

Reappropriating the Trincheira-Bacajá Indigenous Land

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

This photo essay aims to describe the process of reappropriation of a part of the Trincheira-Bacajá Indigenous Land by the Mebengokré in September 2021, after almost three years of its invasion by not-indigenous people. The images were taken by Bepkyi Xikrin when the Mebengokré have been able to return to the area after the partial removal of the invaders. The perceptions and sensations of the invasion's impacts on the environment, as well as the participation of the people in this collective recuperation highlight the social dimension of the environment as well as the resistance of the Mebengokré resistance and their struggle for their lives, lands and rights.

Keywords

Mebengokré, Amerindians, land occupation, land recuperation, Amazon, deforestation

Bio

Bepkyi Xikrin is a Mebengokré from the Mrötidjam village in the Trincheira-Bacajá Indigenous Land. Throughout his life, he has helped anthropologists work with his people, developing great intercultural sensibility. He was trained as an Indigenous Environmental Officer by the Nature Conservancy, and currently works in environmental inspection and control of Indigenous Land. He also produces images to document important events in his village and in the Indigenous Land.

Paride Bollettin works with the Mebengokré since 2015. He obtained the PhD in anthropology at the University of Siena and worked in diverse universities in Brazil, Italy, UK and Latvia. Actually he is an assistant professor at the Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Science, Masaryk University and permanent professor at the Graduate Program in Social Sciences of the Universidade Estadual Paulista. <https://www.muni.cz/en/people/247100-paride-bollettin>

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Introduction

The Trinchreira-Bacajá Indigenous Land is located in central Brazil, along the Bacajá River, which is a tributary of the larger Xingu River. The region has recently become known for the construction of the Belo Monte hydro dam, which had serious consequences for the surrounding region, by affecting the water flow of the Xingu River and its tributaries, including the Bacajá River (Oliveira and Cohn 2014). Along with this mega-infrastructure, the region experienced a greatly accelerated process of invasion of the various Indigenous Lands in the region, which had devastating effects on the environment and social life of these people. Although invasions and expropriations of Indigenous Lands are not new in the Amazon, they have increased in recent years with the accelerated advance of the exploratory economy in the forest. Several invasions have also occurred along the borders of the Trinchreira-Bacajá Indigenous Land, and in the surrounding towns, trucks can be seen illegally transporting timber and removing tons of logs from the area.

One of these invasions began in 2018 and took place in the southern part of the Trinchreira-Bacajá Indigenous Land. A few thousands invaders entered the forest and began deforestation in order to sell the trees, plant crops, raise cows, engage in illegal mining, and build houses. Although they were people without land of their own, they were supported financially and practically by some large landowners. Some newspapers reported the invasion and the associated *queimadas*, the burning of the forest, and the judiciary issued several orders over time to remove the invasion, but no official action was taken until the end of July 2021 and the invaders continued to illegally occupy the land. Additionally, the invasion was also the source of the arrival of the Covid-19 in the Indigenous Land, endangering even more the health situation, as it happened among diverse indigenous people (Pacheco 2020). The invaders came close to some Mebengokré villages, as well as they occupied hunting and fishing sites, ancient villages, and other traditionally significant sites. Eventually, a massive intervention by the Nacional Indigenous Foundation, the Brazilian institute of the Environment and Renewable Resources, and the Federal Police, supported by military forces and helicopters of the Brazilian Army, managed to drive away a large part of the invaders from one of these invasions, despite not all of them yet.

At the end of August 2021, a large meeting was held in the Mrötidjam village, attended by representatives of all twenty villages of the Trinchreira-Bacajá Indigenous Land participated. During this meeting, the Mebengokré decided that it was time to reappropriate this place was arrived, since it had been impossible for them to go there since the invasion, as the invaders were heavily armed. Many of them took part in this expedition, *mebenghete*, elderly, *memu*, men, *menire*, women, and *meprire*, children. From the *Kenkrô* village, that was the nearest to the invasion, the Mebengokré moved into the area from which the invaders had been driven. Before the expedition, a *metoro*, a ritual/festival/party, was held, in which songs and dances were performed. The *menire* painted among themselves and their husbands and kins. Then they moved along trails into the forest. Only seven kilometres separated the village from the frontier of deforestation by the invasion.

