



WARAO

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The Warao people: from the mouth of the Orinoco river to Rio Grande do Norte

Introduction

The Warao people, traditionally inhabitants of the Orinoco river mouth (Venezuela), are an ethnic group quite diverse in their costumes and forms of social organization, sharing a common language, also named Warao, and totalizing a number of 49 thousand people. Since at least 2014 there is evidence of their migrant presence in Brazil, which has been intensified in recent years. In virtue of the geographical location of Venezuela, the first migration areas on Brazilian lands were in the North of the country (Roraima, Amazonas, Pará). This flux quickly expanded into other capitals, already in the North East, such as into the states of Maranhão, Piauí and Ceará, and more recently into Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba and Pernambuco. In the first semester of 2020, there were estimated to be about 40 thousand families of the Warao ethnic in Rio Grande do Norte, both in Natal and Mossoró.

Warao migration into Brazil

Among the Venezuelan migrants who have been circulating in Brazil in the last few years seeking for better living standards, approximately 4 thousand are Indigenous. In 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated the presence of three ethnicities between them: Warao (representing 68% of this number), Pemón Taurepang (30%) and Eñepa (2%).

The Warao are an ethnic group mainly inhabitant of the mouth of the Orinoco river, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Even though they traditionally occupy a large region encompassing the Orinoco's estuary (in Delta Amacuro state), they can also be found in neighboring states such as Monagas, Sucre and Bolívar as well as in the cross-border region with the Guiana. In 2011, according to the census of the National Institute of Statistics of Venezuela, there were 48.77 Warao people in the country, which represents 6,73% of the Indigenous population. In 2019, according to an estimation of UNHCR, it was believed that the Warao population was about 49 thousand people, counting in this number the Indigenous people in transit, migration or refugee situations (UNHCR, 2019, p. 17).

Considering the extension of the lands which they traditionally inhabit and the multiplicity of people and groups they present, the Warao don't have homogeneous cultural elements besides sharing the same language, also named warao (GARCÍA-CASTRO, HEINEN, 2000). To the linguistics, this language is sometimes classified within the chibcha family (MOSONY, 1987) and sometimes as an

isolated language (WILBERT, 1957; VAQUERO, 1965; OSBORN, 1966; ver también GRANADOS, 1991 e ROMERO-FIGEROA, 2003).

Based on the anthropological report of the Federal Public Ministry (MPF, 2017a), there is pre-colonial evidence of coexistence between several interethnic systems in the Orinoco delta. With the later arrival of the Europeans and their missionary process, these systems became even more complex, due to the new social relations that the colonial invasion evolved. This presented to the Indigenous new conditions of living, as though raised the necessity of elaborating new strategies of existence, resistance and conjunction with the colonizer expansion system. Therefore, according to the specialized literature: “The Warao cultural heterogeneity coming from the multiplicity of people gathered through a common language who were living in the mouth of the Orinoco river and its surroundings at the pre-colonial period is a notable characteristic of this Indigenous people” (YAMADA, TORELLY, 2018, p. 65).

After the first moment of the colonization impact — when the Warao gathered into an ethnic group (although not homogeneous) —, in the 20th century they faced new socio-environment impacts and migratory displacement provoked by major enterprises and economic interests. In the 60s, a dam built at Caño Manamo (branch of the Orinoco river), affected the socio organization of the group and their maintenance in their traditional territories, forcing them to migrate to the urban centers of the region to seek alternatives of living (GARCÍA-CASTRO, HEINEN, 1999). The dam increased the non-Indigenous and agricultural occupation of the region, raising the interethnic conflicts and the violation of Indigenous rights, who were not previously consulted about the project. In 1976, a flood probably caused by the dam environmental impacts provoked the death of thousands of people, including several of the Warao. In the 90s, a cholera outbreak severely affected the Warao communities, since they didn't have health care and sanitation assistance (BRIGGS, MANTINI-BRIGGS, 2004). Since the 2000s, there has been an increase in HIV/Aids cases between the Warao as a consequence of governmental neglect in addition to a decreasing access to food, health care, housing and ways of income generation, which is made worse by the political instability of the country (cf. SOUZA, 2018).

“Considering the current Venezuelan economic situation, the migratory displacement of Indigenous Warao to Brazilian cities is fundamentally motivated by the pursuit of food, stability, temporary work and money, as well as access to health care” (MPF, 2017b, p. 8). The UNHCR, United Nations Refugee Agency, shares the same opinion, observing that the migratory flux ends up generating new diseases and vulnerabilities: “Many Venezuelans seek health treatment in Brazil or even end up contracting illnesses during the migration because of the poor access to basic health services in their home country” (UNHCR, 2019, p. 10).

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capitals, already into the North East, such as the states of Maranhão, Piauí and Ceará, and more recently into Rio Grande do Norte. In the first semester of 2020, in Natal/RN the presence of Warao groups settled in two neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city — Cidade da Esperança and Planato — was registered. Still in June of 2020, the Warao families were being moved to an emergency shelter provided by public institutions of Natal municipality and the Potiguar government.

It was also reported the presence of another Warao group in Mossoró city, 183 miles far away from the capital of the state. Apparently, the firsts Warao arrived at the Potiguar capital about september 2019 (BARBOSA, 2019) in a number of 19 people, and nowadays they have reached a number of 50 residents (REUNIÃO..., 2019). According to the previous data we obtained from the employees of the Specialized Socio Assistance Reference Center (CREAS) of Natal Municipal Secretariat of Labor and Social Assistance (SEMTAS), there has been an influx of Venezuelan immigrants in the offices of the agency responsible for the social registration of families in vulnerable situations.

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