

# The commonplace period of expulsions: Frameworks for Warao migrations during the COVID-19 pandemic in Natal, RN, and João Pessoa, PB

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## Abstract

In this article we describe and discuss several frameworks through which Warao Indigenous migrations were understood and managed in two cities in the Northeast region of Brazil: Natal (RN) and João Pessoa (PB) during the most restrictive period of the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that their transits do not begin with the recent ‘Venezuelan crisis’ and do not end with the promised reception in Brazil’s refugee policies, rather they are another stage in a long cycle of expulsions. We also suggest that these expulsions are not the most evident forms of the brutal violence that forcibly disconnects populations from their territories, but rather a banal, daily exercise that slowly, and sustained in time, enables the invisibility of multiple violences that denies these groups a place for themselves in the world. Examining the parallels between the two municipalities, we underline both shared frameworks and practices, and the significant differences in the development of public policies.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Warao, Pandemic COVID-19, Expulsions, Migrants, Refugees.

# O tempo corriqueiro das expulsões: enquadramentos das migrações Warao durante a pandemia da Covid-19 em Natal/RN e João Pessoa/PB

## Resumo

Neste artigo descrevemos e discutimos diversos enquadramentos por meio dos quais foram entendidas e geridas as migrações indígenas Warao em duas cidades da região Nordeste do Brasil: Natal/RN e João Pessoa/PB no período mais restritivo da pandemia de Covid-19. Argumentamos que seus trânsitos não começam com a recente “crise venezuelana” e nem terminam com o acolhimento prometido nas políticas de refúgio no Brasil, mas que eles são mais uma etapa de um longo ciclo de expulsões. Sugerimos também que essas expulsões não são somente aquelas mais evidentes da violência bruta que desliga forçosamente populações dos seus territórios, mas um exercício corriqueiro que, devagar e sustentado no tempo, permite invisibilizar as múltiplas violências que lhes negam a estes grupos um lugar para si no mundo. Com o paralelo entre os dois municípios sublinhamos tanto enquadramentos e práticas compartilhadas, quanto diferenças significativas do desenrolar das políticas públicas.

**Palavras-chave:** Indígenas Warao, Pandemia Covid-19, Expulsões, Migrantes, Refugiados.

# El tiempo ordinario de las expulsiones: Encuadramientos de las migraciones Warao durante la pandemia de Covid-19 en Natal, RN e João Pessoa, PB

## Resumen

En este artículo describimos y discutimos varios marcos a través de los cuales se entendieron y gestionaron las migraciones indígenas warao en dos ciudades de la región Nordeste de Brasil: Natal/RN y João Pessoa/PB en el período más restrictivo de la pandemia de Covid-19. Sostenemos que sus tránsitos no comienzan con la reciente “crisis venezolana” y no terminan con la acogida prometida en las políticas de refugiados de Brasil, sino que son un paso más en un largo ciclo de expulsiones. También sugerimos que estas expulsiones no solo son las más evidentes de la violencia brutal que desconecta por la fuerza a las poblaciones de sus territorios, sino un ejercicio cotidiano y banal que, de manera lenta y sostenida en el tiempo, permite invisibilizar las múltiples violencias que les niegan a estos grupos un lugar para sí en el mundo. Con el paralelismo entre los dos municipios subrayamos tanto marcos y prácticas compartidas, como diferencias significativas en el desarrollo de políticas públicas.

**Palabras clave:** Indígenas Warao, Pandemia Covid-19, Expulsiones, Migrantes, Refugiados.

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## Introduction – the long period of expulsions

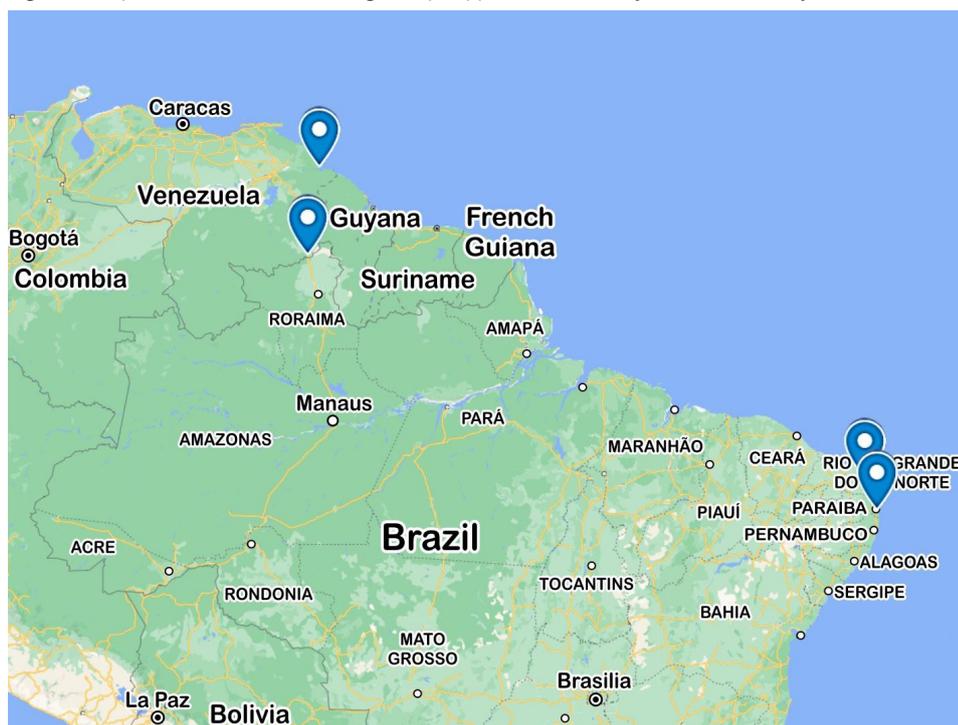
The reflections in this article are the product of several encounters of different orders. The first, when the authors met with some groups of Indigenous people of the Warao ethnic group from Venezuela who, since the end of 2019, began arriving in the cities of João Pessoa, Paraíba (PB), and Natal, Rio Grande do Norte (RN), in the Northeast of Brazil. The second, meetings between these Indigenous people, and Brazilian Indigenous peoples, with different types of governmental and non-governmental agents and agencies, who began to form part in the management of their transit and social assistance services. Finally, the third, within our areas of anthropological work. Until the onset of this process, our work had different emphases, focusing on migration in one case and Indigenous ethnology in the other. From these meetings, it became explicit how common points in the analysis of the management of populations produced otherness and were subordinated in the administrative traditions of Brazil. With no apparent contradiction, at the same time that significant differences in the response to assistance for the Warao Indigenous people in each of the cities became evident, the idea of Brazil as a homogeneous unit and as a receptive, welcoming space was also contravened.

The arrival of several Indigenous groups of the Warao ethnic group in Brazil, together with other groups belonging to the *Pemón*, *Eñepá*, *Kariña* and *Wayúu* ethnic groups, has been documented since 2014 (Rosa, 2021) and research shows agreement of an increase in the number of entries since 2018. During the most restricted period of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the border remained closed, entries were made unofficially, but they did not cease. The Warao stood out among migrant Indigenous groups as numerically more significant and leaving the cities and states bordering Venezuela, undertaking journeys that took them to almost all Brazilian states. The UNHCR estimates that there were approximately 7,000 Indigenous Warao migrants or refugees in Brazil in 2022<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Information provided by the UNHCR on the agency's Brazilian website. Accessed on: 2 Aug, 2022. <https://www.acnur.org/portugues/2022/04/19/indigenas-venezuelanos-no-brasil-ja-somam-mais-de-7-mil-pessoas-sendo-819-reconhecidas-como-refugiados/#:~:text=A%20maioria%20da%20popula%C3%A7%C3%A3o%20ind%C3%ADgena,para%20outras%20regi%C3%B5es%20do%20pa%C3%ADs>. The Warao are one of the most numerous Indigenous groups in Venezuela, currently the second most populous Indigenous people in the country, with around 49,000 members (UNHCR 2021, p. 13)

Figure 1. Map recovered from the Google maps app and modified by the authors, May 2023.



