

Seizing the words – politics among guarani and kaiowa women

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Lauriene Seraguza Olegário e Souza

Universidade Federal da Grande Dourados | Dourados, MS, Brasil
laurieneolegario@ufgd.edu.br |
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9825-6626>

ABSTRACT

This text reflects on the fabrication of the body and construction of personhood among the Guarani and Kaiowa, highlighting the centrality of women in social organization and political action. Women wield a political potency that acts in several spheres of social life, through different mechanisms that all originate in their prerogative of “feeling more.” However, their position in the social organization sometimes allows them to harden their speeches, especially those addressed to the outside of the village, while seeking softness in the internal relations within the *tekoha*, when imminent risk to life is perceived. We discuss the processes of producing feminine bodies and words, understood as possible practices of “presentative” politics in which we identify the effort to produce beautiful, light, happy, but also warlike bodies. Those are the bodies that occupy the trenches of the land repossessions, the center of the great assemblies, and other strategies of Guarani and Kaiowa political action in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil.

KEYWORDS

Amerindian
Politics,
Indigenous
Women, Kaiowa
and Guarani

Tomar as palavras – política entre as mulheres guarani e kaiowa

RESUMO Este texto é dedicado às reflexões acerca da produção do corpo e da construção da pessoa entre os Guarani e Kaiowa e da centralidade das mulheres na organização social e no fazer político. As mulheres possuem uma potência política que atua em diversas esferas da vida social e através de diferentes mecanismos que partem de sua prerrogativa de “sentir mais”. Todavia, a posição que ocupam na organização social, às vezes, permite o endurecimento de suas falas, geralmente aquelas que são feitas para fora da aldeia, buscando a suavidade nas relações internas da *tekoha*, quando se percebe o risco iminente da vida. Trata-se de uma reflexão sobre os processos de produção corporal e de palavras femininas, enquanto práticas possíveis de uma política “presentativa” em que se identifica o esforço em produzir corpos belos, leves, alegres, mas também guerreiros, que são os corpos que ocupam as trincheiras das retomadas, o centro das grandes assembleias e outras estratégias de ação política guarani e kaiowa no Mato Grosso do Sul.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Política Ameríndia, Mulheres
Indígenas, Kaiowa e Guarani

NOTES ON “PRESENTATIVE” POLITICS

This text results from imaginative efforts around inventive possibilities regarding the “politics of presentation.”¹ In this kind of politics, as we understand it here, the delegation of power is seen as a differentiating factor, reporting to the center of indigenous thought, where kinship relationships established in everyday life and intimacy are fundamental to an existential possibility for the outside, standing in contrast to the politics of “representation.”

An existence in “representative” politics is apparently of little significance in general terms, or even in the exercise of the politics of lived life, here understood as that of “presentation” which presents itself in networks of relationships, but little “represents” beyond inattentive interests, some of which (the most dazzled) by non-indigenous eyes.

When searching within the indigenous lands for that which is strictly understood as politics, in an isolated, autonomous way, or even in its effervescence, those gazes receive and perceive little of what mobilizes political action among indigenous people in actuality, beyond some magnified figures or contexts — those who have their agencies crossed by multiple relationships, and its Strathernian inspiration makes this kind of figure be perceived as the one containing many — a “dividual” (SZTUTMAN, 2012), recurrently compared to the privilege of leaders and shamans, in their specific contexts.

The elaboration I present here seeks precisely to echo the provocation around “representative” politics in order to “take a closer look”² at how female political actions are consolidated in the political arena, given that Guarani and Kaiowa women are concerned about the whole; and, having made everyone around them grow, they find themselves empowered as founding voices of strategic political decisions and actions of collective interest: actions that come close to the idea of “presentative” politics that I pursue here.

This idea departs from the elaboration of a “cosmopolitical proposition” that is less accelerated and more open, even open to the agency of the cosmos over politics and vice versa (STENGERS, 2018). “Politics” is thus offered a conceptual expansion required in the face of regimes of indigenous creativity, since, as Beatriz Perrone-Moisés suggested, “all politics is, in some way and everywhere, cosmopolitics” (PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2011: 868).

In order to think about this question, I bring up the Guarani and Kaiowa ethnographic landscape in Mato Grosso do Sul, taking this opportunity to respond to those who took away these women’s capacities for the political as for the agentivity in conflict. Their talents in administering and mediating between worlds have already been largely ignored, and there are few records of their political agencies

¹ | This article stems from my doctoral thesis *As Donas do Fogo – Política e Parentesco nos Mundos Guarani* (“Women Keepers of the Fire – Politics and Kinship in the Guarani Worlds”), supervised by Marcio F. Silva and defended at PPGAS/USP in 2022, holding a FAPESP scholarship (Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo, process n. 2017/09129-7). A preliminary version was presented as an oral communication at the Seminar “Amerindian Political Representation and ‘Presentation.’ Coexistence and Hybridization of Regimes of Politics in Tropical South America,” organized by the AMAZ project, under LAS of Collège de France and CEstA of University of São Paulo, on the 24th, 25th, and 26th of October 2022. This seminar brought together dozens of researchers who were set on discussing the politics of “presentation” and “representation,” being provoked by the event organizers, Alexandre Surrallés (ANR/AMAZ project coordinator) and Renato Sztutman, Adriana Testa, and Marcio Silva (USP/CEstA/AMAZ).

² | As the organizers of the Seminar had urged, in their official call.

and creative capabilities being activated, most of which were produced in the last decade.

