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“When Everything was Forest”:

Aikanã Narratives on the Environmental Destruction in Southern Amazonia

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Lisa Katharina Grund ¹

“When Everything was Forest”: Aikaná Histories and Environmental Destruction in Southern Amazonia

Abstract. This article explores how the Aikaná, speakers of an isolate language, who live in the south-eastern Amazon, in the Brazilian State of Rondônia, make sense of the drastic transformations brought about by the colonisation of this region. Through an analysis of Aikaná narratives and life histories, the article highlights how Aikaná social memory gives meaning to experiences of contact, land loss and environmental destruction. It will contemplate the temporal markers, i.e. periodisations that occur in narratives and life histories and that delineate Aikaná historicity. These temporal markers refer predominantly to an experienced past between the beginning of the 20th century and the present, from a distant period of displacement from their traditional territory and the severe loss of human lives to the transformation of the forest into pastures for cattle and soy. In this vein, temporal markers are also anchored in space, unveiling sentiments of nostalgia and ecological grief for a past fertility of social life, interconnected with the fertility of the more-than-human world of the lost forest. Exploring Aikaná narrativity and its operation in the construction of social memory, the article aims to contribute to contemporary debates on Amazonian historicities, as well as to the theoretical and political role of Amazonian socialities in face of the current environmental crisis.

Keywords: historicity, social memory, environmental destruction, Aikaná, indigenous people, Amazon

Resumo: Este artigo explora como os Aikaná, falantes de uma língua isolada, que vivem no sudeste da Amazônia, no estado brasileiro de Rondônia, dão sentido às drásticas transformações trazidas pela colonização dessa região. Por meio de uma análise das narrativas e histórias de vida dos Aikaná, o artigo destaca como a memória social dos Aikaná dá sentido às experiências de contato, perda de terra e destruição ambiental. Para tanto, contemplará os marcadores temporais, ou seja, periodizações

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que ocorrem nas narrativas e histórias de vida, e que delineiam a historicidade Aikanã. Esses marcadores temporais referem-se predominantemente a um passado vivenciado entre o início do século XX até o presente, de um período de distante dispersão do seu território tradicional e de perda populacional, que culmina na transformação da floresta em pastagens para gado e soja. Nesse sentido, marcadores temporais também são ancorados no espaço, revelando sentimentos de nostalgia e pesar ecológico por uma fertilidade passada da vida social, interligada com a fertilidade do mundo mais-que-humano da floresta perdida. Explorando a narratividade Aikanã e sua operação na construção da memória social, o artigo pretende contribuir para os debates contemporâneos sobre as historicidades amazônicas, bem como para o papel teórico e político das socialidades amazônicas diante da atual crise ambiental.

Palavras-chave: história oral, memória, destruição ambiental, povos indígenas, Amazônia

Ani kawaina tawāa heri hiku hiku hene eri? –

(“Is it over, what can we do, and with each other, what can it be?”)

Yanemii Aikanã, 2015

Nada é forte o bastante para poder restituir o valor da floresta doente.

(Kopenawa & Albert 2015, p. 354-5)

Introduction

Since the Aikanã², speakers of an isolate language, in the southeast of the state of Rondônia, Brazil, came into closer contact with the non-indigenous population at the beginning of the 20th century, their history has been marked by frequent invasion of the lands they traditionally occupied. Between the beginning of the first rubber boom in the late 19th century and 1973 when they moved to the current Indigenous

² The Aikanã (auto-denomination) are known in the literature under various names, such as Huari, Massaca, Cassupá, Tubarão, among others, many of which were personal names of chiefs that were mistakenly used as ethnonyms (see also Galvão 1980; van der Voort 2016).

Territory Tubarão-Latundê, the constant displacement of families and settlements had a significant impact on Aikaná life, their daily practices and rituals.

The period that marks the loss of their fertile lands on the right and left banks and headwaters of the Apeya (Pimenta Bueno) river coincides with growing deforestation rates and drastic modifications to the landscape - from forest to monoculture pastures, making this region one of the most devastated in the Amazon in terms of environmental destruction. The remaining indigenous populations, with whom the Aikaná used to have friendly relationships, and whose traditional territory used to encompass the Corumbiara-Apeya region, today live in small separated and dispersed land parcels, in a sea of unrecognisably transformed grassland for the cultivation of soy and livestock aimed at the international market.

The present analysis seeks to show how the Aikaná make sense of the drastic changes brought about by the colonisation of the southwestern Brazilian Amazon region, and how their social memory gives meaning to these transformations experienced in their world, which are closely linked to the loss of land and environmental devastation.

To understand how the Aikaná themselves identify and intentionally choose specific historical events, not only to interpret the past but also to comment on the present, the analysis will contemplate the temporal markers mobilised by the Aikaná narrative. Identifying and exploring these discursive devices analytically means taking statements people make about their past lives seriously and reconstructing therein “a wider sense” of the historical processes that have shaped their past (Rosaldo 1980, p.xx).

As shown by the works of Rosaldo (1980) and Price (1985), temporal markers operate to establish different periodisations and, therefore, unique temporalities in non-corporate social contexts, where genealogical memory is not a relevant trope for social memory. The importance of temporal markers as devices to access Lowland South American history, through indigenous perspectives and conceptualisations of temporality and change, was demonstrated in the influential volumes edited by Albert & Ramos (2002) and Fausto & Heckenberger (2007), correcting accounts of western unidirectional objectification, pacification and victimisation. However, Aikaná narratives anchor their temporality to movements in space, in a similar sense as Rivière (1984) long ago described for the Guianas region, where the movements of groups and whole villages inscribed their political history in space. Moreover, subsequent studies, notably in the Guianas (Whitehead, 2003; Overing, 2004; see also Feld and Basso, 1996), emphasised not only indigenous perceptions of landscape, but also the interconnection between historical and ecological memory. These studies highlight that Amazonian indigenous understandings of the environment consist of multiple scapes of time and myth and

of multiple worlds of human and non-human entanglements, in which the forest - and the animals, plants and spirit entities within - in most cases, share the same fundamental social principles as human beings (Kohn 2013; see also Viveiros de Castro 1998). These considerations help to understand how the Aikanã experience and talk about the drastic transformations that have shaped their place and to gain an insight into Aikanã perspectives regarding what it is that has been lost through them.

The temporal markers examined in what follows refer predominantly to an experienced past between the 1930s and the present, and begin with the recurrent use of the expressions “when the White man arrived and everyone left” and “when measles arrived and everyone died”. This time refers to the deterritorialization, dispersion and reduction of the Aikanã population, when the Aikanã were taken to work in the rubber plantations and many died from exogenous diseases.