The explanation for the departure of these groups from Venezuela is often based on common sense given the intensification of the economic crisis in the country over the last ten years. This is the explanation that we found in some academic activities and that is also mobilised by colleagues and administrators at public events, as well as by many of the Warao Indigenous people we accompany. Whether you need to renew immigration documents or present yourself in the avalanche of live online debates organised during the pandemic concerning your presence in Brazil, ‘the crisis’ appears as a self-explanatory model of a complex reality that has been going on longer than is usually portrayed. This manner of producing an explanatory key for an immediate, superficial understanding of complex processes previously appeared in the dynamics of Haitian and Colombian migration. Due to their graphic force, ‘the earthquake’ and ‘the conflict’, respectively, became the allegory of each of those situations (Facundo, 2021, p. 208). The recurrence and indiscriminate use of these images hide a series of social processes, including that of their own production.

Within the different dimensions of the so-called ‘Venezuelan crisis’, hyperinflation and shortages are in fact very serious problems that directly affect the most precarised populations. Interruption of the sale of state-subsidised food, scarcity of foodstuffs in general, lack of basic hospital and pharmaceutical equipment and items, added to an absence of food sovereignty programmes, are concrete conditions that have led millions of people to leave Venezuela in recent decades, provoking one of the most impactful migratory processes in the region. However, we feel the need to emphasise that these situations do not affect all populations the same way. The extraordinary time of crisis for Indigenous populations, for example, is better thought of as a new moment of intensification in a long, permanent process of expulsions and other daily violence.

As stated, the recent history of the Warao people, anchored in the national pact originating from the Iberian colonisation process, has been marked by a continuum of violence characterised by its power to incapacitate life in its territories. The Orinoco Delta region in the State of Delta Amacuro has suffered the intervention of several projects that directly affected Indigenous populations. García Castro and Heinen (1999) point to the 1960s as the beginning of the expansion of the agricultural frontier for the region. During this period, the construction of

a series of dikes altered the cycles of flood and drought and, therefore, substantially modified the possibilities for subsistence of Indigenous peoples<sup>2</sup>. The construction of the Manamo River dike was followed by a series of events that were reconstructed in a chronology proposed by anthropologist Marlise Rosa (2021), based on these authors. It highlights the cholera epidemic, the administration of which by the Venezuelan national government caused the death and forced displacement of many Warao in the 1990s. A series of violences followed, associated with extractive economies, particularly the oil industry, and the increasingly intense contact of Indigenous peoples with traders, workers, smugglers, churches, missionaries and city inhabitants, which continued to grow with the appearance of more oil and illicit economies.

We understand that the dynamics described are not very different from those that can be reconstructed in the history of Indigenous peoples from other parts of the world. In fact, despite the extraordinary nature of the Venezuelan crisis, we see that in other countries the daily lives of most Indigenous peoples are marked by recurring processes of expulsions and struggles to remain in their territories. In the case of the Warao, Venezuela's most recent crisis corresponds to yet another chapter in the cycle of expulsions and not its origin. Here, we understand expulsion in the sense proposed by Saskia Sassen (2014), that is, not only as the act of brute force that disconnects populations from their territories, but also the systemic process of producing limits that make people and things invisible to the system. In this sense, the Warao were not only expelled from their territories by extractive, agro-industrial and energy projects, but also by the prolonged famine and lack of resources to maintain life as they understood it; that is, through a process of expulsion sustained over time that makes the multiple forms of violence suffered commonplace, to the point that they become invisible (Sassen, 2014). Processes similar to those we see happening in the cities they have inhabited over the last few years.

By emphasising this long-term perspective, we hope to reinforce two premises that are often obfuscated in migration studies. The first is how the entire process of forced mobility is based on the politically provoked impossibility of staying (Facundo, 2019). We are not merely discussing the right of people to migrate and of migrants having rights, but also the struggle for land and the right to remain both in the territories from which they came and the places where they take up residence, according to their interests, desires and possibilities. The second premise is that crossing a national border does not nullify the marks of a person's class, gender, race or ethnicity. Moreover, unfortunately it does not interrupt the cycle of vulnerability and racism to which they are subjected. Although the legal language of the institutional worlds of migration and refuge speaks of receiving countries as those that guarantee a new pact of citizenship and rights for refugees, we know that this is far from corresponding to reality. The Warao left a country with a colonial matrix of social organisation for another that is also organised around a socio-racial hierarchy, and they continue to occupy the lowest ranks in it. From what we have observed following their paths in Brazil, this is not about a resumption of protection, but rather the continuation of the long history of expulsions, though on this occasion, one marked by serious effort from social assistance teams and other agents interested in minimising their suffering and promoting improvement in their living conditions.

The Warao's continued condition of subalternity and exclusion does not directly correspond to a lack of interest on the part of local technical teams in the municipalities in serving these populations. On the contrary, as we examine below, the arrival of the Warao in each city activated a very broad network of people linked to public institutions of different scales (federal, state and municipal), religious entities and organised civil society, as well as actors linked to transnational agencies. We realised that their dual status, as Indigenous people

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<sup>2</sup> According to the authors: 'the Venezuelan government decided to convert the Orinoco Delta into the main food supplier for Venezuelan Guyana (...) To achieve this, a decision to intervene in the Delta was made, building a series of large dams and other works that would prevent the seasonal floods of Orinoco from flooding thousands of square kilometres that was supposedly suitable for agriculture. In 1965, in the first phase of the project, the Manamo pipe was closed; however, the resulting serious negative ecological consequences paralysed the following phases' (García Castro & Heinen, 1999:31).

and refugees, rather than reinforcing a double exclusion, worked in many situations as a fundamental element in the visibility and mobilisation of resources, the proposing of solutions and implementing care processes.

Without diminishing the importance of these efforts, it should be noted that in the majority of the Warao's relationships with different public authorities, old categories historically associated with Brazilian Indigenous populations were mobilised. As previously highlighted in encounters with other refugee groups (Facundo, 2017), in this case, we also perceive a distinction between refugees who cause problems and those who do not. This distinction can be understood in light of the categories analysed by Pacheco de Oliveira (2016) of 'good' and 'bad savages' that, even though they are colonial categories, continue to operate in different types of relationships between state agents and populations produced as peripheral. This is discussed by the author (Idem) in his analysis of the 'pacification' policy in urban communities in the country's large centres.

During the first year of attending to their needs, in both João Pessoa (PB) and Natal (RN), after meetings with tripartite care teams, we recorded in our field notes the words 'problematic', 'a very difficult case', 'greater complexity'. Another coincidence in the records we made in both cities was the constant complaints from the assistance teams concerning what they called grime. Sometimes in reference to living spaces, but sometimes also in reference to the people. This accusation caught our attention because it enables us to notice the greater emphasis given by the teams to the individual responsibility of the persons for their living conditions, to the detriment of a structural vision of the conditions of existence. In Natal, for example, city hall teams insisted on the topic in each meeting with Warao leaders, and they, in turn, insisted on the need to provide rubbish collection containers and periodic delivery of cleaning materials. Skips or rubbish bins were never made available and, according to leaders, the delivery of cleaning products was irregular and insufficient. The concern with the possible harmful effects on health resulting from the lack of cleanliness, which clearly bothered the teams, contrasts with the relative compliance with the fact that the Indigenous people shared a stove for six or more families, only one or two bathrooms for groups of more than one hundred people, with no access to drinking water or a refrigerator to store food. Cleaning as an individual responsibility appeared in the field as a moral accusation that diminishes the collective responsibility in combating poverty and its structural causes and it becomes a criterion for deserving assistance.

Thus, in João Pessoa, as assistance was established, particularly due to the conditions in the context of the pandemic, which we examine below, a certain select group of Indigenous people was produced whose values were close to those shared by the assistance network. Aspects like gratitude, cleanliness, education began to be identified as positive and, in contrast, groups formed by drunk, aggressive, ungrateful, or noisy people, were among aspects classified as undesirable. Given the impossibility of serving everyone, the former began to be prioritised in the implementation of assistance and settlement policies, while the remainder were relegated to the background, as a stimulus to leave. In Natal, in addition to sharing the aforementioned moral categories of interaction, the idea that a smaller number of people would be easier to manage also emerged, such that the fact that there are fewer Indigenous people in the city or in hostels, even though they were the 'problematic' ones, was sometimes interpreted as a positive change that made it easier to assist those who remained. Paradoxically, a small number of people were sometimes activated, by public administrators or members of civil society, as an argument to explain the difficulty in obtaining resources or to question the true need for a differentiated policy for so few people.

In the following sections, we propose a possible anthropological understanding of this ongoing process, simultaneously producing the necessary disenchantment of the state as a univocal entity and of Indigenous people as homogeneous groups (Souza Lima, 2010, Trouillot, 2003, Vianna & Lowenkron, 2017). To achieve this, we describe everyday practices and relationships, woven into contexts imbued with previous experiences in each of the cities. The option, therefore, to contrast the formation process of the Warao assistance network in Natal (RN) and João Pessoa (PB), during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 (which we took part in directly),

responds to the hypothesis that the mobility processes of this group are not an isolated phenomenon of Indigenous people, but are intimately related to the living conditions offered by each of the spaces they arrive at, occasionally renewing the cycle of expulsions. Throughout the text we discuss the assistance teams: professionals and technicians who implement public policies and social programmes, whether they are under contract, outsourced, interns or grant students. We differentiate these teams from administrators, understanding these as the group of people who, while occupying elected or designated public positions, have more decision-making capacity and influence in the understanding and direction of policies. This distinction does not follow an understanding of population management processes as a matter divided between a thinking part and an operating part. On the contrary, we adhere to readings of public administration that understand relationships in commonplace locations of administration as places and interactions that hold the intense power of subjectivation and subjection of the people involved and for guidance in the administrative decisions that constitute state bureaucracy (Lugones, 2012). We make this distinction in the sense of doing justice to the differences in terms of the contact, intensity and daily engagement with the Warao Indigenous people, and regarding the sociological differences between these state agents.

## The frameworks

The process of Warao mobility in Brazil is marked by multiple frameworks, in the sense proposed by Vieira (2019), that guide the understanding of agents and institutions concerning them. Since their arrival in the cities studied, we have identified several categories that seek to classify them, and define the type of assistance they require and those responsible for providing it. *Migrants, refugees, Indigenous people, Venezuelans, vulnerable populations, high complexity populations*, and so on, are some of the categories that operate within these frameworks and which enable such agents and institutions to legitimise or delegitimise access to certain rights at their intersections. These frameworks are fundamental to understanding the cycles of expulsion throughout their circulation and installation in different states in the Northeast region.

The first framework concerning the Warao Indigenous people precedes their arrival in Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte. It is the result of the presence of non-Indigenous Venezuelan migrant and refugee families in the region, mainly due to the *Operação Acolhida* [lit. Operation Welcome] strategy to relocate migrants, known as *interiorização*<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the states began to receive people of Venezuelan origin in the cities of João Pessoa (PB), Conde (PB) and Caicó (RN)<sup>4</sup>. The choice of municipalities was explained to us by some of the administrators of one of the programmes, due to the presence of units capable of receiving and housing migrants by the civil organisation *Aldeias SOS* [lit. SOS Villages] and the *Serviço Pastoral dos Migrantes* [Pastoral Service for Migrants]. These organisations formed part of the network of receiving institutions in the shelter-to-shelter modality. Upon arriving at the destination cities, non-Indigenous families were directed to a place previously arranged for their reception and a technical team was mobilised for the initial period of assistance.

Once they arrive, the families are accompanied by technical teams for a period of up to 180 days. During this period of assistance, the expectation is that Portuguese classes would be taught, together with professional training, job recommendations and assistance in searching for new places of residence. According to evaluations by these relocated individuals, not all of these aspects were fully and/or adequately carried out and reports of dissatisfaction were frequent. However, minimal assistance and guaranteed transport between regions

3 *Interiorização* is a federal government action, implemented in 2018 as part of the 'border ordering' strategy proposed by the *Operação Acolhida*. It consists of the transfer of refugees and migrants from the northern border of Brazil to other states of the federation.

4 Sites consulted on 31 July, 2022. <https://cmne.eb.mil.br/ultimas-noticias/interiorizacao-da-operacao-acolhida-no-rio-grande-do-norte>; <https://www.clickpb.com.br/paraiba/quinze-familias-venezuelanas-trazidas-pb-nesta-terca-ficaram-nas-aldeias-infantis-sos-245555.html>

reduced the risks of the route, and families' investments along the route. This freed up scarce resources for other purposes: sending remittances to family members, helping with the mobility of relatives, saving for the end of social assistance benefits, preparing for another trip, and so on.

Venezuelan Indigenous populations, however, were not included in the *interiorização* strategy implemented by *Operação Acolhida*, a situation that generated the first framework that we wish to highlight, constructed in relation to the non-Indigenous, *criollo* Venezuelans. The Waraos we met in João Pessoa and Natal expressed (and still express) interest in assistance in travelling from Roraima to join relatives who were already established in other cities or to have relatives from those cities join them. Relocation could have been framed within the family reunification modality that already exists in the *interiorização* strategy or another modality could have been implemented. However, the decision made was that only non-Indigenous people would be included; that is, part of the management of the Warao at the border (Capdeville e Silva, 2021; Vasconcelos, 2021) began with the refusal to accept the distinction requested by the Warao based on their ethnic identity, for example, separate shelters from the *criollos*, while unwanted policies of differentiation were implemented using the distinction between *criollos* and Indigenous people, like the case analysed here, in which the Indigenous people were denied inclusion in the *interiorização* strategy.

It is worth noting that the modality that brought the majority of non-Indigenous Venezuelans to the Northeast region was the shelter-to-shelter modality. Leaving aside the assumption that civil society organisations willing to receive non-Indigenous Venezuelans were not ready to receive Indigenous people, or that they were even consulted regarding this possibility, when the Warao arrived in the Northeast region, the *criollo* groups were already present as an image of what a migrant and/or refugee is. Thus, paradoxically, the distinction created between *criollos* and Indigenous people during the *interiorização*, created a lack of distinction among the administrators of the cities of João Pessoa and Natal in regard to these groups. Initially, the belief was that all Venezuelan refugees or migrants were like those who arrived through *interiorização*, that is, they were non-Indigenous.

The presence of the Warao was often read as the arrival of a few more groups of Venezuelans and was marked by the obliteration of their ethnic status. Their arrival in the cities of the Northeast was characterised by the overvaluation of the category Venezuelan with regard to that of Indigenous, marking the re-encounter of the two groups in the form of a single framework. It worth noting that many of the Warao Indigenous people used Venezuelan national symbols on their clothes, on the posters they created to raise money on the streets, and even in their presentation on signs that registered their Venezuelan nationality as a prominent element. The Venezuelan 'crisis' was also materialised in the streets of these north-eastern cities and allowed potential donors to be questioned with common elements of communication, avoiding complicated explanations concerning the situation of the Warao and their multiple displacements. Hunger on the one hand, and motherhood on the other, functioned as signs of communication for the required comprehension, connection and awareness of passers-by and agents of public power and civil society.

Figure 2. Photo sent via Whatsapp to one of the authors on 10 July, 2020.



Reading the Warao simply as Venezuelans initially enabled the idea that they were people who shared the same educational levels, documentation status and living conditions as the latter group. In contrast, we were faced with a group whose mother tongue was not Spanish, that had very high rates of illiteracy and little or no trajectory in the job market. It is also worth highlighting that between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, the *interiorização* programmes active in the Northeast and the resources and agents mobilised in their execution had already suffered setbacks and in some cities were in a phase of discontinuity (Facundo, 2020; Vasconcelos, 2021), increasing the precarious situation of the first non-Indigenous families that had arrived in the cities.

Given the lack of distinction between Waraos and *criollos* in the initial situation, the process of providing assistance that incorporated the ethnic dimension became even more time consuming, as was required by some leaders in each of the cities and as echoed by some of the people who began to work on their behalf. In addition to us as university professors coordinating extension and research projects, in both cities, this request also had the support of agents from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), who began participating in the *Comitê Estadual Intersectorial de Atenção aos Refugiados, Apátridas e Migrantes do Rio Grande do Norte (CERAM/RN)* [Intersectoral State Committee for Assisting Refugees, Stateless Persons and Migrants of Rio Grande do Norte] created in 2020 and monitoring reception policies in João Pessoa, including offering training courses for technical teams on the specificities of Indigenous migrations. Training initiatives were also undertaken in João Pessoa by the *Secretaria de Estado de Direitos Humanos (SEDH)* [State Secretariat for Human Rights] in partnership with teachers and anthropologists Mércia Batista and José Gabriel Correa, both from the Federal University of Campina Grande, training and developing the state's social assistance network. In Natal there was also a strong presence of one staff member of the formerly named *Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI)*<sup>5</sup> [National Indian Foundation], whose engagement with the Indigenous cause resulted in significant action by this agency in the state of RN between 2020 and 2021 in favour of respect for the group's Indigenous rights. However, this also meant the virtual absence of this agency's participation the moment the staff member asked for leave to attend post-graduate education.

<sup>5</sup> During the period in which the events described took place, the formerly named *Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI)* [National Indian Foundation] was removed from the Ministry of Justice (except for the demarcation of Indigenous territories) and subordinated to the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights during the Bolsonaro government. On 1 January, 2023, President Lula da Silva officially created the *Ministério dos Povos Indígenas* [Ministry of Indigenous Peoples], dedicated exclusively to Indigenous demands, and the newly renamed *Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas (FUNAI)* [National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples], joined other bodies relevant to Indigenous issues within the new ministry.

In addition to the mobilisation of Indigenous people, UN agencies and ourselves as representatives of what those in the field of migration conventionally call 'academia', it is worth highlighting that it was reality itself, the concrete forms of life and interaction that made the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups evident. In concrete terms, the ethnic particularity, which challenged assistance and led to the reinforcement of differences in management from one group to another, can be read through differences in the conception of family, challenges to the parental-proletarian model that guides many integration programmes in the context of migration, in addition to other socio-cultural differences regarding the care of children, the use of language, and the manifestation of moral emotions. These concrete material aspects also appeared very strongly when it came to renewing documents. The electronic, online registration of the *Sistema do Comitê Nacional para os Refugiados (SISCONARE)* [lit. System of the National Refugee Committee] was completely inaccessible to almost all Indigenous people. The vast majority of them not only did not know how to read or write, they also did not have the knowledge and digital tools to fill out forms and request the renewal of documents.

The characteristics of the groups' migration, engendered in the distinction highlighted in the *interiorização* strategies, also played an important role in this transition to their ethnic understanding. Regarding the Warao who arrived in João Pessoa and Natal, their departure from Pacaraima to their destination cities was mostly self-financed by *asking for money* on the streets, according to what they told us<sup>6</sup>. This unstable, precarious source of income often forced them to choose between purchasing food and purchasing transport tickets. Furthermore, due to the costs, Indigenous people moved to the outskirts of large cities, occupying villages and shacks located close to major highways and bus stations. These places became references and circulated as possible locations for other Warao as they began to follow their 'own *interiorização*' or circulating around the cities.

The option of travelling in medium to large groups or having some of their close relatives stay behind at points along the way, with the expectation of regrouping later, vindicated other modes of understanding migratory dynamics and life expectancies. It was increasingly obvious to the administrators and technical teams that these groups did not meet the configuration of nuclear families that commonly structure social assistance mechanisms and programmes, such as registration with CadÚnico<sup>7</sup>, rental assistance, the distribution of food items, and similar forms of assistance.

In João Pessoa, another element that played an important role in terms of frameworks was that of complaints. Some articles were published in local newspapers that provoked a first wave of mobilisation and demands for emergency assistance for Indigenous people. In Natal, complaints in the media and public opinions sent to state and municipal social assistance agencies were intense. The element most emphasised in these articles was the presence of children on the streets, very often accompanied by accusations of child exploitation, as previously discussed with regard to the Warao (Rosa, 2021); however, they also focused on the unhealthy and extremely unsafe situation of housing placement.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the practice of *asking for money* on the streets, there are disagreements among the Warao Indigenous people concerning whether it is appropriate or inappropriate, including incorporating into the discussion whether or not it is a cultural practice of its own. For some of the Warao people we interacted with in João Pessoa and Natal, 'going to the streets' not only guarantees the necessary income for their own daily expenses and that of relatives who are waiting for remittances, but it is also an autonomous way of circumventing the controls of state policies. Some women in João Pessoa commented on their desire to go, even temporarily, to other cities where their presence is less known and they could obtain larger donations on the streets. This reading by the women strengthens our interpretation that custom, or rather, the commonplace nature of precarity, integrates it into the common landscape and demobilizes indignation and the rush to reverse it. We thus understand that *asking for money* can be understood in multiple ways and when we point out its use for internalisation displacements, we are not ignoring its potential, but rather drawing attention to the fact that displacements to cities does not receive institutional support, not even when it is desired. For a more detailed discussion on the subject, we suggest the work of Marlise Rosa (2021).

<sup>7</sup> CadÚnico is the registry of information on Brazilian families in situations of poverty and extreme poverty, which is then used by federal and state governments and town halls to implement public policies capable of promoting improvements in the lives of these families.

Thus, even before an understanding of the Warao as a differentiated ethnic group was consolidated, a new form of classification was activated to assist them through the high complexity category. This is a category of the *Sistema Único de Assistência Social* (SUAS) [Unified Social Assistance System] which entails the provision of services for complete protection of individuals in vulnerable situations. High complexity entails the provision of 'housing, food, hygiene and protected work for families and individuals who have no references and/or are in a threatening situation, who need to be removed from family and/or community life' (MDSCF, 2009). In each of the municipalities analysed, the departments responsible for social assistance (municipal and state) develop projects and actions for groups that include homeless people, victims of violence, people released from the prison system, people with disabilities, children, adolescents and older adults. In all these subcategories, our attention is drawn to the fact that they are people who have been unhoused temporarily or for longer periods, who have no home, but in the majority of cases, they are people who lack the possibility of living in a domestic group.

With the arrival of the Warao, their demands began to be met through this classification. The framework as a target population for high complexity teams and programmes was also related to the idea that they were a homeless or nomadic population. The precarious conditions of the trip and the fact that they collected food fuelled these views. Moreover, in João Pessoa, the entity responsible for welcoming the Warao was the *Ação Social Arquidiocesana* (ASA) [Archdiocesan Social Action], a social organisation with extensive experience in serving the homeless population and the poor in general. While in Natal, for example, during an action aimed to update the *Sistema Único de Saúde* (SUS) [Unified Healthcare System] to register the group's territorial link to a new local *Unidade Básica de Saúde* (UBS) [Primary Health Centre], the person in charge of carrying out the re-registration did not even ask for a residential address and began registering the entire group as homeless, even though at the time, they had already been housed in an old, deactivated school. These examples are not just circumstantial, but point to the proximity produced between Indigenous people and homeless populations. This approach forms part of the long process of national formation which, in Brazil, was operationalised by state agencies, such as the *Serviço de Proteção aos Índios e Localização de Trabalhadores Nacionais* (SPLINT) [Indian Protection Service and National Worker Location] and the FUNAI, which had strong connections with religious and civil society entities (Pacheco de Oliveira, 2016).

We also consider that ancient representations regarding Indigenous populations in general, not just migrants, played an important role in these interpretations of their presence. When the ethnic status of the Warao finally began to be recognised, the Indigenous presence in the city created a short circuit in the images associated with 'native' peoples as people of the forests or frontiers. News of persecution, deforestation and mining in Indigenous lands is a common theme among administrators in the cities studied and a good number of people who interact with the Warao know that their territories have been the target of different types of invasions. However, this knowledge did not undermine the idea that the city is incompatible with their presence. Their circulation and permanence in the cities and their collective way of life constitutes a certain *discomfort* and, as we show, reinforced the idea of an assumed provisionality, which already accompanies the reading made of migrants in many different national contexts (Sayad, 1991, p. 51). As stated, this misunderstanding does not always occur through public agents at the forefront, some of whom have good academic and political training, but it persists as a basis in the structuring of regulations and administrative instruments.

