

ÖWAWE HOIBARÉ/RIO DAS MORTES ALIVE

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DOSSIER WORLDS IN PERFORMANCE: 20 YEARS
NAPEDRA

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INTRODUCTION

The Öwawe Hoibaré Video Series comprises seven episodes documenting the relationship between the A'uwé Xavante peoples and the Rio das Mortes river, in the context in which plans to construct a hydroelectric plant is presented to the A'uwé by the Bom Futuro group, a giant in Brazil's agribusiness sector with a history of building dams on rivers in the proximity of indigenous lands in southern Amazonia, located in Mato Grosso state, Brazil.

This river has been a home to the A'uwé Xavante since the beginning of the twentieth century when, withdrawing from contact with the white colonizers and fleeing a smallpox epidemic, they discovered the Rio das Mortes and the Salesian mission on its shore. As Gomide (2011, 118) writes, the 1940s were marked by the "occupation of the Center-West agricultural frontier under the ideology of occupying 'empty' spaces and conquering territories with the 'Marcha para o Oeste' (Westward March) led by the Roncador-Xingu Expedition and the Central Brazil Foundation. Following "official pacification" (Gomide 2011, 118), the A'uwé Xavante settled around the Salesian missions and, over time, obtained the demarcation and approval of some of their lands. Today, the A'uwé Xavante live in nine demarcated indigenous lands, half of them on the banks of the Rio das Mortes. Their society is divided into two exogamous clans, öwawe and pored-




za'ono, meaning “river” and “tadpole” respectively, and is organized by a complex ritual life that centers on distinct age groups (Maybury-Lewis, 1984; Graham, 1985, Falleiros, 2011). Aracy Lopes da Silva (1986), who I was lucky to have as a tutor in the 1990s, provided a detailed description of Xavante social structure and recommended a deeper anthropological analysis of their mythological corpus.

My own visual ethnography was conducted in May 2022 and set out to gather the material needed for a study of the material and symbolic relations between the Xavante A'uwé and the Rio das Mortes river. The videos were edited in short films to be distributed in support of the A'uwé's demand for recognition of their Right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent concerning the proposed project for a hydroelectric plant, which involves the construction of a dam on the river, with a huge impact on the life of the fish, gallery forests, and all life of the cerrado biome.

An analysis of the A'uwé mythology allows us to glimpse the symbolic relationships in which the öwawe clan is the river and women are associated with fish. The river feeds the A'uwé with fish and all the rivers and streams in the northwest region of Mato Grosso with its waters until it eventually flows into the Xingu River, a major southern affluent of Amazon. For the A'uwé, water is an essential element that marks the different moments of their life cycle. The river itself is a fundamental social space for childhood; in adulthood, young people depend on the river in their initiation ritual to become men; and even in death, the river also plays a vital role.

The river marks the different moments of a person's life. In childhood, parents teach children to bathe in the river from an early age, to enter the water, jumping up and down, so as to grow quickly and purify themselves. Bathing in the river protects a person and rids them of evil spirits. On the way to adulthood, they perform the male ear piercing ritual. After participating in this rite of passage, young initiates belong to the Ritei'wa category and can have sex. The group of youths perform the water-beating ritual for a month before the ear piercing that distinguishes them as A'uwé men. After their ears have softened, elders perforate their ears using a jaguar bone, and the youngsters go back to beating river water again for another ten days. These rituals purify and strengthen the spirit. Likewise, in the myth of the U'ú, present in the women's naming rite, the lakes and the river are the main spatial references.

When an A'uwé Uptabi dies, the hair of their relatives is shaved off and buried at the river's edge. The river will wash away all the pain and the person's spirit will be purified so that he or she can reborn soon. Afterwards, the hair will grow back strongly and will look beautiful. The spirit will return from the village of the dead. Therefore, to dam the river is to



wipe out the fish and threaten the rituals intrinsic to the A'uwé Uptabi way of life.

