

Sandra Benites (author)

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Born in the Porto Lindo Indigenous Territory in the municipality of Japorã, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, in 1975, Sandra Benites is a Guarani activist, researcher, and mother. She works as an anthropologist, art curator, and educator. She has stood out for her militancy in defense of the rights of Indigenous peoples, especially in the demarcation of Indigenous territories and Guarani education. Her reflections emerge from her experiences with ‘Guarani women’s knowledge’ (*kunhangue arandu*), resulting in academic debates and publications that challenge the colonization of knowledge imposed by hegemonic modes of knowledge production. These have invariably given scant attention to Indigenous women, not only in Brazil but in the various South American countries inhabited by the Guarani peoples. Benites has curated exhibitions in museums – such as *Dja Guata Porã: Rio de Janeiro Indígena* (2017) at the Rio Art Museum (MAR) – and has worked as a consultant on educational projects, including initiatives in collaboration with the Maricá Municipal Education Secretariat, Rio de Janeiro. Among her publications in Portuguese are articles contained in the edited volumes *Descolonizando a museologia* [Decolonizing museology] and *Ações e saberes Guarani, Kaingang e Laklãnõ-Xokleng em foco* [Guarani, Kaingang and Laklãnõ-Xokleng actions and knowledge in focus], both published in 2020.

At the end of the 2000s, on a visit to Boa Esperança indigenous village, in the state of Espírito Santo, Brazil, Ara Rete – as she is known among her people, the Guarani Ñandeva or Nhandewa – began working as a community health agent. In 2003, she joined the Guarani Teacher Training Program, called *Kua’a-Mbo’e* (Know, Teach), supported by state education offices, the Brazilian Ministry of Education, and the

National Indigenous Peoples Foundation (FUNAI). Later, she began to teach classes of children and teenagers in Três Palmeiras Indigenous village, Espírito Santo, where she stayed until 2012. In 2010, at the invitation of historian José Ribamar Bessa Freire, professor of the Graduate Program in Social Memory at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), she became a member of the Observatório de Educação Escolar Indígena [Indigenous School Education Observatory] (OEEI), where she became more systematically involved in debates and demands in the field of education. Her experience at OEEI fuelled the researcher's criticisms of the institutional model of Indigenous school education, a critique that she developed in her end-of-course monograph and her master's thesis. In these works, she reflected on the possibility of applying traditional Guarani teaching methods as a 'Guaranized' reformation of the school structures imposed by the Brazilian state, which continue to oppress and silence the knowledge of indigenous peoples, despite the legal recognition of their right to differentiated education policies. Sustaining a concept of the 'border,' based on *ywy mbyte* ('the center of the place that spreads to the other side'), Benites argues that the possibility of 'living well' (*teko porã*) is rooted in a respect for difference.

As part of her Southern Atlantic Forest Indigenous Intercultural Diploma at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Benites presented the monograph *Nhe'ẽ, reko porã rã: nhemboea oexakarẽ. Fundamento da pessoa Guarani, nosso bem-estar futuro (educação tradicional): o olhar distorcido da escola* [The foundation of the Guarani person, our future well-being (traditional education): the distorted view of schools] (2011), in which she explores the differences between the 'traditional education of the Guarani people' and 'Indigenous school education.' The first is linked to the dream (*xara'u*) and orality (*ñe'e*), emphasizing the experiences lived by children and teenagers in the village world. The second is imposed by the Brazilian state and ignores the traditional knowledge (*mbya arandu*) of the Guarani people. The author argues the need for a dialogue between the two modes of knowledge production – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – thereby enabling the

schooling process of these peoples to be structured on their own experiences of Guarani knowledge.

In her master's thesis, *Viver na língua Guarani Nhandewa (Mulher falando)* [Living in the Guarani Nhandewa language (Woman speaking)], presented at the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro, in 2018, Benites attributed a vital role to the collective histories of Guarani Nhandewa Indigenous women, shedding light on their narratives and their ways of 'walking in the world' (*guata*). In this study, the body of the Guarani woman (*kunhã rete*) is shown to be fundamental as the place where wisdom, territory, and language overlap and where the differences between Indigenous and the *juruá* (the non-Indigenous population, the 'whites') are produced. This prominence given to the body also allowed her to describe the specificities of the world of Guarani women, as well as manifest the vulnerabilities historically and structurally suffered by female indigenous bodies. In this work, she continued to develop earlier reflections on the conflicts surrounding 'Guarani traditional education' and the educational project implemented by the Brazilian state, pointing to the violent processes that she experienced herself due to the imposition of the Portuguese language and school norms.

Sandra Benites has consistently highlighted the knowledge of Guarani women, given that the anthropological studies dedicated to her people, established more of a dialogue with Indigenous men – such as those of Curt Nimuendajú (1883-1945), a German ethnographer who lived in Brazil, Paraguayan anthropologist León Cadogan (1899-1973), Brazilian anthropologist Egon Schaden (1913-1991), Spanish Jesuit and anthropologist Bartomeu Melià (1932-2019) and French anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1934-1977). By adding the perspectives of women, especially those of her mother and grandmother, both of whom were renowned midwives (*mitã mbojahu ha*), Benites brings forth a version of the history of *Ore Ypy Rã* ('Our Beginning') that focuses on the trajectory of *Nhandesy* ('Our Mother'), otherwise neglected by the majority of the narratives recorded by white men, who concentrated on *Nhanderu* ('Our Father') and the twins *Kurahy* (Sun) and *Jasy* (Moon).

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A central figure in Indigenous feminism, the author argues that any exploration of the topics of the territory, political activism, the Guarani language, health, the Guarani conception of the world and mythic narratives must set out from the productions and knowledge of Indigenous women themselves so that more just and diverse understandings of the worlds of these peoples can be developed. Her name joins those of indigenous women intellectuals like Joziléia Daniza Kaingang, Rosi Waikhon, Braulina Baniwa, Naine Terena, Creuza Prumkwyj Krahô, Célia Xakriabá, among many others. Pursuing a doctorate in social anthropology at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro since 2018, Sandra Benites was assistant curator of the São Paulo Art Museum (MASP) from 2019 to 2022, becoming the first indigenous curator of an art museum in Brazil. In 2023, she was appointed Director of Visual Arts of Funarte, the National Arts Foundation of the Ministry of Culture of Brazil.

Editor's note: The Guarani are more than 280,000 people living in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay – in the latter Guarani (*avañe'ê*) is an official language alongside Spanish. In South-Central Brazil, where the population is 85,000, the Guarani are organized into three subgroups, the Mbyá, the Kaiowá, and the Ñandeva/Nhandewa. In English, Sandra Benites published the essay “Kunhã Py’a Guasu” in the magazine *Piseagrama* in 2023; “Walking Towards the Indigenous Protagonism: On the Work Process in *Dja Guata Porã: Rio de Janeiro Indígena*” with Pablo Lafuente, in *Terremoto*, in 2019; “Retomadas / Retakings” with Clarissa Diniz in *Brazilian Histories*, in 2022, the catalog of the exhibition held at the São Paulo Art Museum (MASP), of which she was one of the curators. She also wrote “Ka’a Body. Cosmvision of the Rainforest” with Anita Ekman for the portal *Paradise Row*.

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