

Stop to Feel, Ask to Know: Doing Archaeological Science with the Ancestors in Brazil

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Abstract

This article discusses what it is like to be the first Indigenous female bioarchaeologist in Brazil and attempts to bridge Indigenous ancestral knowledge and archaeological science towards an ancestral science—one that heals, listens to our stories and the elders and approaches Indigenous materiality with wisdom and care, therefore respecting its sacred character. It seeks to produce a bioarchaeology that does not objectify our bodies or the bodies of our ancestors. My research is committed to bringing our Indigenous territorial knowledge into the university and deconstructing the inflexibility that characterises traditional science. The connection established with the ancestral child Nimu Borum, who was removed from Mother Earth at an archaeological site called Lapa do Caboclo in 2004, is contributing to challenging our way of doing archaeology and bioarchaeology. Our ancestral science involves dreams, care, dialogue with other Indigenous relatives, songs, sacred materialities that accompany us and respect.

O amor originário

É libertário

Ser abá (indígena)

É saber que é

Parte tatá (fogo)

Parte yby (terra)

Parte y' (água)

Parte tudo que há.

Fazer do próprio corpo

Ygara (canoa)

E deslizar

Nas águas da vida por aí”.

(Lima 2021: 24)

Introduction: crossings

It is a challenge to write about the archaeology or bioarchaeology that I am trying to build here in Brazil. This is because it is new for me to navigate in between these two worlds—the Indigenous world I was born into, and the world of academic archaeology that I chose to enter.

I have tried to keep my Indigenous body out of archaeology for some time, but I was called upon by my ancestors and my people to take a stand. I asked so many questions and wanted to learn from anyone who could teach me, but then they started asking me to speak about our experiences because I am now within academia and, historically, our voices have been violently silenced in this space, which considered our knowledge to be subordinate (Pelúcio 2012).

I am made of earth; I am a daughter of the waters and the winds—*Wayrakuna* —¹and fire runs in my veins. I come from the warrior Borum-Kren people, described by European colonisers as ‘botocudos’. My people are from Brazil, living in the state of Minas Gerais. We belong to the Atlantic Forest biome, and

1 The Plurinational Wayrakuna Movement is an ancestral, artistic, philosophical, and cosmological network. We are the first research group certified by the Brazilian National Research Council composed solely of Indigenous women.

are guardians of the Upper Rio das Velhas, Upper Rio Doce and Upper Rio Parapeba. We are surrounded by many mountains that mining companies are trying to destroy. Our forest is being consumed by illegal fires, and our animal relatives are dying from river poisoning, smoke, fire and the destruction caused by mining in our territory.

Wherever I walk, I am an Indigenous woman; I have no other body to inhabit, nor would I want one. While living my culture, I always keep my mind focused on bringing my territory into every space I go, including the university, as my relative Arlete Schubert-Tupinambá (2023: 156) says:

It is important that we know and reflect on our own knowledge, stories, and experiences as the different women who decided to undertake this collective journey of seeking research and reflection on our ancestries and belongings. We need to ally ourselves with an ancestral identity that guides our actions and practices, not only as individuals but as a collective. Without our ancestry, there is no awareness of who we are. The suppression of the point of reference we call ancestry and identity does not allow us to exist with dignity in a society that qualifies us according to its interests.

In 2022, when I arrived at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) to begin my Master of Arts (MA) programme (Nhatarâmiak 2024), many things, beings, people and materialities crossed my path and accompanied me, so that I did not start my journey alone. However, I had no idea what calls would come from my research—the breaths of the ancestors helping, protecting, demanding and connecting me throughout this journey that I am still walking.

The MA project I submitted in 2022 was no longer the right one to undertake. I, the beings that accompany me, and Nimu Borum herself had chosen different paths to follow. Before discussing those paths, let me explain who Nimu is.

Nimu Borum is a child who was given her name by the ancestors on the day when I, and several other people who are part of the network that my research has mobilised, went to the Hospital das Clínicas in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais,

Brazil, to perform a CT-scan on the tree bark where Nimu was laid to rest.

Nimu was removed from the earth in 2004 when Professor Andrei Isnardis was conducting research in the region of Diamantina, Minas Gerais, Brazil. This research led to the excavation in which Nimu and other relatives who had also been buried in tree barks were removed from the earth and taken to the Museum of Natural History and Botanical Garden of UFMG.

