



Master's thesis on welcoming indigenous mothers at university

Thiago Rodrigues Müller / 4 de abril de 2024

Education | Based on her own experience and interviews with other indigenous mothers, researcher Rejane Paféj Kanhgág points out the need to improve the permanence of these students at UFRGS

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*Picture: Personal Archive

Rejane Paféj Kanhgág was the first indigenous woman to enter the Graduate Program in Social and Institutional Psychology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and she is also a mother. So, she started from her experiences at the institution to write her dissertation entitled "Seed women, ình kósin vy ình mré konìn Jé: experiences of indigenous mothers at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul". In her master's thesis, which was defended at the end of March, Rejane mixed her own experiences and those of other indigenous mothers studying at the university to assess how access and permanence worked for these students.

"The university brings us the best, it gives us access to this space, but it denies [indigenous mothers] permanence," she explains. According to the research, for Affirmative Actions to be considered adequate, they must be constituted by a dialog with the original peoples. This implies that the institution should take into account their temporalities and ways of life, which in the case of the Kaingang tribe, of which Rejane is a member, is called Kanhgang Èg My Há (what makes them well as Kaingang), as well as their notions of health, body, and illness.

"We are writing our history, working on health from this language, from being indigenous, from indigenous ways of being and living"

— Rejane Paféj Kanhgág

To carry out her work, the researcher followed the daily lives of Indigenous mothers at the Indigenous Student House (CEI) between November 2022 and January 2023. During this period, the researcher conducted interviews in the form of pin ró nî, which in the Kaingang language means "around the campfire". During the meetings, they shared experiences of thinking about issues related to being indigenous mothers as well as undergraduate/graduate students. The method, genuinely Kaingang, is for them a way of keeping conversations sacred and connecting with the ancestral force.

Temporality and ways of life

"Dictatorship of the clock." This term is used by the researcher to specify how the Fóg (non-indigenous) experience time. For the Kaingang, time is slower and more spaced out: "We go to lunch when our bodies ask us to, we go to sleep when our bodies ask us to, because we respect our body's space," she explains. Therefore, the sickening pace of university life is incompatible with this.

Eating is a point of attention: it is sacred and must be done when the body asks for it. However, in the University Restaurants (RUs), meal times are set. In addition, although children aged 0 to 5 who are children of undergraduate and graduate students linked to UFRGS have access to the RUs, the interviewees also consider that the controlled food does not allow mothers to eat and feed the children. Another issue the indigenous students reported was the strange looks and reactions of discrimination they were subjected to when they took their children to the RUs.

Another aspect that makes it difficult for indigenous mothers to stay at the university is that, in the indigenous way of life and education, separation between mother and child is uncommon, especially when the children are small, as this can cause illness. The Kaingang tribe believes that children choose their mothers long before the umbilical connection. The women of the tribe see motherhood as something sacred: "we are obliged to have children, because we believe that it is only after you have a child that you become sacred to your spirituality," says the researcher.

UFRGS, however, does not allow children to live in the Student House (CEU). Before 2022, when there was no Indigenous Student House, Rejane had to keep her son hidden in the CEU for periods of up to four months. She also explains that she couldn't study without him around. The accounts of the other indigenous mothers at the University are made up of scenes of prejudice and similar difficulties.

The Kaingang have a dualistic family system, with the Kamê, warriors and linked to the sun, and the Kairu, linked to spiritual practices and the moon. Both names refer to the extensive kinship and descent of two brothers who, according to Kaingang belief, created life forms and populated the earth. Marriages that complement each other are honored by the Jagrê, spirits of the forest.

Rejane is Kamê and married another Kamê. In the first few months of his life, her son, Gustavo Kafág, had health issues: Rejane had to perform rites to keep him alive, because he felt the pain of his missing Kairu half. Thus, her son's presence is very important to the researcher and his absence causes her concern. Although he wasn't one of the formal interviewees in the research, some of Gustavo's words, now 10 years old, are highlighted in the work, such as the one in which he says: "We indigenous people are like this: where the mother goes, the children go with her".

Indigenous territory

The CEU, which was not designed to accommodate children, forced indigenous students to hide their children for fear of accusations and expulsion from the house. According to the dissertation, the environment had a sickening silence that didn't heal the culture shock. Even though she hid Gustavo, it came the day when Rejane had to send him back to the village, and she told her relatives in letters attached to the study that she was unable to study because of the separation.

The Indigenous Student House (CEI) was, however, acquired in 2022 after occupying the former building of the Municipal Secretariat for Production, Industry and Commerce (SMIC). Housed in the former UFRGS nursery school, on the Health Campus, the CEI accommodates approximately 11 families from the Baré, Potiguara, Guarani Nhãndewa, Mbyá Guarani and Kaingang ethnic groups. Only two residents have no children.

For the researcher, this achievement represents a strengthening of the native peoples' collective. It is of great importance for the maintenance of rites, prayers, typical foods and other traditional cultural experiences, which could not be held in the CEU. According to Rejane, the CEI – indigenous territory and affirmation of their identities – represents a tool of struggle that goes beyond access and permanence. However, she criticizes the structural difficulties and precariousness of the building and stresses the need for improvements and maintenance.

She explains that the best way for the University to be prepared to receive different cultures is simpler than it seems: with respect for the culture and diversity of others with different ways of life and perspectives. The imposition of life on non-indigenous people and the failure to recognize these differences within the institution hurts them. With her study, Rejane wanted to bring the voices of indigenous women to value their knowledge, èg vâfy tî kân ka ri ke (like when a basket is finished). "My dissertation shows how violent the university still is, because it brings us the best, it gives us access to this space, but it denies us permanence." In the coming weeks, Rejane's work will be available in its entirety on Lume – UFRGS's Digital Repositories.

Translated into English by **Luana Santos**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training II (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari R. Becker (P.h.D.) – IU/UFRGS.

:: Read in Portuguese

[Acolhimento de mães indígenas na Universidade é tema de dissertação de mestrado](#)

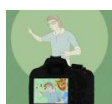
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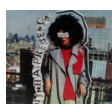
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