

Science, Culture, and Ancestral Knowledge: Dialogues in the Training of Indigenous Teachers in the Amazon – Interview with Marilene Correia Freitas

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Introduction

Marilene Correa da Silva Freitas is a professor in the Department of Social Sciences and in the Postgraduate Programs in Sociology and Society and Culture in the Amazon at the Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM). Throughout her distinguished career, she has held key positions, including Secretary of Science and Technology for the State of Amazonas (2003–2007); Rector of the State University of Amazonas (2007–2010). Currently, she serves on the board of the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science (SBPC) (2023–2025). With extensive academic contributions, her research focuses on the Amazonian Social Thought, Science Policy, and Indigenous Education as pillars of sustainability, emphasizing teacher training as a central axis. Internationally, she has participated in comparative studies between Brazil, France, Mexico and Argentina about the crisis of legitimacy in the teaching profession.

The interview was conducted at the House of Knowledge of the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Rio Negro (FOIRN) in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, Amazonas, during the II Seminar on Human Rights, State, and Citizenship: Indigenous Training and Challenges of/for Citizenship (May 26–30, 2025). The event featured public defenses of master's theses by 16 Indigenous scholars from diverse ethnic groups, affiliated with UFAM's Postgraduate Programs in Sociology and Society and Culture in the Amazon.

In this interview, Professor Marilene Correa Freitas discusses the challenges of sociological research in the Amazon forest; the importance of intercultural dialogue

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that connects ancestral knowledge, science, and culture and the role of Indigenous school education in strengthening identity and autonomy for Indigenous peoples.

1 Your intellectual trajectory was shaped by formative experiences with Prof. Otávio Ianni (São Paulo) and Prof. Louis Marmoz (Paris). How did these scholars influence your studies about the Amazon forest?

I joined UFAM in 1979 as a professor after competitive selection for teaching assistance. At that time, I was doing a specialization course for upper teaching in social research, invited by a former Social Service professor. I graduated in Social Service in 1975 and, as soon as I finished the course, I started working with signed contracts in two institutions: Eduardo Ribeiro Colonial Hospital, a public psychiatry hospital that had a field for debates about antipsychiatry, counting with residents and Medicine professors highly engaged in the theme; and in the regional SESI department for Amazonas, where Social Service was in great expansion. When I was invited by UFAM professors, along with other former prominent students, for two public contents (Social Science and Social Service), I was approved in first place in both of them. I chose the Social Science Department, where I have worked until my retirement in 2023 - today I work as a volunteer professor in the Postgraduate programs of Sociology and Society and Culture in the Amazon.

In 1986, there was this rare opportunity to pursue a master's degree in Sao Paulo - enabled by the former PICD (Institutional Program of Teaching Capacitation) of CAPES, by indication of the local coordinator - I couldn't refuse it or retreat. After all, there was another professor who had given up and we couldn't lose that vacancy for humanities. I decided to go, I applied for it and, one more time, I was selected in first place.

Teacher Octavio Ianni was part of the examining board along with teacher Carmen Junqueira. During the evaluation, Ianni commented about my written test and the bibliographical references that I have chosen - The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte and the Class Struggles in France - requesting specific and general comments. I explained to him that these texts were part of the reading list of the

Sociology II course, which I applied for in the careers of Social Communication and Social Service.

He also asked me how I had access to Max Weber's theories of domination. I told him that it happened through the Fondo de Cultura Económica editions² than through UnB collections³. When he asked me if I had already chosen an advisor and made himself available, I immediately accepted it, because until that moment I only knew him through what he had written.

That's how we initiated a very special partnership of reflections about the Amazon forest. Otávio Ianni was already analyzing authoritarian developmental policies in the Amazon. He published important books about the Amazon: *Dictatorship and Agriculture* (1979), *State and Economic Planning in Brazil* (1971), and *The Struggle for Land* (1978) - in which he analyses the arrival of smallholders, as a result of his immersive camp field research in Belem do Para. Under his guidance, I investigated the importance of the Amazon for the national question and how the Amazon forest reflects the political power difficulties of comprehending the "deep Brazil". To comprehend the elements that constituted the national Brazilian question and how the Amazon forest would be inserted in it was my biggest motivation. I explored colonization of the Amazon forest and the diversity of pathways that moved away and approximated the region from the rest of the country.

As long as I could go further in my investigation, I understood the singularity of the Amazonian social formation in its multiple ways of existing: indigenous, Portuguese, lusitana, Brazilian, and the revolutionary possibilities of being an independent country... well it has totally changed the nature of the studies between the part and the whole, between the Amazon forest and Brazil, between the region and the nation. It was certainly a differential in my whole perspective about the contradictions of Brazilian society and its national state.

² WEBER, Max. *Economía y sociedad*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974.

³ WEBER, Max. *A ética protestante e o espírito do capitalismo*, São Paulo: Pioneira; Brasília: UnB, 1967.

In parallel, I was being inserted in his work, in his studies and partnerships with Florestan Fernandes and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, in the different interests of Brazilian sociologists at PUC-SP and USP and in the creation of the Social Science postgraduate course at Unicamp. In this period, I encountered the thinking of Antonio Gramsci through Elide Rugai Bastos, who had returned from a period of studies in the Gramsci Institute, in Italy. For a year, she dedicated herself to make us comprehend fundamental concepts such as the passive revolution and the meridional question - essential theoretical keys to analyse the reality of unequal relations in Brazil among its regions. Elide Rugai Bastos was a PhD candidate under Octavio Ianni's supervision, researching Gilbert Freyre's thinking, whose work is central to understanding Brazilian intellectuals formation and the interpretations about Brazil.

During the elaboration of my doctoral project, four years later, Octavio Ianni's thinking about the global society returned to impact my scientific imagination. My research revealed how the global processes impacted the most remote regions, which allowed me to identify connections among the emerging conflicts in the Amazon region and the current structural transformations in Brazil and in the world. In this context, I equated the impasses between the region, the nation and the global order through four analytical axis: (1) the model of Manaus Free Trade Zone, as a paradoxical expression of economic globalization; (2) the indigenous question in its dual face of resistance and vulnerability; (3) the tension between culture and environment in the Amazonian ecosystem; (4) the ambiental problematic stemming from the agribusiness expansion and the changes in ground cultivation.

I characterized these transformations as "Amazonian Metamorphosis" - process of intervention of international capital in its most advanced and perverse phase in the region. Twenty-Five years later, I see that not only had I comprehended the dynamics that were then initializing, but I have also witnessed its consolidation. The paradox remains: the Amazon forest became even more central for the national project, but Brazil keeps incapable of deciphering the forest in its global-local complexity.

My collaboration with Louis Marmoz (France) started through a project headed by Coordination for Upper-Level Improvement Personnel (CAPES), along with the French Committee for Evaluation of Academic Cooperation with Brazil (COFECUB) that focused in the Amazon Forest, involving researchers of Education and Social Science Institutes. This partnership examined the sociocultural dimensions of educational policies in the region, with emphasis in indigenous education and in the schooling processes in the Amazonian and Brazilian contexts. In the scope of this cooperation, we have developed multiple activities, such as organizing international seminars and colloquiums; academic mobility for students and researchers; and co-supervision of theses and participation in examining boards. I realized my first postdoctoral work in France under his supervision, where I investigated the relationship between education and westernisation of the world. This academic internship, initially developed at Université de Caen and further in the Université de Versailles was particularly enriched by the position of Professor Louis Marmoz as Assistant Director of UNESCO's High Education and Research Division. This connection allowed us to establish strong dialogues with investigators of African, Asian and Latin-American countries. This experience opened doors for new international collaborations between Brazil, France, Mexico and Argentina, as evidenced by my second postdoctoral work (2023) at Université Gustave Eiffel with Veronique Delattre, where we conducted comparative studies between Brazil, France, Mexico and Argentina. Currently, I keep active academic links through the Francophone International Association of Education Science Investigation (AFIRSE), of which Marmoz was president until recently. I also collaborate as co-director of *La Recherche en Éducation* journal, created by Louis Marmoz (France) and Maria Tereza Estrela (Portugal) and today directed by Veronique Delattre. Louis Marmoz has always valorized the research agendas that involved the Amazon and the investigators that act in the region with indigenous population, as well as education policies in multicultural contexts. Marmoz's support was vital for consolidating

intercontinental research networks that address educational problems in different national contexts.

2 Gender inequality in academia involves discrimination and domestic overload. How did you navigate these challenges?

I did not have this perception of gender in the early phase of my career. At that time —neither in my academic circle nor in local social debates —was gender perceived as an analytical category, as it would later come to be developed. However, there were already vigorous critical discussions about the condition of women in three concrete dimensions: as exploited factory workers in the Manaus Free Trade Zone, as subjugated extractive workers, and as subalternized housewives in domestic relations. In other words, the acquisition of perception and critical consciousness stemmed from readings of Simone de Beauvoir, Rosa Luxemburg, and Rose Marie-Muraro’s “Sexualidade da Mulher Brasileira: Corpo e Classe Social no Brasil” (an important work because it showed different forms of men’s domination over women in both rural and urban settings...). Looking back, I realize that the transforming realities in my state of Amazonas and in Manaus, as well as in Brazilian university institutions (I lived intensely through the debates of redemocratization and the growing tension between the military dictatorship and libertarian institutions), contributed to a sharpening of my critical gaze toward myself. Yet I observe that this was simultaneously intellectual, political, and existential apprehension.

In the 1980s, I went through a divorce with three children and did not request alimony. Soon after that period, I began my university career. I married again, had two more children, pursued my doctorate and postdoctoral studies, and my children always accompanied these movements.

I reconciled my academic trajectory with intense political activism, actively participating in historic moments such as the founding of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) in my state, the creation of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), and the organizing process of the Associação Nacional dos Docentes do Ensino

Superior (Andes) — which, at the time, functioned as an association before consolidating as a national union. My political engagement as a leader, activist, and university professor took place in the context of the redemocratization of society and the university, and it did not allow me self-pity or the opportunity to engage in gender or racial struggles. I was never afraid, nor did I retreat from what we did (direct elections in universities, the national struggle for a unified career path, strikes, etc.). At some point, I recognized that I was overwhelmed by raising children, but that never stopped me from participating in social movements or fulfilling my career obligations, including completing my education. It seemed natural to my choices. Throughout my trajectory, I always problematized the difficulties of teaching as a collective issue, highlighting how the Amazon region has historically been —and continues to be— excluded from national teacher training policies, equitable distribution of scholarships, and educational excellence projects in Brazil. I did not see adverse conditions as a personal problem but as a result of Brazil's structural inequality. Today, I understand the importance of these studies and how much they have contributed to relationships and the acquisition of new human rights and equality among individuals.

3 In your experience, how do the Social Sciences dismantle stereotypes and reveal the complexity of the social life in the Amazon forest?

In my experience, the Social Sciences provide crucial tools for deconstructing stereotypes about the Amazon by revealing its social complexity through a deep structural analysis that exposes colonial continuities, the imposition of national policies on regional diversity, and the impacts of the extractives economy on territories and peoples. The Social Sciences have uncovered how modernization processes have damaged the environment and the traditional organization of rural, urban, and forest populations. They have demonstrated how the authoritarian planning of the military period fragmented the Amazon, handing it over to international capital, destroying traditional territorialities, and intensifying the

struggle for land among indigenous peoples and smallholders, contributing to wealth concentration and poverty in the region.

On the other hand, the Social Sciences have researched and continue to investigate the forms of organization and original dynamics of populations, peoples, migrants, institutional life, public policies, states, and sociocultural and political-economic processes. This is fundamental for removing the Amazon from a naive and unscientific imaginary and for producing recognition of the region's cultural and political specificities. Understanding the Amazon through the lens of the Social Sciences means unravelling deep Brazil in its contradictions. As a consequence, this vast field and repertoire of research allows us to see ourselves as Brazilians — subjects grappling with internal and external economic and cultural inequalities and processes, who are in regional conditions considered peripheral to Brazil and the world, but who have a clear understanding of the processes they can protagonism and lead in the realm of education and scientific research of our realities.

4 Which are the biggest obstacles - be they political, logistical or cultural ones - that have hindered your research in the Amazon region?

Political obstacles relate both to how Brazilian science is structured and to the mechanisms for national scientific funding and development. The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) provided little funding for research in the Amazon until 2003, because we did not have postgraduate programs in all states of the region. CAPES supports training programs that end when master's and doctoral students complete their studies. Research funding programs only reached us through significant political struggle during the Lula I and II governments. The establishment of the Amazonas State Research Support Foundation (FAPEAM), the creation of Science, Technology, and Innovation (ST&I) structures, and specific funding have gradually broken the institutional isolation of Amazonian universities in terms of graduate teaching and research. But this has only been in place for 20 years, and we have already made great progress!

Alongside these obstacles, national calls for proposals place Amazonian researchers in the same competitive arena as those from other regions, increasing the injustice of treating unequal parties as equals—and the contradictions only grow. Publications, national and international cooperation mechanisms, and funding agencies do not benefit those in lower positions in national rankings. Even so, there is slow progress, but it comes with much wear and tear and sacrifice for the many researchers who compete for positions and work in Higher Education Institutions/Federal Institutes of Technological Education/State Research Institutes in the northern region. Add to these difficulties the distance to participate in national events without grants, the lack of access to national and international publications—which remains constant. In my case, even with a degree from PUC-SP and UNICAMP, and guidance from Octávio Ianni, it did not guarantee me belonging to the scientific community, but changes are happening very slowly.

5 Your analysis about the Amazonian reality highlights the deadlocks in Brazil's formation and the difficulties of integration in a region characterized by structural marginalization. How do you interpret this contradiction?

The former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), who was a sociologist, stated more than once that Brazil was only capable of granting full citizenship dignity to 30% of Brazilians. It took me time to understand that he was referring to the impossibility of resolving the national question—which indeed remained unresolved: poverty and wealth concentration do not foster democracy nor guarantee the rights achieved in the Constituent Assembly. Thus, we still have a long journey ahead as a national society.