More than half of the 116.4 thousand people registered by IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística) in 2022 as indigenous in Mato Grosso do Sul are Guarani and Kaiowa. In Latin America, the Guarani amount to almost 280 thousand people, distributed between Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil. They are divided into three majority groups: Kaiowa (or Paĩtavyterã), Mbya, and Ñandeva (or Guarani, or Xiripa, or even Ava Guarani) (MAPA GUARANI CONTINENTAL, 2016).

The Kaiowa and Guarani in Mato Grosso do Sul currently occupy more than 60 areas, approved or under titling study, located in urban neighborhoods, in camps, or on land reclaimed as repossession, *retomadas* (FUNAI, 2015; SERAGUZA, 2015). The diversity of territorial situations to which they are subjected, since the fragmentation of their areas through the constitution of the so-called national territories, highlights the uniqueness of each of these indigenous groups in their specific lands.

In Mato Grosso do Sul, the Brazilian government, between 1905 and 1928, reserved eight small pieces of land for the Guarani and Kaiowa to be settled. They were mostly expelled from their ancestral areas by agents of the SPI (Indian Protection Service), currently FUNAI (National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples), making their lands available for the agropastoral advance fronts. This gave way for extensive monoculture plantations, cattle raising, and other non-indigenous interests to develop at the beginning of the 20th century.

This settlement process in small spaces of land — reserves — was called “confinement” by Antonio Brand (1997, 1993) and resulted in indigenous people remaining confined to reserves for almost a hundred years. Many Guarani and Kaiowa resisted expulsion by employing themselves as workers on the new farms, to continue to access their territory. However, from the 1970s onward, these indigenous collectives were put under even greater pressure by the increasing deforestation of the few forest areas that still remained in the state, and by the intensification of conflicts between indigenous groups and the new non-indigenous farmers who had arrived there.

These decisive facts, combined with population growths and countless conflicts arising from confinement in reserves, justified a process of return to the lands, the *tekoha*, from where the Guarani and Kaiowa had been expelled by non-indigenous people and their weapons. They come back through what they call in Portuguese “*retomadas*,” land repossession, a form of political action that aims to pressure the State to return and regularize their territories. The repossession is perceived as politics of “presentation” — politics referring to everyday life, to the emergencies of life, to a collective uprising, and to a response to the way of life of the *karai kuera*, the non-indigenous people.

It is necessary to highlight that, in recent years, in addition to the political terms of “presentation,” other political experiments of a representative nature have been practiced, such as the “Aldear a Política” project promoted by APIB³ (Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil). The initiative resulted in the State’s acceptance, not without tension, of the indigenous presence in its rigid structure. This includes elected indigenous women representatives who, in addition to fulfilling their public duties, keep imparting strength and courage to the women leaders in their respective territories.

It seems that representation is only possible when there are those who create bodies that are strong enough and capable of establishing relationships with the outside, non-indigenous, non-everyday world — which can often be taken as the price of representation, in the face of a certain refusal to accept such a representative format. In a world in which it is possible to cohabit — not without tensions or disputes — the two relationships, the politics of “representation” and the “presentative” politics, the fact that representation in State politics has included indigenous women since the last elections brings to the fore scene the question about with what bodies and with what words these women take on these trenches.

Thus, in dialogue with what Renato Sztutman proposes when he suggests that “[...] indigenous politics can only be understood in its own terms [...]” (SZTUTMAN, 2013: 17) and that the category of “political action” is perceived “[...] in a largely broad sense, encompassing both factional politics (engendered, for example, in the system of aggression) and the constitution of a political domain (common, local, and supra-local spaces, in addition to positions of headship and leadership)” (SZTUTMAN, 2012: 25), I share some ethnographic reflections, seeking to identify what are the terms, in its own expansions, proposed by women in reference to Guarani and Kaiowa political activity, in which it seems to me that the language of corporeality has an important place.

To this end, the text presented here is divided into two sections. The first section is dedicated to reflecting on the production of corporeality and the construction of Guarani and Kaiowa personhood as forms of “political action,” while the second will focus on a Guarani and Kaiowa feminine enunciative aesthetic, composed of soft and hard speeches that refine the dichotomy between good and bad speeches, providing elements to think about “presentation” politics.

MAKING BODIES, CREATING PEOPLE – FORMS OF POLITICAL ACTION

She was sitting on the threshold of the front door of her house, facing me, while I was sitting on the short wall surrounding the porch. Kuña Kuarahy, a Guarani

3 | “The Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, APIB, was created by the indigenous movement at the *Acampamento Terra Livre* in 2005. [...] it is a body of national reference for the indigenous movement in Brazil, created from the bottom up. It brings together [...] regional indigenous organizations and was created with the purpose of strengthening the union of [...] peoples, the articulation between the different regions and indigenous organizations in the country, in addition to mobilizing indigenous peoples and organizations against threats and attacks on indigenous people’s rights” (APIB, 2024). More information at: <https://apiboficial.org/sobre/sobre> | APIB (apiboficial.org).

leader from an indigenous land on the border between Brazil and Paraguay, was telling me that, as a child, during her first menstruation, her mother locked her in a room with a fiber sieve, in which she had to sift corn and rice for her mother to cook. The mother took care of her food intake at that time — it was a special diet for the occasion. I then got up and went to the room where I had stored my stuff. I took a sieve that I had brought from another village, showed it to her, and asked: “Was it the same as this one?”