“When INCRA³ arrived”, at the beginning of the 1970s, is the temporal marker that inaugurates a period of permanent colonisation of the area and the transition to an “infertile present”. Thus, these sections highlight the processes that have led to a shift from “the time of the *maloca*” (i.e. the time of the traditional roundhouse) to “the time of today”, which resulted in the decimation of indigenous populations and the destruction of the forest. Although these narratives will be brought into dialogue with written sources, the main focus of the present discussion is on Aikanã conceptualisations of time and memory. Particular weight will be placed on the final section “when everything was forest”, an idea mobilised by the older generation in reference to the past, which is also a powerful cultural comment about contemporary times. The forest therefore functions as strategic space from where to unfold Aikanã views on the tragedy of and dilemmas brought by colonisation.

Although the Aikanã do not seem to make a distinction between narratives of a remote or experienced past – all refer generically to *hameri’ika*, “it’s of the past; it has been a long time ago” –, the criterion of age plays a major role in who has propriety to narrate and thus, older people are acknowledged as the masters of the largest narrative repertoires (see also Farage 2003, p.117-118). The material for this article derives predominantly from conversations on life histories and memories of the past with elders, women and men, in Aikanã, as well as in Portuguese, held during several ethnographic fieldwork periods between 2012 and 2020.⁴ To a large extent

³ National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform.

⁴ The ethnographic data for this article was gathered in the context of two consecutive endangered languages documentation projects (DobeS 85,611 and 92,740, Museu Paraense

the narratives are from elderly women, who are respected in their community for their knowledge of the past (some for their shamanic knowledge, as wives of previous shamans) and for having raised many children and grandchildren. The aspect of gender, although not a limiting factor, weighs into the considerations on agriculture, community and fertility in the lamentations about life in the present, as these represent themes of traditionally female domain. The resort to biographies and personal testimonies of historical processes has been identified as central to Amerindian historicity more generally, as it creates a “sense of position” and orientation within larger historical events and shifts (Bacigalupo 2010, p.99). The narratives presented here are from those who remained in or returned to the Corumbiara-Apeya region and who now live in the Indigenous Territory Tubarão-Latundê. While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the perspective of the younger generations, the narratives explored here are also recalled in conversations between older and younger village folk and seem to have educational properties, relevant to future generations. For the purpose of the present analysis, this also means acknowledging and exploring the narratives’ “moving force in the lived-in present” (Rosaldo 1980, p.31).

“When the White people arrived” and “everyone left”. Narrations of Contact, Trajectories of Dispersion and Separation

The Aikanã “sense of history” (Carneiro da Cunha 2007, p.xi) of the more recent past is deeply marked by a rupture, a point in time when “everything changed” - *itü’iheẽ*. Geographically, this is linked to a particular place called Cascata, significant in numerous aspects: as a birthplace of many Aikanã and site of pottery remains, petroglyphs and a cemetery; an important place of transit in bygone days of the indigenous people that lived between the Corumbiara-Apeya rivers; and a mythical reference, where *arüme* - a tapir -, in ancient times, had formed a famous waterfall while carving out the Apeya river bed, which today has been turned into a hydroelectric dam. Importantly, there, at Cascata, at the beginning of the 1940s, against the backdrop of heightened US demand for rubber during WWII, a post was established by the Indian Protection Service (SPI). This point in history, in the early 1940s, signifies a transition from a time when the Aikanã were mostly still inhabiting

Emílio Goeldi/Max Planck/ZAS/Volkswagen Foundation) between 2012 and 2020, supervised by the linguist Dr. Hein van der Voort (Museu Goeldi), and undertaken with the authorisation of and in collaboration with the inhabitants of the T.I. Tubarão-Latundê. The present analysis of the narratives and thoughts on experiences of loss and environmental destruction, are being explored by the author in a postdoctoral research project on Aikanã narrativity and memory, at the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi, under the PCI scholarship (CNPq) since 2021.

malocas (*keza*, communal roundhouses), located on lands of traditional occupation, to the “time of today”, marked by the absence of this territory and way of life, analysed in the last section.

The SPI post at Cascata hosted various ethnic groups, Aikanã, Kanoé, Salamã, Kapishana, among others, who, according to Becker-Donner (1955), had either moved there voluntarily, or had been “wandering” through the forest and were “gathered” by the SPI. This kind of “gathering” of indigenous people at the time is narrated by the Aikanã in the form of the sudden arrival of a “White man” in the village, in the midst of life occurrences. This “White person” that appeared was often a rubber worker looking for additional workforce, for instance; other times it was SPI personnel who tried to convince people to move to an indigenous post. For Ũpe’i Yümukapa’i Árüasu’i, an Aikanã elder, Cascata was the place where his mother and all his relatives lived “before the White people arrived” and a place from where his relatives then departed and never returned. Ũpe’i recalled about the maloca of Capitão⁵ Urupu that, once, a girl was going through the female puberty ritual of seclusion as “menina moça”, and the family of the girl and invited guests were preparing for the end-of-seclusion festivities, when, suddenly, the “White man arrived and took everyone away”. In the case of the Kanoé chief Yápulizu, according to Wázerip Salamã, it was a rubber worker, who one day arrived at Yápulizu’s village and “took everyone to Cascata”. Both Urupu and Yápulizu and many of their relatives never returned to their place of origin.

The trajectory of the dispersion of the Aikanã population, as well as neighbouring indigenous groups (such as the Kanoé, Sakurabiat, Makurap, Djeoromitxi and others, see: Bacelar 2004; Maldí 1991; Soares Pinto 2017; Timóteo da Cunha 2017; van der Voort 2016) follows the trajectory of the establishment of various SPI posts and the route the rubber travelled, from Cascata to Barranco Alto, from there to Guajarã-Mirim and further to Rondônia’s capital Porto Velho. Furthermore, as Kuirã Aikanã explains “From Porto Velho a ship took the rubber to Manaus and from there to the factory.” These indigenous posts were established by the SPI in response to the second rubber boom, from 1942-1945, which saw an increase in rubber exploitation and rubber cutters in the region, with the task to “attract” and “pacify” Amerindians, by “directing them to useful and systematic work” (Vasconcelos 1939, p.20-24), in the name of the rubber trade.

⁵ The term *capitão* ‘captain’ was used during the first half of the 20th century to refer to indigenous leaders.

