



## On the Paths of the Pandemic: Xikrin Tales and Forest Remedies

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Received 7<sup>th</sup> October 2024; accepted 9<sup>th</sup> December 2024

### CESTY PANDEMIE: XIKRINSKÉ PŘÍBĚHY A PŘÍRODNÍ MEDICÍNA

**ABSTRAKT** Tento příspěvek se zabývá složitým vývojem pandemie COVID-19 z jedinečné a významné perspektivy komunity Mebengokré-Xikrin, která se nachází v domorodém území Trincheira Bacajá ve státě Pará v Brazílii. Prostřednictvím poutavého vyprávění zkoumá první záznamy o výskytu COVID-19 ve vesnicích Xikrin a odhaluje řadu příběhů, které se odvíjely v průběhu pandemie, jež začala v roce 2020. Článek se věnuje zásadním tématům, od problémů, s nimiž se potýkaly první případy viru, přes strategie, které Xikrinové přijali, aby se s nemocí vypořádali, vývoj léků, utržené ztráty až po očekávání nových časů, které přinesla vakcína. Tato analýza zdůrazňuje pozoruhodnou odolnost Xikrinů tváří v tvář nepůvodním vlivům a poskytuje jedinečné a hluboké pochopení jejich zkušeností v tomto náročném období.

**KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA** Mebengokré-Xikrin; COVID-19; přírodní medicína; pandemie; invaze

**ABSTRACT** This paper will explore the intricate developments of the COVID-19 pandemic from the unique and deeply meaningful perspective of the Mebengokré-Xikrin community, located in the Trincheira Bacajá Indigenous Land in the state of Pará, Brazil. Through an engaging narrative, she will examine the first records of COVID-19 in the Xikrin villages, revealing a series of stories that unfold over the course of the pandemic, which began in 2020. Crucial themes will be addressed, from the challenges faced with the initial cases of the virus to the strategies adopted by the Xikrin to deal with the disease, the development of medicines, the losses suffered and the expectation of new times brought by the vaccine. This analysis will highlight the Xikrin's remarkable resilience in the face of non-indigenous influences, providing a unique and in-depth understanding of their experience during this challenging period.

**KEY WORDS** Mebengokré-Xikrin; COVID-19; forest medicine; pandemic; invasions

### INTRODUCTION

The Xikrin live in the Trincheira Bacajá Indigenous Land, in the state of Pará, Brazil. They are a people of the Jê linguistic family who self-identify as Mebengokré-Xikrin, similar to the Kayapó. Despite sharing socio-cultural aspects such as language, mythology, and graphic symbols, these two groups identified themselves as relatives until a certain mythical-historical moment, having split (Turner 1979; Bollettin 2020). Although they share a common mythical and cultural origin, these groups distinguish themselves from each other through behaviors of body ornamentation, application of graphic patterns, and the use of writing for language recording (Mantovanelli 2016). The Trincheira Bacajá Indigenous Land (TITB)

is located along the banks of the Bacajá River, one of the tributaries of the Xingu River. It was demarcated in 1996, covering 1,650,939 hectares and borders the lands of the Parakanã, Araweté, and Assurini, who speak the Tupi language (Cohn 2000, 14). Currently, the Xikrin are divided into 31 villages, totaling approximately 1,067 people.

The Mebengokré-Xikrin people are directly impacted by the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, one of the largest hydroelectric installations in the world, which has profoundly affected the ecology and seasonal patterns of the Xingu River, altering indigenous life in surrounding areas (Conh 2010; Mantovanelli 2016). By damming the Xingu, Belo Monte has drastically reduced the water flow in the Bacajá River, a tributary that provides sustenance for the Mebengokré-Xi-

krin people in the Trincheira Bacajá Indigenous Land (De Souza 2015; Bollettin 2020, Foltram 2024). This has depleted the local fauna and flora, creating long-term health problems (Jarratt-Snider – Nilsen 2020). This is a case of environmental racism, which refers to intentional acts disproportionately harming ethnic groups by disrupting social and cultural contexts, leading to severe environmental injustices (Parsons 2021). It is rooted in capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, which legitimize environmental inequalities.

The political context during the three and a half years, from 2019 to 2022, that I was in the field, which this text addresses, was a process of violations of indigenous rights. In 2021, Law 191/20 was presented, with the aim of opening up indigenous lands to mining, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil (Terena 2022). This situation, according to Terena (2022), portrays indigenous peoples as obstacles to the country's development. In the writings of Krenak (2020), the question is: development for whom? Where would this gold really end up and who would have access to these riches? The destruction of indigenous lands, soil contamination, and river pollution—direct effects of mining activities—are ways in which necropolitics (Mbembe 2016) decides who lives and who dies, and who the Brazilian people are (Terena 2022, 8). In this context of unbridled exploitation, indigenous lands are under constant attack due to the threat of unsustainable exploitation of natural resources throughout the Amazon rainforest. For more than 400 years, mineral exploitation, now linked to agribusiness production, has been two of the main fronts of the neo-extractivist economy that threatens the lives of indigenous peoples. Despite the achievements celebrated in the 1988 Constitution<sup>1</sup>, indigenous peoples continue to be threatened, as we can see with the issue of the Temporal Framework or, initially, the, PL 490/200 (Rocha 2020), which seeks to open up indigenous lands to mining, farming and agribusiness, as well as denying the demarcation of Indigenous Lands to those who were not included until the 1988 Constitution.

Since April 2020, 14,471 hectares of deforestation have been recorded in the Altamira region<sup>2</sup>. In the Trincheira Bacajá Indigenous Land alone, 32 hectares were deforested in May and June. In November and December 2021, more than 1,600

hectares were cleared in the Indigenous Lands of the Xingu region and 132 hectares in the Trincheira Bacajá Indigenous Land, despite the heavy rains during the Amazon winter. With the then President of the Republic Jair Bolsonaro and his support for deforestation and the invasion of Indigenous Lands, there has been a significant increase in invasions of TITB, which has been called the “Bolsonaro effect”<sup>3</sup>.

The topic of mining and invasions of Indigenous Lands gained prominence during Bolsonaro's entire government tenure, as the former president advocated for the opening and exploitation of indigenous territories, as well as his approval of mining (Bonilla – Oiara – Bonilla – Artionka 2021). It was this movement that led to new cases of COVID-19, not only in TITB, but in Brazilian indigenous territories as a whole (Foltram 2024). According to Farias and Wanderley (2021), it was during the pandemic that the financial market increased demand for gold due to global financial instability, lack of jobs, and ineffective public policies in Brazil, leading to an increase of the gold price from R\$195 to R\$306 per gram, a 56.2% rise over the course of one year from December 2019 to December 2020. This prompted a reaction from indigenous peoples to protect their autonomous territory.

Several complaints were made in 2020 about the situation in TITB; however, due to COVID-19, the invaders could not be removed (Xikrin – Bollettin 2022; Foltram, 2024). This action, according to Supreme Court Minister Gilmar Mendes, would prevent the arrival of COVID-19 in the villages. The Xikrin from Mrõtídjãm and Kenkro villages went up to the intrusion area and tried to expel the most vulnerable, this movement resulted in various cases of COVID-19 in both villages (Foltram 2024). “We will go there to remove the invaders; it's already decided, we can't wait for anyone to come here and remove them” (Chief Bepkutoy Xikrin, Mrõtídjãm Village, march, 2020).

#### PANDEMIC TIMES: A XIKRIN NARRATIVE OF RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL

In a conversation with Maradona, one of the elders and prominent leaders of the Mrõtídjãm village, and with Soko, president of the Bebô Xikrin Association of Bacajá (ABEX), which encompasses the 42 villages of the Trincheira Bacajá Indigenous Land, I was told that when the men who had allegedly returned from the invasion arrived in Mrõtídjãm, everyone already knew that some of them might have been infected with the new disease that was terrifying the white people. To calm everyone down, it was decided that on that night, when everyone arrived from different places, the people of the Mrõtídjãm village, young and old, women and children, gathered at the warrior's house with a large coffee pot and only one cup, and everyone drank coffee from the same cup (Foltram 2024). That night, everyone in the village attended, discussing that

