Land and Indigeneity in Toré Songs of the Brazilian Tapeba People

Invited essay by Ronald Conner

In Northeast Brazil, indigenous identity claims advance to legalized status through a process that routinely contemplates evidence of an active tradition of the *toré*, a song- and percussion-driven circle dance and sacred ceremony recognized as the region's "utmost marker of Indianness" (Grünewald 2005:17). This tradition aside, the 6,300 Tapeba people of the municipality of Caucaia, Ceará[1] bear little outward resemblance to the Indian of the Brazilian historical imagination: chanting, dancing, warring, pre-modern, naked but for body paint, feathers, and rattles. Indeed, the Tapeba and the approximately 50 other indigenous groups who have reemerged across the Northeast since the 1970s—some two centuries after their purported extinction—are tri-racially fused (indigenous-African-European) Portuguese speakers, many of whom have lived as ethnically unmarked, landless peasants for generations, occupying but having no legal claim to territories once populated by the region's now-extinct Tupi-speaking Indians and later titled to white Brazilian landholders (*posseiros*).

Without exception, land rights are the most sought-after and lethally contested entitlement guaranteed by law to Brazilian communities like the Tapeba who have achieved legal recognition of their indigeneity. Since October 2011, I have conducted dissertation research at Lagoa dos Tapeba I, "Tapeba Lake I," one of 26 Tapeba communities in and near Caucaia, investigating how toré song texts specify Tapeba land claims absent the federal demarcation that should have followed their recognition in 1993.[2] The following brief analysis of two toré song texts reflects some Tapeba perspectives on land—particularly the indigenous village as a rightful, timeless, and stabilizing feature on it—during this ongoing period of uncertainty.



Lagoa dos Tapeba I exists on an indigenous *retomada*, "retaken land," located along the south flank of federal highway BR-222 outside Caucaia. Although Tapeba occupation here has since the 1990s gone sufficiently uncontested to allow the construction of several dozen brick-and-mortar and stick-and-concrete habitations, a schoolhouse, water tower, and community pavilion, posseiros have at least twice brought in armed police and bulldozers in attempts to force indigenous inhabitants off the land. Many toré songs respond to such conflicts. One example exhorts Ceará's governor to recognize the Tapeba occupation as a reconstitution of Ceará's indigenous presence via the Tapeba's symbolic return to the *tapera*, a Tupi term translatable as "old Indian village."

Na tapera, ô, na tapera,	In the old village, oh, in the old village,
Onde eu fui, governador?	Where did I go, Governor?
Ai, ai, eu lá, na tapera!	Ay, ay, I'm over there, in the old village!

Another song naturalizes Indians and their village within a timeless chain of ecological transformations and renewals through reference to the *jurema* tree:

O vento balança o mar	The wind ripples the sea,
O mar balança a areia	The sea carries the sand,
É no tronco da jurema	It is at the trunk of the jurema tree
Que os índios balançam a aldeia	That Indians balance/incite the village

Perhaps the most venerable natural symbol of Northeast indigeneity, the *jurema* tree has entheogenic uses

throughout the region, including in a beverage made from its root, consumed during toré rituals to facilitate contact with nature and ancestral spirits known as *encantados*, “enchanted ones.” Here, Tapeba knowledge of this plant confers birthright to land; it validates the Tapeba village as a boundless, synchronic, simultaneously natural and supernatural feature of Ceará’s landscape.



While these two songs cannot fully propound a Tapeba vision of land, they emphasize a recurring perspective by which land rights are ever coterminous with indigeneity. Put another way, synchronicity trumps diachronicity: indigenous legitimacy in Brazil rests not on blood quantum and unbroken descent from a federally recognized Amerindian group (as in the U.S.) but on self-ascription and substantiation of a differentiating cultural practice (see French 2002; 2009). The Tapeba address these latter criteria through strategically aligning timeless notions of Brazilian “Indianness” to images of nature culled from Ceará’s local environment. In this, they sound through song what they continue struggling to overcome by means of law: the historical break catastrophically separating their “posttraditional Indian” selves (Warren 2001:5) from their pre-contact, unacculturated, and landed indigenous predecessors.

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1 25 kilometers west of Fortaleza, the Atlantic coastal state capital.

2 Partly because Tapeba territory coincides with several urban zones in Caucaia, legal and bureaucratic efforts have largely stalled, unable to solve the problems of posseiro counterclaims against the Tapeba and relocating thousands of non-Indians; these and other issues must be resolved before demarcation can be considered finalized and the Tapeba can claim control of their lands.

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