Dadü Aikaná recalls that she was a small child when “the White people took the indians⁶ from Cascata to Barranco Alto” - she was still in her “mother’s arms, still feeding on her breast, when *everyone* left”. Then, when Dadü “*começou querendo andar*”, “started learning to walk”, around the age of one roughly, “*everybody* went away to Guajará-Mirim”; she stayed behind and grew up with her uncle and aunt. “They raised me and after I turned young lady,⁷ they kept on telling me: our relatives (“parentes”) are the Kanoé, Aikaná, Kwazá, Txeramái (Salamái), *everybody* left for Guajará-Mirim. The people (“o pessoal”) took them there and we stayed.”

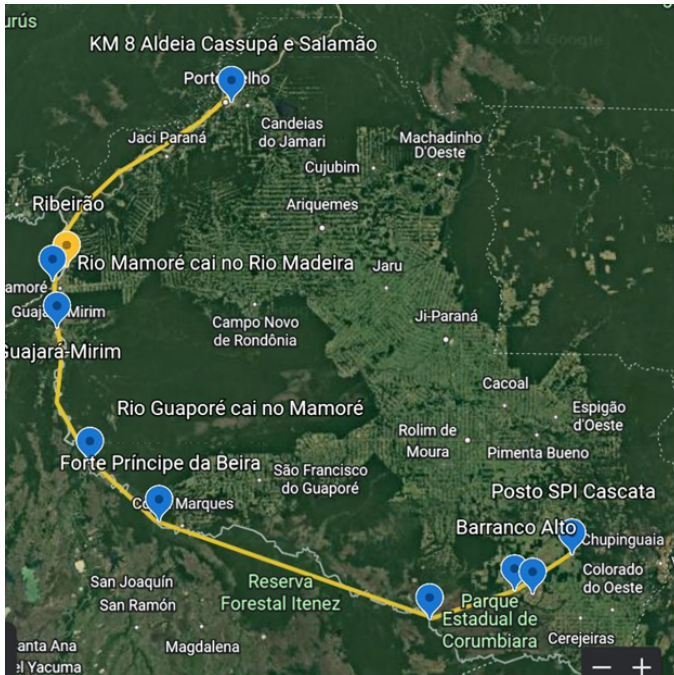


Figure 1. Rubber trajectory and SPI posts between Cascata (bottom, right) and KM 8, near Porto Velho (top, left). Map made in Google Earth. Prepared by author.

The separation into those that “left” and those that “stayed” and the repeated dispersion of the Aikaná community at that time, also of those who fled on the way and sought refuge in the forest (cf. van der Voort, 2004), is an important marker in

⁶ The term *índios*, commonly used in Portuguese to refer to Amerindians, is translated as “indians” throughout the article.

⁷ “Quando eu me formei”, i.e. with the start of her first menstruation and the commencing period of the female seclusion ritual.

the historical perception of the people and frequently recalled in the narratives of the past. The fact that, recurrently so, in Aikanã memory, “everybody” left, expresses not only the profound impressions the dislocation of whole village populations imprinted onto those that were left behind but also that, retrospectively, this was a time when the socio-spatial perceptions and inter-ethnic relations changed.

The connection between the arrival of the *asasare'ene* (White people) and the dispersal of the Aikanã population (*asasare'ene wareyãna puxariüpeẽ*) is explained by the change from living together in communal roundhouses (*keza*) to living in dispersed camps (barracões) which served the rubber trade, a change from a traditional economy based on agriculture and indigenous trade networks to a system of exploitation and indentured labour.

When the *White man arrived* in the village, *everyone dispersed* (“espalharam tudo”), all the indians, because they wanted them to cut rubber for them, so *everyone got dispersed* (...) the White people ended it all, because they sent the indians to work, scattered them. Then they said that there are no longer any *malocas* (Dadü, my highlight).

In Dadü's memories of her childhood, the dispersion of the indigenous population of the area was the reason she did not “see” the villages of several neighbouring groups, with whom the Aikanã maintained friendly relations.

Then they secluded me (“me prenderam”; as part of the female puberty rite). I grew big, but we were still visiting the Kwazá, cheering, singing, dancing, drinking chicha (fermented drink, typically made from corn or manioc). I've never seen the village of the *Eruera'ene* (Mekens). The *Txeramãi* (Salamãi) I also did not see. And *Erii'ene* (Kanoé) I didn't see them either. Everyone left to Guajará-Mirim. I don't know where they went. Until now, there are indians there in Guajará-Mirim, Porto Velho.

The dispersion of the different peoples at the time directly impacted the social memory about the ethnic composition of the region for the following generations, who then, according to Dadü, would not witness the places where the Aikanã and neighbouring groups traditionally lived and the inter-village celebrations were held. Thus, the expression “everyone left” does not only refer to the perceived overwhelming amount of Aikanã that left and left others behind but extends to other ethnic groups with whom the Aikanã at that time had frequent contact. Interethnic relations through marriage and ritual exchange, visiting and celebrating, common at that time, diminished with the repeated dispersion of the indigenous people of the

region and the disappearance of the many cultural practices that used to bring them together. These interethnic festivities and ceremonies, such as male and female initiation rituals, have become an important reference of a good life recalled through the narrative marker the “time of the maloca”.

“When the White people arrived” then is a common expression in Aikanã social memory, it marks a transition from the “time of the maloca”, the time “when we were naked” - *kāwāhāyāna*, - to a “time when living among White people”, or rather *nu hizusanena* - “the time that we had started wearing clothes” (cf. Soares Pinto 2017, p.64 for the Djeoromitxí). This reflects, in a similar vein, the ideologically motivated strategy of the SPI of promoting the wearing of clothes and accumulating indigenous workforce for the surrounding rubber plantations as a form of domestication and way of teaching conviviality with the *asasare’ene* (the White people). Both *kāwāhāyāna* and *nu hizusanena* are Aikanã expressions that developed reflexively after encounters with the “Whites” and in hindsight became used as marking the transition between a time pre- and post-contact.

The quotations and narratives above reveal the profound changes that occurred to the social and village fabric with the advent of the second rubber boom and dislocations induced by the governmental agency SPI. This was the point in time when families and different ethnic groups became dispersed, regional networks destroyed and new local spaces formed. This SPI strategy of confining people into newly created “local geographic spaces” (Fausto & Heckenberger 2007, p.18) had a profound impact on the wider regional economic and social relations between the indigenous people and their perception of territory.

As a consequence, the Aikanã that eventually moved never returned and today live in the indigenous territories of T.I. Guaporé, at the border with Bolivia, the Reserva Indígena Cassupá e Salamái at km 8,⁸ near Porto Velho, as well as in the cities of Ribeirão and Porto Velho. Although there is little contact with the Aikanã that stayed behind, they consider their place of origin to be in the area of Cascata, before *itü’iheẽ* (“everything changed”).