Perhaps one of the most eloquent examples in this regard is the dispute over vaccination against COVID-19 during the pandemic. When the first vaccines began to be applied, Brazilian Indigenous groups were considered priority groups by determination of the *Ministério de Saúde* [Ministry of Health]. However, in RN, when consulted on the need to allocate doses for urban Indigenous people, the response was that there were no Indigenous people in the municipality of Natal. This affirmation denied the existence of urban and *não aldeado* [lit. non-village] Brazilian Indigenous people, while simultaneously denying the possibility of the inclusion

of foreign Indigenous people in the initial phases of vaccination. It took the intervention of several agents, including the committed FUNAI staff member, to achieve due respect for the right of Indigenous migrants to be vaccinated and for them to be classified as Indigenous. This coincidentally reinforced the urban life of local Indigenous people.

Despite the broad recognition by public agents of the Indigenous condition of the Warao at that time, in João Pessoa, priority vaccination was not granted to them even after the determination of the *Supremo Tribunal Federal* [Federal Supreme Court] that began to orient the vaccination of *não aldeado* Indigenous people, which was replicated at the state level through the work of the *Ministério Público Federal* (MPF) [Federal Public Prosecutor's Office] with the State and Municipal Health Departments<sup>8</sup>. Although they recognised the scarcity of services offered to the Warao Indigenous population, the element of cultural difference was mobilised by employees of the Municipal Health Department as a reason for the non-adherence of Indigenous people to the healthcare services offered, which, for them, constituted 'an evident obstacle to the successful provision of assistance to the Warao'<sup>9</sup>. The group and its cultural differences were considered to be the reasons for obstacles to care and assistance and they were responsible for resolving the impasse by adapting to the formats and culture of the receiving location.

## The paradoxical period of the pandemic

Still within the scope of high complexity, and largely motivated by the pandemic situation resulting from COVID-19, shelter strategies were created for Indigenous people in both cities. This *sui generis* context inaugurated the shelter policy in the first half of 2020; however, each with very distinct characteristics. In Natal, the solution found came as an emergency solution proposed by the CERAM/RN, given the threat of eviction that people were suffering.

The state government had created the CERAM/RN in 2019, and the inauguration ceremony took place on February 18, 2020, shortly before the pandemic and lockdown measures. Soon after, a period of more restrictive circulation was established in the first months of 2020, which imposed a series of limitations on the presence of the Warao on the streets for fear of being infected. Furthermore, there was no circulation of people in either city that would guarantee money when asked in order to pay rent or buy food.

These circumstances, as mentioned, led to the fact that in June 2020 the majority of Indigenous people in the city of Natal agreed to be housed in an old, deactivated school in the Dix-sept-Rosado neighbourhood in the city centre. The shelter solution, in addition to being a demand of the Indigenous people, was decreed in the CERAM/RN document '*Recomendação* no. 01/2020 of March 23', an official letter of recommendation advising 'public authorities on measures to prevent and reduce the transmission of the new coronavirus among refugees and migrants in situations of social vulnerability'. Among the measures in this recommendation document was the provision of 'temporary shelter to assist refugees and migrants in situations of social vulnerability'. A large part of the Warao Indigenous people who were in Natal were then sheltered in an old, structureless building, which the state authorities named the *Centro de Acolhida e Referência para Refugiados, Apátridas e Migrantes* [Reception and Reference Centre for Refugees, Stateless Persons and Migrants] (CARE/RN). The Indigenous people and ourselves refer to this place as the '*Abrigo*' [Shelter].

<sup>8</sup> The Supreme Court's decision arises from the precautionary measure raised within the scope of the *Arguição por Descumprimento de Preceito Fundamental* (ADPF) [Claim for Noncompliance with Fundamental Precept] no. 709, and, in the case of João Pessoa, PB, it was requested of the State Department of Health through the administrative process initiated by the *Ministério Público Federal* (MPF). See official letter no. 1472/2021/MPF/PRPB/GAB-JGBS, dated 21 April, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> See official letter no. 1472/2021/MPF/PRPB/GAB-JGBS, of 21 April, 2021, on Administrative Procedure no. 1.24.000.000234/2020-11, MPF/Procuradoria da República [Public Prosecutor's Office] - Paraíba, instituted on 10 Feb., 2020.

Despite the deterioration of the place, the Indigenous people who went there were relieved not to have to pay rent or services and quickly began to establish themselves in the neighbourhood and in the building itself. During these months, the clothes hanging on the lines, some wood stoves, as well as two old gas stoves, a soccer field that they created by clearing a space in the courtyard, and the children running and playing in the trees, transformed the abandonment of the place into uproar. They became friends with taxi drivers and church volunteers, arranged small informal jobs with neighbours, distributed space in the corridors, not without fights, and even a small room for the leaders to work together was conditioned by them.

Figure 3. Entrance to the 'Abrigo' (CARE), Natal, RN. Photo: Angela Facundo.



In this temporary, swampy and unhealthy place, which they transformed into their home, one group remained during the most restrictive time of the pandemic. The group of families that did not agree to go to the shelter received the benefit of social rent. The requirement of this other group to stay together made the search for properties difficult, but *Cáritas*<sup>10</sup> managed to rent some adjoining houses in a village in the Nordeste neighbourhood. Shortly afterwards, these people left the city for Ceará, citing a lack of assistance, scarce resources and little or no monitoring of their situation. However, one of them returned a few times to visit and take care of the grave of his wife who had died in the city. In turn, in administration meetings, officials from *Cáritas*, the state and the municipality emphasised the problematic nature of these families, the fact that they made too much noise with parties and loud music, as well as the waste of water and electricity and the 'depredation' of the houses. As the most critical period of the pandemic was becoming a habit, inside the shelter as well, following disagreements caused by disputes over scarce resources for preparing food, the collective use of few bathrooms, the distribution of donations and other social frictions, several families left the place though part of them remained until July 2022. Shortly afterwards, due to a season of heavy rains that flooded the building and put the safety of its residents at risk, another large group also left the shelter and the state.

<sup>10</sup> *Cáritas* International is a coalition of humanitarian organisations run by the Catholic Church, which works mainly with poor and oppressed people.

In June 2022, two more women, a mother and daughter and their children, left and went to live in a room almost as precarious as the state shelter. The room had previously been rented by the first group of Waraos, who arrived in 2019 and who did not remain in the city, and a family who travelled back and forth between Natal and Maceió had also stayed for a few weeks, in April 2021. Likewise, when the Indigenous people who remained sheltered by the state were transferred to a new location without enough space for all the families, and disagreements over the use of the rooms were repeated, one group decided to leave the new building and rent a space on their own. The two small houses that they negotiated for 15 people, now homeless, are exactly the same ones in which we had first met other Warao families, two years earlier, who had recently arrived in the city and who are now in the state of Alagoas.

In João Pessoa, the process of sheltering families followed a different form. With no committee, the assistance network operated through the *Procedimento Administrativo* [Administrative Procedure] instituted by the João Pessoa MPF/*Procuradoria da República* [Public Prosecutor's Office] that activated the different bodies and secretariats<sup>11</sup>. At the end of 2019, the Warao arrived in a residential village located in the Baixo Roger region, known for its high levels of social vulnerability. Initially, the *Secretaria de Estado de Desenvolvimento Humano* [State Secretariat for Human Development], together with the João Pessoa MPF, sheltered the families in a deactivated school in Ernani Sátiro, a neighbourhood located between the main access highways to the municipality and about a 15-minute drive from the city centre.

