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Which world ends when Covid-19 strikes? Understandings of vulnerability and new beginnings amongst Guarani Mbya people from southern Brazil and Argentina.

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Research Note

This research note is an abridged version of [a paper presented at the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK's 2021 conference \(ASA2021\)](#) in early April, 2021.

Vulnerability is a polysemic term, which is usually linked to risk, and its definition may vary depending on what it intends to indicate. People, peoples or situations considered “vulnerable” are invariably tied to the risk they run. The opposite is also possible, if considered “at risk” they are compulsory considered “vulnerable”. As soon as the new coronavirus pandemic reached Brazil, the understanding that indigenous collectives would be more vulnerable to the new disease was popularized. Vulnerability and risk are markers for approaches within the fields of health and management, for example, and they are part of a biosafety repertoire, which remains open-ended.

PARI-c emerged from a shared concern amongst many researchers and social activists regarding the possible impacts that the ongoing pandemic could have on over 300 indigenous collectives living on the Brazilian territory. The concern that the COVID-19 pandemic would be even more lethal amongst indigenous collectives, considering the current state policy regarding health as well as the many permanent crisis experienced by indigenous peoples, such as the restriction of access to sustainable lands and the lack of suitable nutrition, has been one of the main motivations for the development of PARI-c. In other words, we also assumed that indigenous collectives were “at risk” and were indeed “vulnerable populations”. However, as soon as we initiated our conversations with PARI-c indigenous investigators, especially Guarani Mbya investigators, we were faced with a dissonance of understandings regarding risk and vulnerability.

The understanding that indigenous peoples are at risk regarding COVID-19

In a [study published by Lancet Global Health](#), Victora et al. (2020) claim to have found prevalence of 6,4% of SARS-CoV-2 antibodies amongst indigenous populations ahead of 1,4% amongst non-indigenous people, demonstrating that, by October 2020, indigenous people had already become the most affected population, especially in Amazonas. [An analysis performed by Instituto Socioambiental](#) [Socio-environmental Institute – ISA], determined that both within communities located in large territories, with abundance of environmental resources and low risk of contamination as well as small communities, close to large urban centres with high contamination risk, there is relevant vulnerability amongst indigenous peoples. That is because even though large communities were more isolated from cities and contamination, the distance from Intensive Care Units or even basic health attention would aggravate the situation in case people became infected, which would be the opposite from the communities located near large urban centres, because even though they are exposed to a probability of contamination which is greater and faster, they rely on good availability of health care.

Amongst medical practitioners, the understanding that indigenous peoples were more vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic was also spread. For example, [in an interview to the](#)

[Brazilian newspaper Correio Braziliense](#), the epidemiologist Wildo Navegantes, professor at Universidade de Brasília (UnB), argued, that "the indigenous population " is historically more sensitive to respiratory infections, and that "they pass away easily", therefore they should receive vaccines as soon as the vaccines were made available. However, despite the fact that such analyses are important when evaluating the risks indigenous peoples undergo, and are also important when planning differentiated public policies towards these peoples, they sometimes end up serving as an embodiment of a series of negative assumptions regarding indigenous peoples. They also reinforce the ideology that the western mode of urban life would be the most prepared to deal with the adversities of the contemporary world, and strengthen biomedical intervention actions within indigenous communities which go against indigenous understandings and interests.

From a Mbya perspective, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted another diagnosis. The identification of the causes of the new disease as well as the means to fight it emerged strongly. Guarani Mbya cosmology, and the ones from indigenous collectives from the South-American Lowlands in general, have a fairly fertile openness to the idea that the earthly world, the one we currently live in, constantly collapses or is about to collapse. In this sense, a pandemic event is not completely scary, but the confirmation of what they have already anticipated.

Living means being vulnerable to constant attacks of visible and invisible beings. The anticipation of a catastrophic future in constant imminence does not seem to find space within the same terms in a health-safety hybrid, such as the ones assumed by biosafety measures. The centrality of bodies designed to live amongst relatives, which needs investments in order to become human, different from the bodies of animals and plants, emerges as a connection between human-relatives and deities. A relationship mediated by the *ja* (owners) is the foundation of an instable relationship which requires constant investment on strengthening people-bodies and deities-people.

Under the sign of multiplicity

According to Guarani Mbya people, we are immersed in *teko axy* – an earthly level where everything decays, lacks and deteriorates. Differently from us, the gods live in celestial levels characterized by abundance, ripeness of fruits and harvests – *teko porã*, where corn springs on its own, without the need of cultivation, and it never spoils.

