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## **The Color Red: Fighting with Flowers and Fruits in Xavante Territory, Central Brazil**

**Resumen:** Se trata de las reacciones emocionales y artísticas de niños indígenas de los Chavante (Xavante) en una aldea de la ‘Tierra Indígena’ Sangradouro (Mato Grosso, Brasil) al asesinato extremadamente brutal, a la decapitación y al despedazamiento del líder local chavante Joaquim Maradezuro por un miembro de una familia de poseedores de grandes plantaciones de soya y sus ayudantes en el mes de abril de 2003. Poco tiempo después, dentro del programa “Flores y frutas de la sabana brasileña en las vidas cotidianas y en la cocina del pueblo chavante”, los niños dibujaron con lápices de colores estos sucesos y sus consecuencias para el espacio social, el medio ambiente y la memoria colectiva de los Chavante. Flores, frutas, semillas, retoños y la tierra misma, que en dibujos anteriores, en la escuela, se habían pintado de verde, amarillo, azul y café, se pintaron ahora de diferentes tonos de rojo, representando la sangre del líder que cubría todo. Bajo el fondo de luto común y de la resistencia activa de los Chavante así como de sus medidas en contra de los *fazendeiros* culpables, e insertando los dibujos en el relato oral chavante de los acontecimientos trágicos, narrado por dos jóvenes artistas, la contribución discute el papel metafórico de flores, frutas y plantas dibujadas como armas en la lucha contra la violación del derecho a vivir.

**Summary:** This article is about the emotional and artistic reactions of indigenous children of the Xavante people in a village of the ‘Terra Indígena’ Sangradouro (Matto Grosso, Brazil) to the extremely brutal assassination, decapitation and dismemberment of the local Xavante elder Joaquim Maradezuro by a family member of owners of great soy bean plantations and his men in April 2003. Some months later, within the program “Flowers and Fruits of the Brazilian Savannah in the Daily Lives and Cuisine of the Xavante People”, the children made drawings with color pencils and crayons of those events and their consequences for the social space, environment and collective memory of the Xavante. Flowers, fruits, sprouts, seeds and also the land, formerly colored by them at school in green, yellow, blue

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and brown, now were painted in varying tones of red, representing the elder's blood covering the area. With the background of common mourning and active resistance of the Xavante, as well as their active measures against the *fazendeiro* family, in mind, and inserting the drawings in an oral narrative of the tragic events given by two young artists, the contribution discusses the metaphorical role of flowers, fruits and plants in the drawings as weapons used to fight against the violation of the right to life.

### Introduction

Fighting with flowers and fruits now tinted red by blood spilled from the body of a recently assassinated elder is the underlying motif of more than 50 colored pencil and crayon drawings Xavante children of central Brazil produced in June and July of 2003.<sup>1</sup> The drawings were created in the wake of the summary execution and decapitation of one of their elders, Joaquim Maradezuro, by a local soybean farmer in April 2003. Joaquim was stabbed in the back, his body chopped into pieces and hidden in an old sewage pipe while hunting on ancestral Xavante territory now owned by Ernesto Ruaru, one of the largest soybean plantation owners in the region. Ruaru is the titleholder of lands now known as Fazenda Rica II – literally Rich Farm II, where Joaquim was executed, as well as Fazenda Rica I and other farmlands in the state of Mato Grosso.<sup>2</sup>

The illustrations (Fig. 1-6) were produced at the Idzô'uhu Village on the Terra Indígena Sangradouro as part of the activities of the project "Flowers and Fruits of the Brazilian Savannah in the Daily Lives and in the Kitchen of the Xavante People". Funded by the Program for Developing Nations (PNUD) of the United Nations starting in 2003, the project was originally envisioned by Xavante women and their elders from five different villages of the Sangradouro reservation – Idzô'uhu, Santa Bertila, Santa Glória, São João and Bom Jesus – to allow villagers seeking independence from the tight grip of Catholic missionaries to become economically self-sufficient, thus enhancing the overall quality of Xavante life. Two Xavante Ritei'wa (initiated young men), Tseredzaró Ruri'õ and Were'é Marciano, who worked as my research assistants, took a leading role in explaining to me details of Joaquim's execution, while children aged 5 to 18 elaborated their drawings.