1 The Brazilian Constitution was enacted in 1988, after the end of the military dictatorship, and played a crucial role in the political mobilization of indigenous peoples, who began to organize more effectively to demand the rights necessary for the indigenous movement. Important leaders such as Chief Raoni, Paulinho Paiakan, and Davi Kopenawa actively participated in the discussions that led to the legislation protecting indigenous peoples. The 1988 Constitution guaranteed, among other rights, cultural pluralism, ensuring indigenous peoples the freedom to maintain their social organization, languages, beliefs, and the right to the use of the lands they traditionally occupy. This political and legal advancement was essential for the demarcation of indigenous territories in Brazil, ensuring these peoples the spaces needed for the preservation of their cultures and ways of life.

2 See more at: <https://xingumais.org.br/> Accessed on: 13/04/2024.

3 See more at: <https://site-antigo.socioambiental.org/pt-br/tags/efeito-bolsonaro> Accessed on: 12/04/2024.

they should not fear the “white people’s” disease and that many relatives already knew how to manipulate forest herbs. Everyone in the village drank coffee from the cup, and the explosion of COVID-19 cases began in the Mrõtídjãm village (Foltram 2024). Initially, most of the elders left the villages and went to live in the forest out of fear of the disease. In the forest, they could find medicine and easily manipulate it for everyone, as well as have more food such as game and more security that the white people would not find them, only those they wanted to (Bollettin 2020).

The first cases of COVID-19 in TITB were mild; no one needed major care, except for Bebjay one of the sons of the shaman of the Mrõtídjãm village. Interestingly, before Bebjay left, but due to his aneurysm rather than COVID-19, the Xikrin were already not very certain about believing in COVID-19 because they could not see the disease; many were asymptomatic, others had a mild headache, and the lack of smell and taste were also symptoms, but they could not understand why we were so desperate because of a disease that “did almost nothing” (Foltram 2024). At the same time that they were not very concerned about the disease, they bathed and took “forest medicine” every day, this extremely effective medicine for Xikrin bodies, as it helped improve and cure many people who had COVID-19.

The Xikrin reported that the forest medicine was so strong that one had to go to the forest and take it alone; the name given was Rambreó, called the “corona medicine”, which is a type of leaf mixed with vine, they said. Everyone who went to the forest understood what isolation would be like. After drinking from the shared cup, they also thought they had been infected and went to the forest to take medicine, living for 15 days until the village situation improved and everyone recovered (Foltram 2024). The The Indigenous Special Sanitary District, DSEI<sup>4</sup> protocol and city medicine in general was for all flu-like syndromes to be treated as COVID-19.

The days passed, and even living in Altamira, Pará, Brazil, I always received news from those who had stayed in the village to take care of the place; the nurse from the Mrõtídjãm village was my direct informant about what was happening. After the 15-day quarantine, the Xikrin began to return to the Mrõtídjãm village. By this time, at the beginning of June, according to Associação dos Povos Indígenas Brasileiros, APIB<sup>5</sup> data, there were already about 1,350 infected indigenous people

and 70 deaths in Brazil, with 1 death and 13 indigenous people infected in the Altamira region.

In mid-July 2020, Onça’s son, leader of the Py-Takô village, traveled to Altamira to accompany the medical procedures to be carried out on his father. All the Xikrin who had contracted coronavirus and were hospitalised were entitled to a companion, as long as they were not intubated in the Intensive Care Unit-ICU. Onça was in the ICU and could not have a carer, but his son went to the hospital every day at 3pm to inquire about his father’s condition. The doctors provided up-to-date information to the relatives of those in the ICU. At the Py-Takô village, I only had the opportunity to meet his wife and children as he was absent. During my first encounter with Onça’s son at Casa de Saúde Indígena-CASAI<sup>6</sup>, he requested my presence at the hospital. However, I was unable to attend and instead offered to communicate with the DSEI team and doctors via WhatsApp. He mentioned that the medicine from the forest was not being allowed.