She was moved when she saw the object in my hands, and my only reaction was to gift it to her. Visibly happy, she wove together many more stories about that moment. She said she did not like having her hair cut, or taking medicine baths with unpleasant odors, and being subjected to seclusion and food restrictions⁴. She did not repeat these procedures as intensely with her daughters when they reached menarche. But what she liked least was when she was squatting down sifting the grains, and her mother arrived with a pestle and tried insistently to hit her feet. Kuña Kuarahy became desperate; she got up, threw the sieve into the air, and started jumping, trying to protect her feet. The more she dodged the pestle, the more her mother chased her. “Today I understand that she was training me to know how to defend myself, teaching *xondaro*⁵, which the Kaiowa call *sambo*: she was forming a warrior body,” she told me, concluding the story.

It is necessary to have the body of a warrior to live on the border between Brazil and Paraguay, on the front line of the fight against the invasion of ancestral territories. That woman’s thin body, which is made much larger by her history and her ideals, was produced to withstand everyday life in the villages: the difficulties of growing up on a reservation, getting married, having children, burying a husband, awakening to the struggle and making it her reason for living.

Such a body was produced through the prayers of her grandparents, the massages of her mother, the medicines of which she still retains the knowledge today, and the true foods that she grows in her backyard, which makes her a “keeper of her fire” (SERAGUZA, 2023).

Fire is used here as a category based on the idea developed by Levi Marques Pereira (1999) when he proposed an ethnographic model for kinship and its relationships among the Kaiowa. As an analytical resource, this author advanced the native category of “domestic fire” (*che ypy kuéra*), crafting an understanding of social organization centered on dialogues between the ethnographic model and the anthropological discussion of conviviality and reciprocity.

According to Pereira (1999, 2004), kin groups are arranged into “family fires” (*che ypy kuéra*) gathered around a kin group head (*hi’u*, *ha’i*), a political/religious leader who mobilizes both the kin group and the solidarity network internal to the *tekoha*. Several family fires make up a kin group, and several kin groups make

4 | In my master’s thesis, there are reports on this subject, given by other Guarani and Kaiowa women, going in that same direction (SERAGUZA, 2013).

5 | Among the Guarani Mbya, Lucas Keese dos Santos discussed the *esquiva* (in Portuguese, the evasive or defensive movements of a fighter — here in particular, a *xondaro*) as a Guarani political action (SANTOS, 2021); and, among the Kaiowa, Veronice Rossato was one of the organizers of the book *Ñemborari*, about the history and movements of *sambo*, produced by indigenous students from the Guarani and Kaiowa Teacher Training during a course on the subject (ARA VERÁ, 2012).

up a *tekoha*, that is, a network of relationships prioritized by broad alliances, of a political and religious nature (PEREIRA, 1999, 2004). Therefore, the domestic fire is equivalent to the home, and the women are the ones who control the domestic fire, thus being the “keepers of the fire” — mothers in potential (SERAGUZA, 2023).

In this sense, Kuña Kuarahy is a “keeper of the fire”: she is a *ha'i*, head of her kin group, responsible for raising five children. Her body was also made through the pain of lost loves, the pain of childbirth, and the fear of death in the face of threats in the retaken lands and within the reserves; and through the need to speak at the center of the assemblies or in the world of non-indigenous people so as to support the struggle.

Corporeality and fabrication of personhood are necessary practices for the construction of human beings, since “[t]he body, whether affirmed or denied, painted or perforated, secluded or devoured, always appears to occupy a central position in the vision that indigenous societies hold about the nature of human beings” (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO; SEEGER; DA MATTA, 1978: 4). It is a collective path shaped by the different experiences of indigenous groups, based on their shared existence in the lands where they live. Among the Guarani and Kaiowa, such care dedicated to relatives is fundamental for obtaining recognition as a subject and group member, which also does not happen immediately at birth.

After birth and all the demanded bodily care, such as seclusion, specific diets, medicines, massages, and restrictions on carrying out social activities — hunting, family visits, participation in rituals, conversations, or food preparation —, a naming ritual is necessary, based on the identification of the source of the child’s “soul,” *ñeẽ* (understood as word-soul-speech, language, spirit), by a qualified male or female shaman, called *rezador*, *rezadora*, in Portuguese. Such task implies the knowledge of how to care for the named children, placing them as collective subjects, recognized by their relatives.

Since the body is the place where the *ñeẽ* seats, and since the earth is, in turn, the place where bodies seat, we must recover the teachings of *Ñandesy Alda*, recorded among the Kaiowa by Diógenes Cariaga (2019). She explained that “before the *nheẽ* is fixed in the gestating body, the maternal uterus is the *mitã apyka* – the seat of the child” (CARIAGA, 2019: 30), relating the production of the *ñeẽ* directly to the existence and cosmopolitical power of women.

That is why it is necessary to take care of the *ñeẽ* so that it seats happily in the bodies and is not at the mercy of other people’s desires. This conduct implies knowing how to listen to the deep feelings emanating through the Guarani and Kaiowa words. If the basis of the *ñeẽ* is feelings, and if talking about *ñeẽ* means talking about the deepest feelings stored in the heart, then it is necessary to know how to speak, but above all, one must know how to listen in order to speak.

By listening, *hendu*, I learned from my Guarani and Kaiowa friends how to understand and take responsibility for the knowledge accessed, which only happens through affection. One must listen with the heart, which will activate one's thoughts to the intensity necessary for the reactions of the body and spirit to occur. It is no coincidence that one of the terms referring to thought in Guarani and Kaiowa is *py'a ñomongueta*⁶ — which can be translated literally as advice/talk from the heart/stomach/chest.

Women's bodily care permeates the people who receive it and those who produce it. During pregnancy, much of the care practices are to be followed by the couple, as the gestation is derived from the conjunction of the substances of the two — blood and semen. Any lack of care may have effects on the couple and the child, as well as on the entire village.

