



LAS OBSERVACIONES DE UN GRINGO A VIEW OF A TOKEN GRINGO

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Resumen:

En octubre de 2015, los Primeros Juegos Mundiales indígenas se llevaron a cabo en una de las nuevas ciudades en la tierra: Palmas, Tocantins, Brasil. Me invitaron a venir a estos juegos Beatriz Ferreira y Marina Vinha, dos profesores de la Universidad Federal de Grande Dourados. Donde desarrolle un seminario sobre "Educación y Procesos Civilising". En este artículo, presento mi impresión sobre este evento dedicado al registro, de las observaciones del gringo, sobre los inicio del evento, los signos de protesta y los intereses en conflicto, el ritual de hacer fuego, y un representante holandés, en la competencia y la celebración.

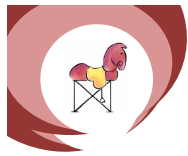
Palabras clave: juegos mundiales, Juegos Indigenas, conversaciones de un gringo, competición y celebración

Abstract:

In October 2015, the first ever World Indigenous Games were held in one of the newest cities on earth: Palmas, Tocantins, Brazil. I was invited to come along to these games with Beatriz Ferreira and Marina Vinha, two professors at the Universidade Federal de Grande Dourados, where I would first give a seminar on 'Education and Civilising Processes'. In this paper I give my impression about this event focusing the registration, the token gringo, Start of the event, signs of protest and conflicting interests, the ritual of making fire, and a dutch representative, competition and celebration.

Key words: world games, token gringo, Indigenous Games, competition and celebration

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In October 2015, the first ever World Indigenous Games were held in one of the newest cities (built from the ground in 1990) on earth: Palmas, Tocantins, Brazil. I was invited to come along to these games with Beatriz Ferreira and Marina Vinha, two professors at the Universidade Federal de Grande Dourados, where I would first give a seminar on 'Education and Civilising Processes'.

After the last session of my seminar, held in one of the university buildings, about 8 kms outside the city centre of Dourados, a woman asked me if I was interested to see the 'Faculdade Indigenas' (Indigenous Faculty). I looked at Camilla, one of my translators, and when she nodded and I said yes, we were taken by car to a rather new building. Inside, we were introduced to Carlos, who turned out to be her husband. After we had a short informative chat with him and then with the director of the Faculdade in the adjacent room, we went out to drive Camilla to her place and me to my hotel. As we were driving, Carlos told us that the Guarani from Mato Grosso do Sul were not coming to the [First World Indigenous] Games in Palmas because the Games are a symptom of peace and there is no peace.

-Games? I asked. No Peace?

-No, he said, the state and the Guarani are in a fight.

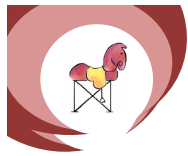
With surprise in my voice, I responded: But I thought these games are a demonstration of peace among the 'povos indigenas'?

Yes, also, he said, but we want to draw attention to the conflict with the government. If we don't go, journalists will come to us and ask why.

After a little silence, he continued our conversation by teaching me a few Guarani words.

REGISTRATION

In Palmas, two days before the opening of the games, we (Beatriz Ferreira and Marina Vinha, Vera Toledo, Manuel Hernández and me) went in the car we had rented to the site of the Games. There, we spent much time in and around a barrack built outside the actual terrain of the games. It was the registration room for participants and journalists. On the way to this simple building, vendors are selling a variety of Indian crafts from mats on the ground and near the building, many are waiting to be allowed in by a guard. The waiting lasted and

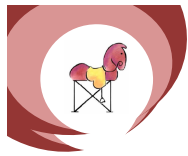


lasted until we could go in, and then it was continued. No, there weren't any passes or entree tickets for us. Because Manuel wanted to take his kilos of cameras inside the gates of the games, he needed a journalist pass. Without one, his equipment would not be allowed in.