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1 Only six illustrations are shown here for lack of space.

2 Amnesty International's Urgent Action (AMR 19/07/03), a follow up of UA 216/02, provides more information on the circumstances that surrounded the death of Joaquim Maradezuro. On June 26, 2003, the International Indian Treaty Council in the USA requested United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Mr. Asma Jahanqir, to exercise his mandate in respect to the execution of Joaquim Maradezuro.

The extra supply of red colored pencils and crayons spread over the table was quickly consumed, as flowers, fruits, sprouts, seeds, and the land itself – usually colored green, yellow, blue and brown in schooling activities, when drawing on paper is a common activity – became tinged with red. I noticed the bright yellow color of the flower called *utöparané*<sup>3</sup> in the Xavante language, whose great importance (“it works for everything!”) in Xavante medicine was documented that same morning, change to a deep ruby red in the hands of the young artists. Tones of red conveyed the kids’ deep distress with Joaquim’s death, as flowers and fruits metaphorically became weapons used to fight against the violation of their most basic human right – the right to life. Inspired by the little ones, Tseredzaró and Were’é began their detailed narrative of Joaquim’s assassination, captured on audiotape. Rather than analyze the drawings and narrative myself, I offer the reader the opportunity to interpret the discourse and graphic representations of Xavante youth, who made such eloquent use of words and the color red to convey their theory of environmental justice, incorporating the language of human rights into Xavante discourse.<sup>4</sup>

The Xavante People basically use four terms to classify colors: red, black, white, and yellow – which includes green and blue. Gê-speaking Brazilian nations, such as the Xavante, Kayapó, Suyá and Panará, use body-paint as a medium of decoration and communication. The contrast between the color red, obtained from processed *urucu* seeds (*bixa orellana*), and black, extracted from charcoal and the juice of the *jenipapo* fruit (*genipa americana*), produces a highly structured system of communication that reveals one’s membership to an extended patrilineal family, clan, age-set or other social group. The everyday ritual of covering one’s body in red and black (white is reserved for the dead or ghosts, while yellow/blue/green is rarely used for body-paint) is a visual contribution for the construction of the Xavante self and notion of humanity (Vidal 2000: 212).

While drawing on paper brings tones of yellow/blue/green into play more often than painting on skin, Xavante children have used the color red to communicate graphically on paper to a non-Xavante audience their perceptions of life and death, in the context of the summary execution of one of their elders. The fabrication, decoration, transformation and destruction of bodies are central issues of Gê-speaking mythologies, ceremonial life and social organization (Seeger et al. 1979). Yet it is not uncommon for the Xavante People to evoke the color red – in its contrast with black and sometimes white – to talk about people, places and events. The social memory of one’s relatives, village and territory comes in flashes of red and black, as one becomes

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3 *Utöparané* has yet to be identified scientifically.

4 The project Flowers and Fruits of the Brazilian Savannah is co-coordinated by myself and the Xavante elder Batika Dzutsi’wa, a well-respected medicine woman and midwife of the *Terra Indígena* Sangradouro.

homesick during a long journey or trip. The same is true for the Gê-speaking Kayapó of northern Brazil, who long for their women in a language of red and black (Vidal 2000: 214).

Since February 2003, Xavante women of Sangradouro have been collecting and documenting plant species of the Savannah, which hold nutritional and medicinal value. The use of these plant species, however, has been discouraged and sometimes prohibited by Salesian missionaries since the late 1950s, when the Xavante were first contacted by governmental “pacifying fronts”, as part of an alliance between the Brazilian State and the Catholic Church to bring “progress and development” to indigenous peoples of the Amazon. Rice, beans, beef and dairy products were first offered by the federal government and catholic missionaries alike as a “solution” to the perverse effects of forced confinement on reservations, including hunger, scarcity, substance abuse, depression and suicide. While beef and milk never became a reality given the failure of cattle raising in the dry and parched savannah, rice (especially) and beans soon became the staple diet of a society traditionally used to an enormous variety of food plants and animals from one of the richest eco-systems in the world, the “Cerrado brasileiro” or Brazilian Savannah. The Xavante children and young adults were originally drawing to produce illustrations for the book *A’ uwē Tsa Tsi*, “Xavante Food Only” (Ferreira, forthcoming).

