

“Indigenous intellectuals embrace anthropology. Will it still be the same?”

“Intelectuais indígenas abraçam a antropologia. Ela ainda será a mesma?” Um debate necessário

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.10515>

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Two decades have passed since indigenous peoples began to have access to higher education in Brazil, and about fifteen years since the first indigenous anthropologists graduated. This is a short time, considering the weight of over five centuries of colonization. However, indigenous scholars trained in universities have already produced some essays on their first theoretical, methodological, and political findings in anthropology. Due to the substantial increase of indigenous professionals, we now live in rich, effervescent and promising times regarding future accomplishments, despite the many challenges, doubts and reservations.

We indigenous peoples spent centuries silently observing and trying to comprehend the White anthropologists in our villages and territories, and elsewhere. Sometimes we even struck up a friendship, a partnership, alliances, and took on advisory tasks around common interests, but neither side ever opened their minds and hearts to actually know and understand each other beyond impressions, appearances, and immediate interests. The text "Indigenous intellectuals embrace anthropology. Will it still be the same?" by Alcida Ramos is a timely and courageous invitation to begin a dialogue and debate along these lines. The author's respect and honesty in tackling complex issues involving indigenous people in the field of anthropology invites and stimulates us to engage in frank conversations. Her sensitivity, which does justice to years of research and collaborative work with indigenous peoples, is both extremely important and deeply necessary for us to think about the future of anthropological work with indigenous populations, and even about their future in anthropology.

I begin with her provocative question of whether anthropology will be the same when indigenous professionals enter the field of academic anthropology. First, it is important to point out that our arrival and permanence in it as peers in research and teaching, although very recent, is irreversible, for it involves both our individual right to choose freely and the collective and autonomous decisions of indigenous peoples. However, let us not forget that, from the very beginning, we have always been part of the discipline's history as objects, informants, escorts, translators, forest guides, and sources of information of interest to non-indigenous anthropologists. Furthermore, the transformations now under way are not solely the outcome of the presence of indigenous people in the discipline, but are also due to new autonomous and proactive postures and attitudes in indigenous communities, peoples and organizations, no longer willing to accept the discipline's traditional *modus operandi* toward them. This is notably the case in the deeply rooted unequal political-methodological subject/object relationships and in the old habit of reducing indigenous protagonists simply to useful and submissive guides and informants, disrespectful attitudes that dismiss their social, political, and epistemic worth.

As Alcida rightly underlines, anthropology and ethnography are much too important and strategic for contemporary issues of indigenous empowerment to remain solely in the hands of White people. The interest indigenous people have in appropriating anthropology is part of a broader strategy the main purpose of which is to prevent or neutralize the possibility of the discipline falling in enemy

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hands. A second purpose is to assess its accumulated knowledge on indigenous and other peoples as tools to defend and guarantee their rights, along the lines observed by Alcida, that is, to fight the enemy with the enemy's own weapons. The knowledge produced about indigenous peoples reveals much about the White world itself. As Alcida points out, it helps decode White people's mind-set, be they anthropologists or not. Anthropology helps us understand not only how the White world operates. It also lets us know ourselves better by examining what they say about us. Furthermore, anthropology is a strategic and privileged space to make indigenous knowledge, cultures, realities, and problems visible, and to explain indigenous realities to society at large.

The third goal addresses the need to adapt anthropology to indigenous collective demands, needs, and interests. With formal education, we are able to seize anthropology in our own terms. If this is not enough, we are prepared to create other anthropologies, the so-called "anthropologies otherwise." Once inside, or even on the fringes of the discipline, we inevitably will imprint our own ways of thinking using anthropological tools as we go along. This too is a natural process, especially when indigenous people discovered that White society, despite its huge cosmological, socio-political, ideological, religious, economic, and academic apparatus, is not impenetrable, indomitable, or even immutable, as Alcida stresses. As indigenous peoples, we have the right to say what we think about science, about the anthropological science, based on our own epistemological framework, Cosmo vision, and historical experience. In so doing, we reaffirm our legitimate positions as observers enjoying the same intellectual rights as non-indigenous anthropologists.

Along these lines, we notice the first changes in the way Whites conceive and practice anthropology. There is a growing concern to relativize past convictions and truths about us, as a response to our critical analyses of theories about our ideas and ways of life that academics unilaterally imposed on us. Everything said about us past, present, and future will pass through our analytic and critical evaluations, whether produced by students, researchers or scholars, anthropologists or not. I do not see this as a threat to anthropology, but as a precious opportunity for the discipline to adapt to the changes now underway and to build its future on firmer grounds.