In February 2020, a few months after the first shelter, the report conducted by the FUNAI to identify the Warao Indigenous people in the same village where the first families arrived showed the existence of around 100 people living in houses rented at their own expense (see footnote 11). The central element mobilised by the administrative procedure concerns their condition of vulnerability, an aspect reinforced in journalistic articles<sup>12</sup> that circulated at the same time the procedure and the FUNAI report were initiated. After the João Pessoa MPF conducted an initial round of consultations with different assistance agencies in the city, the ASA, an organisation with a long history of social assistance serving the homeless population in João Pessoa, was made responsible for shelter. The ASA's actions contributed to guiding assistance for the Warao using the same logic of assistance as groups falling into the high complexity category, to the detriment of their ethnic specificities.

Initially, this second group of Indigenous families went to the *Centro Social* [Social Centre] of the ASA where, in May 2020, they tested positive for COVID-19. Those identified with COVID-19, all of whom had mild symptoms, went to the *Centro de Atividades e Lazer Padre Juarez Benício* (CEJUBE) [Padre Juarez Benício Activity and Leisure Centre], in order to comply with social distancing measures. Those who were not positive received a rented house in the central region of the city, through an agreement established between the ASA and the SEDH, using resources from the *Fundo de Combate à Pobreza* [Fund to Combat Poverty], which financed assistance for the Warao over the next two years.

After the quarantine period, the remaining people occupied two other houses rented through the ASA/SEDH agreement in the same region, in nearby neighbourhoods. The definition of family group configurations and distribution in each shelter was decided by the Indigenous people themselves. When moving in, each house maintained a private space for each nuclear family (generally a bedroom or living room), while the remaining spaces, such as the kitchen, bathroom and patio, were shared. Cleaning and maintenance of the spaces were carried out by the residents without the presence of a permanent technical team, a characteristic

11 *Procedimento Administrativo* [Administrative Procedure] no. 1.24.000.000234/2020-11, *Procuradoria da República* [Public Prosecutor's Office] - Paraíba, instituted on 10 Feb., 2020.

12 <https://g1.globo.com/pb/paraiba/noticia/2020/02/11/venezuelanos-sao-encontrados-em-estado-de-subnutricao-no-bairro-do-roger-em-joao-pessoa.ghtml>

shared with Natal, where there was also no permanent monitoring or administration of the shelters by third parties. Food was delivered weekly and divided among nuclear families. Disputes surrounding the use of the stove, bathrooms, and demands for more space and food were recurrent. Social workers, psychologists, health agents and other members of the technical teams linked to assistance services carried out occasional visits and, given the pandemic, long periods often passed between one visit and another.

It was in this context that we expanded the scope of action of the extension projects. Not only did we promote the implementation of public policies, we were also responsible for diagnoses, registrations, monitoring and technical visits, together with certain members of the federal, state and municipal teams that had been mobilised. Throughout 2020 and 2021, we actively participated in assistance networks, moving among the assistance, health and education teams<sup>13</sup>. We often participated in medical consultations, wakes, the elaboration of protocols, prior consultations on shelter, events to promote the production of handicrafts, meetings to implement education plans, and meetings convened by Indigenous people to negotiate conflicts, resolve bureaucratic issues, perform translations, hear dreams and suspicions of bewitchment, and many other demands. As our actions unfolded over time, the ethnic condition of these groups became increasingly evident and with it, the need to implement differentiated assistance policies.

This emphasis was equally accentuated by the Indigenous people themselves, who began to use diacritical elements, including headdresses, maracas and the group's distinctive clothing, in public spaces, in addition, of course, to the overt presence of their language. Another important element along these lines was the development of closer ties between the Warao Indigenous people and the Brazilian Indigenous movement, through meetings between different leaders in the two cities and the visit of some Warao representatives to events like the *Acampamento Terra Livre* [lit. Free Land Camp] held in Brasília. These meetings began to take place when confinement and isolation measures were being relaxed, but it is worth noting that in the State of Rio Grande do Norte, during the onset of the epidemic, some Indigenous groups allocated part of their prevention materials (e.g. masks and alcohol gel) to their Warao 'relatives'. A gesture of solidarity and closer ties with the local Indigenous movement that also reinforced the group's ethnic identity. Furthermore, the implementation of ethnically differentiated projects required by the Warao, notably the experience of promoting handicraft production in the two municipalities, generated visibility for their Indigenous condition in spaces beyond the immediate circuit of assistance.

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<sup>13</sup> During the initial context of the families' arrival in the Northeast, universities were activated by public authorities or by Indigenous people. In Natal, this action came from a Warao leader. The actions of Marlise Rosa (LACED, Museu Nacional/UFRJ) and Mércia Batista (UFCG) were fundamental at that time. Together with Mariana Dantas (UFRPE) in Recife, we established a continuous monitoring network throughout 2020 and 2021 that involved four cities: Natal, João Pessoa, Campina Grande and Recife. This network was made official through the construction of projects at the four universities, with strong emphasis on actions linked to the scope of university extension. Over the years of working with the Warao, we have produced several reports, notes, diagnoses, censuses and other instruments. The objective of these documents was to facilitate the implementation of the required public policies, particularly during the pandemic (2020-2021). These instruments are available for consultation. In João Pessoa, they were mostly gathered during the *Procedimento Administrativo* [Administrative Procedure] filed by the *Paraíba Procuradoria da República* [State Public Prosecutor's Office] under no. 1.24.000.000234/2020-11; while in Natal, this was achieved through a joint UFRN/FUNAI report on the situation of the Warao Indigenous people in the city of Natal in 2020 and recommendations for their assistance and guarantee of rights. Available at: [2. RELATÓRIO WARAO NA CIDADE DO NATAL EM 2020.pdf](#).

Figure 4. Workshop to produce handicrafts intended for sale (September, 2021). Photo: Rita de Cássia Melo Santos.



It was also due to the pandemic that there was a significant reduction not only in Warao mobility, but also in ours. During the pandemic period, face-to-face activities, such as conferences, dissertation or thesis defence committees, academic leave, field trips, leaves of absence, among many other frequent trips in our profession, were all suspended. This suspension led to our stay in the municipalities of João Pessoa and Natal for almost the entire period between 2020 and 2021. We began to share an intense daily life; at the same time that we waited for consultations and assistance, we came to know their interpretations, judgments, perceptions about us, of public agents, of the city and bureaucracies. Our knowledge concerning the ‘Warao worlds’ was constructed not from a rigorously planned ethnography, but from a kaleidoscope of situations that were taking shape in different ways in the daily life of our work as mediators between the Indigenous people and the different state agents to ensure their rights within the normative frameworks of the nation-state.

Our action began to take shape as the Warao placed some demands, or as the technicians on the socio-assistance teams, with a very refined knowledge of the SUAS system, proposed solutions and framework possibilities for assisting Indigenous migrants and refugees within existing programmes. But they also unfolded due to the fact that sometimes the answers did not exist and we were activated to help construct them. The way in which our operations were configured also included the widely described discrepancy between the resources and rhythms of social assistance programmes and the urgency and need of the populations for which they are intended, as well as the need for linguistic and cultural mediation, as described above. We were absorbed by feelings of solidarity and a commitment to reversing the insignificance of Indigenous lives. Thus, university extension has become the main front of our action, to the detriment of research work expressed in forms widely recognised and legitimised as ‘truly academic’<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the two years of the pandemic, our production in relation to the Warao was concentrated on the preparation of reports, opinions, guidelines, and preparation of informative and educational materials, among other elements that favoured the technical teams’ understanding of the Indigenous people and the implementation of differentiated public policies. Throughout this period, we developed two educational booklets, one emphasising education and the other on health-related issues: ‘Caminhos Warao’ [Warao Paths] (available at: <https://bit.ly/3HnHJG2>) and ‘Cartilha de apoio linguístico para interações em saúde’ [Language support booklet for health interactions] (available at: <https://www.acnur.org/portugues/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Cartilha-de-apoio-Linguistico-para-interacoes-em-saude.pdf>). Here, it is worth registering that Spanish is the mother tongue of Angela and the translator of the extension actions in Natal, Luis Meza. In João Pessoa, Spanish was also the predominant language of communication with the Indigenous people, both due to the fluency of Rita Santos and the presence of a bilingual researcher. Over time, Portuguese also began to be frequently spoken by Indigenous people and by those who followed the projects. We reflect on the linguistic dimension of these exchanges in a recently published article (Santos, Facundo Navia & Meza Álvarez, 2022).