The kids’ narrative and graphic work also convey their perceptions of a series of conversations held at night in the central plazas of different Xavante villages, on International Law and the Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples’ Rights. Indigenous organizations in the United States, such as the International Indian Treaty Council and the Laguna Acoma Coalition for a Safe Environment, supplied me with various documents in which the rights of indigenous peoples worldwide are discussed. The first presentations of these documents to the elders’ council of the Idzô’ uhu Village was so successful that I was asked to present a series of talks to other villages, comparing the political situation of indigenous peoples in North America to the current struggle of indigenous peoples in Brazil, focusing on environmental justice.

The narrative presented ahead communicates concepts and ideas stemming from these discussions, indicating how the language of human rights has entered the discourse of Xavante children and young adults in central Brazil today.

### **Brief Xavante History**

In the year 2000 the total population of the Xavante people was recorded at 9,602 individuals (Ricardo [ed.] 2000: 10), distributed in the state of Mato Grosso, central Brazil, in eleven *Terras Indígenas (TI)* or ‘Indigenous Lands’, as these territories are now officially called in Brazil. On the TI Sangradouro, nearly 1,000 Xavante live in

17 different villages.<sup>5</sup> The Xavante belong to the Gê linguistic family, one of the four major linguistic families in Brazil, along with the Suyá, Kayapó, Panará and other Brazilian indigenous societies.<sup>6</sup> The Xavante language is spoken by Xavante adults and children alike as the primary language of the People.

One of the newest Xavante villages of Sangradouro, Idzô'uhu, was founded in 1995 by political leader Adão Top' Tiro, his brothers and sons. According to Top' Tiro, the main reason for moving away from the missionary controlled village of São José, was to free themselves of the "interference of the whites" and "preserve the social organization of the Xavante" (Ruri'ô/Biase 2000: 7). Salesian missionaries have retaliated heavily against villagers seeking independence, not allowing, for instance, government distributed medicine and services to reach "heretic" villages (Ferreira 2003a; 2003c; 2003d).

The Xavante face serious health problems today. Degenerative diseases like cancer and diabetes are increasing at an alarming rate, in addition to parasitic infections, respiratory ailments and infecto-contagious illnesses.<sup>7</sup> From 1993 to 1997, the mortality rate of Sangradouro was calculated at 87.1 per 1,000 – well above the national Brazilian average (37.5 per 1,000 in 1996) and much higher than the average for the miserable Brazilian northeast, one of the poorest regions in the world. Recent studies indicate that the chronic malnutrition of children and the meager attention to health by the Brazilian National Health Foundation (FNS) and the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) are responsible for this dramatic situation.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to health problems, land conflicts persist. In Sangradouro, farmers have intruded and deforested vast portions of reservation land in order to plant soy, illegally leasing land from Xavante families who are bludgeoned into accepting small "gifts" of food and money to escape hunger and scarcity. It is common to see in Sangradouro the glare of flames as the remaining 15% of the Brazilian Savannah is destroyed by forest fires set by the big land owners, opening space for cotton, soybean, sugar cane and livestock. The satellite image (TM LANDSAT 225/71 from 06/30/2000) shows there is no more space available for agriculture in the central-Brazilian municipalities of Primavera do Leste, General Carneiro and Poxoréu, where Sangradouro is located.

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5 Decree 249 of 10/29/01 confirmed the limits of the *TI* Sangradouro, with 100,280 hectares, in the municipalities of General Gomes Carneiro, Poxoréu Novo and São Joaquim. In 1999, the total population of the then 13 villages of Sangradouro (some of the larger villages have broken up into smaller units, forming today 17 villages), was at 974 individuals (FUNAI/FIOCRUZ in ISA 2000: 691).

6 In order to understand more about the dislocation of the Xavante in time and space, see Graham (2000) and Silva (1992; 2000).

7 Ferreira (2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2003d); Flowers (1994); Vieira Filho/Botelho (1996); Vieira Filho/Russo/Novo (1983).