“When measles arrived” and “everyone died. sarampo wareyána ime’imehedukariẽ

⁸ A very small reserve of 5 ha., previously known as the DEMA, *Divisão Estadual do Ministério da Agricultura*.

When Dadü refers to certain ethnic neighbours – the Kwazá, Kanoó, Salamái and Sakurabiat – that she still “experienced” or did not “see” anymore, she also refers to certain people she still saw or not anymore before they succumbed to “disease”, a concept expressed in Aikaná as *pe’i* ‘illness’ (lit. “that which hurts”). The “arrival” of exogenous diseases, such as measles, influenza and chickenpox had devastating effects on the regional indigenous population, wiping out particularly the older generations but also children:

We were dying. First, we were dying of measles, I saw it. I was a child but I remember everything. (...) Several died, even chiefs, women died, *everyone died*. Children died, everyone.”

According to the personal accounts which built up Aikaná social memory, there were several outbreaks of infectious diseases: at the village of Capitão Tapu, the SPI post at Cascata at the time of the chiefs Kyane and Masaka and at the time they were living at the mouth of the river Tanaru, before moving to their current demarcated indigenous territory. Dadü recalls from the stories told by her grandfather Kwazamii that Tapu died in a flu outbreak: “everyone had a cold (“gripado”), they didn’t know *what disease* was (...) several died” (my stress). Or as Kuira puts it: “And then, at this moment, *measles arrives*. Masaka died, Kyane died, Aru’i died, *everyone died*.”

Narrated in similar terms as the sudden “arrival” of the White man who “took” the people away, measles also “arrived” from *outside*. Just as there is a time before and after the White man arrived, there is a perception of before and after disease occurred, highlighted in this sentence, for instance: “after measles, many died, and we left the village” (Wázerip). There exists a clear connection between sustained contact with the Whites and the arrival of these infectious diseases that are perceived by the Aikaná, as in many other Amazonian cultures, as being not autochthonous but as brought in through contact and through cohabitation with the non-indigenous population (Buchillet 2000, p. 114).

Because of the sudden and extreme reduction of the population, usually narrated in people's memories as “everybody died” - *ime’imebedukariẽ* -, the fact that many elders died, chiefs, musicians and shamans, required reshuffling roles and reorganising villages.

Thus, the sudden deaths of several village elders marked a turning point and led to the relocation of the survivors into other villages. Within the communities, as a response to the loss, socio-political and spiritual roles were rearranged. Furthermore, the many orphans that remained behind, from various waves of infectious disease,

especially when no close kin ties were left, often ended up being “taken” by (o “branco pegou”) or “given” to White people who needed workers at their homes and farms.

The epidemics of influenza and measles, which typically occurred in the overcrowded habitations of the *seringal*⁹ and the SPI posts, caused many Aikanã to “return” to the forest (Galvão 1980, p. 8). Thus, this “shape of history” (Rosaldo 1980, p. 19, p.48) consists of different kinds of movements, of contraction and expansion, concentration and dispersal of the population. On the one hand, there were the continuous movements, from one place to the next, from the malocas to different SPI posts in Cascata, Ricardo Franco, Guajar Mirim and even further. On the other hand, there were those movements from posts, barracks and larger, mixed villages back to the forest and into smaller, scattered communities, away from agglomerations. As highlighted above, “when measles arrives”, marks the time the Aikanã were “many”; after measles, “the majority died”, and is hence seen as a transition from a populous past to a present where merely few Aikanã remain.

For the Aikanã elders living in the T.I. Tubaro-Latund today, the dispersion “when everybody left” and the decimation “when everybody died” are temporal markers that indicate a period of transition from the “time of the maloca” to the “times of today”, characterised by *npi darbe*’i (‘cut down grass’) and permanent colonisation.

After the decline in population the time “When INCRA arrived” began. It marks the start of large scale deforestation, the loss of the Aikan’s traditional land and the move to a demarcated territory characterised by infertile earth.

“When INCRA arrived”. Colonisation, Demarcation and Land Loss

After many years of working on the rubber plantations and living in posts and barracks, some Aikan had returned to their traditional lands, along the Tanaru River, where they established several villages while still working in the *seringal*, where most of the old generation died that were born into the maloca and where many of those now in their 50s and 60s were born. “When INCRA arrived” (*INCRA’ene wareyana*), as the Aikan narrate it, in the early 1970s, these fertile homelands were sold and permanently occupied by the Other and by another landscape. This directed colonisation and allotment of land, supposedly empty and uninhabited, pushed the remaining Aikan out of the traditionally occupied areas.

⁹ A *seringal* is a concession area for the extraction of latex from rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis*). Here, reference is made to the post (or *barraco*) where the rubber (*seringa* or *borracha*) is collected and the workers are paid in kind (coffee, sugar, alcohol, rice, beans, tobacco, matches, metal tools, etc.).

Thus, with the “arrival” of the National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform, or short INCRA, the Aikanã were “given” a less familiar and considerably less fertile area, with predominantly sandy soil (*dü hü’anunaẽ* ‘not good soil (for planting)’), prominently represented in the descriptions of the “times of today”. It was also a major issue for INCRA to sell off Aikanã fertile lands, and it played a significant role in the bureaucratic process leading up to the current demarcated area, on the “worst possible land”, according to Galvão (1980; in Reesink 2010, p.65). It is interesting to note that the concept of soil or earth (*dü*) as such does not make much sense in the Aikanã language, as it is always seen in relation to the farm/garden (*roça, kemiide*), and in that sense, fertile soil is basically a place that is good for planting, where garden produce grows in abundance. In fact, “loss of land” for the Aikanã is always inextricably intertwined with the notion of fertility. Thus, the equivalent of “losing one’s land” would be *dü dukumiibe’i’ete erüaxãẽ* “living on earth that is bad” for planting.

The times “when INCRA arrived” marks a new period in history dominated by different geographical spaces and projects, mainly logging and farming cattle, urbanisation and infrastructure – away from rivers and train tracks, towards roads – leaving lasting marks on the landscape (Théry 2010, p.7). It also meant a time in which the Aikanã were few and the Whites were many, with the dominant figures of the cattle rancher and the peasant settler. Furthermore, and analogous to that, the explosive deforestation rates since the 1970/80’s, has made this region develop into one of the most devastated in the Amazon in terms of environmental destruction.¹⁰

¹⁰ In February 2022 the Brazilian news agency Globo reports that only in the past three years 191km² of forest were cut down in Rondonia alone.

<https://g1.globo.com/ro/rondonia/natureza/amazonia/noticia/2022/02/08/rondonia-e-o-2o-estado-da-amazonia-legal-que-mais-perdeu-areas-protegidas-nos-ultimos-anos-diz-ipam.ghml>

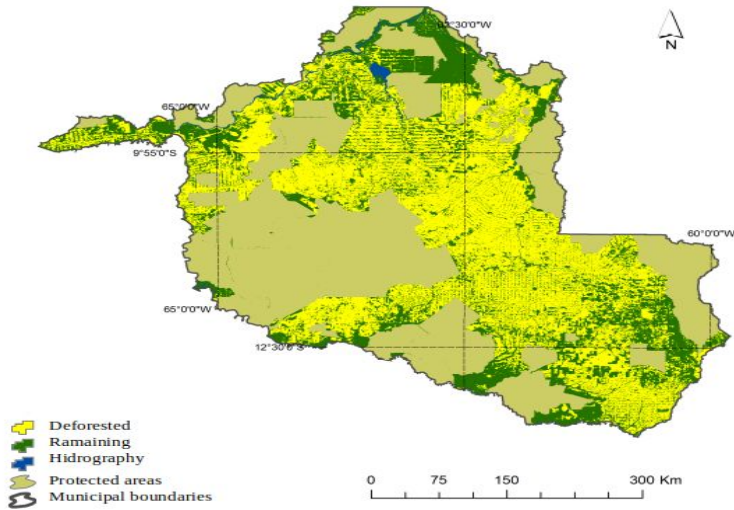


Figure 2. “Simulated deforestation until 2050 in a business as usual scenario, highlighting the protected areas in the State of Rondônia.” (Piontekowski et al. 2019, p.10).



Figure 3. Screenshot from Google maps (taken by the author, on 24th May 2023), showing the Indigenous Territory Tubarão-Latundê (highlighted in the centre) and the scale of deforestation in its surrounding.

The arrival of INCRA goes hand in hand with and was a result of several other major infrastructural projects and government incentives that were concretised during the military-entrepreneurial dictatorship in Brazil, which started with the state coup in 1964 and lasted twenty years. Thus, the distribution of land under the Gleba Corumbiara Project, commencing in 1972, which affected not only the Aikanã but also other remaining indigenous people in the area, such as the Kanoé and Akuntsu of the Omerê river (Aragon and Algayer 2020, p.225), was part of a wider National Integration Plan (PIN) of the Amazon region. With this, since the 1960s, a new era of production/extraction of raw material commenced in the region, moving away from a rubber dominated past (between the end of the 19th and the mid-20th century) to an agro-pastoral future, based on the production of meat and animal feed (Trubiliano 2017, p.44-45).

The way INCRA must be read then in Aikanã narrations, is as an agglomerate term for all these developments that brought profound changes to the region, including the construction of the highway BR-364, which connected the capital Brasília with the state of Acre. Indigenous workforce was essential during the construction of this road corridor in the 60s and 70s, which followed the path of the telegraph line built by General Rondon, and is the main road link between Vilhena and Rondônia's capital Porto Velho. The Aikanã, too, were "called" to work on the road construction that paved the way for large-scale migration to the region. Several Aikanã men and women worked along the construction and in the encampments of this road, including Dadü and Wãzerip, attracted by payments in colourful beads, which, in the end, they never received.

According to Kuira Aikanã, former chief and son of the old Cap. Ariximun, the idea of INCRA at the time was to distribute the now landless Aikanã families to the farmers who bought the land, to serve them as cheap labour. Kuira remembers:

We lived in Tanaru, bleeding rubber. And then, around 1973 the seringal closed. So INCRA allotted land to all the ranchers, and we were left without land.

Our region was this region here, where the rubber tappers extracted all their rubber. So we were left with nothing.

Then my father told me: what are we going to do? You understand a little bit of Portuguese. At this time I also did not understand much, I spoke very badly, but I had a bit of intelligence in my head.

At that time, they wanted every family, two families, three families, to stay with a rancher.

Then we came here, after the seringal closed. I went to talk to INCRA. "No, there, you can live over there. You can continue to extract rubber there for yourselves and sell it for a living", INCRA said to me.

The new area of 114,000 hectares¹¹ "reserved" for the Aikanã by the INCRA, under pressure from the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), was largely characterised by savannah. There were neither sufficient rubber trees to sustain a living off the rubber trade, nor fertile soil to plant enough food (*dü hü'amuẽ tadu'a'iza* 'good soil for planting').

As described in the FUNAI report by Galvão (1980), the Aikanã would make a clear distinction between before and after the White people arrived, as a temporal marker when their engagement with the land and community changed, from agriculture, their principal occupation, based on the work and reciprocity of the domestic group, to extraction, on the basis of "payments". This is highlighted in the equation put forward by several older villagers: "Before we lived off agriculture, when the White people arrived, we started working in the seringal". When the Aikanã started working in the rubber trade, farming stopped being the principal occupation. Much more than that, for the Aikanã, working on their gardens as they used to in the past is synonymous with the idea of 'working together', in a collective formed by various extended families, rather than within nuclear households or individually, which became a characteristic of the times of today.

As highlighted above, a frequent complaint of the Aikanã about the Tubarão-Latundê Indigenous Territory refers to the loss of the fertile land where they traditionally lived, closer to the Pimenta Bueno River. Now, however, they live in an area dominated by sandy soil that is unsuitable for planting. The T.I. Tubarão-Latundê has been poorly protected from the changes that have taken place in the region over the past decades. The advance of deforestation and the intensive use of pesticides in soybean crops, in addition to the proximity to urban areas and cattle ranches, have placed significant social and ecological pressures on the Tubarão-Latundê Indigenous Land. "When the INCRA arrived" coincides with the time when large infrastructural projects paved their ways into the Aikanã territory and when the Aikanã were confined to an unfamiliar landscape, surrounded by a familiar place that was becoming unrecognisably transformed. Indeed, a transition to an infertile present.

¹¹ The Indigenous Territory Tubarão-Latundê, demarcated in 1983, has now about 250 inhabitants of diverse ethnic groups, mainly Aikanã and Latundê.



Figure 4: Deliberate forest fires, set to make way for cattle grazing. Location in the vicinity of the T.I. Tubarão-Latundê.

“When there was forest”.

The Infertility of Earth and Sociality

The final section examines Aikanã thoughts on the forest (*ama*) and its regenerative forces in the narrative marker “when everything was forest”: *amalüpe’ikana*. As mentioned above, in the “times of today” recurrent complaints equate unproductive community life and infertile earth. On the other hand, narrations of the past are ripe with nostalgic images of abundant produce from the gardens, singing and merriness, intercommunity exchanges and festivities, functioning leadership and ritual practices, in short, with fertile social life. When they talk about the past the Aikanã lament the loss of forest and its effects on the conviviality among themselves and with the many others with whom they co-live. The narrative marker “when everything was forest” - *amalüpe’ikana* - is closely related to the “time of the maloca”. More broadly, it is an indicator of the past, before urban centres emerged and the landscape substantially and anthropogenically transformed, as for example in this phrase by Dadü, in an account of her life history: “I worked in the city of Pimenta Bueno, but it was *still forest*; it had a shop, a bar, a restaurant, there I worked.”