She is an ancient child (Nhatarâmiak 2024), now materialised as bones; her bones were painted red and placed inside a tree bark known as Pau Santo. She is not in an anatomical position; this is what bioarchaeology defines as a secondary burial. Alongside her bones is an animal hide (the species is not yet identified) and a tangle of straw, the function of which I have not been able to determine.

All the relatives who were removed from the Lapa do Caboclo site had their bones painted red and were buried in tree bark as secondary burials. The place where they were found is an archaeological site known as Lapa do Caboclo, located in the city of Diamantina, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Lapa is a grotto formed by the collapse of part of the outcrop that surrounds it, resulting in an amphitheatre-like shape. This concave area is the most extensive sheltered sedimentary floor in the region (Solari et al. 2012). The occupation of the site dates from 10,560 BP to 680 BP, but the tree bark where Nimu was placed dates from 1300 BP to 650 BP (Isnardis 2013; Isnardis and Linke 2021).

However, beyond these technical details, the place where Nimu was laid to rest upon her return to the ancestors is a place full of rock paintings, many beings and abundant life. It is a home with stones, loose earth and water that flows from the rocks; it has an ancestral energy. As the project changed, the research evolved through struggle, mobilisation and meetings with relatives from my people and other peoples, always supported by powerful materialities like the *kuandik* (fig. 1).

The *kuandik* holds the power of sound; it is the being of the sound of balance. For my Borum-Kren people, the *kuandik* guides the balance of Mother Earth. It is a very powerful instrument because it is an extension of us—it lives through our battles, prayers, festivals, and songs. It helps us with our calls and cannot be used without purpose.

Encounters and re-encounters

The *kuandik* was the connection through which Nimu Borum received her name from the ancestors, on the day we undertook the CT-scan. On the 1st of April 2023, we went to the Hospital das Clínicas at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil, to perform the scan on the structure of the tree bark to better visualise the child's body, which was in a skeletal state.

The child received her name from the ancestors so that she would not be entered into the hospital system as just a number. It would have been an act of violence against her, against me, against my people and against all Indigenous peoples if she, an Indigenous child whom I was caring for, and who was also caring for me, was reduced to a number. As my relative Eliane Potiguara says, "enough of killing my songs and silencing my voice. You cannot dry the roots of those who have seeds scattered across the land ready to sprout" (2018: 33)—we will no longer be silenced.

I say that the *kuandik* was an important being on that day because I was incredibly worried and fearful when they told me that, without a name, she would be registered as a number. We have been for so many years parts, categories, remnants and numbers in physical anthropology and archaeology itself (Anzini 2021).

I shook my *kuandik* and asked my ancestors and the ancestors of the child to guide me on that journey. What came to me was a breath, carrying the name Nimu. 'Borum' came as a form of comfort, because her people had perished in the fire at the Museum of Natural History and Botanical Garden of UFMG, but an Indigenous person never walks alone, and I would not let her be alone, so we became part of the same community. Hearing the chief say that the region where she had been found was a territory where our people had once walked, I typed her name into the hospital's registration system as I could not bring myself to say her name out loud at that moment.

I have made the decision here to not share a photograph of Nimu. My MA dissertation contains photos of her, but I spoke with her before including those images, and I avoid exposing her unnecessarily. After all, we are talking about the body of an Indigenous child, and we must show respect.

The reason for undertaking computed tomography (CT) was to be able to see the child before opening the tree bark. This is something I will now do during my PhD, for which I have already received Nimu's permission to generate a deeper conversation about her life: after all, I will be touching her body. The CT-scan images allowed us to see how Nimu's body is positioned inside the *tchone*,² generating over 600 images that revealed Nimu on the computer screen (fig. 2).

Getting to know, care for, be cared for, learn from, teach, reconnect and engage with Nimu throughout my MA journey made me stronger, enabling me to survive the university and its violence and demands upon my body. Being an Indigenous woman, walking through the corridors of academia means constantly reaffirming that my place is indeed here, that the university is on Indigenous land, and that we will occupy it. Using technological tools does not make me any less Indigenous— in the same way that white people eat manioc and corn. As my relative Aline Kayapó says, "We need to be aware of the webs that surround us because citizenship turns Indigenous women into *caboclas* and *caboclas* into ex-Indigenous, into *pardas*, and we are none of these...We are here, shouting to this society: 'Stop questioning my body, my soul, my spirit!'" (2023: 36).

What Aline Kayapó wrote in the Wayrakuna book (2023) is the reality we face in our existence, in our resistance, in our lived experiences and in our survival. As I wrote earlier, society constantly demands that we assert our identity, and we no longer accept these questions. I do not grant anyone the right to question my roots, my origins, my relationship with Mother Earth, my ancestry, my spirituality, my body or my spirit.