8 Ferreira (2003b); Graham (2000: 64); Santos et al. (1994; 1996).

Exploited by grain and beef producers, the Savannah was made “productive” – the main reason for the invasion and deforestation of indigenous lands in Brazil.

The drawings and narrative here presented are an attempt to document human rights violations in Brazil from the perspective of indigenous youth. Reliable information on the systematic violation of indigenous peoples’ rights in Brazil is scarce, especially coming from children. As the anthropology of children has made very clear, the little ones’ critique of human society stands on its own and is not, as commonly believed, a mere replica of an adult worldview (Ferreira 2002; 2003c; Ferreira/Suhrbier 2002). While in theory Brazilian Indians enjoy a wide array of institutional protection from human rights abuses, in reality there is a disturbing pattern of organized violence against them. Violence against Brazilian Indians is compounded by delays in the federal process of legalization of indigenous territories, or “demarcation,” which is fiercely opposed by landowners. Although indigenous peoples welcomed the recent election of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and publicly stated their expectations of his government, there has been an alarming escalation in attacks and killings of indigenous peoples in Brazil so far in 2003. Amnesty International (2003) reports that the year of 2003 has been one of the most violent years in the last decade in terms of summary executions of indigenous leaders in Brazil. Whereas in the last ten years 70 indigenous leaders were assassinated in Brazil, in the first six months of 2003, 14 Brazilian Indians were murdered, their deaths never investigated. Violence and the struggle for environmental justice is the topic of the drawings and the narrative presented below.

**The color Red: The execution of Joaquim Maradezuro, on April 2, 2003.**

**By Tseredzaró Ruri’õ and Were’é Marciano (July 3-4, 2003).<sup>9</sup>**

The old man left home to go fishing, his wife stayed home. [...] He walked and walked, following the barbed wired fence (that divides the reservation from the farm) looking for a good spot to fish. Joaquim could see the peons working the farmland, the land that the farmers stole from the Xavante. The white men (*waradzu*) stole our land, we want our land back! He saw them work the land with a big tractor, a really big one digging into the land, making holes into the land, digging up all the roots, destroying the land!<sup>10</sup>

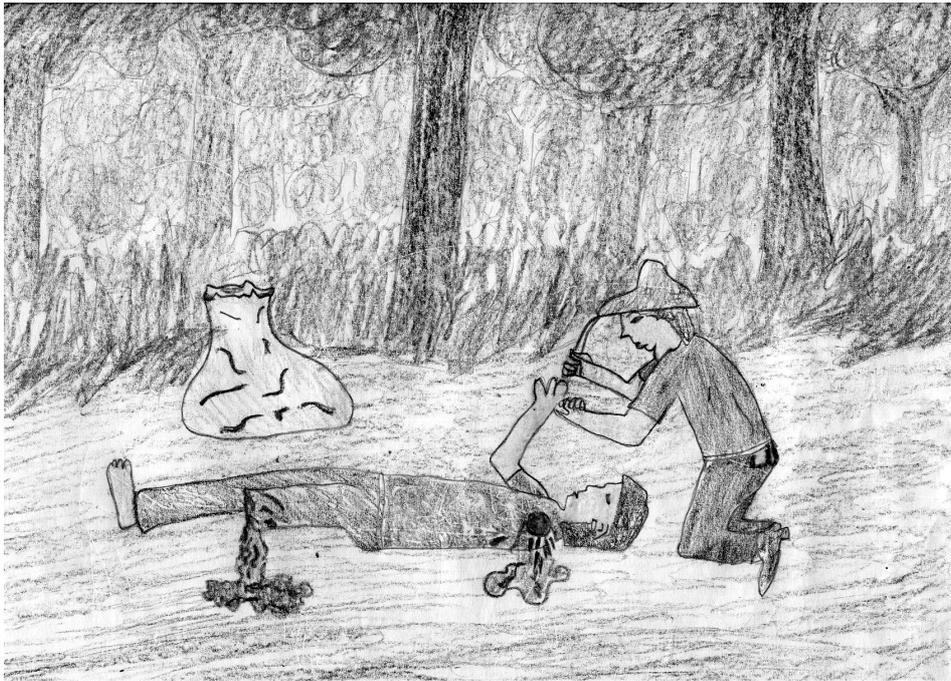
[...] Joaquim was thinking about fish, big fish to take back home. He spent the day fishing, but he did not return home. How could he walk back if he was dead? He could only walk in the dead man’s world, but that is another world of our brothers, not this world of live people. If he were alive, he would have gotten back home around 3 pm, that’s what he always did. Only his dog went back home, alone.