Similarly, the expression “still living in the forest” is frequently used by the Aikanã when referring to indigenous people who they consider “still live in the past”, evident in Kuira’s comment: “we already knew that there were people *still in the forest*” – in recollections about the contact-making with the Aikanã group of Capitão Aru’i Uhune’i and the Nambikwara-speaking Latundê in the latter half of the 1970s.

Both groups had been living in voluntary isolation in the current indigenous territory Tubarão-Latundê and have since been integrated into the Aikanã community¹². Hence, a place “still covered in forest” and a person “still in the forest” (uncovered by clothes), are both indicators of the past, of how people and places used to be.

There also seems to be an important correlation for the Aikanã between an intact, continuous forest and the perception of living within a wider indigenous network, which was disrupted in the process of colonisation.¹³ “Cascata was ours”, Dadü’s mother, Pekenae, used to tell her before she passed away some years ago. Pekenae, who is Kanoé, explained to her daughter that Cascata belonged to “all the indians, not only Kanoé, but Aikanã Wïikuruta, Aikanã Wïinzakii'ene, Kwazá Kemuke'ene, Erii'ene [Kanoé], Dapure'ene, Eruera'ene [Sakurabiat], Txeramai'ene [Salamái], *it was forest.*” The phrase further suggests that there exists an analogy between the violence experienced by indigenous people and the violence experienced by the forest, fates, then, that are considered deeply entangled.

This is also highlighted in the narration below by Kuira Aikanã, who forms a similar equation when he compares the time when forest and indigenous people as well as animals were abundant, with the time when the dominant picture is one of deforestation and places emptied of all their original inhabitants. Kuira makes an important distinction though between the “time of the *seringal*” and the “time of the cattle ranches”, where the latter is the driving force of forest and species loss:

I don't know which year it was, which month it was. Because I was born in 1954 and it was already full of White people among us. *Pure forest*, but the White man (o branco) already worked with rubber (seringa, borracha). (...) *It was full of indians (era tudo índio)*, there were no ranchers yet, there was nobody in this time. *Now, all the trees are knocked down (agora tudo é derrubado)*, in the region. Wherever the tractor digs, they find indian bones, clay pots, because there were a lot of indians. We know this cattle ranch very well because we used to fish and hunt in this region. *Now, all the trees are knocked down (agora está tudo derrubado)* and there is nothing to hunt nor fish.

The Fazenda do Pará that Kuira refers to, one of the biggest cattle ranches in the area, is known by the older generation for being the site of a large Aikanã village of the famous Cap. Tapu at the beginning of the 20th century (cf. Nordenskiöld 1924,

¹² At that time the FUNAI policy was still one of enforcing contact and the Latundê case is a particularly tragic one. Reesink (2010), who writes about this process in detail is especially interested in the conceptions and uses of narratives of wilderness.

¹³ Adding to the notion of a continuous forest is the fact that the Aikanã use just one word for forest (‘mato’), which is *ama*.

p.224). Road construction works in 2015 unearthed remains of that village - human bones and clay pots - piled up on the sides of the road, unacknowledged. Kuira's narration not only indicates the link between the cutting down of trees and the subsequent disappearance of people and animals. He also draws an analogy between the disposability suffered by the forest and forest people alike, and the violence that goes hand in hand with the creation of cattle ranches and roads.

The large, continuous forest of the past was fertile, abundant and life-enabling, as this time is also characterised by the perception of when the Aikanā were still many, especially many elders with important social functions, chiefs, flute players, shamans, with the power to create fertility (cf. Overing 1975; 1989; 2003). Ūpe'i explains: "*When there was forest*, when there were still many Aikanā, when everyone was still alive, the young boys were initiated." There are several important aspects in Ūpe'i's comment, which point to a series of consequences that followed when the forest disappeared. When there was forest, when the forest was abundant, so were people (the Aikanā). There was a functioning community, evident in Ūpe'i's account of initiation rituals, here, specifically the sacred flute ensemble *anatukii*, performed at the male initiation ritual (Grund, in press). These rituals are a symbol of a past with a functioning social life, of inter- and intra-communal exchanges, and merriness, before dispersion and separation.

With the disappearance of people and forest, these sacred flutes turned silent, the mythical ancestors were not invited anymore to join the village celebrations. The abundance and absence of the forest is then directly linked to the abundance and absence of Aikanā ritual and social life and those of neighbouring ethnic groups.

(In)Fertile life

The temporal marker "when there was forest" (*amalūpe'ikana*), thus, much more than disclosing a timeframe, unveils Aikanā perceptions of the past in relation to their thoughts on the contemporary world, illustrated by the "time of the maloca", which refers to a period in history that was characterised by a different community life.

With the deaths and the dispersion of settlements, a time began when families were separated, and people lived "here and there" rather than together. Thus, as expressed in the complaints about life today in the village, according to Dadü, "everyone lives apart, every family in their own home", separated into nuclear housing units. This separation, as highlighted in conversations, was particularly encouraged to give space for domestic animals, such as chickens, ducks or pigs, which

families keep around their houses. These domestic animals, bred for consumption, were introduced in the first decades of the 20th century, as part of an official strategy to “civilise” and “assimilate” Amerindians into the national society, and constitute a symbol of the present times. These have been largely replaced – and stand in contrast to – the domesticated wild animals, “taken from the forest” and kept as pets, as a result of hunting activities (see also Vander Velden, 2011).

While the *maloca* is seen as a time when a lot of “traditional food” was eaten, hunted meat, collected fruits and insects, and garden produce, because hunting, foraging and agriculture were widely practised, the complaint today is that “no one has a garden (*roça*) anymore” and importantly, “no one plants anymore together”. The separation of living, thus, is not only meant in terms of distance between houses but much more so in terms of communal relationships. The *maloca* symbolises a time when people not only produced food and attended the land, but agriculture was still a communal activity and served the reproduction of community life through acts of sharing and celebrating festivities (Overing & Passes 2000.). The reduction in indigenous garden produce correlates with the increase in exchange of individual labour and purchased food items, and the diminishing of collective work and production, which makes it difficult to serve visitors and foster relationships.