This led some people to claim that we were doing humanitarian work rather than anthropological work. At times, this understanding signified an accusatory act, one of censure, especially when expressed by our anthropologist peers. In their reading, our necessary approach through the method of social service, to understand the options for assistance and to try to support the responses, delegitimised the broad knowledge that we were simultaneously acquiring with regard to management practices and Warao migrations. Moreover, we were also aware of the criticism that we were contributing to the capture of Indigenous people by the logic of the nation-state. Well, we were contributing to this, though not without feeling contradictory and in anguish; however, we were also convinced that the refusal of state assistance is a privilege of a few who can enjoy public wealth without having to subject themselves to the moral conditions imposed on the poorest among us. The reflection of this intense period of work then unfolded into an interrogation concerning the role that extension plays in university hierarchies, as well as the academic doxa on legitimate methods for understanding social and cultural issues. Or as some university walls say: Who (and what) is our knowledge for?

As we show, the actions promoted did not ensure the resolution of the 'Warao social problem' (Santos, Menendez & Soares, 2022). What we can affirm is that not doing them would certainly have made the people's conditions worse. We have no interest in reinforcing the idea that the Warao were being saved from death, since we comprehend the political uses of salvationism that requires those who are freed from death to accept any type of life (Facundo, 2017; Vianna, 2002). However, we need to emphasise their intense vulnerability and precarity. The physical debilitation of the groups that arrived was evident, added to the accumulation of consecutive periods or days without eating was the critical condition of previous illnesses associated with poverty. Both cities, but especially Natal, have a very high incidence of ultraviolet rays and the heat at the traffic lights at certain times of the day is intimidating, which makes being on the street even more arduous. In João Pessoa alone, in the first year following the arrival of the Indigenous people (2020), there were seven deaths among the Warao.

What we are interested in reinforcing is that, despite all the difficulties and challenges in providing assistance, the arrival of the Warao, which quickly combined with the pandemic period, was marked by efforts to provide shelter and social assistance. While throughout the country, the entire period of isolation due to the pandemic was described as a threat to the lives of humanity, for the Warao in João Pessoa and Natal, this was the period of greatest deployment of actions to ensure they lived. A moment in which shelter strategies, even though precarious and provisional, slowed down the routine pace of expulsion for a few months.

The deaths we reported were not caused by COVID-19, though deaths due to tuberculosis in people not infected by the coronavirus are common. In fact, it was concern about COVID-19 that led health teams to begin monitoring tuberculosis infections and promoting referrals for treatment. In one of the final stages that we accompanied in João Pessoa, we saw the State Health Department designate a technician who was responsible for monitoring and communicating cases of tuberculosis and other illnesses among the Warao in the states of the Northeast region, including the Warao from RN.

### **Frameworks and cycles of expulsion: by way of final considerations**

In general, assistance to the Warao Indigenous people from the end of 2019 to the beginning of 2022 covered four major frameworks. The first related to the *interiorização* strategy at the border, was the distinction between *criollos* and Indigenous people, excluding the latter from the established process. This was followed by grouping them together under the category of *Venezuelans* and refusing to recognise important distinctions between them in the initial processes of assistance in the cities of João Pessoa and Natal; the production of Indigenous people as a high complexity group as assistance was required and implemented; and, to date, the conjunction of the Indigenous category with that of high complexity.

Based on different forms of classification, each of the frameworks sometimes contributes to the intensification of expulsion and, at other times, reduces the pace of expulsions, enabling longer periods of stay with expectations of durability. In the first framework, by enforcing the distinction between *criollos* and Indigenous people and their exclusion from the *interiorização* process, *Operação Acolhida* deepened the precarity of Indigenous life. The movement of dispersion through the cities of the North to the Northeast, and from there to the rest of the country, traced by the Indigenous people themselves, allowed them to choose where to go and trace their own routes, but it worsened their precarious situation.

The second framework, which coincided with the onset of COVID-19 pandemic isolation measures and which categorised them as Venezuelans, stimulated the first demonstrations of support, such as the delivering food, clothes, money and other items. This was undertaken not only by public authorities, but by a diffuse network of people who responded to the ‘Venezuela crisis’ as an event that required not only the search for solutions on the part of public authorities, but which provoked a moral appeal on the part of each donor who felt called to act. This framework also meant that Indigenous people were able to activate some public policies, going beyond the level of emergency assistance and activating medium-term social programmes, those more oriented towards permanence. However, these programmes continued to be based on familist and proletarian models for the integration of foreigners, as discussed by authors who have researched assimilationist dynamics in the context of migration and refuge (Facundo, 2020; Hamid, 2019; Seyferth, 1997, 2000).

We then identified the activation of the high complexity category, which combines emergency assistance programmes with medium-term income generation and/or employment referral programmes and inclusion in *Português como Língua de Acolhimento* (PLAC) [Portuguese as a Host Language] courses. The first were based on food delivery, temporary shelter and some health care. The second aimed to ensure the much-desired autonomy of people and the future exit from shelters, with an eventual perspective of the potential permanence of Indigenous people in the municipalities. Imagining the possibility of permanence was one we did not perceive at the onset of assistance, precisely because it is contrary to the evident provisional nature of the presence of Indigenous people in the cities we studied, and in Brazil as a whole. Furthermore, unlike the ‘Venezuelan’ framework that was guided by the idea of the nuclear family, the responses provided in the context of high complexity, particularly in relation to the shelter policy and especially during the pandemic, allowed extended families to remain together. This aspect made it possible for Indigenous life to continue in the new spaces they began to occupy. In collective shelters, we saw them develop strategies for maintaining and adapting these spaces to their own ways of eating, the joint care of children, permanent language practice, the creative actualisation of their cosmovision and the re-creation of their bonds of affection and disaffection.

The shelter model constituted a fundamental element in the cycle of expulsion/permanence of families. In addition to the aspect of collectivity, it functioned as a reference point for donations made by individuals, for the development of activities within the assistance network and the university, for establishing ties with neighbours and potential sources of income, and so on. Furthermore, due to its public nature, the shelter modality did not require Indigenous people to pay for rent, water and electricity – which was fundamental to their permanence. Throughout our work with the Warao, we have noticed that the groups that remain outside the shelters or leave them, due to internal disputes and lack of space and resources, are the first to be expelled and begin their journeys again in search of a decent place.

Finally, we affirm that the still developing framework that combines high complexity with the understanding of the group in its Indigenous/ethnic character has been shown to be a more favourable framework for the construction of another way of existing, up to this point, moving beyond the pre-established models of social integration. From this intersection, which took place in both cities, we highlight the possibility of developing projects linked to the strengthening of their ethnic identity, their know-how, their history, in which their knowledge and ways of seeing the world are made possible, together with their desire for a collective life.

This proposal is the opposite of their proletarianisation and incorporation within the national poor, a perspective broadly analysed by ethnic and migration studies (Pacheco de Oliveira, 2016; Seyferth, 1997).

However, it is difficult to know whether this framework for assistance and the more creative development of alternatives can be maintained over time or, at least, long enough to consolidate some of its effects. The paths this framework took from the end of 2021 in both cities were very different. At that time, the majority of Warao Indigenous people had already received one or two doses of the coronavirus vaccine, movement restriction measures had been relaxed and the social charity of the first months of the pandemic, motivated by a strong and sudden feeling of a common humanity, was being abandoned. The crisis was also taking place in Brazil and hunger no longer seemed to be an issue solely for Venezuela and Venezuelans.