9 The narrative was produced in both Xavante and Portuguese. Portuguese words are *italicized*, Xavante words are *bold and italicized*.

10 Xavante knowledge is stored within the complex root system of savannah trees, whose underground roots are often much larger than the tree itself (Ferreira 2003a).

It was dark, the man was not there [...] So the people of the Volta Grande village<sup>11</sup> started looking for him. They walked around and called his name. Nothing (*nada*). They wanted to sleep. His wife had a dream, a dream that he was covered in blood, red, red like *urucu* (*bö*, red ocre body paint), but it was not *urucu*, it was blood (*wapru*). His blood came out of his body, all out, and covered the earth, the blood covered everything. It was all red (*ipré*), all covered in blood.

The next day (April 5), everybody in Sangradouro already knew about it, how the farmers killed him. The people sent a radio message to the other reservations and the men started coming from São Marcos (a Terra Indígena further east) and Parabubure (further north), because the old man had many relatives there. We are happy that the Xavante were getting together to look for the old man, because he suffered a lot in the hands of the *waradzu*. His blood came all out of him and spread over the land. The land turned red, like *wapru* (blood), red like *bö* (*urucu*).



**Fig. 1:** Joaquim's blood covers the earth. By William Tsere'õñdi'õ.

<sup>11</sup> Volta Grande is the name of Joaquim's village.

Joaquim was walking back home, but the peons already spotted him. They planned on killing him, because *waradzu* don't like Xavante around. [...] The old man had a friend on the farm, because he always gave the peon some fish. The river is inside the farm, how can we fish? So Joaquim's friend saw him, came over and said: "They are preparing a trap for you, they are going to kill you. Get out of here". How can the old man run fast? Faster than a car? *Waradzu* have big cars that go fast, they have D2O (big Ford pickup trucks) and the pickup truck was coming fast, already, with the *waradzu* inside, ready to kill the old man.

Joaquim looked back, his legs can't take him faster than the car. The men have guns, but he is going to scare them because he is a jaguar, he does not fear. He prepared himself to fight with them like a jaguar, like an anaconda (*sucuri*) wrapping around them, breaking their weapons. He can fight, he can fight with Luis Carlos (son of Ernesto Ruaru), who brought his men with him. [...] Joaquim said: "I am a Jaguar, I am brave." They came up from behind and grabbed him by the neck. He said, "I am a Jaguar and I am brave". – "No one walks on our farmland, no Xavante can step on our farm. It is not your land", the *waradzu* said, "it is ours". First they hurt him, poked him in the back with a knife. The blood was dripping, they humiliated him. "We take your land, we take your blood", this is what they said. The blood was dripping on the land, on the fruits and flowers that we are drawing now. The yellow flowers are turning red, the green grass is turning red, *ipré up-tabi* (really red), like we paint ourselves with *bö*.

The old man wanted to wrap around Luis Carlos like an anaconda, but the peons stabbed him in the back again, humiliating him again because how can you stab a good hunter, a strong anaconda, a dangerous jaguar? [...] The old man is hurt, his blood is covering his body, he will die in red, like *bö*. He is almost dead. The *waradzu* don't like the Xavante, the land, the flowers, the fruits that we are painting now, for the women's project. They step on flowers, they dig the earth, they don't like you, Mariana, either, because you like us, you like the land, you like the women and the children, you like the fruits and the flowers.