Teko axy, the perishable reflex of *teko porã*, is permeated by a multiplicity of beings, which take several forms, human and other-than-human. Most of these beings are known as *ja* and are connected to each animal, each botanical species, each outcrop and carry a role of protection, as a keeper or "owner" of each non-human being. For example, there are the *xivija*, owners of the jaguars, the *yvyraja*, owners of the trees, the *itaja*, of the stones, and so on. In other words, even though they are invisible to "our" eyes, the *ja* form true crowds throughout the planet, to the extent that a simple fishing expedition to a river compels us to relate to many of them. Causing any disturbance to the *ja* brings direct consequences, because they take revenge through the act of casting all types of diseases on humans who disturb them, or who do not respect the beings they care for. Consequently, it means that health invariably comprises the practice of good diplomacy with them.

According to Mbya people, the rise of coronavirus is directly related to how non-indigenous people ignore the existence and the relationship with the *ja*. It is interesting to point out that, even though the rise of coronavirus is still under debate, its manifestation in humans was first attributed to wild meat consumption in markets throughout Wuhan, in China – the first epicentre of the epidemic. Bats and pangolins were targeted as disease agents for COVID-19

in humans. Quickly, such speculations were in resonance with Mbya cosmology, indicating that prohibited meat consumption, such as bats', or even edible ones, such as the pangolin's, done without due respect to each animals' own *ja*, would have been the main cause of the pandemic.

Mbya assumption presumes that the *ja*, bothered by human-animal relationships triggered by non-indigenous people, would have cast coronavirus as a response to the disorders suffered by them. Therefore, vulnerability in principle, established by the human condition at *teko axy* – this earthly level where everything ends, is paired with an active variable – the destructive action by non-indigenous people regarding animals.

Video: <http://www.pari-c.org/artigo/17>

Video recorded by Ariel at dawn, on April, while he prepared the *mate* [a traditional herb infusion]. The fire reminds Ariel of his grandfather, who used to say that the beautiful words arise over the fire. In several of these conversations, Ariel learned the value of the fire and the smoke in avoiding diseases. The ashes, for example, are very important to care for women and men over the period after the birth of a child.

Worlds which collapse

Mbya people tell us that this is the second Earth, which arose after the collapse of the first. The first world collapsed after a great flood which caused the earth to become “soaking wet”. The main reason which led this first earthly level to an end was a great divine discontent regarding human practices on Earth. It is as if those practices had failed for not being divine enough. The discontent of the deities had been so great that they had to be *convinced* to “lay” another level as to give humans another chance.

As myths undergo constant digression, in order to better elucidate present events and, especially, future ones, if a first divine discontent led to the “end of the world”, there is nothing that would prevent it from happening again, thus, giving room to create a new world. Besides such deduction, Mbya people seek to understand what the gods have been planning for humankind through dance, chants and rituals, as well as through dreams.

Ralf Verá Poty, for example, told us startled about a dream regarding a possible cataclysm. He described that a great fire had fallen on Earth and advanced over Guarani Mbya communities. Women carrying their children wrapped in cloths would run, but as they ran, their children would disappear from their arms. The setting was a general catastrophe, where men were over-drinking and lacked with any respect to divine advice. Children disappearing from the women's arms would be the greatest sign that the deities would be abandoning humankind, giving up on Earth. Guarani Mbya children are considered one of the links between humankind and deities, and taking them away from human arms means to rescue them to the divine realm and discontinue the connection between the divine realm and the *teko axy*.

Such dream describes one of the possible scenarios of an expected cataclysm (*teko nhemondyi*). The pandemic we have experienced could be interpreted as one of such scenarios because it seems to connect speculations towards the end of the world with the current mode of living of non-indigenous people. If the mythic discourse regarding eschatology which normally appears on ethnology elaborates on the agency of gods to either create or destroy Earth, COVID-19 shows the impact regarding the agency of non-indigenous people

who have disrespected beings from the current world, and that due to that may provoke the fury of the gods, who may decide on destroying or cleaning this face of this Earth also due to that. The pandemic as prelude and complementary agent to the end.

Thus, we have been facing a mythologic event which merges past and future due to the actions of non-indigenous people. Rather than focusing on the characteristics of the virus only, Mbya people preferred to reflect upon human-animal relationships which triggered this attack from “nature” towards humankind in general, especially towards non-indigenous people.

