



# A Young Guarani in the Arctic: Ekologos Project, International Academic Exchange for Indigenous Youth

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This essay is a brief account of my three-month period as a visiting researcher at the State University of Campinas representing the Brazilian team in the Ekologos project in Norway. During the programme, I was attached to the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences/Unicamp to carry out a research internship at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, in Tromsø. In this text, I present my trajectory as a young indigenous researcher and recount some of the moments and encounters I experienced in the Arctic. How could intergenerational conversations and cross-cultural exchanges between indigenous scholars establish links between the colonial processes taking place in such different nations — Brazil, India, and Norway? We identified some similarities between colonial domination in the three countries and shared some of the impacts that colonization has had on our indigenous subjectivities and identities.

**Keywords:** Ekologos, colonial domination, international academic exchange, indigenous peoples

In March 2023, I received an invitation from my internship supervisor to participate in the Ekologos project. From the outset, I was excited about the opportunity to experience, for the first time in my life, an international academic exchange. I was even more enthusiastic about the project's theme of international co-operation in the fight against climate change, also involving the Indigenous Peoples of Norway, Brazil, and India. When I received the invitation, I had already started the final semester of my studies and subsequently completed my undergraduate degree in Public Administration in June of the same year at the State University of Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil (Unicamp).

My name is Luiz Medina, and I am a member of the indigenous Guarani people from the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil. My family, in the shape of my great-grandparents, was expelled from our original territory on the border between Brazil and Paraguay. The Brazilian state invaded the lands

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of my ancestors in the region of the Apa river basin, within the biome that is now classified as the Brazilian Cerrado, with a mix of Pantanal and Atlantic forest. Our indigenous families were expelled to make way for colonizing families. Our original territory was overlapped by private properties titled by Brazil for European immigrants in a policy of national occupation of agricultural frontiers, the bandeirantism that also became the March to the West. As a result, my family spent years, from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, wandering through various neighbouring municipalities in search of employment: farm work, cattle work, domestic work, and laundry work, amongst others. In the late 1980s, my great-aunts and my great-grandmother participated in the occupation of a farm on the outskirts of the urban center in the capital of Mato Grosso do Sul, in the city of Campo Grande. The occupation became a neighbourhood in the following decades. This neighbourhood received families with similar histories of violations of their rights, expelled from their original territories, including many families of indigenous origin, with Guarani, Terena, Guató, and Kadiweu ancestries. In this way, the occupation organized itself as an urban village. I was born in the late 1990s, the son of women who resemble Ipê trees: strong bark, dense with wisdom, and resistant to pain – Guarani women whose lives and rights were violated secularly by colonization, nonetheless remaining side by side to overcome life's challenges.

After my childhood, my mother decided to return to higher education, which she had abandoned in order to give birth to me and raise me. She entered university and studied Social Sciences in undergraduate and graduate studies, and this completely changed our lives. From then on, we had more tools to understand the colonial process that our family was forcibly inserted into in the past. My mother's taste for studies led her to a Ph.D. in Political Science and also influenced my desire to study at the university.

In 2019, I joined the State University of Campinas in the first indigenous cohort, which means that I am part of the first group of indigenous academic graduates from this university. And it was with these concerns about the colonial process and forced erasures that our identities suffer in urban centres that I accepted the invitation to participate in the Ekologos project at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, in Tromsø, Norway. I left Brazil restless and curious to better understand the relationship of the Sami people, indigenous people of the Arctic region, with the Norwegian state.

Upon arriving in Tromsø, I was welcomed as part of the family by Professor Heneise and his partner Asanuo, who grew up in India and is, like me, proud of her indigenous heritage. During friendly and genuine conversations that we had with Michael and Asanuo while cooking together, we started comparing the colonial processes that shaped the modern nation states of Brazil, India, and Norway. These were almost weekly meetings accompanied by good laughs and long, tough conversations about colonialism. We shared unique moments of cultural exchange and were able to perceive the pains that colonization has caused in our bodies, territories, subjectivities, and indigenous identities.

As a young indigenous academic, I had the opportunity to attend classes and seminars at this European university, which presented paths to answer my concerns and curiosities. For three months, I lived in the home of the dear Professor Thomas Bøhn with two more Brazilian undergraduate colleagues, Nico and Miguel. They became part of my family during this time. At the university, I was linked to the Departments of Indigenous Studies, Religious Studies, and the Department of Anthropology at UiT. I was able to connect with indigenous and non-indigenous professors who welcomed me warmly and showed me paths to understand the colonial process that the Sami indigenous people undergo. I forged fraternal friendships with indigenous and non-indigenous students outside my native continent.

During my studies in the Arctic, I was not surprised by the Western colonization's ability to repeat the same domination methods over indigenous populations worldwide, donning the same backdrop of capitalist economic practice. These colonial practices served to justify the human and indigenous rights violations committed by colonizers and to subalternize entire native nations. Eva Fjellheim, a Sami PhD whom I had the opportunity to meet personally at UiT, highlights this, pointing out that persistent structural injustices and asymmetric power relations between the Nordic states and the Sami allow colonialism of resources to continue, characterized today by more subtle mechanisms of domination and violence through legal and bureaucratic means (Fjellheim 2023, 114).

For us in Brazil, Europe is always presented as a reference of ‘civilization’ and hence I was surprised to learn that the after-effects of colonization still affect the Sami people in the Arctic region. In the same way that indigenous peoples suffered in Brazil, the Sami were also forcibly converted to Christianity. They were prevented from speaking their native languages and forced to attend nationalist reformist schools in the past century. This history is related in the Norges Arktiske Universitetsmuseum located less than 2 kilometres away from where I lived in Tromsø.

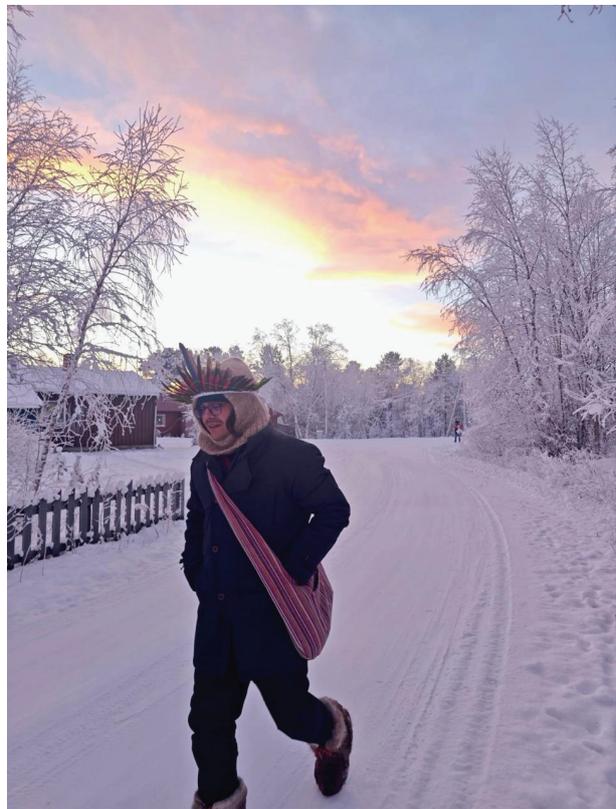
Regarding race, for example, I learned firsthand that ‘whiteness’ is more than just skin colour. I was told about the subtle racism that the Sami face in everyday life on the European continent, inside and outside their ancestral territories, even if many people, including myself, view their skin colour as white. The situation is different in Brazil, where the trade in black and indigenous slaves not only generated wealth for several European countries between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries but also caused a complex mixing of bloodlines in the Brazilian population and a wide variation in skin colour.

At the university, in a class with Professor Laila Susanne Vars and Else Grete Broderstad, I had access to materials that presented the Arctic as an important and pioneering political region in the fight for the recognition of indigenous rights worldwide. This happened when the Sami people advocated for the first time in the world and won a seat in the United Nations, allowing them to participate in many sessions around indigenous issues. This achievement of the Sami people opened doors for the state of Norway, together with Sami leadership, to have an important role in training indigenous leaders worldwide since the 1980s and in developing projects to strengthen indigenous rights in Norway and other countries with indigenous presence.

One week, we visited the municipality of Kárásjohka, where we experienced temperatures between  $-29^{\circ}\text{C} \sim -20^{\circ}\text{C}$ . That was very different for me because in Brazil temperatures do not drop below  $20^{\circ}\text{C}$  on average. We crossed the border into Finland and entered the Sápmi’s ancestral territory. In Kárásjohka, my Brazilian friends and I had the opportunity to visit the Sami indigenous parliament in Norway (Fig. 1).

We participated in discussions with high school pupils from an indigenous school (Fig. 2) and spoke to secondary school students aged between 15 and 17. These classes gave me an opportunity to talk about my people, learn a little more about indigenous life in the Arctic, and exchange experiences with other indigenous people about the racism we suffer in the face of colonization. I was delighted with the didactic and artistic materials made by the students and scattered throughout the school. Full of deep meanings, these materials featured Sami ancestral culture, their world creation stories, and the original constellations that are a source of wisdom.

With the help of our dear journalist friend, Marit-Sophie, we arranged conversations with Kjell Olav Guttorm, Ragnhild Lydia Nystad, and a visit to the NRK Sápmi broadcaster. Ragnhild Lydia is a tireless campaigner who advocated for the construction of the Sami parliament buildings in Kárásjohka. During two friendly afternoons at her house, accompanied by a delicious tea with cake, my Brazilian Ekologos friends and I listened to the struggle, trajectory, and political organization stories of indigenous people in the



**Figure 1:** Walking in front of the Sami parliament in Kárásjohka



**Figure 2:** Ekologos Brazil team visiting the indigenous high school in the Sápmi territory (Miguel on the left, me in the middle, and Nico on the right)

Arctic and learned more about this important woman who is in the vanguard of indigenous politics worldwide.



**Figure 3:** At the NRK Sápmi headquarters in Kárásjohka

One evening, we met the young indigenous Sami Kjell Olav Guttorm from Kárásjohka who works in the parliament. Together with Kjell Olav, we discussed the problems that salmon aquaculture has caused in southern Norway and the differences with wild salmon artisanal fishing in Sápmi (the Sami name for their traditional lands) territory. We also found a link between environmental problems in Norway and Brazil. One of these problems was thematized on the Repórter Brasil website in the article ‘Para alimentar salmão norueguês, soja brasileira desmata e explora trabalho escravo’ (‘To feed Norwegian salmon, Brazilian soy deforests and exploits slave labor’), based on the 2018 report ‘Salmon on soy beans – Deforestation and land conflict in Brazil’ by the NGOs Rainforest Foundation Norway and Future in Our Hands.

We visited the headquarters of NRK Sápmi (Fig. 3), which is an indigenous television broadcaster with financial support from the Norwegian state. All its programming takes place in the traditional Sami languages. During the visit to NRK Sápmi, I couldn’t hold back my excitement and cried tears of joy upon realizing the grandeur of a TV network made by indigenous people and

for indigenous people throughout the Sápmi territory to promote the maintenance of their own languages and culture. And I couldn't contain the tears when seeing the studios dedicated to developing projects for indigenous children of the Sápmi territory about ancestral culture. The tears and emotion arose from the feeling of continuing to believe in our dreams of fighting for our rights.

We saw how the struggle of the Sami people had involved the appropriation of a potent Western tool to combat indigenous rights violations and reverse the logic of domination, something that is still not a reality in Brazil. Although we have many ideas and projects in our territories along these lines of action, we still do not have true recognition from state institutions and even less from a large part of Brazilian society. In Brazil, we still face difficulties in accessing resources and developing projects in pursuit of our autonomy as indigenous peoples. We are still marked by the assimilationist and romanticized gaze of non-indigenous people. The 'Indian' that never existed and was created by the literary school of romanticism still haunts us. This stereotyped image is promoted by Brazilian state institutions to justify the expulsions of people and expropriation of indigenous territory that my family and others suffered from in the past century, their lives and bodies violated by the colonial policies of the State.

Back in the university space, I had the opportunity to present my story and teach a little about the Guarani struggle for the recognition of our indigenous identities in Brazil. I also taught friends and professors at UiT a little about the land recovery struggles in our ancestral territories, a process that is happening in Mato Grosso do Sul. I shared information with exchange friends and professors about some effects caused by colonization in the history of the state and Brazilian population. I prepared and presented a brief introduction to contemporary indigenous art in Brazil. I showed UiT/Tromsø colleagues what indigenous artists are doing in Brazil to organize themselves and change the dominant narratives of colonization.

My experience in the Ekologos project was full of information that I still have difficulty digesting to this day. But over time, the ideas resonate more and more until they settled into a genuine feeling of gratitude for the opportunity in Tromsø. I returned to my continent of origin and family with the feeling of having lived a dream. During the three months of international exchange through the Ekologos project at UiT/Tromsø, I wrote my master's project between Tromsø municipal libraries and the University. The academic materials from the exchange helped me in the project writing process. I found the ideal environment to prepare for the selection process exam. I passed the exam, and in the first semester of 2024, I will start attending classes in the Interdisciplinary Master's Programme in Human and Applied Sciences at Unicamp. My project aims to study how traditional communities in Brazil are inserting themselves (or not) into discussions about energy transition and climate change. On this subject, the Ekologos project helped me connect with indigenous academics from Norway and India who are producing critical science to denounce what is happening in our ancestral territories in the face of climate change and energy transition. At the same time, these themes are important for our territories and indigenous rights. However, they are being appropriated by private initiatives once again for the implementation of 'sustainable capitalism' and, in this way, colonial domination, social inequality, and violations of indigenous and human rights will be perpetuated under the guise of 'green agendas'.

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