The panorama was bleak and the feeling sad because the usual management of the land is now not possible and it will take long time for the forest to recover. The Mebengokré used to hunt tapirs, wild boars, turtles and other wild animals, but now they can find only horses, porks, chickens, and donkeys bred by the non-indigenous people. A change that affected the panorama of their multispecies relations (Bollettin 2019). In the place there were also numerous Brazilian nuts large and old trees, and the Mebengokré were used to collect these nuts for food and for sale. The invaders cut down all these trees (which are also protected by Brazilian environmental law) and all the rest of the forest to plant grass for their cattle and to plant their gardens. The gardens of the Mebengokré have a small extension, consist of a large variety of plants, and

are temporary, as they are disbanded at each three or four years so that the forest can grow again in that places (Bollettin 2020a). In this way, the gardens with their biodiversity also provide food for wildlife. Extensive monocultural agriculture and cattle ranching, as practiced by the invaders, reduce the food supply for the Mebengokré, but also the possibility of obtaining the games consumed during the metoro, such as the kaprá, turtles, which make the metoro rai, mex, big, beautiful, effective (Bollettin 2020b). But the invaders did not only affect the forest and its animal inhabitants. They also occupied sites where ancient villages were located, places the Mebengokré passed through in their history, sites that constitute a living memory of the people (Bollettin 2015). The Mebengokré are now wondering what to do with the deforested area, now that they reappropriate of it.

The images in this photo essay, taken by Bepkyi Xikrin as a member of the expedition during the Mebengokré visit to the place, describe the reappropriation of this part of the Trincadeira-Bacajá Indigenous Land. In these he presents a specific Mebegnokré aesthetics, actualising the use of audiovisuals for documenting their political struggles (Turner 1992). Despite the expulsion of the invaders, others are still present in their Land, threatening the lives of the Mebengokré in their subsistence and social practices. The impact of the predatory economy on the Amazon endangers the indigenous peoples, as well as the other visible and invisible inhabitants of the forest, but also the non-indigenous (Kopenawa and Albert 2013). In this case, the “end of the World” has been temporarily postponed (Krenak 2020), but the Mebengokré struggle for their lives, lands, and rights still continues.



Photo 1 The Mebengokré joined together from the various villages of the Thrincheira-Bacajá Indigenous Land for the realization a *metoro* at Kenkrô village before the expedition to the invaded area (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 2 The Mebengokré also documented the realization of the *metoro* at Kenkrô village before the expedition recording with their smartphones images and videos to be shared with their non-indigenous friends and with their parents of others Indigenous Lands (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 3 Women, *menire*, walking in the forest while moving from the Kenkrô village to the invaded area, looking at the ground to observe for possible dangers as well as for mapping the changes in the vegetation due to the deforestation (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 4 Women, *menire*, walking in the forest in the typical single line they adopt when moving in the forest for their travelling to collect botanical specimens or to move to their gardens, in this case they are going to the invaded area in the same way (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 5 The Mebengokré walking in the forest separating the Kenkrô village from the limits of the invasion, the author recorded this image to show the grandeur of the forest in the region when compared with the following images of the deforestation (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 6 The Mebengokré arriving at the invaded area with the changing landscape and documenting their expedition (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 7 The Mebengokré arriving at the deforested area of the invasion, with evidences of the recent deforestation, which causes a concern about how to restore the area (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 8 The Mebengokré arriving at another patch of the deforested area, in which the invaders were beginning to cut down the forest for opening spaces for the pastures (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 9 The Mebengokré passing through the deforested area characterized by the presence of buriti palms, a plant that proliferates in recent burned areas (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 10 The Mebengokré passing through a patch of the territory burned short before the expulsion of the invaders, who continued to transform the place until the very last moment before their expulsion (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 11 The Mebengokré passing through and observing a pasture created by the invaders, who use cattle breeding as a strategy for advancing in the forest and fixing their presence (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 12 A pasture planted by the invaders after the deforestation to grow the cattle, in which just few trunks of Brazilian nut trees are standing, a plant protected by by the Brazilian law and widely used by the Mebengokré now substituted by the grass (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 13 A road opened by the invaders inside the invasion with lateral fences separating the plots, and which connects the invasion with the close settlements of non-indigenous people outside the Thrincheira-Bacajá Indigenous Land (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 14 A donkey of the invaders beyond a fence that they left in the area after the expulsion, one of the numerous animals they introduced in the area substituting local animals of the forest (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 15 Some pigs bred by the invaders in a creek in the area, usually used for drinking or fishing but which has now become a mud puddle (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 16 A mebenghete, elder (on the left with a red feather crown), realising a me kaben, a formal speech to the young people in the reappropriated area and expressing both his sadness for the deforestation and his proud of the courage of young people to engage in the expedition (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 17 The Mebengokré staying in one of the few shadow patches in the reappropriated area while waiting for the arrival of all the others (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 18 The Mebengokré meeting after the arrival of everyone in the reappropriated area, with some of them recording the moment as a tool for their political fightings (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).



Photo 19 The Mebengokré documenting and recording the metoro they realised for claiming the success of the expedition, with the ones in the middle crouched and bent over while singing (Author: Bepkyi Xikrin, 2021).

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