Inside, the registration room is packed with people. Most are standing in groups, that turn out to be queues, in front of a long counter. Behind it, about nine little groups are busy serving those in the front line before the counter. Pictures are taken to be framed into an entree or participant pass. Most of the waiting, apparently, is for these passes to be produced and handed over. A bench in the back, against the wall, is also full of people. One can take free bottles of water from an ice box. Next to it is a narrow corridor leading to the back side of the counter and to a room in the back, also filled with people being busy. The bustle strikes me as animated and new, driving all my senses into a higher gear, also because of realizing to be in the midst of what I have come for, these people and their Games. We turned out to be part of a bigger group of 'university researchers' and others, most of them working in support of indigenous causes. This group had been lost and forgotten by the reorganization of the Games. This had happened, I heard, as a consequence of the Games having been adopted as a Development Program by the United Nations and launched as a global affair. Therefore, a third group had been added on top of the two that in earlier years had been responsible for the organization of the Games. The initiative and driving force had come from Indian leaders of the Intertribal Committee Memory and Indigenous Science, the brothers Marcos and Carlos Terena, together with representatives of the Brazilian government as the main subsidizer of the Games. This year, Brazilian representatives of the United Nations Development Program (PNUD) had been added. I asked 'Who are these people?' and heard 'Upper Class of the North' as a general indication.

THE TOKEN GRINGO

On the day of the opening, I was interviewed twice outside the registration building. Although everybody called it a 'World Event', there weren't actually that many 'foreign' visitors, and among them, I was taken to be the 'token gringo'. As such, I was interviewed and asked to explain my presence in front of a big camera. I talked about "the importance of these games being acknowledged by the United Nations", an acknowledgement that can be seen as a sign of "global appreciation of the existence of

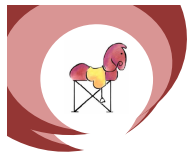


groups of people who suffered colonization but have hardly been able, if at all, to profit from global processes of decolonization, but continued to being decimated, robbed of their own lands, and doomed to live as a voiceless minority in their own country. But being acknowledged by the United Nations is an acknowledgement of their existence as a Nation, and in my view this is a point of no return. That moment is celebrated now; I wanted to be present, and I am."

START OF THE EVENT

It was Marcos Terena who did the opening of the games. From the perspective of many indigenous peoples, Marcos is more or less perceived as their Minister of Foreign Affairs and Carlos as their Minister of Internal Affairs. After Marcos had held the opening speech, and had welcomed the president of Brazil, Gilma Roussef, he introduced a chief from the USA, chief Willy Little Child, dressed completely in white, expressing himself in short and powerful words that were being translated by Marcos in Portuguese. The president of Brazil was clearly present, also because there was a short protest against her or her presence, I didn't understand. The audience kept remarkably calm, they just seemed to wait for the protest to come to an end. The president did not react, she was just there, she didn't give a talk and I respected her for that.

After the more ceremonial part that had drawn all spectators' attention to the VIP box, the program continued in the arena. It started with some sort of dance, then singing and finally the big parade of indigenous nations who were announced one after the other by their name. It was done, however, by someone who shouted in the microphone so loud that I had to put my fingers in my ears for protection. His way of announcing was even more annoying, it was as if he was presenting some sort of fashion show. And yet, as nation after nation appeared on the scene, usually giving away some monotonous ritual chants, the show became theirs. By the seemingly never-ending stream of uniformly and differently dressed groups of people, I became impressed by the combination of their proudness in showing the world [in me] a clear 'this is us!', 'here we are', and at the same time signaling the clear awareness that this also means 'we are *still* there!'. I was moved by the sad intensity of celebrating life after the death of a loved one, and it also reminded me of intense moments in the ritual mourning ceremony commemorating those who died in WW II. It had a similar poignancy of a celebration with a sad undertone.



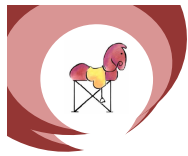
SIGNS OF PROTEST AND CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The next day, in the big 'Oca da Sabedoria, 'tent of wisdom', I heard the protest of people complaining about the large sums of money spent on organizing these Games. It was called 'circus money', "they don't give us money to buy land, and you come here to put money in your pocket by selling crafts; don't sell yourself, wake up! Stop fooling us and yourself, let's close this circus today!" [I could follow this because of headphones you could borrow and listen to the translation into English - during this protest there were two young women sitting at my feet on the floor, painted bodies and bare breasts - a strange experience].

This protest contrasted with another one, directed by IBAMA against the prohibition of selling Indian crafts using colourful feathers of protected birds as ingredients. A big woman, protesting against this prohibition, shouted: "Do we need to change our behavior; you want us women to change? We do not kill the birds, but we remove the feathers at the right time for them to return to grow. Don't kill us by preventing to sell our products, don't take away the right to feed ourselves as we like."

Another protest, formulated by Felix Nahira, was directed against the influence of Western culture: "You give us human rights, you say, but we have our traditional rights and human rights do not belong to them. Our children watch TV, they see the films of Woody Woodpecker, Tom and Gerry, and they may seem harmless, but these films are dangerous because our children believe these 'strangers' more than their parents. We need a re-educational program to teach renewed respect for our collective rights. We have no study what these television programs do with our women. Indigenous women want to be like white people, they want the white hairstyles, etc. We want to be you and you want us to be us, but intermarriage with whites is a poison. We do not need your sermons and lectures; we need to arrest the people who bring alcohol and drugs to our villages. What we need is more than lectures, not just talk!"

This protest sounded familiar. It reminded me of many similar conflicts marking a transition away from tradition-directed cultures in the direction of becoming integrated in more global cultures with more individualized and informalized codes and lifestyles. In my book *Informalization* (2007: 206-8), I compare an Asian example of such a conflict from 1995 with earlier Western ones. The 1995 conflict was a national campaign



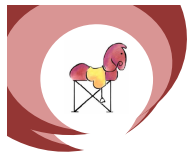
launched in Vietnam against what were called 'negative foreign influences'. 'American cultural imperialism' in particular was considered to be a serious threat to 'traditional morals'. In the 1920s and 1930s, many European authorities used to speak a similar language about American influence. A Dutch government committee, for instance, warned against the 'demoralising Americanisation of Europe.' The threat was disparagingly referred to as 'instinctual life' and 'primitive feelings'. Both the Dutch authorities in the inter-war years and the Vietnamese authorities in the 1990s took disciplinary measures to prevent the population becoming 'estranged' or 'alienated' from tradition and from concluding a treacherous union with 'strangers' or 'aliens' and their more informalised lifestyles. These examples of high-handed attempts at defending 'traditional morals' can be extended by many others, one of them being the public outcry of Felix Nahira in Palmas.

THE RITUAL OF MAKING FIRE

Near the end of a next day, we went to visit the ritual of making fire. It was going to happen in town, not at the site of the Games, only at walking distance of our hotel, in the middle of a big square in front of a beautiful building, named Palácio Araguaia. It made a nice change just to be outside in a public place without fences or any of the other paraphernalia of the official territory of the Games. The public was less numerous and moved along with the people from various indigenous nations doing their fire ritual. At times, I felt to be in the midst of all the action, among so many Indians, dressed according to their nation, many of them, like the Maori from New Zealand, making a great show out of it.

Toward the end of the ceremony I was introduced to the Indian photographer Roberta Tojal, who directly asked me what I thought of it all. I told her enthusiastically that it is a great event but that I also had been wondering about how the ancestors of about a century or two ago would have looked at it, whether and how much they would have recognized. Her answer, which she gave after a little hesitation, pleasantly surprised me since she acknowledged that rituals, obviously, change because they are part of wider processes. Yet, at the same time, she added, the ancestors would most probably have recognized the feeling of solidarity and connectedness evoked by these present-day rituals. And in the end that's what it is all about.

Indeed, traditions change, imperceptibly [inconspicuously] as well as consciously planned and then become part of what

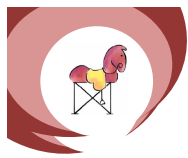


cultural anthropologists call 'invented tradition'. And at times, traditions are re-invented. I heard the Pataxo have gone through a process of re-inventing [parts of] their tradition and feel good about it, which is a hallmark of authenticity; tradition may have no beginning but its origin must have been a process of invention.

We walked back to our hotel in a bigger group than before, we were joined by José, one of the *profesores*, and a Canadian woman called Sarah Bourdages, with whom I had an open and honest conversation about the world of social science. After a while, we went to a restaurant where Marcos Terena and three others joined us, a bit later. Beatriz had invited them to come. Marcos and I had a nice conversation after Marina had explained him my reading of the name 'First World Indigenous Games'. The word 'First' can of course stand for first "world games", but also for 'First World', and in that sense it usually refers to the rich First World countries. However, it can also be read geographically and in that case it refers to the indigenous peoples: those who were 'First' in many places of the world. Marcos seemed to appreciate this way of looking at the title of the Games.

FISH AND A DUTCH REPRESENTATIVE

The next day our group of *profesores* had become even bigger because of the arrival of Tatiana and Zelia, and at dinner Marcos Terena and his cousin/nephew had also come. We ate 3,1/2 kilos of fish, river fish. Marcos, who was sitting close told me that there had been some problems at the opening of the event. When it was decided that the president of Brazil would indeed attend the Games, "them of the government" had, without informing him, stopped the big tour busses on their way to the Games, preventing indigenous participants to arrive in time for the opening. I did not understand so I asked, why would they do that? Because, he answered, they were afraid that people travelling to the Games in a large group were suspected of coming to make trouble. Among the Indians, this kind of measures casts a slur upon [the organizers of] the Games, which is so stupid. It could have easily been prevented. The story convinced me that Marcos should not stop his work as an intermediary between the Indians and the bureaucrats. Because Marcos had told me that this was his last time as an organizer of the Games, I tried to emphasize the importance of this role as



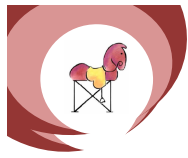
an intermediary. People like this, I tried to tell Marcos, they are so used to look up to their superiors and the established world, that they are bound to make mistakes like this again and again. If you would keep a function as adviser and supervisor, intermediate between down here and up there, you still could do a lot of important work. "No, no", he tried to interrupt me "I am fish... I am finished... and I only do this kind of talking with a beer!"

It happened several times during our conversation that I got the impression that Marcos saw me not only as one of the *profesores*, but also as a representative of a foreign tribe, the 'tribe of the Dutch', and more or less took it for granted that the Dutch tribe would have the same strong community feeling as the tribes he knows in Brazil. He made me feel more of a representative of the Dutch than ever before, even though in Asia the ever-returning question "Hé Mister, where do you come from", had made me come up with the answer "I'm from my mother. And you?" And this association brought another one to mind, in Bangkok, in the early 1980s, when a Thai woman asked me "What is your religion?" When I answered not to have a religion, she was shocked, said "No, that is impossible, all people have a religion." I tried to explain my position, but she could not believe me.

Marcos is a man of the world, yet his sensitivity for group-identities made me feel Dutch to the extent that I even hoped not to have blemished my group-identity as a representative of the Dutch.

COMPETITION AND CELEBRATION

In Palmas, a maxim of the Terena brothers about the Games was well-known: 'It's not about competition, it's about celebration', I even saw these words on cloths like t-shirts. I mentioned the words to a Dutch politician, and he immediately recognized the maxim as a brilliant political statement. The attraction of these words, however, is in the opposition of competition and celebration. This opposition is an exaggeration, for competition is everywhere and can only be regulated, but not avoided. That being said and accepted, it becomes all the more important to emphasize that it is not the competition that counts but its regulation. In and during these First World Indigenous Games, the regulation of competition consisted of a celebration of being there and taking part. I was there!



Note

During many years of friendship, Lennert van Oorschot has educated Cas Wouters in his specialism, Indigenous American history. Van Oorschot was not present at the Games in Palmas, yet before and after these Games his contribution to 'O olhar do estrangeiro para os Jogos' was such that we decided to sign together as co-authors of this contribution.