The social ties, produced and reproduced during these community rituals have a special reverberation in indigenous cosmologies. As shown by classical studies of Lowlands South America (Hugh-Jones 1979; Clastres 2010, p. 139) the continued renewal of society takes place, especially, through the relationship with mythical ancestors and mythical discourse, and therefore extends beyond the human realm. For the Aikaná, similarly, the mythic ancestors - *anatokii'ene* - that are represented in the flute ensemble at the male initiation ceremonies, mentioned by Ūpe'i above, were important for the production of social fertility. The nourishment and feeding of the *anatokii'ene* with fermented manioc and maize drinks (*chicha*), fabricated and distributed by women during the male initiation ritual, has an important social function. On the one hand, to transform boys into productive men; on the other hand, to tame potentially dangerous but beneficial relationships through female substances (*chicha*; Grund, in press).

The initiative of the *ewadukii*, usually translated as *cacique* ('leader'), in keeping families together and getting them “enthusiastic” (“animado”) about the activities of daily life, is considered essential by those who experienced the “time of the *maloca*”. The *ewadukii*'s social functions of “putting” people to work, of “calling” festivities and bringing the community together (see also Overing 1989; 2000 etc.) are lacking in the leaders of today, who seem more focused on fulfilling the role of mediator with the non-indigenous world. Consequently, the chiefs tend to be younger, born after the “time of the *maloca*” and are skillful in foreign knowledge,

such as mastery of the Portuguese language and familiarity with the world of “White people”.

Apart from the role of the political leader *ewadukii*, in the “time of the maloca” the *haditae* (‘shaman’) had a central function to cure and protect his community and land from evil, illness and death through dialogue with the wider cosmos, in which everything has spirit. The *haditae* blows words, both good and bad, over objects, foods, places, people, to bless them, neutralise them and achieve magical effects. Breath, together with words, is an essential act in Amazonian cosmologies because it is through breath work that the shaman performs his healing, just as it is through it that sacred flutes are activated (Piedade 1999: 112). This connects to a perception of the world, in which, in primordial times, words had creative force - “the word was creation” (Farage 1997: 263), or as Aru’i Aikanã explains, “Everything is word (palavra), everything that happened before (antigamente).”

Thus, the *haditae* would apply his magical knowledge as a mediator for the external relations of his community, especially by securing reproduction for humans and animals alike. During his seance he would meet with the ‘owners’ of species, plants and animals, such as the *xüxiuwe* (the grandmother) of the wild hog, who live like humans in malocas in the forest and who take care of their animals’ fertility. The *haditae* would ask for abundant growth of garden produce, such as maize, manioc, beans and peanuts; for seeds and sprouts to be brought and for game to be fattened.

This idea of the important link between leadership and the creation of fertility is clearly demonstrated in the figure of the *ruwang*, who combines religious/political leadership among the Piaroa in the Venezuelan forest (Overing Kaplan 1975: 45-68; Overing 1989). It is the *ruwang*’s responsibility to maintain and nourish the fertility of the land, through performing the “increase ceremonies”, which keep the forests and rivers fertile and abundant (Overing 1986: 144).

Similarly, in the case of the Yanomami, as described by Kopenawa & Albert (2013), it is through shamanic work that the forest generates its life-enabling fertility, which continuously needs renewal and it is the ‘value of fertility’ of the forest as agent (*në ropeni*) that makes the plants grow (see also Pitta 2021, p. 203). But it is based on a reciprocal relationship, as the shamanic spirits feed on the forest’s “image” of the value of fertility (Kopenawa & Albert 2013, p.148) and the vital breath/blowing of the forest (*wahari*) can only generate the value of fertility if there are enough trees and foliage remaining to keep the breath moist and circulating (ibid., p.204).

For the Yanomami, as Kopenawa explains, the value of fertility of the forest is interlinked with humid air/shamanic breath and magical/mythical words. As

evident in Ūpe’i’s comment, the reciprocal link between the fertility of the forest and of ritual life is equally made clear. Without these rituals the relationship to the wider cosmos is not nourished and replenished, since they are necessary to make the forest grow and become abundant. And without the forest these rituals themselves cannot exist. A deforested land means a change to the “value of hunger”, which is socially unproductive. There are a few things, according to the Yanomami, that make the value of fertility turn into that of hunger irreversibly – deforestation and mining. Then, the forest becomes “other”. In a footnote (*ibid.*, p. 496), Albert explains that the transformation of one value to another – of fertility to hunger, for instance – is a process of becoming Other, which equally means losing “one’s mind”. In this sense, a forest that turns “other”, by losing its reproductive capacities and abundance, becomes “mad”.

In a way, the value - fertility versus hunger (of death, of financial exchange value; *ibid.*) - resonates with the Aikanã’s perception of the fertility of the past. In comparison to the fertile past, the unproductivity of life today - without forest - is affected by the negative value of hunger, epidemic and deforestation. The landscape, then, has turned alien and hostile, unearthing “death rather than fertility” (Sandilands 2017, p.162). A deforested landscape that has turned infertile becomes self-destructive - mad -, which relates to Aikanã ideas on haunting, expressed in the notion *awexü*. For the Aikanã, places that are affected and marked by suffering and violent actions “gather” *awexü*, usually translated as evil spirit or haunting (“assombração”). Thus, places become haunted by *awexü*, for instance, through being locations of tragic deaths or murders, where the inhabitants live with constant illness and fighting. Similarly, people “taken by *awexü*”, whose life force, or *ürümüi*, has been temporarily separated from the body, often turn mad, lose their human speech and orientation, would get lost in the forest for days, and without the *haditae*’s intermediary intervention would risk their death. Similarly, with *awexü* haunting the lands, disorientation, madness, illness and death will prevail in them.

Loss

It is conspicuous that the temporal marker “when everything was forest”, despite referring to the past, is a reflection on the present, often perceived by the older generation as not only a present in which *ama hinárüpenẽ*, “there is no forest anymore”, but in which “there is nothing left in life”. Specifically, it refers to a comment by Dadü, after recalling the “time of the maloca”, in which she concludes: “This was how it used to be, they always had enough, they celebrated all the time (...) now we are here, now there is nothing, nothing left in life.” This nostalgic tone resonates with much other commentary heard about a life that once was good.

The violent transformations of the landscape, expressed in the correlation of “when there was forest, there were people”, have left profound experiences of trauma and mourning that could be translated into an “ecological grief”, as defined by Cunsolo & Landman (2017, p.4), which arises from experiencing or anticipating the loss of non-human entities and destruction of landscapes and ecosystems. Grief, theoretically anchored in Butler’s concept of grievability (2004), which refers to the differential value placed on human lives, where some lives are worthy of mourning, while others are rendered disposable, is here expanded to more-than-human worlds. Furthermore, Cunsolo & Landman’s (2017, p.4) considerations on the mourning of nature are inspired by Inuit narratives about “sense of loss” induced by climate change, which resonates with the experience by many Aikanã elders who deplore the loss of forest and fertile soil and all that it stands for: the “time of the maloca” and human/non-human interrelations and fecundity.

