media production, circulation, and consumption linked to these alliances. Therefore, besides deciding on their own terms *who* is entitled to represent them and *how*, I argue that the Kayapo now use their allies to help produce and manipulate their image to fulfill their own purposes as an indigenous group.

As an illustration, the indigenous media project Video in the Villages (VIV), founded in 1987 in Brasilia by the *Centro de Trabalho Indigenista* (CTI), has facilitated the production and editing of indigenous films *by* indigenous groups like the Kayapo, according to Barber (2011):

Today nearly all VIV films are directed and edited by indigenous filmmakers, and these filmmakers are usually members of the community depicted in the film. Though originally intended for internal consumption and domestic advocacy, videos produced as part of the VIV project have now been shown around the world at film festivals and special screenings hosted by international organizations such as Amazon Watch and the United Nations. VIV films have also garnered a substantial amount of attention within Brazil, including a retrospective held in Rio de Janeiro in 2004 in celebration of the organization’s fifteenth anniversary, and a major exhibition in Brasilia in 2006. (2011: 4)

Thus, the Kayapo first experiment with video projects as an approach to performing ethnographic documentation of themselves for themselves (Turner, 1991) became part of a larger project of self-representation and construction of the Kayapo’s identity as cultural and political subjects. Among the allies that embrace the Kayapo people’s struggle with the developmentalist

state in the case of the Belo Monte Dam, NGOs are undeniably an important resource for global distribution of information and attention for the cause. Organizations like Amazon Watch and Cultures of Resistance have promoted and screened Kayapo videos and supported the filming of (non-Kayapo) documentaries such as *The Battle for The Xingu* (2009) to raise international awareness.

The main vehicle of advocacy is, nevertheless, the Internet: websites and social media urge non-Kayapo audiences to acknowledge and to take “virtual” action (by signing petitions on line or writing to authorities) regarding environmental issues and the violation of indigenous rights related to the Belo Monte developmental project. Xingu Vivo is one of the national NGOs that tap into every connection available in the digital word: a website with updated news about the cause (www.xinguvivo.org.br), a Twitter account (with daily posts in Portuguese and English), Facebook group, a Ulule account (in Portuguese, English, and French), a blog, and a YouTube channel that makes documentaries and videos produced by non-indigenous organizations available to the public (including videos by famous Western directors and actors, such as James Cameron and Sigourney Weaver). Hence, the digital world is no longer a privilege of Western cultures. The Kayapo chief Raoni (perhaps the most internationally recognized Kayapo) has his own website (www.raoni.com), Facebook page, and Twitter account – all paths that lead to the same ideal: to inform outsiders about the Kayapo struggle while contributing to ethical debates, solidarity, and funds.

Conclusion

The flame of self-determination... needs to burn from inside the indigenous community itself. Internal and domestic law can, and should... protect, and grow this flame... illuminating the path for the ultimate goal of self-realization of indigenous peoples around the world (Wiessner, 2008: 1176).

Some scholars believe that indigenous participation in international human rights law-making remains constricted by discursive and structural limitations (Miranda, 2010) and therefore that “affirmative steps should be taken to more effectively protect, promote and revitalize” indigenous cultures and ways of life (Wiesner, 2008: 1175). Yet, I argue that the Kayapo’s transnational activism through the use of global indigenous media, as contextualized here, claims and redefines the indigenous right to self-determination under the Kayapo’s own terms. The actions of *self-help* and *re-empowerment* represent the Kayapo’s most valuable survival and flourishing tools.

Moreover, considering that “in essence, [the law] ought to serve human beings,” and that “any effort to design a better law should be conceived as a response to human needs and aspirations” (Wiessner, 2008: 1170), the Kayapo resistance, as described in the present essay, simultaneously validates and reshapes indigenous human rights’ norms in regards to culture, land, autonomy, and self-government rights.

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