Various institutions organized themselves to ensure the protection of Indigenous peoples’ rights and, thus, created the Interinstitutional Committee for Combating COVID-19. The first time forest medicine was introduced into the Altamira hospital was through nurses, and it was successful. Bepjai is here to demonstrate that traditional forest medicine, used by the Mebengokré people, is effective in treating illnesses. Many people treated themselves with forest medicines during the pandemic, including me. When I got home, I started thinking about what I could do to help. The shift of a doctor friend who had helped with getting the forest medicine into the hospital would be delayed and she didn’t work in the ICU, so I got in touch with another doctor friend who said she could help by talking to the hospital’s social worker, who could communicate directly with the doctors to sensitise them, since the coronavirus protocol stated that indigenous peoples have the right to access medicines from their culture. During our conversation, the doctor reassured me even more by sending me a photo of Bepjoti leaving the hospital and going to CASAI. Unfortunately, Bepjoti discharge only lasted one night. He had to be transferred back to the Regional Hospital and returned to CASAI after a few days.

In the days following August, Cacique Onça’s blood oxygen levels fluctuated until a tracheostomy was performed, helping to increase his oxygenation to 97 per cent. However, his state of recovery was still not very encouraging until 31 August 2020, when the great leader of the Middle Xingu passed away, the dear friend who helped anthropologists better understand his culture (Fisher 1991; Conh 2010; Bollettin 2020; Mantovanni 2016; Foltram 2024).

As the news of his death spread, it seemed that everything had ended with his passing, and each person would mourn in their own way. However, things became even more complicated on September 1, 2020, when I received a call at 7 a.m. from Ra-

4 The Indigenous Special Sanitary District (DSEI) is a decentralized management unit of the Indigenous Health Care Subsystem (SasiSUS). It is an organizational service model that is oriented towards a dynamic, geographic, population and well-defined administrative ethno-cultural space. It includes a set of technical activities aimed at providing rationalized and qualified health care measures. This text promotes the reorganization of the healthcare network and sanitary practices, and carries out necessary administrative and managerial activities to provide assistance, with social control. See more at: <https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/composicao/sesai/estrutura/dsei> Accessed on: 11/04/2024.

5 See more at: [https://emergenciaindigena.apiboficial.org/dados\\_covid19/](https://emergenciaindigena.apiboficial.org/dados_covid19/) Accessed on: 11/04/2024.

6 CASAI is the establishment responsible for supporting, welcoming and assisting indigenous people referred to the SUS Services Network for complementary basic care and specialised care.

iane, the wife of Kudjoyre, Onça's son: "Hi Rochelle, we need help. The aircraft commander doesn't want to take Onça back to the village." The commander refused to transport the body to the village because the death was related to COVID-19, and his contract did not require him to transport bodies (Foltram 2024). When I received this news, things started to get even more complicated. I started calling the DSEI and spoke to some nurses who told me the same thing: according to the contract, they couldn't force the body to be transported on the plane. Commander claimed that he was at risk, and that's why he didn't want to transport the body. However, he had personally flown to pick up all the Xikrin with coronavirus on his plane, despite having a fever, cough and much stronger symptoms, which represented a greater risk than transporting a body in a sealed coffin.

The situation was as terrible as it could be, with the rights of those people violated to such an extent that nothing we said could help improve the situation. With their bodies left in a car, in the sun, and with no prospect of being able to perform the rites of passage as they should. We spoke to them and told them that it was better to leave by car; they would be in the village in 16 hours and could say goodbye to the chief. At that point, Onça's son said that they would indeed open Onça's coffin and carry out the funeral rites, as well as taking over the DSEI car, which had been unable to find an aeroplane to transport his father. He agreed to take his father by van, so we spoke to the nurse, who asked for another ten minutes to get an answer about the plane they were trying to arrange. We waited the ten minutes, but nothing happened. Now all that was left to do was prepare the vans for departure.