After birth, the postpartum seclusion period (*resguardo*, in Portuguese) should, ideally, be carried out by the woman and her husband, in different modalities and intensities, encompassing the handling and consumption of food; baths and infusions with bush medicines; and even the participation in prayers-chants. On that account, until the moment of the child's baptism, all the care prescriptions must be taken to the letter — its *ñe'ẽ* is still seating in the body, has few stories within the collective, and can easily become detached, or be seduced by some non-human or more than human being, like a spirit or an animal.

Therefore, making children joyful and happy within their kinship group is crucial, and demands intense negotiations and diplomacy with all living beings in the Guarani worlds. This must be done with mothers too, as it is in their womb that children seat to receive the *ñe'ẽ*, and children feed on their milk. Milk needs to be transmitted with affection and generosity — *mborayhu* — but, for this, women also need affectionate and supportive care, because “[a] woman can acquire *akã tarowa* throughout her life if she lives or has lived under pressure; if a Guarani woman goes crazy in the head, it's because someone made her crazy” (BENITES, 2018: 79).

Sandra Benites describes how the elders of her people “always advise mothers not to say any words idly, on impulse, when they are angry, referring to their children,” because, according to the author, this can cause desire “in the child of wanting to return to the *amba* (heavenly home)” (BENITES, 2020: 40). Therefore, care for mothers is fundamental — food, medicine, words, songs, and prayers that will keep her *ñe'ẽ* (and, consequently, her head) joyful. This way, she will be able to pass on these deep and positive feelings through her substances, such as breast milk, blood, sweat, saliva, and tears. It is her blood that connects the child to its vital principle, and it is her milk that keeps the child in conditions to receive and establish its *ñe'ẽ* in earthly life.

Memory, *mandu'a*, is activated in the gestation process, through the care

6 | It was translated to me in this manner by Jacy Guarani, Leila Guarani, and Eliel Kaiowa. Eliel knows the term, but more frequently uses *tesa mondo* (to send to the eyes — in the sense of traveling), while Izaque João translates it as *jehesa mondo* (thinking intensely about how one shall do something), *jeheko mondo* (thought, imagining, thoughtful), and understands *py'a ñomongueta* as reflection.

dedicated to others, as well as the care dedicated to oneself. Feeding is one of these care practices for blood and thought: from breastfeeding to the food that is transformed by fire and prayer, feeding presupposes in-depth relationships and amassed knowledge (SERAGUZA, 2013), which gives women an important role. So much so that the self-designation as “keepers of the fire” derives from this: it is women, potentially, who generate, nurture, and grow the future. They are the ones who introduce children to the collective and contribute to their recognition as Guarani and Kaiowa, including in the affective dimension.

In the rituals to take care of the different types of blood that are shed (*tuguy / huguy*), such as puerperal blood and menstruation blood, the seclusion (*resguardo*) and care are different — but are generally remembered with bitterness and pain by the women who went through them. As in the first menstruation ritual mentioned at the beginning of this text, the memory of loneliness and the unknown in care instills a feeling of suffering and is related to thought, as it is possibly the first time that these girls are subjected to a situation of no social interaction, rupturing commensality. According to Sandra Benites (2018), silence is crucial in order to care for thoughts in these moments, as it provokes deep reflections aimed at the joy and well-being of women and their relatives: that is why they need concentration.

This is a time for thought and care for the “head,” when everyone in the family thinks about the secluded person — fathers, mothers, grandparents, siblings, and cousins. The girl also thinks of herself and her family, growing her courage and shaping her words. She follows the example left by *Ñandesy ete* (the First Mother), who goes around the world pregnant and alone, thinking about her children and her partner, who, in turn, also think about her. In this way, the menstrual seclusion (*resguardo*) practiced by the girl has positive care effects on the entire collective and builds the collective memory in her own body.

First menstruation rituals leave marks on one’s thoughts; hence one does not forget them. That is why, in these rituals, we are said to be “born again” (SERAGUZA, 2017), as the girls stop being children to become women capable of being the keepers of their fires. For this, care practices around substances and bodily fluids are essential.

Among the Kaiowa and Guarani, the blood is composed of water, y, and knowledge, *arandu* (SERAGUZA, 2017; LOPES, 2016) — two vital materials for producing life. This implies that the knowledge of the care practices around the substances expelled by women is necessarily a matter of the common sphere: because, when expelling blood, they shed lived life, which becomes exposed, especially on these occasions, to all the beings that make up the Guarani and Kaiowa cosmos. Blood is perceived as a hot element. Menopause is understood as the moment when a woman stops shedding blood (BELAUNDE, 2006; HÉRITIER, 1990),

which places her in the condition of a more constantly cold body — and, therefore, a greater possibility of circulation.

Thus, this is when everyone knows that women are at the peak of their experience and gentleness. Not coincidentally, it is also at this time, especially when she becomes a grandmother, that a woman's words turn even hotter and liberated. She can activate them according to her wishes, without worrying too much about their effects, since the respect and admiration for her trajectory and her words conjure listening attitudes, which unfold into actions of respect. Women lead this moment through their enchantment, evoked by their substances and words, and by their effects on the collective.

It is with these bodies that women occupy the indigenous assemblies and the fighting trenches. There they are encouraged by other women to speak, confronting their shyness, their lack of skill or practice, and their fear of “speaking wrongly” or remembering the pain — from disease, hunger, deceased parents and grandparents, lost children, or violence from farmers — that ravages their hearts. Among the shouts of “*mbarete*” (strength) and the shaking of their *mbaraka*, when emotions dominate, the women continue to learn to speak and pray-sing to have fighting bodies, including in collective formations with other bodies of women, but also men, as forms of political experimentation.