The 1988 Federal Constitution eliminated, at least on paper, the spectre of extinction, and terminated state wardship. Subsequent experiences show that indigenous peoples have emphasized strategies of protagonism, autonomy, and empowerment, opening the way to construct potential alliances and collaborative partnerships. A case in point are the Catholic missions that had caused us severe damage. The decision to "domesticate" the missionaries and turn them into our allies was ours, recognizing the constant risk of relapse. Even considering its historical role in colonialism, anthropology continues to be strategically important as a major source of knowledge on indigenous peoples as well as the White world. No less important is its long commitment to defend indigenous rights, very often a vital force to guarantee indigenous survival. Anthropology's historical role in

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colonialism includes its contribution to empire-building with theories, concepts, and categories that disqualified native peoples as "savages," "primitives," "tribal peoples," "simple societies," "uncivilized," "integrated" and "unintegrated." Colonizers interpreted and appropriated hierarchical categories such as "non-human" or "subhuman" Indians according to their particular interests. Added to this is the propagation of the anthropological thought and practice according to which the (indigenous) *others* can only be accepted as students who must learn what science has to teach them. This tactic is visible in syllabi, in the attitude of both teachers and fellow student, and in the evaluation and supervision of research and theses. The entire set reaffirms the legitimacy and competence of non-indigenous epistemic and civilization projects over indigenous systems of thought (Santos and Dias Jr. 2009). It is what Santos (2007) calls a monoculture of knowledge. Our interest in anthropology stems from the desire to seize it to our own purposes, as a support to our personal and collective rights and interests. We are aware that non-indigenous anthropologists have been more sensitive, empathetic, and collaborative than other social scientist, particularly at difficult times in our history, like the recent attempts to wipe out indigenous peoples in Brazil, as Alcida reminds us.

Other changes – silent and gradual, but potent and promising – are unfolding in the theoretical-methodological field, namely, in research and knowledge production. Individual researchers and ethnographers are giving way to collective and community research groups, whereas individual authorship is shifting to collective authorship of theories, monographs, and theses. Although these efforts are still local and patchy, nevertheless, they are inroads both within and without anthropology. New dialogue and negotiation procedures are increasing between indigenous/non-indigenous researchers and indigenous communities regarding research activities that observe the requirement of free and informed consultation of indigenous communities. In this process, the parties agree to terms abiding the researcher to return research results to the community, be available to do consultant work, and acknowledge the community as a collective co-author. In some cases, this new collaborative partnership and co-authorship has gone even further, when roles were reversed and the community defined the research topic and became the senior researcher, putting the ethnographer in the position of supporting co-author. These experiences are wreaking havoc in academia, specifically, over the problem of how to handle officially co-authorships and collective authorships of monographs and theses. In sum, examination committees and programs ought to deal with this issue and find novel solutions appropriate to specific cases. As an example, I mention the recent case of a doctoral research project at the Graduate Program in Education, Knowledge and Inclusion in the Federal University of Minas Gerais. The doctoral dissertation was submitted on 27 May 2022 with the peculiar title *Xi Hõnhã? And now? We're going to be researchers: a Tikmũ'ün research undertaking among multiple beings, knowledge forms and practices*. In this study, the Xacriabá community in question selected the subject matter and conducted the research collectively; more precisely, in communitarian form, with the consent of both the program and the student. The program is currently seeking official

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recognition of the dissertation as it was presented.

It is impossible and undesirable for anthropology to remain the same after indigenous professionals entered the field. In fact, it has not been the same for some time. Against all efforts to frame indigenous intellectuals, they absorb, reinterpret, and appropriate anthropology in their own terms and according to their personal and collective projects and interests. Even if Brazilian anthropology had closed its doors to indigenous people over the past two decades, which in itself would be odd, it would have been under great internal and external pressure to heed the worldwide trend in universities and in Western science. It is clear that anthropology is no longer the same as before the arrival of indigenous scholars. What is still unclear, however, is its future, not in the sense of questioning the discipline's future but the future of what sort of discipline it will become. We can envisage at least two possibilities. The first would be a revitalized anthropology, updated, plural, and open to encompass the diversity of other forms of thinking and practicing anthropology, that is, an ecumenical anthropology in Alcida's terms, or an interscientific anthropology, as Little (2010) calls it. I prefer the notion of interscientificity, because it places the debate right in the middle of what is most cherished and profound for academia, namely, Science. In this case, Science would recognize, among others, Indigenous Sciences in their own right. I understand that interscientificity raises the possibility of interactive dialogues and the coexistence of knowledge systems that do not simply tolerate each other, but interact with and complement each other.

With indigenous people coming into anthropology as subjects, we have noticed a growing interest in sharing diverse anthropological modes, notably, indigenous anthropologies. This evokes the idea of an anthropology in the plural, as proposed by Peirano (1992) when she refers to anthropology as a knowledge system with various versions. In the same vein, Santos and Dias Jr. (2009) suggest a series of symmetrical and interknitted anthropologies. They point out the need to recognise other systems of knowledge and other cognitive and epistemological competences, as distinct from traditional Western anthropology, but with equal heuristic value. Anthropology in the plural or distinct anthropologies need not renounce the traditional beliefs adopted from Eurocentric colonial societies, but rather admit and recognise the legitimacy of other beliefs. Some of these beliefs or theories, such as the place of humans in the world or, more precisely, in nature, ground the human sciences. The very name "anthropology" reflects the specific Western European Cosmo vision that created the discipline. It highlights, and even sets apart the human realm as hierarchically superior. Such superiority and detachment of humans from the rest of the cosmos, or from nature, has spawned the harmful misconception that nature has to be "discovered" and known only to be dominated and destroyed by means of science and technology. As is increasingly evident, such arrogance has put the entire planet and humans at risk.

Indigenous thinking is utterly different, as it regards human beings as an intrinsic, organic, and dependent part of nature. Hence, the term anthropology fails to contemplate sufficiently the idea that humans are indissociable from nature.

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For us, indigenous peoples, concepts such as cosmology and cosmopolitics are more palatable, audible, and significant. Right away, we see the challenges a pluri-epistemic anthropology will face. It promotes a symmetrical practice between scientific knowledge and traditional indigenous knowledge, as in Peirano's notion of anthropology in the plural. It incorporates different anthropologies with their own epistemological frameworks and distinct cultural and cosmological bases. Finally, a pluri-epistemic or interscientific anthropology would overcome the mono-epistemic and monocultural anthropological science that considers indigenous and traditional knowledge as prescientific, or even unscientific, and its subjects, mere informants or research objects.

A plural, intercultural, ecumenical/interscientific, and pluri-epistemic anthropology is ideal, but hard to achieve, at least in the short run. It requires a profound change in the discipline's epistemic and methodological framework, including curricula. However, there are yet no signs that White anthropologists are willing to face up to such changes, trapped as they are in the fear that the discipline will lose scientific quality or status. They seem to shy away from the unpleasant task of conducting a theoretical-methodological revision of the epistemic, political, cultural, and civilizational bases that has sustained the discipline, which, after all, is a Eurocentric creation.

An all-encompassing anthropology that welcomes the diversity and plurality of Cosmo visions and epistemologies, necessarily, requires a critical and, above all, honest and just rereading of its own history and main theories. This entails a critique of the ways in which these theories have contributed to the violent and racist process of colonization that wiped out entire indigenous societies, while making important contributions to the survival of indigenous peoples and defence of their rights.

Without recognizing and accepting other anthropologies, particularly those advanced by indigenous people, it is difficult for indigenous anthropologists to feel part of the discipline as full members. We should say, by way of example, that when we indigenous people read anthropology texts, particularly the old and new classics, we can hardly avoid a gut reaction as we discover that most of these scholars used us to devise the notions, concepts, categories, and theories that, ironically, justified – and still do – all sorts of racism and prejudice against us. This explains the nonconformity of young indigenous anthropologists. It also explains the need for a reparatory, honest and just (re)reading of what so far Whites have said about us. Such an exercise could clear the way for new paths and horizons, but now with indigenous people as subjects, authors, and anthropologists. We are not concerned with what White people say about themselves and their societies, for they have that right and legitimacy conferred them by their societies' autonomies and alterities. Our concern is rather with what they say or fail to say about us, which demands an attentive, careful and profound (re)reading.

The second possibility is to construct distinct anthropologies, already tested elsewhere in the so-called indigenous anthropologies. This is a provisional alternative, given the difficulty to create an anthropology that is ecumenical, interscien-

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tific, and pluri-epistemic. The fact is that indigenous anthropologists are seeking a place for their knowledge systems with their own epistemologies. If they cannot find it within the current, dominant anthropology, it is logical, and necessary, that they create their own institutional and disciplinary spaces, marginal as they may be, but still within the scope of the discipline. This possibility is neither ideal nor desirable insofar as it fails to aggregate, welcome, complement, interact, and enhance the parties concerned. At best, it would simply maintain the logic of hierarchical tolerance or, worse, provoke the mutual denial of human realities, knowledge, and experience. From this perspective, the defensive, timid, and over-cautious dominant anthropology is bound to lose more, because we indigenous peoples will continue to be keenly interested in anthropology and determined to gain ever more from it, including its long legacy to support of our own struggles and social projects.

The coexistence of distinct anthropologies is not necessarily a problem. It may limit interaction, collaboration, and complementary dialogues – or, in Alcida's words, an intercultural and interscientific communication – if competitive, disputing, and mutually delegitimizing processes develop. For this reason, we believe that our priority should be to construct jointly a truly plural, ecumenical, and pluri-epistemic anthropology allowing for the coexistence of diverse anthropologies, including indigenous anthropologies. Moreover, if there is any consensus among indigenous and non-indigenous anthropologists about this idea, then we should begin by creating the concrete conditions for our dialogue to occur and prosper in a frank, honest, systematic, and institutional form. Consequently, this dialogue and the debate stimulated by Alcida's provocative text, which I deem to be in the best of intentions, are a welcome beginning and the start for a new anthropological route, which promises to be long and challenging. There is no harm in dreaming. For our part, we are willing and confident to carry on and deepen this debate.

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Recebido em 27/02/2023

Aprovado para publicação em 20/03/2023 pela editora Kelly Silva (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3388-2655>)

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