Reconnecting

Nimu is a child playing a very important role within the Natural History Museum and Botanical Garden of UFMG. What was once seen by many as an archaeological object is now recognised as a child, identified by her name. The people working at the museum care for Nimu, marking the beginning of a movement to decolonise research (Smith 2018), Indigenising the university by bring-

2 In our Ithok language, *tchone* refers to the bark or the tree, and in this context, it is being used to signify the structure or casing.

ing our knowledge and wisdom into our research and interweaving sciences—in this case, archaeological and ancestral sciences. Our body-territory (Xakriabá 2018) accompanies us wherever we go; we are part of Mother Earth, and we cannot ignore the call to bring the voices of our ancestors into the spaces we now occupy.

Mother Earth reminds us with her memories, as she holds all the recollections of what our ancestral Indigenous relatives did when they left behind the materialities that we now discuss in archaeology. They speak through their bone-bodies (Ferreira 2024). In archaeology, we need the knowledge of the body-territory (Xakriabá 2018) to activate the memories of Mother Earth and to excavate the memories of the elders and the land itself (Wai Wai 2022). For too long we have looked at materiality without realising that the earth can speak.

We are the earth; "the earth is an extension of our body" (Xakriabá 2022: 18). What she feels, we feel. What she knows, we can access. But this ancestral conversation requires great respect. We are constantly learning from the earth, from the materialities she safeguards of our ancestors, and from the ancestors themselves, who have been planted in the ground for years, removed, placed in boxes and are now calling out to us to tell their stories, our stories.

My dedication in archaeology is to engage with Indigenous relatives to bring our elders' knowledge into the university and academic conferences. We bring our ways of knowing and living, which are fluid yet deeply reflective of how the ancestors lived. It is a cycle: we tell the stories of the ancestors and learn from them. By introducing our knowledge into the university, we contribute to the decolonisation of science, the academic space, and the minds of the people within them. As my relative Ana Arapiun once told me, it is okay that we are unsettling things, because it is through unsettling that we will bring about change. And, as Sonya Atalay (2020: 7) states in the following excerpt:

In examining the political economy of knowledge production in western academic institutions, I have found that researching, teaching, and learning are changed, transformed, and improved through various forms of braiding knowledge. I argue that bringing Indigenous concepts of knowledge production into research and teaching practices is part of a larger project of decolonizing our institutions, which is beneficial both within and outside the academy, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and multiple, diverse groups and communities. Braiding knowledge in support of science is not only an ethical imperative, it is essential for our survival as we face devastating climate change.

Our fight is for an environment and science that respects us. I seek to strengthen my body, my people, and the relatives of other peoples. Today, I am the first Indigenous bioarchaeologist in Brazil, but I do not want to continue to be alone in this position, nor do I want Nimu to be the only child-elder treated as a person, not an object (Nhatarâmiak 2024).

We can no longer support a science that exterminates us (Lyons and Supernant 2020), nor can we pretend that they are treating our bodies with care when they do not even ask permission to speak with the relatives who have become ancestors. They do not even speak to them (Lipu Pereira and Elias de Melo 2020), nor to their materialities—everything becomes a lifeless thing.

My concern for Nimu has always been about respect and the responsibility I have towards her, my people and all my relatives, because she is my ancestor. She is a child: a child who teaches me many things. But since she was exhumed from Mother Earth in 2004 (Isnardis and Linke 2021), she has experienced many things, including being exhibited at the Natural History Museum and Botanical Garden of UFMG. Exhibition involves forms of violence that affect our bodies and this needs to be discussed. But being closed up in a box in a museum storeroom is not the solution either. Being shut away inside a box leads to being forgotten by people, as they no longer remember to sing for her, to shake a *kuan-*

dik to restore balance, to speak to her, to slow down and simply spend time in silence, just feeling.

I do not have the answer for what bioarchaeology or archaeology should be in the future, but what I am doing is thinking about archaeology today—what I can do now. As relative Ailton Krenak says, "The future is not for sale" (2020). If we do not implement our projects now and undertake our research with respect, thinking about the future will not solve our problems.

The archaeology I am doing today is collective. It is with my Borum-Kren people, with relatives from other peoples, and with the support of my supervisor, Dr Mariana Cabral, who has been walking with me on this journey, opening paths for us Indigenous people to occupy academic spaces and produce our archaeological projects using our knowledge from the land, because we are the land. What we, as Indigenous archaeologists, are doing is Indigenising archaeology, bringing the knowledge of our people's existence into our archaeological research and no longer allowing ourselves to be silenced. We fought for our academic degrees, and we will use them.