From the A'uwé point of view, the rivers must always flow so that the land remains healthy, the fish are able to live and the life cycles can be renewed. Water purifies and makes a person grow and the spirit of water accompanies the Xavante A'uwé. In their mythical repertoire, the story of the fish, which the elders tell, speaks of their kinship with them: the fish are the ancient women who fell into the river and were transformed into fish.

RIO DAS MORTES (RIVER OF DEATHS) ALIVE


In the first episode of the series Öwawe Hoibare/Rio das Mortes (River of Deaths) Alive, a fisherman, Teseretomozatse Moritu, tells us how the river is like a mother who feeds and breastfeeds her children and nephews. The river flows and its flow nourishes (Öwawe Hoibare 2022a). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1bEiWC86_8

The gallery forests that line the river are home to countless species of animals, each of them unique for the A'uwé, fishermen, hunters, and gatherers of the cerrado vegetation that characterize this region, called Ró by the indigenous population. It is the dwelling place of the Xavante A'uwé world, the source for the elaboration of its ritual and mythical richness, their classification system and their own knowledge. Paths through the forest (Gomide, 2009) – today restricted to demarcated Indigenous Lands and gallery forests – connect the A'uwé of different regions, despite the advance of agribusiness, placing the communities under siege with its roads, railways, wire fences, tractors, trucks, and the nefarious idea of “hydroelectric exploration.” I was able to document the fishing practices and the education of children on the banks of the rivers of the beautiful Rio das Mortes basin, which is now under threat.

In the next film, Tepemrami/Fishing, we follow the visit of the wapté to Smoke Waterfall in the Toricoejo district, an activity proposed by the teachers and accepted by the godparents (Öwawe Hoibare 2022b).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=588vOIXrhGw&t=7s>

The river plays a central role in children's education and it is the location of a series of bodily practices, games, and fights. Every boy is a swimmer. Bathing, drinking, cooking, every kind of household use. The villages are located along the river systems. In São Marcos there is the mission presence; in Etenhiritipa the reference point to the presence of the State



is “the Indigenous Post, where whites no longer live.” In both localities, the process of becoming a person entails acquiring a name and many new connections and, then, becoming a member of a moiety.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6YQSS9GaqU&t=38s>

In another episode, set in Etenhiritipá, in the Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land, Jurandir Ruró Xavante mentions the relationship between the clan system and the rivers and streams where tadpoles spawn. Eurico explains that a plant is Poredza’ono because it is the incarnation of an ancestor, which is why it flourishes at the water’s edge.


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxjHKZws-UU&t=313s>

The short films presented here are being circulated in the A’uwé networks as a way to open spaces for debate on the threat posed by the hydroelectric plant to life in the river of the Xavante A’uwé Indigenous Lands.

COLONIAL INCURSIONS INTO THE CERRADO TODAY

Today, we see the expansion of the capitalist frontier over Indigenous Lands in the cerrado and Amazon regions, part of a voracious process that has been pressurizing communities to enter the market economy and adopt the commodity logic of organizing life (Neves and Mendonça, 2018). The A’uwé live well with their river, hunting and fishing, despite non-indigenous health care, schooling, and the federal indigenist agency, Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas (National Indigenous People Foundation – FUNAI).

In his studies on the advances of the capitalist frontier, between an expansion front and another pioneer front, Martins (1996) writes that the time of the frontier is the meeting of different temporalities. A violent time marked by the encounter between the logics of the big landowners, settlers who seized lands in Mato Grosso, and the indigenous cosmology, configuring “conflicts over different conceptions of destiny” (Martins 1996, 45). My own work in progress will map this process using video technology. Faced with the prospect of the Entre Rios Energia hydroelectric plant, including the context of many other incursions made by the capital into protected lands today, the A’uwé demand Free, Prior, and Informed Consent as a right guaranteed by International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169. The A’uwé Xavante insist that this consultation must be conducted in all the Indigenous Lands bordering the Rio das Mortes: the São Marcos Indigenous Land (IL), Merure IL (Boe Bororo), Areões IL, and Pimentel Barbosa IL, as well as the Sangradouro Indigenous Land, where



the company has met with some village communities without forwarding the consultation process to the A'uwé Xavante people.

In Mato Grosso/Brazil, today, another form of harassment seen on Indigenous Lands has been “Agro Xavante,” an experiment in formalizing a grain production cooperative (COOI Grande San) by the promotion of the Rural Union in the municipality of Primavera do Leste/MT. This project followed the mold of the “indigenist policy” introduced by the Bolsonaro government, aiming to legalize criminal practices that violate indigenous peoples’ right to cultural difference and autonomy. The influence of the ruralist lobby on the idea of the cooperative is evident in every video produced for the project based in Sangradouro. The population also mentions previous attempts to legalize the incursions of rural producers onto the Indigenous Land when the tractors of local farmers deforested the region. Today, this land is described as “previously anthropized” in legal proceedings that led to the Mato Grosso Public Prosecutor’s Office legally recognizing the cooperative and its Terms of Agricultural-Technical Cooperation. Despite their responsibility to protect indigenous rights, both FUNAI and the Public Prosecutor’s Office allowed this to happen. In Sangradouro, 11,000 hectares of native forest were transformed into a monocultural swidden, destroying the cerrado. By proposing incentives for illegal land leasing, advertising soybean productivity, mechanization, deforestation, and monocropping, the farmers lend their tractors and keep the harvest.

The poor logic of profits at any cost cannot buy the presence of *Ró*, the cerrado, in A'uwé life. The cerrado, its vegetation, the animals, the plants used as herbal medicines, the fish and the manioc used for bread, the ritual cycles, and knowledge – none of this is valued by capital beyond its market price. The productivist rhetoric ignores the wealth of knowledge accumulated over centuries of relationship with *Ró*. The gardens, hunting lore, medicines, fishing, villages, healthcare, ritual systems, and bodies. The driving force in this conflict is agribusiness, which, along with its roads, trucks, and planes, continues to advance over land and water, over the birds, fish, and animals of the cerrado. It is *Ró* that the A'uwé Xavante fight to defend.

The hydroelectric plants on the Rio das Mortes are fiercely resisted since they will undoubtedly have a hugely negative impact on their lives, starting with traditional food sources. A'uwe people’s shift towards a sedentary lifestyle after settling in missions and Indigenous Lands has led to an increase in health problems related to dietary changes, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, as well as the resurgence of infectious diseases like tuberculosis. The introduction of sugar in the form of soft drinks, breads, and cakes, as well as the introduction of grains, such as

rice, have altered the nutritional makeup of A'uwe Xavante bodies. These factors have not failed to influence the high rates of fatalities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without the river, nutritional autonomy will prove profoundly difficult.

This is a work in process that proposes a video intervention in the study of the relationship between the A'uwé and the river at a critical moment of their mutual history. The ethnographic video project aims to document the current situation, as well as intervene in the licensing process. Creating a space of visibility for A'uwé ways of life and their relations with the *öwawe*, circulating first within the indigenous communities and, later, to the white world, this work seeks to narrate the case from the Xavante A'uwé perspective.

The organization of screenings of the material in the villages constitutes the Rio das Mortes Vivo movement. The circulation of video materials (spoken in the Xavante language) should have a positive and energizing impact on the A'uwé networks, helping constitute a public arena in which the A'uwé's right to their own way of life can be expressed. All care will be needed to deal with the various misconceptions and rivalries pre-existing between the groups separated by non-indigenous colonization.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

The Öwawe Hoibaré video series consists of seven episodes which document the relations between the A'uwé Xavante peoples and the Rio das Mortes, in the moment where the project for a hydroelectric plant is presented to the A'uwé by a Brazilian agribusiness giant.

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