Luis Carlos shot Joaquim in the forehead [...] There is a hole in Joaquim's head, the blood is squirting out, it is pouring out like a waterfall. He is dead. The *waradzu* are alive. But the *waradzu* know their laws, they know they need to hide the body. They want to cut it up, they want to kill the Indian for good (*matar índio de verdade*), so that he will not go to the land of the dead (*terra dos mortos*). They think they can do that so they cut the arm off, the leg off, the head off, the other arm, the other leg, the other foot, the hands, chop up the stomach, even cut off his penis. They don't know that he is already gone to the other world, like they call an angel, he is already on the other side, flying, his body is covered in hawk dawn, he is like a spirit.



**Fig. 2:** The *utöparané* turns red, like blood. By Marlito Nō'rō're.

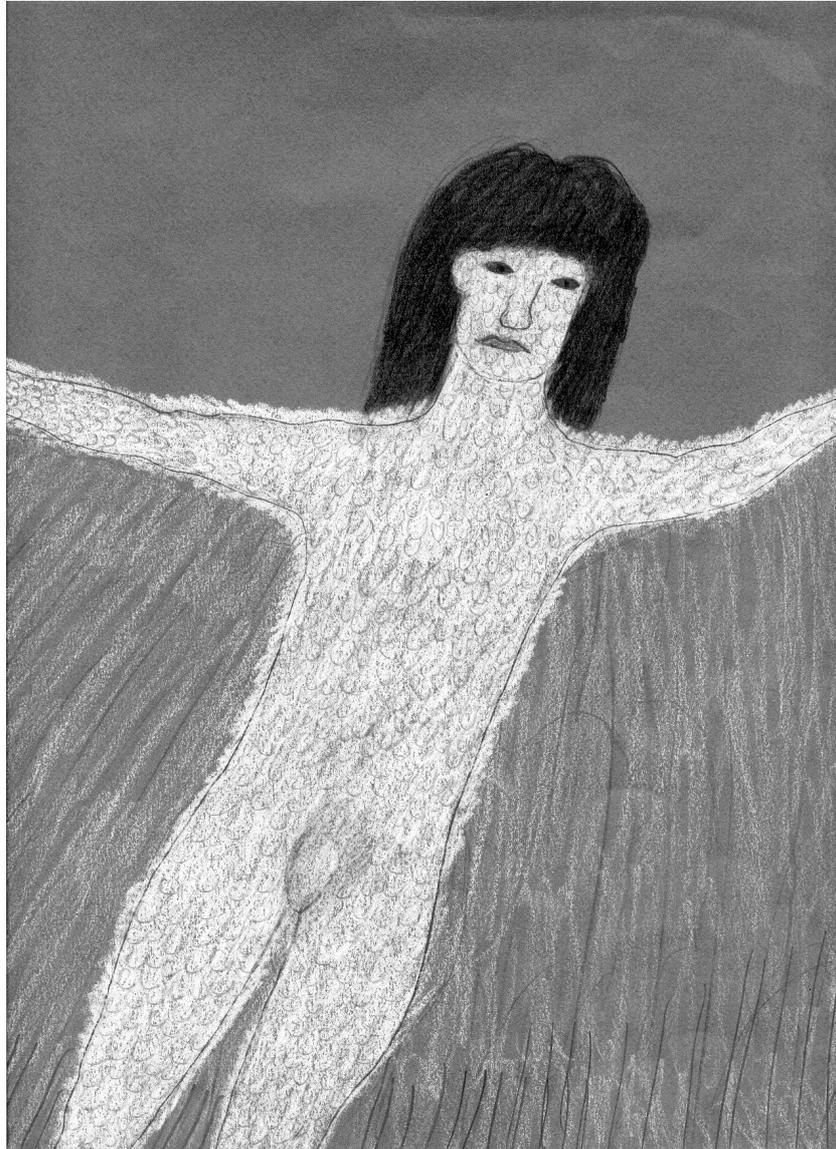


Fig. 3: Joaquim's body covered in hawk dunnets. By Timóteo Tserewaropá.

The body parts the *waradzu* put in a bag, but they have to hide it. [...] They have to hide the body or they go to jail. They have to clean up the blood, but the blood is already inside the land, it already is in the root of the trees, all over the flowers, the fruits, the grains, everywhere. [...] They cannot hide anymore. But they come with their tractor and they clean up, stir the land so nobody will see the blood. The blood goes in even deeper [...]