The bioarchaeology that moves from my mind to conversations around the fire, that became a dissertation (Nhatarâmiak 2024) and made me the first Indigenous bioarchaeologist in Brazil, is a bioarchaeology that diverges somewhat from the scholarship I read during my undergraduate studies. My way of doing science is through dialogue with the ancestors, with their permission, by feeling the bones, the power of *rapé*, the meetings in dream-reality, and respecting the Indigenous person who has become an ancestor but remains my relative. All of this comes before anatomical concerns, pathological uncertainties, or questions about age, because before being an archaeologist or bioarchaeologist, I am an Indigenous woman. Respecting the dead is of the utmost importance—I plant my feet in the same earth that the enchanted ones and ancestors planted theirs.

Therefore, I feel a responsibility to bring to my people and to the relatives of other peoples the questions that I cannot answer. I always need to return to the place I came from, to be able to move forward (Arruda 2021). I need to sit on the ground at the feet of the elders, listen to stories I have never heard, listen again to those stories I have heard dozens of times and share my frustrations with university life and the pains of research. It is in these encounters and reunions that

paths cross, and we find answers to questions we never even asked. Spirituality whispers the stories of the ancestors when they are ready to be told.

Conclusion: the present and future of archaeology

As I have mentioned previously, I do not know what the future holds for archaeology or bioarchaeology in Brazil, nor do I know how to resolve our conflicts regarding the treatment of the bodies of our ancestors. If it were a white person, would they be displayed in the same way? Would they be boxed up without any empathy? Would they be transformed into mere materials and reduced to numbers amongst so many others? I do not think so.

Most archaeologists, when excavating our cemeteries or ancient villages, do not bother to first ask us for permission, nor ask permission from the beings that reside there and from the spirits. The absence of this request, which is a matter of respect, often leads to a tumultuous situation in the field.

Since I realised that I wanted to listen to and tell the stories of the ancestral beings that have been exhumed by archaeology, I knew I needed to take care of myself. Until the beings and the relatives tell me their story through the bones, I might be putting myself in danger by engaging with hostile people, which could harm me and my community. Therefore, my relatives always look after me and protect me.

Nimu is the first child whose story I am attempting to tell. She spent 20 years in the Museum of Natural History and Botanical Garden of UFMG, waiting for someone to engage with her and narrate her story through her body, which exists in the form of bones. Previously, she was merely "the child," but now, with the relationship we have built and the spiritual energy we carry, when the ancestors whispered in my ear the name she would bear at that moment of resurgence and reclamation, Nimu Borum came to bring her essence to transform archaeology into an ancestral science.

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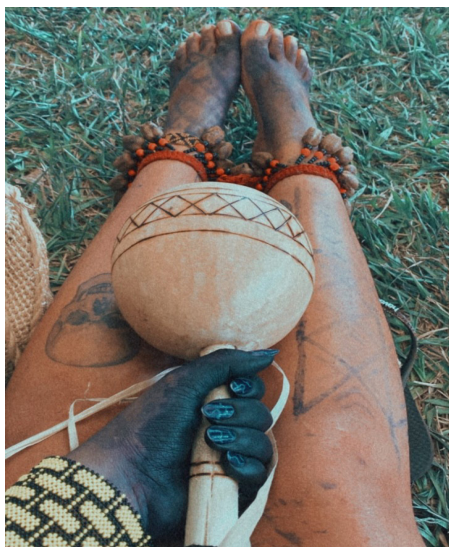


Fig. 1. *Kuandik*, a word in the Borum-Kren language designating a protective instrument similar to a rattle (photograph by Bibi Nhatarâmiak).

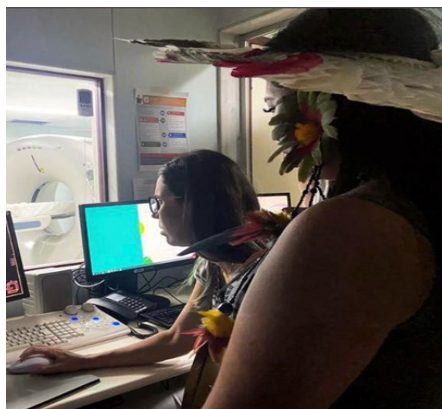


Fig. 2. CT-scan in progress, Nimu re-emerging (photograph reproduced with the permission of Lilian Panachuk).