TALKING AS WOMEN — LESSONS IN GUARANI AND KAIOWA POLITICS

For some years now, I have been suggesting that the speeches of Guarani and Kaiowa women, when uttered, have a different weight in the Guarani worlds, in terms of the political potency conferred on women by their practices and knowledge. The harsh speech⁷ evoked by women in certain situations indicates the mastery of words in a sense to which the Guarani Mbya leader Kerexu Yxapyry drew my attention (during a conversation on March 8th, 2020, at an assembly of Guarani women held in Santa Catarina by the Guarani Yvyrupa Commission⁸): the fact that “women need to recover their position in politics, especially with regard to public spaces, which are mostly occupied by men.”⁹

Good oratory, generosity, and the capacity for moderation are the attributes of a leader among the Guarani and Kaiowa (PEREIRA, 1999, 2004; SERAGUZA, 2013, 2023; CARIAGA, 2019; CRESPE, 2015). Known for their good and sharp words, these indigenous people tend to see in words the potency of indigenous chieftdom, in the terms of Pierre Clastres (2013), or of leadership, as they usually emphasize — be it in the fire, in the kin group, or in the *tekoha*.

It is very common to see leaders speaking in public spaces such as the *Aty*

7 | Among the Wajãpi, Dominique T. Gallois (2002) identified *ayvu kasi* as a reference to the harsh speech uttered by this people, in the face of emerging political discourses in their midst that contribute to the understanding of the relationships established with the non-indigenous world, also demonstrating a “political resistance project formed in a historical context that makes increasingly evident [...] the threats to the integrity of their territories, the autonomy of their way of being, and their physical survival” (GALLOIS, 2002: 212).

8 | The Guarani Yvyrupa Commission (CGY) is an indigenous organization that brings together the Guarani people's collectives in the South and Southeast regions of Brazil around the struggle for land. CGY was conceived as an instrument to act on the demarcation processes of indigenous lands. More information at: <https://www.yvyrupa.org.br/sobre-a-cgy/>.

9 | When Kerexu Yxapyry spoke to me, we could not imagine that we would face a pandemic caused by an unknown virus, nor that, after all this, Kerexu would become Secretary of Territorial and Environmental Rights of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples (MPI), forming part of the third Lula government in 2023.

*Guasu*¹⁰ (the Guarani and Kaiowa Great Assemblies) while people do other things, without apparently listening to them — which, around the fire, seems to be different. Near the fire, women receive attentive listening. Speaking is the chief's obligation, as Clastres (2013) taught us — and, through words, captivating and preparing people to listen, enchanting their *ñe'ẽ*.

The duty to speak is also present in the exercise of leadership, but it seems that female leaders, especially the Guarani and Kaiowa, as leaders and keepers of their fires, turn their words into a lived experience and a care practice. They enchant people to listen and, therefore, greater attention is paid to their speech. This corroborates the fact that the greatest expression they acquire in the recovered lands is related to the attention their words receive, to the detriment, for example, of those imposed by the reservation captains¹¹ — words that threaten, that force, that punish, never accepted by one's own desire, but by coercion. It is not necessarily about a female chiefdom or leadership following a masculine style, but rather about enhancing chiefdom or leadership through female presence and knowledge.

The figure of the captain was established by the Brazilian State, in principle, as someone to mediate internal disputes, equally distribute goods, dialogue with the State itself, and regulate the entry and exit of relatives in the reserves. He was someone with a police-like, punitive style, who spoke Portuguese, and was legitimized by the State through SPI and, later, FUNAI (VALLE, 1976; PEREIRA, 2004). The creation of the figure of the captain originates markedly from the perception by the State (and by the Guarani and Kaiowa themselves) that the “problem of the reserves was the lack of administration” (BRAND, 2001: 72), since they create an unknown way of life compared to what was practiced in previous times. This perception led to numerous demonstrations of coercive power, that resulted in an explosive increase in violations, in an attempt to “manage” the new territorial configuration allowed to the Guarani and Kaiowa.

Over the years, the controversial figure of the captain became the point of reference in the mediation of the various State agencies with the Kaiowa and Guarani in Mato Grosso do Sul. This happened especially in the reserves, which nowadays carry out local elections to choose the captain, without yet making him a consensual figure of representation among these indigenous people and their kin groups.

This is because, historically, these groups recognized the *hi'u* and *ha'i* of the family as their political and spiritual leaders — the elder men and women of their kin group. Then, they found themselves under the yoke of the State, through the presence and actions of an indigenous captain. Some of these older people are also known as *ñanderu*, among men, and *ñandesy*, among women. They are the reference for prayer-chants and for bodily and spiritual care practices, and important figures in the recovery of territories — they are the Guarani and Kaiowa *rezadores* and *rezadoras*.

¹⁰ | The *Aty Guasu* are the large assemblies held by the Guarani and Kaiowa people. They are a form of self-organization of these people dating back to the 1970s, used as a movement to fight for the demarcation of Guarani and Kaiowa lands. Currently, the *Aty Guasu* is also formed by the women's council — the *Aty Kuña* (or *Kuñague Aty Guasu*) — and the youth council — the RAJ, *Retomada Aty Jovem*. More information at: <https://www.kunangue.com/>.

¹¹ | Historically attributed by the Brazilian State, since 2008 the institution of the “captain” has lost its state character and has been assumed by these indigenous people as a possible figure, never consensual and quite controversial, of political representation within the Guarani and Kaiowa indigenous lands (BRAND, 2001; CAVALCANTE; DELFINO DE ALMEIDA, 2019).