Living even though we are in a world coming to an end

Mbya parameters regarding vulnerability rest upon the constant threat of a relationship unbalance between visible and invisible worlds, as we have seen. Vulnerability is a human condition which is inherent to life on the earthly level, *teko axy*, and aggravated by the human-animal mode of relationship that non-indigenous people practice. Considering what has been mentioned above, those who are more vulnerable to *ja* attacks and, thus, to the COVID-19 pandemic, are non-indigenous people themselves. They are the ones who do not respect the necessary restrictions as to have a diplomatic relationship with other-than-human beings, as these people are also the ones who do not perceive the deities’ dissatisfaction which could bring this planet to an end.

In contrast, the assumption which have led Guarani Mbya people and other indigenous collectives to be considered vulnerable by health agencies and by the biomedical area is different. Their bodies are considered vulnerable due to their biological composition, deprived from antibodies. Conditions which are considered “social”, which exclude the invisible world, are also considered important to support greater promptness in protecting indigenous peoples. Matters such as nutritional insecurity, the violence caused by mining and the destruction of forests by loggers, (in)direct genocide policies caused by the current Brazilian government have also been part of the reason indigenous peoples have been considered more vulnerable to the pandemic.

In general terms, the scenarios point to fragilities which are inherent to indigenous existence: first, they were vulnerable because they lived in the forest and did not have access to the technologies of the non-indigenous world, now they are often considered vulnerable because they live in tiny urban territories and maintain direct relationship with the non-indigenous world. The current pandemic situation differs from other situations indeed, but allocating indigenous people in a position of vulnerability is recurrent since the first contacts. The naive indigenous man, the good wild man, the one who needs help to be and to live as an indigenous person is somehow part of an imaginary which puts them in this position.

Up until now, Guarani Mbya people have been mildly affected by the pandemic. Our network of relationships in Southern Brazil and Argentina have not reported any coronavirus deaths until the conclusion of this note. Since some precise isolation measures have been taken (Brazil did not adopt a national lockdown), our Guarani Mbya friends have avoided moving around communities and urban centres. They have invested a lot in their gardens and they have managed to cultivate food regularly. It is clear that there is a diversity of situations, and within communities located in Argentina, a greater shortage of food has been reported, which has been caused by the difficulty regarding cultivation and hunting on reduced pieces of land and a greater dependence on industrialised products, which, on the other hand, has triggered a support network amongst Mbya families. Recently Yva, who lives in Pará Roke, a community located on the southern border of Brazil and Uruguay, travelled to the region of Misiones, in Argentina, with a load of food and clothes. For a couple of weeks, she prepared two bags of corn, beans, *erva-mate* (an herb used for preparing *mate*), tobacco, two blankets,

medicinal herbs (*poã*, “medicine of the forest”), clothes and shoes. She stayed at Tekoa Pipiri for a few weeks in order to nurture and be nurtured by relatives. The bag of artefacts is an opportunity to see relatives again and also receive shamanic treatment through the *Karáí Verá* (shaman). The pandemic can only be fought against, within her understanding, if Guarani Mbya people continue to exist as expect by Nhanderu (deity): eating together, being happy and using medicine from the forest. Yva says that Guarani Mbya people do not become sick with coronavirus because they already knew the best medicine to treat this type of disease. Coronavirus is not necessarily new – not in mythological terms, neither regarding which medicine to be used as a treatment. What is new is that non-indigenous people do not know how to treat the disease with their “strong” medicine. Guarani Mbya people also perceive this as a reason to believe that the target of coronavirus *ja* are not indigenous people. This has been a daily narrative, added to the understanding that there is profound difference between Guarani Mbya bodies and non-indigenous bodies. COVID-19 does not operate in the same manner because the bodies are not the same.

Speaking of the future, even when it is to announce the end of the world, has been constant within Mbya rhetoric. Speaking of past experiences with any Guarani Mbya interlocutor is always a challenge. Tragic events, deaths of relatives, violent situations are embodied silences. The sad memory weakens the person-body. The future, even though looking ahead to a world which will come to an end in order to begin again, causes greater interest and moves constant conversations and speculations. The future in the event of the end of the world is an invigorated past. It has already happened; it is happening again. A world which comes to life after the end of the world has already happened. Guarani Mbya people are in fact witnessing the vulnerability of the *juruá* (non-indigenous person). As long as Mbya people are surrounded by relatives, with children being born and plentiful gardens, the certainty of a new beginning always lies on the horizon.

Translated by Karen Villanova

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