Furthermore, the mourning expressed in the temporal marker “when there was forest”, similarly to what Albrecht (2017, p.297) points out in the same edited volume, could be connected to a nostalgia in its very original sense, resulting from the forcible removal of people from their traditional land. For the Aikanã, this familiar region was laden with mythological reference markers, toponyms and place names, so important to indigenous memory (see Feld & Basso 1996; Casey 2000; Whitehead 2003; Overing 2004 etc.). As evident in indigenous perceptions of place, a “multiple-world landscape” or “mythscape” (Overing 2004, p. 81-84) interweaves numerous personal and collective memories, oral history, recent and mythological events. One such example is Cascata, mentioned above. Another, is the “Serra Negra”, an area that today lies in the middle of private cattle ranches, but which holds rocks, caves and stone engravings from a mythic past when the first Aikanã women stole the sacred flutes from the men, recalled in stories and initiation rituals. Today, this landscape has been so irreversibly transfigured that there are no clues, no grounds on which to walk on that help one trigger those memories and orient oneself. As Kopenawa rightly says, without forest, there is no history (Dias & Marras 2019, p.238).

To go back to Dadü’s comment, embodied memory of place for Aikanã elders, as this reading suggests, is first and foremost one of loss. The experience of loss, more precisely, of deforestation, that underlines a life in which there is “nothing” left, also refers to a present in which the absence of forest is the dominant picture. As Whale & Ginn (2017, p.106) have argued about ecological grief, building on Derrida’s ideas of the spectre, loss “should not be seen as the subtraction (...) but as a displacement, as a shift into less certain terrain and a production of haunted place”.

A place, to quote Derrida, where “one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see” (1994, p. 136, in Whale & Ginn 2017, p.106), in which the absence of the past haunts the present, leaving traces and spectres that disrupt linear notions of time. The forest, then, in the case of the Aikanā, is not simply removed, but the forest is still standing there, albeit invisible, watching, reminding of its absence. Importantly, it is a present haunted by both, that which is no more, as well as that “which threatens to disappear” (Sandilands 2017, p.162). The vulnerability of the remaining indigenous populations in the region and the continued environmental destruction become revealed in the ghostly, “anguished qualities” that constitute these “landscape histories” (ibid.).

It is interesting then that the idea of haunting is connected to violence and suffering in the Aikanā notion of *awexü*. Places and people that are “haunted” by *awexü* turn ‘mad’ or ‘other’; places marked by violence and suffering mean an accumulation of *awexü* (haunting), linked to negative sociality. The large, deforested lands that characterise the times of today, then, generate, in a similar sense as Benjamin (1999) argued about capitalism’s illusory promises: a negative growth and abundance of waste and ruins. Among the rubble, “the bodily debris that [capitalist] conquest leaves on space” (Lesutis 2021, p.4) is also an image critically evoked by Kuira above through the machines/tractors/roads versus human/Aikanā bones; cattle ranches versus people/forest. It is crucial that the quest to make the land economically productive and valuable – which, under this logic, can only be possible without forest - contrasts fundamentally with the perceived infertile soil and sociality lamented by Aikanā elders.

Concluding remarks

To sum up, “when there was forest”, the temporal marker - in opposition to a landscape *zame daxiwaë habaneheë*, “cleared and transformed into fields” - indicates a necessary relationship between full sociality and the abundance of the forest. In a similar way to what Overing (1975; 1989, p.304-305; 1990; 2003 etc.) described about the Piaroa in the Venezuelan forest, the Aikanā conceive their fertility interconnected with the fertility of the environment, not only that of the land, but that of the more-than-human beings that cohabit it. Furthermore, there seems to be an important connection expressed in the narrative, between the perception of violence against the population and violence against the environment, the destruction of the forest and disappearance of mythscapes (Overing 2004), which constitutes a plausible explanation for the relevance given in Aikanā social memory to the systematic destruction of their world through agribusiness. The Aikanā make it particularly clear that this historical perception of change is always seen in connection with the wider region, the wider inter-ethnic networks and the wider cosmos. The

focus lies precisely on the forest as a continuous forested region, essential for all forms of life, and whose absence is seen as the cause of absence of fertile social life more broadly.

“When there was forest”, a commentary, then, by the generation who knew the “time of the maloca”, about the contemporary world, is, on a positive note, an important reference for the younger generations about what life - in a nutshell - needs in order to thrive. It consequently points to the inextricable link between the fertility of social life and the fertility of the more-than-human world and vice versa. Furthermore, the lamentations of the Aikanā elders about the times of today and the transformations since “the White people arrived”, are not to be understood in a passive, victimised way. Rather, they are an active, critical stance about the transformation of Aikanā life itself. The Aikanā narrative, then, brings with it several questions directed at internal transformations, but, equally, at external changes and alternative paths that concern us all (Hill 2020): How can the fertile lands be reconstituted; how can the forest be repopulated? Or in Kopenawa’s terms, how can the value of the fertility of the forest be restored?

Similarly, grief here should be read, inspired by Butler, as having a “transformative effect” (2004, p.21) and as being “life-enabling” (2009, p.15). Thus, the mourning that underlines the narrative marker “when everything was forest”, “is a signifier of life that was/is liveable” (Lesutis 2021, p.132, referring to Butler 2009). The grief that underlines the experience of loss - and a life in which there is nothing left - therefore also has to be read as resisting a pessimism that refuses hope.

For many of the older generation that were born into the maloca, the haunted landscapes have created an uncertain terrain, unsettling and disorienting; poetically expressed by Yanemii Aikanā in the epigraph - *Ani kawaina tawāa heri hiku hiku hene eri?* “Is it over, what can we do, and with each other, what can it be?” Apart from doubt, the openness and uncertainty that underlines Yanemii’s question equally holds space and possibilities for reinvention. What are the “weedy hopes” and “new livabilities” that might emerge then (Tsing et al 2017, p.5-7)? While there are no straightforward answers, the Aikanā narratives clearly stand in opposition to the shared disposability of people and forest and against the forgetting of the destruction of the many “life-enabling” entanglements that constitute our histories. It can be argued that in attending to the “ghosts” of past ways of life that haunt the barren lands (ibid., p.1-2), Aikanā social memory is resisting the impossibility of the present.

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