The chief, according to Clastres (2013), appears to have better productivity in relation to the *hi'u* and *ha'i*, the heads of the kin group; and his leadership is supported by his good words and generosity, but also by those of the *rezadoras* and *rezadores* — the *ñandesy* and the *ñanderu* —, who hold the words guided by the deities. In the case of the *ñandesy*, their speeches are enhanced by the fact that they are indigenous women and *rezadoras*.

Thus, in terms of approximations, women's speech is closer to the inspired speech of the *rezadores*, either because feminine speech gains listening through affection, or because women are predisposed to pay attention to the elders' words and knowledge and, therefore, they get to master them. These speeches are radically opposed to the words uttered by the captains, which make themselves heard through coercion and violence; or even to the public speeches of male leaders, as women speeches contain within them the intensity and experience of their female feelings and bodies.

That is to say that women's speeches are present in the performances of *rezadores* and *rezadoras* — but, in the case of women, including women *rezadoras*, the experience is added of having produced the bodies and personhood of their relatives, through their affections and sentiments and specific knowledge. For Guarani anthropologist Sandra Benites, "Speeches are words that come from the *py'a* [heart/chest/stomach], therefore each spoken word has its effects, which are the reactions to expressions" (BENITES, 2020: 39).

Speaking is a teaching given by women. It is necessary to learn to speak; and, when women sing, talk, or give advice to their children, they are teaching them to speak. Children learn from women to reproduce the sounds and tones of the words that connect all of them as a collective. Thus, it is possible to affirm that *ñe'ẽ*, the word/soul/language, is connected to the art of words as a political/cosmopolitical agency resulting from a mother-child relationship.

The speech of women is thus associated with the collective, expressed in terms of concerns about the future of children. Sometimes they deliver harsh speeches, made from the stance of someone who is greatly admired but, when heated, can scare and affect. Thinking within this logic makes it possible to connect conflict to women's lives, as, in existing records, women are generally outside conflict, or the agents instituting conflict. I suggest that speeches of women follow other etiquettes than those of the chief's harsh speeches, such as the ones recorded by Clastres (2013). In this sense, women may give hard and hot speeches because they are admired for their soft, cold speeches, which un-heat the heart.

The woman's harsh speech is the speech of someone who knows *teko porã*, the Guarani and Kaiowa good way of being and living, and therefore has a good perception so as to act when it is threatened. Generally, it is a speech directed

outside the village, with the aim of producing joy or feast internally. In other words: the harsh speech and the speech about peace or feast are related processes, as long as the harsh speech is produced for the outside of the kin group — considering Perrone-Moisés' proposition that "Peace can only exist on a background of war" (PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2011: 866). Let us examine this further.

Regarding the political tensions internal to the Guarani and Kaiowa networks, for example, I remember an Aty Guasu that took place in 2017, in Pirakua, when a female leader stood up in the midst of the assembly. Even though she was not the host of the assembly, she expelled representatives of another indigenous organization that had a dubious history, who came to the meeting at the invitation of a male leader. Shouting, she argued that the real chiefs were guided by the good teachings of the *ñanderu* and *ñandesy*, unlike those who were there, who responded to the money and desires of the "white people." She said it was thus, through those teachings, that women made "the earth grow," following the guidance of the divine beings, and concerned about the future of the children.

This speech is remembered as a declaration of war, a stance taken by those who have the knowledge to defend their own against the enemy threat. In that same Aty Guasu, another woman leader interrupted, in tears, on behalf of the children, a prayer for the destruction of the world that was being said by a prestigious *rezador*, pleading: "Stop, my *compadre*, our children need to live."

In the context of the domestic fire, in everyday life, it is said that men complain that women do not respect them, because they want to have the final word and women do not agree. Kuña Kuarahy taught me that "this is the *kuña juru guasu* (woman with a big mouth): if she doesn't see eye to eye, she goes and debates with you, speaks her mind, disagrees and really talks, a harsh speech, a heavy speech, *kuña juru atã* (woman with a hard mouth), which means she has a very hard mouth, one that no one holds back and that doesn't go back."

She says that it had to be like this for them to defend their lives, as there were five women and a young boy, all under the responsibility of Kuña Kuarahy, and they needed to defend themselves: "If there wasn't any *kuña juru atã* or *kuña juru guasu*, no one would have defended this *tekoha* to this day. I'm a big-mouthed woman, *juru guasu* and *juru atã*, I go where I can speak, I talk to the person's face [...] If you want to step on my foot, I really have to become *juru atã*." Kuña Kuarahy provokes: "How can a woman say to men: come and defend me? Many times have I been through hard times and threats, and I've never asked a man to defend me, not me, I know how I'm going to defend myself, I do it, I speak!"

Regarding confrontations with non-indigenous people, Mboy Jegua, a Kaiowa woman from Laranjeira Ñanderu in Rio Brilhante, Mato Grosso do Sul, gave a tough speech during the II International Guarani Ethnology Seminar (held in São Paulo, at

USP, in 2019) which is important for the argument presented here. She stated that

[...] Each one of you who is here is inside our homes! Today we are dying by the pen. The pen of the deputy, the Senate, the Federal Supreme Court, ordering us to be evicted, destroying our *tekoha* [...] I am a housewife, I feel the pain, I still see my relatives being killed in a cruel way; each city is being built on top of the bodies of my relatives. That's where the word equality comes in: we are not equal, we never will be, we have our differences. (Mboy Jegua, Nov. 2019)

Such potency of feminine language is shown in several situations. I recall some of them, such as when, after disagreeing with her husband's public speech during an assembly, a Kaiowa *rezadora* grabbed the microphone from his hand, leaving him in an awkward situation. She took over the leadership of the meeting and called on other women to do the same, by reorganizing a space dedicated to discussions from the women's point of view (SERAGUZA, 2014, 2023).

Therefore, it seems important to “look” at women's speeches in the making of politics, since political speeches are not only those produced for the external sphere: the fire, as an image of the house, appears to be the great place of Guarani and Kaiowa indigenous politics and, in this sense, the place of difference and differentiation. What I am stating is that placing political activity exclusively outside the intimate and the domestic among the Guarani peoples could be a mistake. This might make sense in the non-indigenous world but, in the Guarani worlds, the place of transformation and relationships is the fire.

So this leads us to wonder whether the harsh speeches made by women fall within the framework of the *ñe'ẽ porã* or enter that of the *ñe'ẽ vai* — ugly, bad words — since there are occasions when they are uttered with a certain sagacious lack of temper.

The harsh speech uttered by women in their specific contexts contrasts drastically with the descriptions of the soft-spoken speech that is ideal within the Guarani and Kaiowa way of life, the *ñe'ẽ*, as registered in the studies involving these people. But, if that speech is the person's breath of life, reflected in their erect body, in their voice, and in the words elaborated through deep feelings, it must be perceived as a kind of *ñe'ẽ porã*, “The perfect language — *ñe'ẽ porã* — has aesthetic and moral implications, applying concepts, formulas, and statements related to the social functions to which this type of language is directed,” and thus directly opposes “imperfect speech — *ñe'ẽ vai* —, which has opposite implications, related to gossip, spells, and jaguarized beings” (PEREIRA, 2004: 373).

While good speech, delivered softly, is the ideal speech to be made internally, it seems to me that women also use harsh speeches, aimed externally, in order

to establish softness in internal relationships. Taking into account the context of the land repossessions and the agency of women in these spaces, it is possible to understand that it is the female relationships that seem to contain the creative and transformative power of social life — given where and why they are expressed. And it is precisely this specific way of women's political activity that I propose to reflect on as a kind of “presentation” politics.

If, as I argue (SERAGUZA, 2023), women are producers of the joy that is fundamental to the composition of the Guarani and Kaiowa *socius*, and since, through their speeches, they can also produce other effects that aim at offense and sadness, this can only happen based on the prerogative of their daily experience and their skill in maintaining the fires — which involves the knowledge of producing the body and the person of their own relatives as a political practice. This feminine prerogative allows them to break with the etiquette of gentleness expected in the speeches of the Guarani and Kaiowa, under the pretext of being the carriers of deep feelings, which are recognized by the collectives and contribute to maintaining social cohesion, but equally enable them to the excesses (SERAGUZA, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2023), thus also operating in the opposite direction, toward imploding social relations.

In this sense, it is possible to affirm that the harsh, sometimes immoderate and fearless speeches of women remain in the field of the *ñe'ẽ porã*, as they are produced in defense of their own and their kin group's life and integrity. However, the limit between *ñe'ẽ porã* and *ñe'ẽ vai* is quite tenuous. Hence some control is necessary, starting from birth, through their bodily processes, so that their *ñe'ẽ* does not distance itself from the teachings of *teko porã*, the Kaiowa and Guarani ideal way of being.

The admiration towards the women's good words spoken in the prayer houses also manifests towards their harsh speeches in situations of conflict or disorder of the group cohesion. However, the perception around these speeches, beyond the public addresses aimed outside, can only be gauged within the intimacy of everyday life. That is why carrying out continuous fieldwork — in spite of any turbulence involved in remaining in the field, in the Guarani worlds — and “liking women,” as suggested by Luisa Elvira Belaunde (2016), are the fundamental (and privileged) actions for compensating and overcoming any contextual difficulties.

What we are dealing with is not the everyday speeches, like the ones given by the leaders¹². It's the speeches that are activated in the face of situations of imminent danger for the collective; and precisely the women's knowledge, their experience, and their expertise in appeasing the heat of life, in lifting people up, are called upon for this standpoint of an intense, immoderate speech. Coercing through words, hurting through words, is only tolerated if aimed outside, when it produces “peace”

12 | Like the speeches recorded among the Tupi Guarani on the coast of São Paulo by Amanda Danaga (2021): “The chief says phrases like ‘That is what I want you to feel,’ indicating the intentionality of the words spoken at the meeting. The goal is for his speeches to be not just heard, but experienced, and for his words to affect people. It is a speech produced as a matter of affection and transformation of the other. These are ‘harsh speeches,’ ‘scoldings,’ so as to encourage actions, organize and ratify positions, especially among the leaders. In defense of the sternly imposed words, he concludes: ‘Otherwise, no one will open their eyes. They have to wake up’ ” (DANAGA, 2021: 23).

internally — as Kuña Kuarahy did when expelling the leaders who threatened the collective during that Aty Guasu in Pirakua. The opposite is not possible.

In this environment, it is known that words can be violent, and they are thus punished like the act itself (by one's own leaders or community), especially when it is the leaders' very words that threaten and violate — as those of the reserve captains. In this sense, if words can be violence, living with the violence generated by one's own relatives is unbearable; yet, it still produces and transforms the social: conflicts become intolerable when good words must be cultivated, hence generating separation and fostering the occupation of new (and old) lands, along with other collectives and organizations, as happens in territorial reposessions.

