

NOTE OF SOLIDARITY WITH THE MUNDURUKU PEOPLE:

They had no choice but to rescue their Itig'a.

We, the undersigned, have publicly expressed our complete support for the legitimate, autonomous and independent action taken by the Munduruku people which led to the recovery of twelve **Itig'a** (the funeral urns of their ancestors) which were held at the Museum of Natural History in Alta Floresta, Mato Grosso (Brazil) during the Christmas period of 2019.

Below, we briefly contextualize the history of relations between the Munduruku people, Luso-Brazilian society, and the Brazilian State, and then we recall the troubled process in which the construction of the Teles Pires and São Manoel hydroelectric dams occurred. This context is necessary for understanding the sequence of events that culminated in the historical act in which the Munduruku rescued the Itig'a of their ancestors.

The first known written reference mentioning the Munduruku people dates from 1742, but archaeological evidence dating back thousands of years has been associated with their ancestors, and it is likely that their language, which belongs to the Tupi trunk, also has similar antiquity.

After resisting the invasion of their territories by the colonial expansion fronts from the south, in the present state of Mato Grosso, and from the north, via the Tapajós River itself, a truce between the Munduruku people and the Portuguese was agreed to in 1795-96. But the emergence of the rubber-extraction economy along the Tapajós River in the late nineteenth century led to the advance of national society into their territories, leading to the territorial dispersal of the Munduruku. This is why Munduruku lands held in already demarcated territories or those awaiting final demarcation represent only fragments of what was once the vast territory occupied by this populous people, and the same is true for several other indigenous peoples who have also historically inhabited the Tapajós basin. The impact of colonialism and the rubber boom also helps to explain why there are sacred places located outside Munduruku lands officially recognized by the Brazilian state, such as Karobixexe on the lower Teles Pires River (also known as Seven Falls Rapids, this site was also a sacred place for the Kayabi and Apiaká peoples and was destroyed by the construction of the Teles Pires Dam) and Dekoka'a (also known as Monkeys' Mountain, destroyed by the São Manoel hydroelectric dam). This fact – that numerous places beyond those within the officially-recognized indigenous territories nevertheless form part of Munduruku cultural geography – had already been pointed out by the Munduruku themselves in a letter drafted in 2013, which was widely circulated in Portuguese and English. In this document, Karobixexe and Dekoka'a were listed among the most significant places of the Munduruku people.

Unfortunately, the Munduruku, Apiaká and Kayabi peoples were never consulted on the construction of the Teles Pires and São Manoel hydroelectric dams, as stipulated in ILO Convention 169. This fact was unanimously recognized by the 5th Panel of the Federal Regional Court of the 1st Region (TRF1) in December 2016, which at

that time held that the license to construct the Teles Pires dam granted by the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama) was invalid (after the fact of construction). The violation of a sacred cemetery area, represented by the excavation of ceramic vessels around the Teles Pires plant, was added to the annihilation of Karobixexe (Seven Falls Rapids) within the river itself. Karobixexe is the main holy place of the Munduruku people, being a gateway for the spirits after death; it also serves as a natural nursery for many fish species. It is considered home to a supernatural entity, called the Mother of Fish, which is responsible for the life and reproduction of the region's fish species. Since the construction of the Teles Pires hydroelectric dam began in 2011, the Munduruku, Apiaká and Kayabi have been without this fundamental reference to their own sense of identity, and the Munduruku especially report a series of punishments suffered throughout their community on account of the spirits of the dead having nowhere else to go.

In 2015, after completing a survey of the region, a specialized team from the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office found the following in its technical judgement on the Seven Falls Rapids:

“As a sacred place, it should be protected by the Brazilian State. Being secular, the State has an obligation not to interfere with the free exercise of religious expression and to guarantee protection to places of worship. Despite the importance attributed to the integrity of the Seven Falls Rapids, the documents show that the environmental licensing process did not adequately meet the constitutional rules and procedures. Ibama issued Preliminary and Installation License No. 818/2011 without listening to the affected indigenous peoples.” (2015, p. 13).

In the same year, the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (Iphan) itself stated that the improperly excavated Itiğ'a should go to wherever the Munduruku desired (Official Notice #025/2015 - CNA / DEPAM / IPHAN).

In 2017, the Munduruku made two trips to visit the Itiğ'a in Alta Floresta. On the second occasion, they were greeted with tear gas by the National Public Security Force, despite the fact that their demonstrations have always been peaceful. That the Munduruku need to use their own resources to recover their Itiğ'a, facing an exhausting and dangerous journey, again demonstrates a tremendous disregard for their beliefs and traditions and a serious disregard for their urgent needs, which have been widely shared through public letters over the past 6 years.

In the most recent letter, following the Itiğ'a recovery action, the Munduruku wrote:

“What to the *pariwat* [non-indigenous people] look like objects, our shamans know are our ancestors. These spirits were torn out of their land and were sad, so we had to return them to our territory. Therefore, we rescued our spirits. Our Itiğ'a cannot be locked up in Museum. No *pariwat* museum is a place for Itiğ'a.”

Following the retaking of the funerary urns on December 24-25, 2019, Iphan issued a statement dated Dec. 27, published on its website, where it notes:

“Regarding the final destination of the funerary containers, Iphan reiterates the position, held firmly since 2015, that with respect to the Munduruku people, the containers must ultimately go to the location that the ethnic group requests.”

We second this position. **No possible compensation exists for the destruction and violation of sacred places by the construction of dams on the Teles Pires River.** The violation of these places may eventually be considered ethnocide or genocide, as it may contribute to the cultural destruction of the Munduruku, Apiaká and Kayabi peoples. The recovery of the Itiğ’a by the Munduruku must be understood as the only choice available to them, and in this they have our complete support. We urge the institutions of the Brazilian state to continue honoring the commitments they have made and to guarantee the Munduruku people their rights.

Jacareacanga, Pará - Brasil, 7 January 2020

Sign the Petition: