SURUI AIKEWARA

THE MEMORY ABOUT THE ARAGUAIA GUERRILLA

During the military dictatorship in Brazil, that was between 1964 and 1988, had arose a left group of armed resistance. This group, that was know like ‘Guerrilla of Araguaia’, was located in the south of Pará Region, in the Brazilian Amazon.

The Aikewara Indigenous, also know as ‘Surui of Para’, are the native inhabitants of this region. They got involved in the repression of the guerrilla between 1970 and 1974. This episode has been hidden of the official history, as many other facts related with the violence and crimes perpetrated for the dictatorship power.

The central argument that I want to approach is the mechanism of memory according the facts occurred went the army placed and acted in the village and the relation with the aikewara people, but also it is about the oblivion of the traumatic memories that has been hidden during 50 years.

In the first part of this essay I will developed some historical facts about the aikewara indigenous, in order to contextualized the information that will be exposed; after that I will approach some theoretical arguments about memory and oblivion as a framework; then I will try to explain how aikewara people constitute their daily lives dealing with this memories of contact, and specifically about the times of Araguaia Guerrilla, as an opposite relation with the outsiders.

Some historical context

The Surui Aikewara is an indigenous group from the forest that inhabits the area of Tocantins, the region called Bico do Papagaio. Their first contact was made in 1953 for a priest called Fray Gil Gomes, who became in their protector until the 70s, when the military forces took him out of the area. Roque Laraia (1978), who was the first anthropologist to work directly with them, said that the Surui-Aikewara have the history of disagreements with the world outside of the forest.

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1 This essay is the result of a small fieldwork developed in the Sororo Village, the Surui Indigenous Reserve, between April and June of 2014.
One year before my first stay on 1960, influenza epidemic killed 2/3 of the population. What can we wait from these discouraged 14 men, 7 women and 19 kids scared for the advance of the regional society on their land? (Laraia, 1978:10)

During the 60s, this group was around 40 people with tribal organizations that had passed for diseases: smallpox, measles, and others. At that time their future was to disappear in a new order of the outside society with the national discourse of development and exploitation of natural resources. Before the military occupation the relation that they had with outsiders was related specially with the interchange of Brazilian nuts. Laraia mentioned that against his predictions in the 70s the group growth up to 60 people.

At that time, the government declared this area as ‘national interest’ for the development of the country and sent its military forces to settle the region, first of all, with the purpose annihilate the guerrilla movement.

During the 1970s the Araguaia region came under military occupation as guerrillas of the Communist Party of Brazil fought the dictatorship. The army opened “operational” roads from the Transamazonica towards the Araguaia river, including the OP-2, which bisected the Surui territory North-South. The Surui became directly involved in the conflict, being used as guides to reveal the locations of the guerrilla units (Treece, 1987:15).

The army settled a military camp and a landing strip in Sororo village. These actions were approved by the FUNAI (Indian National Foundation) that was in charged to protect the indigenous groups in Brazil. It was just at that time when the Surui Aikewara was officially recognized as a different ethic group that habit the Araguaia Region.

On the other hand, the project of the Communist Party, with Maoist inspiration, was to establish a revolutionary popular war out of the city, where the intensification of violence of the dictatorial State had been worse. It is why they went to the forest since 1967 and cohabited there, in the middle of peasant and indigenous as well.

When the army arrived to the area, the relations established between peasant, indigenous and guerrilla members were the weakness of them. The army began a continuous plan of persecution to any person related with the revolutionaries and the residents of Sao Geraldo and Sao Domingo de Araguaia. The zone was declared as “state of siege”.

During this period of occupation, the soldiers committed many atrocities against peasants. The indigenous remained in the middle of the conflict. The men of the village were forced to
guide the army inside the forest because they, as natural inhabitants, are who knew it. For the condition of recent contact most of them didn’t speak Portuguese and they were lack of awareness about the conflict.

This abrupt story of contact of the Aikewara people was printed in the memory of them. The facts during the ‘War of Araguaia’ had a central significance that has pointed out patterns of relations with the outsiders.

An amnesty law was promulgated in 1978, and also during the military dictatorship, in order to recognize and repair the crimes committed before for the regime. This law is still in course and just was in 2010 that many cases were opened again to be analyzed by the Brazilian Amnesty Commission. The case of thirteen Surui-Aikewara people who got involved in the brutal conflict came to light after 50 years of silence.

In the next part, I will try to explain some concept about Memory as a framework to understand the exercise of remembrance, oblivion and social trauma.

The use of memory

The memory constitutes an important part in the individual and collective history. In this sense, it is important to know the mechanism to recall the past and the uses in the present. Memory means different things at different times.

The most of the times, to remember is not revive, but is remake, rebuilt, rethink, the past experiences with today images and ideas... The remembrance is an image made with elements that we have available today and now; it is a representation of our actual consciousness (Bosi, 1999:55).

The Surui-Aikewaras have recalled the past in official testimonies for the “Truth Commission”; these sad and uncomfortable memories are still vivid in their daily lives, in the mistrustfulness, in the silence, in the intention to forget. The core to this work was to learn how to read the images and the unsaid things.