As Lisandreia Guarani once stated, “the word of Guarani women is not fragile” (SERAGUZA, 2018, 2023). On the contrary, the strong words of women must move thoughts, as good words scare away the violence of wrong words. However, it cannot be denied that the violence experienced in women's daily lives led them to take upon themselves to follow the example of *Ñandesy ete*, the First Mother, and gain courage to defend their bodies and those of their relatives.

Kuña Kuarahy has been voicing countless strong speeches when facing Brazilian agribusiness, or Mato Grosso do Sul politicians, in addition to experiencing countless conflicts with local farmers, politicians, and the police, in the processes of recovering her *tekoha*. The strong speech of Kuña Kuarahy and other women, when delivered in public spaces, is usually directed at non-Guarani and non-Kaiowa people and institutions, especially those who are responsible, to some extent, for the violation of indigenous rights, particularly territorial rights, exposing them to a way of life that deviates from what they desire.

As anthropologist Amanda Danaga (2021: 33) stated about the Tupi Guarani of the coast of São Paulo, “Reality must be stated so that policies can be implemented. Thus, if this reality appears harsh, it would be incompatible to talk about it in any other way than through tough and fierce speech.” Therefore, we completely agree with Beatriz Perrone-Moisés when she argues that, “when the Indians act in the environment of our politics, they have to act in the key of war, no longer with *bordunas*, but with words” (PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2015: 92).

SEIZING THE WORDS – TOWARDS A POLITICS OF LIVED LIFE

If at this point there are still doubts about the understanding of a politics of lived life, a politics of presentation as opposed to representation, we must be suspicious of our own points of view. After all, where there is relationship there is politics, and what's more: all transspecific negotiations are cosmopolitical

(DANOWSKI; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2014). I say this based on the path hitherto presented, which traces an escape route from what is seen from the outside as “more” important, and makes a deliberate choice for what is “less” important for some — while for others, it may provide a good approach to Amerindian politics. After all, as Manoel de Barros, the poet from Pantanal, taught, “[...] the importance of a thing cannot be measured with a measuring tape nor with scales or barometers, etc. [...] the importance of a thing must be measured by the enchantment that the thing produces in us” (BARROS, 2006).

Therefore, *to seize the words*¹³, in an imperative gesture against a plundered standpoint of enunciation, as Kerexu Yxapyry suggests, is a viable image in the face of the centuries-old silencing of indigenous words, especially women’s. The historical power of indigenous women’s abilities in the fabrication of bodies and people, in the prominence of their words and in the leadership of their fires — the power of their political creativity — has been recorded by many researchers since the colonial period. Sometimes, such power justifies the male, external fear of that female potency, mobilizing a sense of urgency in building up the magnification of male leaders, as if in a pandemic which crossed different worlds and crystallized in different ethnographic scenarios, with perverse effects.

The effort to reactivate the indigenous female possibilities of political action leads to the perception that what has been called women’s politics is effected based on the way women direct their relationships. These are marked above all by their deep feelings, sometimes expressed in soft speeches directed inside, sometimes in hard speeches aimed outside, both coexisting to produce the “sweetness” (CLASTRES, 2013) of good living — the assured land, the lit fire, the joyful people, the words from the heart. Women may have a hot body and then make themselves calm, and thus they assist to war and feast — to use the terms of Perrone-Moisés (2015).

The different modalities of female speech represent relationships that materialize through care practices, but also through the accusations, approximations, and separations which make up the *kuña reko* — the women’s way of living. Thus, there are limits between *ñe’ẽ vai* and *ñe’ẽ porã* — as if in a “perpetual imbalance” — where the duality of words is composed of a pair of oppositions, but is destabilized by being also populated by a trio (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1993; PIERRI, 2013; CARIAGA, 2019, 2020) which includes the *ñe’ẽ atã*, harsh words, as those uttered by women.

They need to be nurtured and examined for many reasons. One of them is that women know that their public excesses, as some of their desires, and the contents of their knowledge, could be understood as potential provocations, even putting at risk their existences. One can get lost in the arena of politics, which is always a challenge.

In any case, I insist on the politics of women as a politics of lived life, as

¹³ | An expression deliberately inspired by Gabriela Leite’s testimony, when she states that she had to seize the word “slut” by the horns and confront it. This is how I see what some indigenous women do: they seize the words for themselves, they confront the several worlds with their distinct negotiations, having the danger and the future in their minds.

“presentative” politics, in the terms elicited by the seminar that seeded the ideas presented here. Nothing leads me to disregard “representative” politics in favor of “presentative” politics, due to its life in the multiplicity of inhabiting different worlds. But it seems productive to think that the path of one is only possible in the footsteps of the other, since those who claim representative roles in the Guarani worlds also grew up around their mothers and the other women of their kin group: they learned to speak from them, they learned to feed themselves through their hands and, consequently, learned to do politics as a result of the conversations and skills developed around fires with women.

Lauriene Seraguza Olegário e Souza is an anthropologist, indigenist, and professor at the Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD), working at the Faculdade Intercultural Indígena (FAIND), the Graduate Program in Anthropology (PPGANT), and the Graduate Program in Education and Territoriality (PPGET). She holds a doctorate in Social Anthropology from PPGAS/USP (2022) and a master's degree in Anthropology from PPGAnt/UFGD (2013), having graduated in Literature from FALE/UFGD (2006). She has experience in the work with the Guarani peoples and in the area of Indigenous Ethnology, with an emphasis on social organization, kinship, politics, gender, and demarcation of indigenous lands, among (and with) the Kaiowa and Guarani in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil.

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