Furthermore, the presence of the Warao in the cities of João Pessoa and Natal became widely known by public agents, who were, in a way, normalising their assistance and abandoning the sense of urgency. The technical teams in both cities expressed more frequently that they felt overwhelmed by the constant demands and lack of resources, and by the fact that, at the time, an exclusive and permanent team had not been hired by the city halls, a situation that continues to this day in Natal. From that moment on, the Warao's mobility processes increased and we resumed our own plans involving international travel. In the city of João Pessoa, part of the groups that had moved to the Southeast region of Brazil in the first quarter of 2021 began to return. In turn, a large part of the Indigenous people who were in Natal began to move to the city of João Pessoa, especially after the intense period of rain in February 2022. There was no response from the administrators responsible for the shelter to deal with the flooding and feeling of being at risk, so they left the city. In January 2022, we left the country for academic and professional reasons, which considerably reduced our contact, even virtual contact, with the Indigenous people.

One of the more striking differences between the two locations was that the government of the State of Paraíba, through the SEDH, opted to activate the *Ministério da Cidadania* [Ministry of Citizenship] to welcome and receive the Warao Indigenous people and began negotiations for their inclusion the *interiorização* strategy run by *Operação Acolhida*, in order to promote the reunion of families of Indigenous people whose relatives were in the cities of Pacaraima and Boa Vista (Roraima) and in Manaus (Amazonas). This decision, in addition to possible political motivations, arose from the demand of some Warao Indigenous people living in the state who wanted their relatives to come and be with them. The decision then generated concern on the part of local public officials regarding the 'arrangement of the arrival of the families'. Little by little, the perception consolidated among the assistance teams was that Indigenous people are not a temporary presence and that it would be better to count on resources from the Ministry of Citizenship.

These resources were allocated by the state to transform the '*Projeto de abrigamento dos migrantes indígenas*' [Project to Shelter Indigenous Migrants] into a '*Serviço de acolhimento de migrantes e refugiados indígenas*' [Reception Service for Indigenous Migrants and Refugees]. Requests were sent to the Ministry in December 2021 and in July 2022, multidisciplinary teams were hired that included the participation of psychologists, social workers, social educators, Spanish and Portuguese translators, and Indigenous interpreters. In addition to these staff directly linked to the service, a network of public agents, academics and organised civil society form part of the Indigenous assistance network, strengthening and expanding the services mobilised during the contradictory period of the pandemic. The year 2022 saw the consolidation of policies on educational services (initiated by the *Secretaria Municipal de Educação e Cultura* (SEDEC) [Municipal Department of Education and Culture] in July 2021), healthcare and the regular distribution of fresh food. The arrival of families in João Pessoa, especially in the second half of 2022, was not accompanied to the same extent by the expansion of the shelter policy, which became increasingly restricted and once again began to produce distinctions between those who live in shelters and do not pay rent, water and electricity, and those who live outside them and have to cover these expenses using the social rent benefit, a benefit that does not cover all types of families,

nor all expenses. Indigenous people who are not sheltered constantly register their dissatisfaction with this situation of inequality and often report that they will seek better conditions in other cities.

Despite this internal distinction in the city, due to the set of services offered (education, health, food and a percentage of sheltered families), João Pessoa still shows a more receptive panorama than that in Natal. This is observed by the permanence of families in João Pessoa, while the number of people in Natal decreased at a pace marked by the lack of planned, organised assistance, even though it was never completely absent. In contrast, CERAM/RN has always dedicated at least one agenda item to the subject of the Warao in its monthly meetings (even with no deliberation or linked actions). The few times administrators and political allies went to the shelter, their social networks showed photos and videos of them with the Indigenous people, and they systematically posted solidarity actions in their favour on social media, including vaccination and the delivery of food items and the combat against the coronavirus. Training and capacity building events on migration and refuge and on shelter administration were also promoted for assistance teams, in partnership with the UNHCR and IOM agencies, which were also widely publicised. All of these actions, and others related to non-Indigenous migrants and refugees, earned recognition for the state and the committee, such as the IOM MigraCidades [lit. Migrant-Cities] seal. Recognition was also received by the State of Paraíba, which was added the UNHCR Good Practices seal.

Following this line of a high visibility policy, in August 2022, Natal hosted the first *Fórum Nacional de Conselhos e Comitês estaduais para refugiados e migrantes* [National Forum of State Councils and Committees for refugees and migrants]. In this space, the agenda of assistance for the Warao was positioned as an important axis of action for the local committee and even projects that never got off the ground were presented. However, neither the display of concern, nor the recording of small actions, nor even the enormous skills of some state administrators in policy visibility, led to the materialisation of public policy involving shared responsibility between the state and the municipality that would guarantee the execution of a plan for Indigenous people to remain in the city.

Indeed, in August 2022, the agreement that had been established between the state and the municipality when the Indigenous people went to live in the CARE – the centre for receiving refugees and migrants – appears to have been broken. In 2020, the state became responsible for shelter and the municipality for providing social assistance. As a result of the agonistic political relations between the state and the municipality, from the beginning there was mutual blame for the lack of commitment to providing assistance for Indigenous people, but even so, during the contradictory time of the pandemic, we saw enormous efforts from city hall teams, on the one hand, and some people hired by CERAM/RN as grant students, on the other, in order to achieve the basic guarantee of rights for the Warao who were placed at the CARE. By 2022, however, after increasingly serious episodes of flooding, the departure of several families resulting from conflicts due to living in inadequate conditions, the heavy rains that repeated in July 2022 and the increasingly dangerous situation of the shelter's structure, through the actions of CERAM/RN, the state government decided to move the Indigenous people to the 'Novo CARE' [New CARE]. A building that offered notable improvements in living conditions, but was much smaller than the previous one. This situation quickly led to conflicts between the sheltered families and to the departure of half of the people from the shelter. When asked for a response to shelter for the group that left, the CERAM/RN cited the need to review the 2020 agreement that had been established only for the former CARE, indicating the likelihood of not committing to a shelter policy for people who did not remain in the 'Novo CARE'.

One important development in the days preceding the writing of this article was the reestablishment of the distinction between sheltered and non-sheltered people, which occurred when some of the families in the city decided not to go to the shelter in 2020 and went to live in rented houses with resources coming from social rent, leaving the state shortly after due to lack of service and the possibility of remaining.

Currently, the group of sheltered Indigenous people receive visits from CERAM/RN grant students and people who carry out volunteering activities with them. There is no requirement for Indigenous people to pay rent, water and electricity and some co-ordination in terms of education have already been resolved to ensure children's continued education. Far from ideal, this more inviting situation to remain contrasts with the situation of others. The homeless group is no longer visited by CERAM/RN administrators or grant students, the state insisted that the solution of social rent was borne by the municipality despite the demand from the Indigenous people, and our own, for another building for the collective shelter of the group. For now, with no definitive answer regarding the future of their shelter, families have returned to the streets more frequently, spending more time raising funds under the sun. The abusive rent charged by the owners of the houses they managed to rent is frequently increased, with no legal support for the Indigenous people from public authorities. To date, there is no articulation for their children's education and the threat of eviction and the feeling of being unimportant have once again appeared in the discourses of people in the homeless group. 'We know that we are worthless here', stated one of the leaders during one of our conversations.

According to the arguments of the state administrators, represented by CERAM/RN, the decision not to take on the shelter was to pressure the city hall into assuming responsibility that by law it should. In the day-to-day running of city hall, this has translated into putting pressure on the staff of the *Secretaria de Trabalho e Assistência Social* [Department of Labour and Social Assistance] and not on the mayor, nor his political allies. The team of people who strive to meet the demands for food, shelter, health care, documentation, income creation strategies, and so on, works in precarious conditions and, like us, suffers the frustration of feeling like we are walking in swampy terrain in which it is almost impossible to advance.

On one of those afternoons of anguish and deception, when we realised that it would be almost impossible to find collective shelter for the group that left 'Novo CARE', we asked Melquiades<sup>15</sup> whether he had thought about going to another city in Brazil. Despair activated the common mechanism of expulsion. But he said no, he likes Natal, that it reminds him of his homeland and that he likes the river and the sea. He said he hopes to one day be able to fish in this river and receive his relatives who are in need on the border. He said he will stay, even with the correlation of forces moving more to expelling them or to leave a smaller, easier number of others like him to manage, any other Warao, who, after all, can play the same role in the photograph.

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<sup>15</sup> This interlocutor's name was changed to protect his identity and privacy.

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