Collective memory

The concept of ‘Collective Memory’ was developed by Maurice Halbwachs; it is the fist theorist to argue that our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, so it is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present (Coser, 1992:34)
In that sense the memory becomes is a present element that also embodies a present purpose. Whitehead argues that this kind of memory is more effective in closely and tied groups or network: “These close relations and affective bonds, with people who count for us, operate to some extent between individual and collective memory and support Ricoeur’s contention that, although the two discourses have become ‘estranged from each other’, they can justifiably be perceived as complementary in nature” (Whitehead, 2009:12)

In the case of study, a collective memory is puzzle where each piece builds one part of the fact with the content of each experience. The thirteen people that are asking for reparations for the violations during the dictatorship have different testimonies from different experiences and locations, which configure the big collective memory. That’s why each person tells personal and vivid versions, since the conditions of gender, time, place, different level of acknowledge, use of language, and so on.

The group memory itself comprises a body of shared concerns and ideas. In the foreground are remembrances of events and experiences that are of concern to the greatest number of members, while those concerning very few members or individuals fade into background. Although it reflects and it is refracted through the lives and personalities of individual group members, the collective memory represents the group’s most stable and permanent element, and is sufficiently general and impersonal to retain its meaning when individual members drop out of the group and are replaced (Whitehead, 2009:129).

The use of memory among the Aikewara is different if we compare with the share memory with the outsiders. It is clear the tension with ‘kamara’ (everyone not indigenous). They have specific places and moments to tell their stories to younger people while they are hunting, eating, cooking or fishing; but no indigenous people has to pass many filters and even thought they are still mistrustful.

This small group of people (nowadays are 350 people) have a sense of identity shaped by the experiences of contact, and it is in opposite relation with the others. It should be a strategy of existence and persistence; it was the way that they found to live after the traumatic experiences of the past. It can be reflected in the way that they defend their forest, their territory surrounded by huge farms.

For Halbwachs, then, collective memory necessarily unfolds within a special framework, which allows social groups to ‘enclose and retrieve their remembrances’ (1980:157). It is also provides the sense of permanence or of not having changed
through time that is such a central feature of Halbwachs’ conception of collective remembrance. He’s emphasis on the role of place in collective memory would perhaps lead us to expect that the nation would take on particular significance for him as a social grouping (Whitehead, 2009:137)

The issue of the territory has central interest for the Aikewara. After the times of the military camp, they received the actual area of the Indigenous Reserve of Sororo (1978), but the most of their traditional territory stayed outside of the actual boundaries. So then, they ask for collective reparation to the Amnesty Commission: that means to get back their territory. In order to get that, the memory of the territory is also important.

Halbwachs acknowledges that there are exceptional occasions of national importance that simultaneously alter the lives of all citizens, and these events, although rare, offer a temporary landmark around which other memories come retrospectively to be shaped (Whitehead, 2009:138).

Oblivion and Trauma

During the fieldwork, there are some difficult topics to talk about, and one of those is about the Guerrilla of Araguaia. Nobody knows about the facts that happen in the 70s outside of Sororo Village, and how the indigenous got involved in the armed conflict.

The testimonies about these times are full of military power abuse both at the forest and at the village. Specifically the men were forced to guide the soldiers inside the forest, subjected to humiliation, threats and deprivations. The soldiers got them away for several months without any explanation to them and their family.

The women on the other hand stayed by themselves in village, cohabiting with the army, in a complete state of siege. As people from the forest they used to hunt, fish, have familiar plots to stock up with food; during these times they were deprived to go out from their huts. The memories about that have references to the body feelings about deprivations.

The role of the physical in remembering comprises one form of ‘body memory’, but Bergson also alert us to the importance of habit, which comprises the body’s own form or mode of remembrance. As Edward Craig has pointed out, the amnesia provides a dramatic demonstration of the efficacy of habit, in exposing the difference between memory and retention of language and skills (Whitehead, 2009:8).
The experiences that people lived during this period were confined to the oblivion for the official history. On the other hand they naturalized the facts on terms of assimilation but as a way to carry on.

‘What a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget’, they argue, ‘are intricately bound up with issues of the powerful and it has therefore been necessary to turn to alternative archives, such as the oral testimony archived noted above, to hear the voices of women and other disenfranchised groups… This makes evident the relative degrees of power and powerlessness privilege, and disenfranchisement that have shaped dominant memory discourse (Whitehead, 2009:13).

Nowadays, the memories are on lights because of the actual State and from international demands to the Brazilian government, but also is a politic strategy that Aikewara people claim their territory, as well as the individual reparations. In this case, the memory works on specific and convenient times, there are right moments to forget and right moments to remember.

Conclusion

There are many things to talk about the Aikewara’s memory and the Guerrilla of Araguaia, and this is just a devoid attempt to explain this topic since the theory of collective memory. The individual stories establish a big mark in the conformation of the collective memory that also affects until now, provoking a natural opposition to the world outside. In this sense, the inhabitants of Sororo Village have a legitimate right to claim for reparations for the abuses suffered during the military occupation, not just for physical abuses, but also for psychological and collective signs, what Ricoeur calls the ‘traces’:

“...the most problematic but the most significant for what follows in our investigation; it consists in the passive persistence of the first impressions: an event that struck us, touched us, affected us, and the effective mark remains in our mind (Ricoeur, 2004:427).

The most important part of the Surui-Aikewara claims is that it establishes a paradigm in the international cases of human rights because it is the first indigenous group to ask for reparations with their own truth commission. Personally, I think that it is a chance to put in the table other claims that has been forgotten since the first contact.
Bibliography:


