

An Indigenous *Capitão* and his Experience of the Frames of Encounter in the Mid-Twentieth Century Brazilian Interior.

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Sabino Kaiabi was an indigenous leader whose life spanned the course of the twentieth century. He passed away as an elderly man in 1993 in the Xingu Indigenous Park, a location where he and the majority of the Tupi-speaking Kaiabi, or as they now call themselves Kawaiwete, people moved over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. They moved to the park from areas further to the west along eastern tributaries of the Tapajós River in the states of Mato Grosso and Pará. By all accounts, Sabino was a cultural mediator, a man who had interacted with a wide variety of separate and opposing groups over the course of his life. As a young boy, he moved between remote Kawaiwete villages and the Indian Protection Service or SPI (Serviço de Proteção ao Índio) post set up in 1929 on the Teles Pires River. In the 1940s, he worked for rubber tapping companies, organizing other Kawaiwete laborers to tap rubber as well. In 1953 he became a catechist for Father Dornstauder, an Austrian Anchieta missionary who had a roving mission in Kawaiwete territories. Sabino was also the person whom the SPI put in charge of the first contact with the remote Peixes River Kawaiwete in 1953. In short, he moved between several communities of Kawaiwete and several kinds of non-indigenous institutions. The groups of Kawaiwete who lived at posts and those who intentionally lived apart from the national society did not completely share the same

goals. Kawaiwete living at posts were actively entering into work relations with the members of the national society, while those who chose to remain "uncontacted" were fighting with tappers and ranchers and avoiding key ways of becoming part of the national society, such as wearing clothing. The SPI, the Anchieta mission, and rubber tapping companies, while all to some extent interested in the same goal of opening up the interior, were oriented by very different values. The SPI, inspired by Comteian positivism, fought with the mission about the building of churches. Father Dornstauder wrote against the cruelty of rubber company practices with respect to both indigenous and non-indigenous tappers (Dornstauder ms [1955]:7). The SPI vied with these same companies for Indian laborers to tap rubber for them. In short, Sabino was not simply an intermediary between two worlds, one Indian and one white, but rather an intermediary between at least five very different kinds of social sectors.

This paper focuses on how Sabino described inhabiting a point of connection between these groups in the Teles Pires River area as he narrated his life for me, in the Kawaiwete's indigenous language, in 1992.¹ I focus on his memories of being a *capitão*. The position of capitão or indigenous captain, was a hybrid sort of leader, in part derived from indigenous leadership forms, and in part created by rubber companies and the Brazilian government. It was a key point where the worlds of the SPI, missionaries, contacted and uncontacted indigenous groups intersected. It was an institution that took shape in and supported what Richard White calls a "middle ground" or the "place in between cultures, peoples, empires, and the non-state world of villages" (White 1991:x). The "middle ground" according to White is

both a process whereby actors seek out cultural congruencies, either mistakenly perceived or actual, to create a process of “creative misunderstanding” as well as secondly, a concrete historical space and time (for him the Great Lakes region of North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). It is a historical space in which both a balance of power exists and an infrastructure has developed to support this process of “creative cultural misunderstanding” (White 2006:9).

The Tapajós River and its tributaries during the rubber booms of the 19th (1860-1910) and 20th centuries (1940s) was such a place.² Because rubber trees would not grow in plantations, the only way to increase rubber production in this area was to increase the number of tappers (Nugent 1993: 189). During times when rubber prices were high, the value of indigenous labor combined with its mobility seemed, at least at moments, to balance the relations of power somewhat between indigenous tappers, traders and rubber firms (see Cooms and Barham 1994 as well as Weinstein 1987 on other areas in which this took place).

As Sabino describes his own experiences as a capitão, he gives a glimpse of how the “middle ground” of the Mato Grosso/Pará interior as a process was experienced at a subjective level, by someone who was in one of the most “in between” or median social positions within this space. On the Kawaiwete side of the equation, Sabino was one of the more influential co-creators of this “middle ground.” My focus is not, however, his active participation in creating the structures of the middle ground. Rather, I look at how the large-scale political economic formations of the Brazilian nation and the rubber trade came together with the

"non-state world of villages" within his personal life, specifically how these structures impacted his sense of the developmental time of his life course and his sense of personal influence and power, at least as these were remembered retrospectively in 1992 .

After describing the specifics of Sabino's life, I turn to two general features of the capitão position, the control of labor and the redistribution of goods. These two features were comprehensible to a range of players, but not in exactly the same way. Sabino's account of his own experiences with the control of labor and the redistribution of goods show how the capitão position brought different cultures and social sectors to a point of convergence, but also how from the perspective of one individual familiar with all sides, this convergence was ultimately experienced as dissonant. The result was not so much a "creative misunderstanding" in which each side brought *only* their own particular culturally informed perspective and somehow still managed to work together as White (1991; 2006) describes, but rather a situation in which one individual had a kind of limited fluency in several cultural perspectives and experienced, even actually embodied, their clash and lack of fit.

Sabino

As Sabino tells his story, he did not set out to be an intermediary. Rather, circumstances led him to this position. As a small boy, his family took him to José Bezerra Post, a post set up along the Teles Pires River, where Kawaiwete established their first sustained peaceable contact with the SPI in 1929 after

destroying two other previous SPI posts in 1924 and 1927.³ While at José Bezerra, Sabino's parents were killed by a measles epidemic and he was taken to live with his older brother in a more remote Kawaiwete village. Later, after his brother also died of measles, he was returned to the post and adopted and raised as a *filho de criação* by the white post chief. Sabino spent his adolescence working for this man and then worked at farms and ranches in the area. Fluent in both the Kawaiwete language and Portuguese as a young adult, Sabino began tapping rubber and organizing the labor of other young men living near posts. For a brief time, during the small rubber boom caused by the Second World War, rubber companies tried to win Sabino's favor by giving him and his workers more manufactured goods than posts (Ferreira 1994: 100). Post records indicate that he like other men in his position, encouraged groups of workers to switch from tapping rubber for the SPI post to tapping for one of the local rubber tapping companies, such as that of Renato Spinelli.⁴ In 1953 he was selected by Father Dornstauder to translate Catholic doctrine to other Kawaiwete, likely because he was bilingual and also because Sabino was interested in Catholic spirituality and developed a friendship with Father Dornstauder. After contacting remote groups of Kawaiwete living along the Peixes River for SPI, Sabino took Father Dornstauder to visit these groups in 1954 and 1955 (Dornstauder ms [1954]:2; Meliá 1993:501). Sabino's early life and young adulthood was marked by a shuttling back and forth between remote Kawaiwete villages and Kawaiwete villages that had relocated near posts and were involved in the debt-merchandise system of rubber tapping. It was also marked on the non-indigenous side by a movement between the SPI, rubber companies and missions. Judging from this

autobiographical narrative and others, Sabino had a strong sense that his structural position joining these worlds was built on jarring and imperfect points of connection.

The Position of Capitão

Sabino said he was given the position of “capitão” by the SPI when his older brother who had had this position died. Prior to his brother, his uncle had also held this position (Ferreira 1994: 86, 89). The SPI established particular individuals as leaders in indigenous communities near posts so that they had an intermediary figure with whom they could conduct business. Prior to the existence of SPI, rubber traders had established certain indigenous men as “capitões” in the greater Tapajós area (Murphy and Steward 1956). Capitões were men who functioned as intermediaries between groups of indigenous tappers and rubber companies. French explorer, Henri Coudreau, for example, describes meeting capitões among the Kawaiwete’s neighbors, the Tupi-speaking Apiacá in 1895 (1897:101). Anthropologist Robert Murphy (1956) writes, that in the 1950s, the nearby Tupian Munduruku had rubber-trader-appointed capitões at least as early as ninety years prior to his visit. He writes that they were at first distinguished from hereditary chiefs, but by the 1950s had entirely replaced these chiefs all together.⁶

Prior to the active rubber trade in the Tapajós, the capitão position seems to have been established by the Brazilian government, though in this earlier period, capitões were non-indigenous men. English naturalist Henry Walker Bates

describes meeting in 1852 on the Tapajós what he called “Captains of Trabalhadores.” These were men appointed by the government to “embody the scattered Indian laborers and canoe-men of their respective districts” (Bates 1880:702). He continues, “[a] semi-military organization is given to the bodies, some of the steadiest among the Indians themselves being nominated as sergeants, and all the members mustered at the principal village of their district twice a year” (ibid.). By the time the SPI began to appoint Kawaiwete leaders in the 1930s, they were, therefore, building patterns set up by rubber companies and the earlier nineteenth century Brazilian government.⁷

While capitão to whites in the 1940s and 50s, Sabino reported that Kawaiwete often referred to him also as *wyriat*, a term that translates, “the owner or caretaker of a place.” In the early twentieth century a Kawaiwete *wyriat* was a very senior man who managed to keep his extended family, children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren living with him by virtue of his ability to provide for them. Some Kawaiwete *wyriat*, reported in 1915 along the Teles Pires River, had several hundred people living in their large collective houses (Sousa 1916).

Both the capitão and *wyriat* positions rested on the control of labor and the redistribution of goods. A man could become a *wyriat* only once he had several children and his daughters began to be married. The institution of bride-service meant that newly married sons-in-law owed their wife’s parents years of labor to pay for their wife, in the form of house building, hunting, fishing and agricultural work. This labor was understood as both paying the parents for the labor it took to

form the girl as a baby, and to raise her as a child. The fish and game produced by these in-married young men were then redistributed in the form of cooked food by the wyriat and his wife. Ideally a wyriat would keep several generations of sons-in-laws in his household and perhaps even attract his own sons back with their wives and families after they had fulfilled their own bride-service (Oakdale 2005: 36). To keep a number of generations working together required skill and charisma. Wyriat of the past were remembered in the 1990s as having the ability to talk all day, explaining to people how they should live. They were also supposed to be model workers, providing examples for others. In addition, they were to make life enjoyable, to have a good sense of humor and know how to organize collective rituals.

Capitões appointed by rubber companies were also men who controlled the labor of young men and redistributed goods, though in this case the labor was largely the gathering of rubber and the goods were industrially produced items such as metal tools or clothing provided by rubber firms or the SPI. Murphy describes the Munduruku capitão's authority and prestige as resting on his access to commercial goods. He writes that these men had more purchased goods than others and that, “[t]o increase the prestige of the trader-appointed chief, the trader often took his protégé on his annual trip to buy supplies in Belém, where the chief's position was confirmed by the governor or some other official (1956: 342). In return, the capitão had “the onerous task of goading the people on to harder work in the rubber avenues” (ibid.). The SPI pursued this rubber company pattern with respect to the Kawaiwete. Sabino described going on a shopping trip in Cuiabá with

SPI officials, much as Murphy described Munduruku capitões accompanying rubber traders in Belém (Ferreira 1994: 89).

The SPI, at least in the Kawaiwete case, also made the indigenous capitão a key figure in the pacification of remote, so called, “hostile” groups, those who had not settled at posts. “Pacification” was a SPI process that involved luring uncontacted groups to settle at posts through offering them gifts of industrially produced goods, particularly metal tools. Sabino described how in 1953 he was told to go out and visit the still “unpacified” Peixes River Kawaiwete and give them gifts of knives and axes. Ultimately, through these goods, indigenous people were to be peaceably lured to posts and made into national workers. As Antônio Carlos de Souza Lima has pointed out, by becoming national workers, indigenous people were understood to be both joining contemporary history and the Brazilian nation (Lima 1992a: 254; Lima 1992b: 163).

Despite the overlap between the capitão and wyriat position, with respect to the control of labor and the distribution of resources, these positions did not fit together seamlessly. Firstly, the position of wyriat is one acquired only by senior men who have acquired a series of verbal skills in addition to having spent a significant amount of time as a parent and grandparent, maturing a family. Men in the capitão position, in contrast, were usually much younger men as these were the men who could speak Portuguese.⁸ Sabino recalled, the following about being appointed a capitão as a very young man. I quote,

Then at that time our chief died. He was my older brother. The chief in your white city [Cuiabá] called me and I went.

“Your chief has died,” he said to me. “Your chief has died. Now you have to take his place,” he said to me.

“No, no,” I said to him. “I don’t know how to work as a chief. I don’t know how to speak like a chief,” I said to him.

“No, you are definitely going to take over your brother’s place,” he said to me.

“No, no, no.”

Then he got a little mad at me. [If you do not take this position,]“I will order you to go far away,” he said to me.

The sense throughout his narrative is that the developmental time of his life course was sped up, that he was forced to assume a position beyond his level of maturity and skill. At one point he commented to me, “You whites don’t let people grow up.” This subjective sense of being rushed through the stages of life is curiously consistent with the larger national project of encouraging indigenous people to enter into the process of human development, “helping” them, to make up for centuries of lost time. During the 1930s, the posts of “attraction” as well as posts of “vigilance and pacification”(for those people who had already been “attracted”) were described by a Brazilian official as “awakening...” “peaceful, unarmed groups in their social infancy, the desire to participate with us in the progress that we have reached” (from Oliveira as quoted in Lima 1992b: 166).

The second point of dissonance for Sabino was the erratic way goods and resources were controlled by SPI and their ultimate scarcity in contrast to the renewable nature of Kawaiwete resources on which a wariat basis his authority. Sabino described the way expeditions to explore for rubber were organized and called off midway by SPI for lack of funding. On his pacification trip to the Peixes River Kawaiwete he described being sent without food and starving on the way. The knives he was given for these villages were also not sufficient. To quote Sabino,

But the knives would not satisfy my whole group. The group was really large.

“If this number of knives is not enough for everybody, I will come back to you,” I said to [the white SPI chief]. “You will always give me help.”

“That’s right,” he said to me, lying to me.

Then I went home and I said to my wife, “let’s go visit our people.” That is what I said to her.

Sabino described himself as being duped into trusting that the SPI would provide the resources for him to successfully be a wariat and provide and care for his Peixes River followers. In response to the scarcity of these goods, Sabino turns to Kawaiwete resources. Once he arrived at the Peixes River villages, he describes not having sufficient knives and axes to satisfy all their requests. The Peixes River Kawaiwete, then ask him to organize Jawosi singing for them. Jawosi requires a high level of commitment on the part of the local group, especially the women. This sort of singing can only be done if the women are consulted by the owner or organizer of the ritual, in this case Sabino, and a significant number of them agrees to participate

as a chorus. This chorus then asks each adult man to sing for them and accompanies the focal singers for several hours each night over the course of several weeks.

Sabino told how he visited at each of the households spread out in the Peixes River and asked the women to sing Jawosi. He himself also sang in Jawosi style with the chorus. Jawosi is a style of singing that is done for a variety of reasons, but is used as a kind of welcoming ritual for returning travelers. After singing in this style, he said the Peixes River people began to call him a “wyriat.” The series of requests that are fulfilled in Jawosi singing is a sharp contrast with the lack of support Sabino received from SPI. Kawaiwete tradition is portrayed as a stable dependable resource while commercial goods as only erratically available and in short supply. Leadership based only on the larger political economy of the unstable rubber market and SPI funding is portrayed as ultimately untenable.

Sabino’s reliance on the Kawaiwete resource of Jawosi songs also meant that first SPI “pacification” mission to the Peixes River Kawaiwete was done, ironically through a celebration of Kawaiwete warfare. Jawosi songs feature stylized accounts of Kawaiwete warriors encountering enemies who they ultimately vanquish. Sabino’s 1953 visit based on this celebration of Kawaiwete warrior exploits also later paved the way for Father Dornstauder’s visits in 1954 and 1955 to these same villages.

Conclusion

Rather than focus exclusively on an individual who is a mediator between groups, I have turned attention in this paper to include a mediating institution, that

of the indigenous capitão. This was a position that fit with indigenous patterns of leadership in that a capitão controlled the labor of young men and redistributed goods like the wyriat, a household or residential group leader. For people like Kawaiwete, a capitão was likely interpreted as a version of a wyriat. It was also a position shaped by rubber traders and the SPI. The labor these men controlled was that of tapping rubber and the resources distributed were typically commodities, rather than, cooked game, mature counsel, and ritual guidance. Sabino's autobiographical narrative provides some purchase on the experience of inhabiting this mediating position. While he is not completely fluent in all of the different ways the capitão position is perceived by different social sectors, indigenous and non-indigenous, he understands enough to sense that the way that this position pulls groups together does not result in a seamless fit. Therefore, while these "creative misunderstanding" may have been "put to work" (White 2006), they did not function without personal cost. Sabino feels the stress of becoming a leader too soon, and of having his resources dependent on the erratic funding of SPI and the fluctuating price of rubber. These "misunderstandings" created a dissonance at the level of individual experience, especially for intermediaries like Sabino.

Sabino's stories about this dissonance as well as those of others in similar positions may have been important forces in shaping Kawaiwete actions when they moved to the Xingu Park in the following decades. In the park, Kawaiwete kept the older family wyriat headmen involved in leadership as well as elected new-style young leaders, in the park, called *chefes*. Stories about the fickle nature of the larger political economy may also have played a role in encouraging Kawaiwete people to

revive and invest in ritual life in the park. (The Xingu Park administration also emphasized the cultivation of indigenous tradition from its inception.) My point with these suggestions about the possible impact of Sabino's recollections is that if cultural production is to be set within "the frame of encounter," a perspective Philip Deloria (2006) has seen as being opened up by White's concept of the "middle ground," then personal memories concerning the lack of fit and dissonance between cultural perspectives in this encounter are as important as the way these misunderstandings "work." These memories of dissonance, recounted by people like Sabino, may drive the choices of later generations with respect to how they will participate in new sorts of "middle grounds."

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Endnotes

1. When Sabino told me about his experiences he had already been living in the nationally celebrated, and relatively isolated Xingu Indigenous Park for more than

three decades. While I do not address this context here, the park's intentional isolation and celebration of indigenous purity certainly influenced his account. When he recorded this story for me in the Kaiabi language, he was speaking in part as a senior leader, someone who knew his recorded narrative would be heard by and potentially influence younger Kawaiwete.

2. On account of WWII, the demand for rubber increased in the Teles Pires area after 1942 after having tapered off prior to 1920 after the first rubber boom (Grünberg 2004).
3. These posts were built in 1922, on the Verde River and in 1925 on the Teles Pires (Grünberg 2004:57).
4. The chief of the post's 12-4-1954 letter to the SPI in Cuiabá reads as follows: "...six Indians left, one woman and three children and two men that the Indian Sabino took down river. I said for them not to go. They told me that if I wouldn't let them that they would flee and the Indians who stayed said that they would go in the dry season to go work with Sabino. Sabino works for the firm of Renato Spinelli" (Dorilio ms [1954]).
5. Father Dornstauder refers to Sabino in the 1950s as "Capitão Sabino" as do many of the post records.
6. In the 1950s, as Munduruku people pursued their own exchanges with traders, Munduruku capitões were beginning to be selected by SPI agents and missionaries to function as intermediaries for them rather than having any role in the rubber trade (1956:343).
7. The Kawaiwete, entered rubber tapping in 1927 (Grünberg 2004) and may have had capitões appointed by rubber companies then.
8. Murphy suggests that indigenous capitões among the Munduruku were also younger men (1956:342).

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