They prepared the bed of a truck with tyres to cushion the coffin's journey, with two tyres underneath and one on each side. The coffin was wrapped in a tarpaulin and tied to the back of the van. The despair, injustice and unhappiness in the eyes of Onça's son could not be ignored; while the cacique's body was tied like luggage to the back of a van, everyone cried non-stop. After everything had been dealt with, they travelled 16 hours with a body that had been dead for more than 24 hours.

Chief Onça's body arrived in the village in the middle of the night on September 2, 2020, where relatives were already prepared for the traditional rites (Vidal 1976; Cohn 2010; Bollettin 2014). The coffin was opened, but the nurse who accompanied the burial brought PPE for everyone who would handle the body. The Xikrin wore special clothing, masks, and there was alcohol in the environment. Onça's body was adorned much less than it should have been; in a way, the Xikrin understood that there was a great risk in handling the body, but they also could not let the chief go to the world of the dead without his adornments for the rest of eternity (Vidal 1976; Cohn 2010; Bollettin 2014). It seems that there was an understanding on both sides.

Quickly, Onça became a symbol of struggle. After his death, a meeting was called with the indigenous peoples of the Xingu to discuss the return of bodies and adornment in the villages and nearby riverine communities of Altamira. As the protocol was broken and the coffin was opened, public authorities

present at the meeting were concerned about future deaths and the treatment of bodies in the villages and communities. In this sense, this discussion, which included speeches from the Xikrin and other indigenous peoples of the region, as well as from professors Clarice Cohn and Tânia Stolze, helped to elucidate to the present institutions the violence that occurred with Onça's body and the importance of respecting passage rites by institutions.

After the death of Cacique Onça, in 2021 we began the vaccination campaign in Brazil and indigenous peoples were given priority right to the vaccine. It was a surprise, I imagine, to everyone that the Xikrin and other indigenous peoples didn't want to be vaccinated, but the truth is that we researchers, universities and NGOs left the Indigenous Lands during the pandemic, and the churches, loggers, land grabbers and miners entered in large numbers with the support of the Bolsonaro government.

When I started going on the radio to talk about the vaccine, I realised that in the lower part of the TITB, everyone accepted taking the vaccine and took it easily. Now, what we call the upper region of the river, which, by the way, is the place where we have the biggest invasions and shepherds living in the villages today, was where we found it most difficult to vaccinate everyone.

Bekwtay, known as Índio, then chief of the Mrõtídjãm village, said to me on the radio: "Nire, when are they going to come and remove the invasions?" I replied: "Índio, everyone Xikrin has to take the vaccine. If you take the vaccine, you won't have any more excuses not to remove the invasions." From this passage, it can be seen that everything started to be negotiated via vaccination. At that time, I was still trying to get everyone vaccinated via radio.

Soko warned me: "There's no way to stop the end of the world, it will happen. After this disease, another one will come, and another, and the world will end." (Kataprure Xikrin, vice-president of ABEX, Mrõtídjãm village, janury, 2021).

The news that I was going on the radio to talk to the Xikrin about the vaccine spread, and one day I talked to the DSEI about the work I was doing on the radio. Due to my participation with the Interinstitutional Committee for Combating COVID-19 in the Middle Xingu Region, it was possible to establish a partnership with DSEI of Altamira, which invited me to help with discussions about the importance of COVID-19 vaccination in the highlands of TITB. This was my return to the field in the year 2021, after spending a year conducting fieldwork only in the city of Altamira during the pandemic (Bollettin – Vega – Gomes 2020). The DSEI staff asked if I would like to go to the Mrõtídjãm village because they had been at a standstill for about a week and no one wanted to take vaccines. I replied that I would love to go there and try to talk to the Xikrin in person. On January 28, 2021, a car with ice for the vaccines would be sent up, and it was agreed that I would go.

On January 28, we left early, and by early evening, we were already in the Mrõtídjãm village. That night we had conversations with several people explaining the importance of the va-

ccine, conversations that touched on their own history, such as the dozens of deaths caused by measles before the vaccine, about the safety of the vaccine that came from the same place as the snake serum that everyone took without question when bitten, the vaccine was CORONA VAC. We talked about the indigenous struggle to be the first to take vaccines. It was hours of conversation with each and every one about the importance of vaccination.

My grandfather Bepkrô, who gave me kinship through a Mebengokré-Xikrin name of Bekoykamerety, understood the importance of the vaccine when I reminded him of the measles crisis, in which he lost a sister (Bollettin 2023). Bepkrô remembered the importance of taking the vaccine to end the virus and the deaths, which among the Xikrin of Bacajá were one; we lost Chief Onça, but he knew of the many deaths among the Xikrin relatives of Kateté and Kayapó (Foltram 2024).

Bepkrô told me that he knew I cared a lot about them and didn't lie to them, and that he trusted me: "Paimex, I'll take the vaccine. You told me it will be good, I understood and believe in you, so tomorrow morning you'll come to my house to eat fish, and we'll take the vaccine together" (Bepkro Xikrin, Shaman, Mrôtidjâm village).

I continued walking to the houses and talk about the vaccine. Everyone was waiting for us to ask various questions about the vaccine. A frequent question was: Why couldn't children get vaccinated? Why can't pregnant women get vaccinated? Why can't people with high blood pressure and diabetes get vaccinated? Why are we the first and not you?

I explained that diseases like COVID-19 were appearing in the land due to the misuse of natural resources, whites interfering with the forests, polluting the rivers, enslaving the animals, and since this was a white person's disease, it wasn't fair that they should pay the price by dying. Therefore, the indigenous movement had fought hard for the vaccines to arrive first in the villages.

We had brought audios from pastors (Bollettin 2013) known to the Xikrin who were in favor of the vaccine and from relatives from other Indigenous Lands who had already taken the vaccine. This initiative came from Kapot Xikrin, who sent me audios speaking about the importance of the vaccine, from pastors who spoke Mebengokré. So, I talked, answered questions, played the audios, and showed photos of relatives being vaccinated.

On 29 January, my birthday, I woke up early. I had breakfast and went to the Xikrin houses. Indio, the chief, had said he wouldn't get the vaccine until after lunch.

I went to Bepkrô's house. I arrived at Bepkrô's house, we ate a piranha, and he said to me: "Now let's go to the nurse to get the vaccine, but go and get your grandmother Iretô, who is trying to escape" (Bepkro Xikrin, shaman, Mrôtidjâm village). I called Iretô, the shaman's wife, extended my hand to him, and said: "We walked through the village; Bepkrô's children, Notire and his family, Tomy and his family, Benoi and his family, followed their father. We walked to the infirmary and other people started coming out of their houses to see the

vaccine. The first vaccine was given to Bepkrô, then to Iretô, Karangré, and out of 100 adults, 75 were vaccinated.

After the vaccination, life returned to normal in a global context, and we participated in the Acampamento Terra Livre<sup>7</sup>, where about 7,000 indigenous people from all over Brazil gathered to demand better living conditions from the Brazilian government and chanted "Out Bolsonaro," who was the president of Brazil. Additionally, we highlight the important struggle against the Temporal Framework, a crucial issue for the protection of indigenous rights.

The experience of the Xikrin people during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the intersection between traditional knowledge and modern healthcare practices, as well as the resilience of Indigenous communities. The efforts to vaccinate the Xikrin, despite challenges such as invasions and the spread of the disease, demonstrate the importance of both government-led and community-led initiatives to protect Indigenous health. The creation of the Interinstitutional Committee for Combating COVID-19 was a crucial step in ensuring that the rights of Indigenous peoples were protected during this global crisis. Notably, the use of forest medicine, which was introduced into hospitals by community members such as nurses, is a clear example of how traditional practices can complement modern medical systems, showing the efficacy of these remedies in treating various diseases, whether they affect white or Indigenous people.

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7 The Free Land Camp (ATL), the largest Assembly of Indigenous Peoples and Organizations in Brazil, has been held annually since 2004, usually in April, in Brasília – DF. This event brings together Indigenous people from various parts of Brazil and other countries to discuss public policies aimed at improving their living conditions, as well as addressing issues such as land demarcation, health, education, and other essential demands for Indigenous peoples. See more at: <https://apiboficial.org/historicoatl/>

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