

## Indigenous in the Brazilian Amazon: Refusing Missionaries and 'Us', the Global Plague

BARBARA ARISI

Last Sunday started with my phone ringing from a Dutch government alert. On my screen, as for all citizens of the country that use a smartphone (2G or 3G models did not receive it):

*"Noodmelding NL alert 22-03-2020. Volg instructies Rijksoverheid op: houd 1,5 meter afstand! Bent U ziek of verkouden? Blijf thuis. Bescherm Uzelf en de mensen om U heen. Samen tegen Corona. Keep your distance to others<sup>1</sup>".*

Still sleepy, I checked Facebook, messenger and WhatsApp for news from my family. One post made by Kenampa Marubo, an indigenous leader from Terra Indígena Vale do Javari, called my attention about the danger of the missionaries. He informed that a US missionary called Andrew Tonkin "is again trying to enter the indigenous territory to go on with his conversion work" and that he had a meeting with another North-American pastor in the city of Atalaia do Norte, Brazil (on the border with Peru).

The wealthy Netherlands is running out of Intensive Care beds. Until now, they did not built even one more in order to prepare for the pandemic, but instead intended to oblige us to "social distance". In such chaos, we cannot even publicly debate why they are not investing in saving their "greying" elderly population.



However, whilst we are in enforced social distancing in the Netherlands, the missionaries in Brazil intend to go into forcible contact with the few indigenous people that live totally independent from surrounding societies!

Since 2006, I have been working in the Vale do Javari as a researcher with the Matis indigenous people, whose language I learned to speak. For my MSc, I recorded their narrative reflections on the deadly experience of getting in touch with Brazilian society, and I study and I write about 'people living in isolation'.

The Matis used to live in small creeks located in the middle of the territory, when between 1976 and 1978, representatives of the Brazilian State arrived with the order to make what the Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), official indigenist institution, called as a "pacification" process or, in official terms: to "attract" or to establish "first contact" with the bravios

<sup>1</sup> In English: Emergency notification NL alert 22-03-2020. Follow government instructions: keep 1.5 meter distance! Are you ill or have a cold? Stay at home. Protect yourself and the people around you. Together against Corona. Keep your distance to others.

(untamed indigenous people). As a result, 2/3 of the Matis population died from common flu and other such simple-to-cure diseases, but to which their bodies had no immune system ready to fight against. It was a genocide, perpetrated during the civic-military dictatorial regime, one of which the governmental agents never had to respond for in courts of law, and there was and never have been mitigation or reparations (so far).

Nowadays, the Vale do Javari Indigenous Land is demarcated. It is the second largest in Brazil. Its 8.5 million hectares of high forest area is home to the largest number of indigenous people living in voluntary isolation in the world. Until Bolsonaro's government, this huge territory has been fairly protected by indigenous people and government personnel's efforts. The indigenous 'contacted' groups of Mayoruna (Matsés), Marubo, Matis, Tüküna (Kanamary), Tsohom-Djapá, Kulina (Pano) and Korubo share the vast territory with parcels of their population that prefer to keep living in isolation, along with some other unknown groups like the "Flecheiros" (arrow people). Even though they suffer with illegal miners and loggers, they still try to avoid permanent contact with the outside world.

However, violence had escalated since Bolsonaro became President of Brazil. One FUNAI worker was killed in September 2019 and there was a gun attack in December 2019 against the surveillance posts in the confluence of rives Itui and Itacoai.

In this surrealistic reality of European city centres emptied of people by Covid19, and of us trying to organise our lives in this "siege" in our own rooms, it feels like a "voluntary isolation", but in fact, as I was reminded by my smart phone, it is a "reinforced isolation" declared by the Dutch government. To complete the ironic situation, I live with my boyfriend in a old roman catholic hospital building. Squatted in 1979, it was once the biggest occupied buildings of Europe, and now the Oude RKZ is currently Europe's biggest "social housing" compound. Around 250 inhabitants live here. Many of them are creative artists/musicians on social benefit, IT workers, boat captains, self-employed, their children and grandchildren, and even me, an Amazonian ethnologist turned into a postdoctoral urban anthropologist that studies management of plastic and organic waste in The Netherlands. In this urban community, we



share our WC, showers, and kitchens in each of the departments (block of rooms). Only some of us have a private WC. So, in the self-organised community, we are adapting to keep clean with spray alcohol in common places, handrails, and door handles.

Starting the day under a beautiful blue sky and 7°C, I think we are lucky not to have missionaries trying to come in the old catholic hospital where we live in order to convert us, the old punkies!

I help Kenampa to edit the letter for the União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari (UNIVAJA). He plans to send it to the Federal Police and to the journalists. Since 3rd March, 2020 UNIVAJA has alerted the authorities that the missionaries invasion threat is real. Mongabay agency had published on it in fact.

The day before, colleagues and I from Brazil, France, Mexico and USA had edited a document from Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA) to be sent to the Brazilian government expressing our worries as anthropologists about the religious organizations that are so driven to enter indigenous territories illegally, even after the outbreak of Covid-19.



This Pandora's box threat was opened up by Bolsonaro's government when an evangelical pastor who had graduated in Anthropology in the TI Vale do Javari's neighbour city of Benjamin Constant (AM) was appointed head of the department for Isolated Indigenous People and of Recent Contact.

A pastor heading this department is like appointing a coyote to protect sheep.

This man knew well about the Javari. Plus, the federal government had recently issued a decision against all policies that were valid since 1987. That year, just one year before the new Constitution was promulgated and after decades of forcing indigenous population to establish contact so that the country could keep on building roads, hydro dams and mines, finally Brazilian law stated that the State would not seek anymore contact with indigenous populations that refused to be "contacted". The decision to allow FUNAI personnel to contact the people living in voluntary isolation was revoked on 20th March this year.

On 23rd March, the Dutch government informed us that the lock down will go on until 1st June. I read online news about Brazilian people already testing positive for Covid-19 ("the rich people virus", as some call it in Brazil) and how they are preparing in the favelas, (poor communities in Rio de Janeiro), where not everyone has running water. Every night in São Paulo, Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, and almost everywhere, there are protests called panelaços (when people bang their pans in choir from windows and backyards) against Bolsonaro.

"We are isolated, but we are not alone", Bessa Freire wrote in his blog. This motto seems to be true for Brazilians protesting during the pandemic. It also seems true for us in the ORKZ trying to keep our communitarian toilets and kitchen clean. It is also true for the communities in Rio trying to organise to have clean water and other public services when no one would do it for them, and it may be also true for the indigenous people in the Amazon that, despite all odds, still refuse to be contaminated by this global plague called 'us', the 'global world'.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Barbara Arisi is a Professor of Anthropology from the Universidade Federal da Integração Latino-Americana (2019), and currently works as a Post Doc in the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.

All images by the author.

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