In the Amazon, predatory processes that generate easy wealth through extractives (mineral, biological, and forest resources) persist. National policies remain inadequate and disconnected from regional realities, despite improvements in health and education after the scandalous situation where the Amazon served as

a "laboratory of death" during the pandemic. The invasion of agribusiness into traditional territories and public lands in the Amazon is outrageous, as is illegal mining and the pollution of rivers and natural environments in the region.

The command and control of Brazilian territory in the Amazon are being reclaimed under the Lula III administration, whereas during the Bolsonaro government, we reached the extreme of witnessing Indigenous people being machine-gunned on national television. National and regional priorities—such as environmental issues, border security, protection of Indigenous populations in their territories, and the humanitarian crisis of the Yanomami—have been strong democratic steps to reposition the Amazon at the forefront of the Brazilian government's concerns. The United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 30) will elevate these priorities to another dimension in November.

6 How do national/international research partnerships aid Amazon preservation amid scarce local funding?

National research agendas have been connecting with local Higher Education and Research Institutions (IPES) to study forests, biodiversity, biotechnology, water dynamics, fishing and production methods, land use dynamics, governance, climate, environment, territories and peoples, sociocultural processes, cities, traditional knowledge, etc. However, the levels of engagement vary, and priorities are not always clear. Each disciplinary field tends to promote research agendas that are acceptable to their national peers, which somewhat diminishes the uniqueness and specificity of research in the region. I may be mistaken, but we continue to follow the nationally fragmented choices and research repertoires. Local funding attempts to align call for proposals with local needs, usually those related to social problem-solving agendas or institutionalized public policies. The agendas linked to ecological transition and climate change are starting to mobilize research groups and funding agencies.

7 Why is Indigenous teacher training at the intercultural degree key to sustainable development?

Indigenous peoples, both as communities and individuals, have always been acutely aware of the challenges in the relationship between the Amazon and Brazil. They have demonstrated historical resistance, surviving all types of national integration projects—whether despotic or dystopian—while showing remarkable resilience to past and present adversities. This proves their mastery of adaptation across all Amazonian environments (forest, urban, and rural settings).

Through Intercultural Teacher Education programs, they have accessed other disciplinary fields and graduate studies, revealing a direct connection between research agendas and their processes of knowledge and self-knowledge—both of which strengthen their identities, ethical values, and interethnic relations. Indigenous peoples are expanding the reach of Indigenous knowledge about the Amazon and offering sharp critiques of Western knowledge. At the same time, they are contesting educational spaces, education policies, and worldviews within teaching and research environments, fostering essential dialogues about national institutions, Brazilian science, and the place of Indigenous knowledge within these spaces.

8 How can Social Sciences better reframe its theoretical approaches in the Amazon and dialogue with traditional knowledge in order to minimize tensions between academic and ancestral knowledge?

I have observed a clear shift in the Social Sciences regarding the Amazon. The critical commitment to identifying scenarios and changes where social forces oppose each other remains: the established powers and their chronic inability to address economic inequality among regional populations and Indigenous peoples. Similarly, there persists a significant institutional presence of professional Social Sciences in the implementation of public policies.

Poverty and destitution in the Amazon are reflected in housing conditions, lack of basic sanitation, unemployment, and gaps in education, healthcare, and social assistance policies. Broadly speaking, the Social Sciences continuously diagnose the shortcomings and failures of public authority. However, within the Social Sciences, a discourse "from below" is growing, where marginalized groups become co-producers of social critique in the Amazon. Knowledge of the population's needs is embraced as both denunciation and inventory within the Social Sciences.

Thus, socially vulnerable groups are becoming protagonists in political struggles for greater representation and improved well-being, supported directly and indirectly by social thought and Social Sciences knowledge. This is reflected in the choice of research topics, the deepening of knowledge about local realities, and the expansion of studies on gender, ethnic-racial issues, and ethno-territorial disputes.

In the academic environment, there is a pursuit of: sometimes a symmetrical coexistence between scientific and traditional knowledge; sometimes a strengthening of autoethnography among subjects fighting for prestige and validation of their perspectives (which favors knowledge stemming from local tradition); and sometimes a hyper-visibility of minority studies as a counterpoint to inequality, differentiation, and the intersectional conditions affecting poor, Indigenous, Black, sexual, racial, and gender minorities across all systems of oppression present in the Amazon's social relations.

In other words, the Social Sciences are continually echoing or listening to the region's voices in their diverse problems and formulations—this fosters proximity and complicity. And in some way, this reality minimizes tensions between traditional knowledge and the Western knowledge prevailing in the teaching and research structures of the Social Sciences.

9 Which pedagogical practices are used in Indigenous teacher training? How do they link to Global South epistemologies?

I'm not sure if there's a specific pedagogy for teaching Sociology, but it's evident that there's a pursuit of equal footing in valuing local knowledge; in recognizing Indigenous individuals as knowers of their reality, and in seeking to understand the perspectives of student-subjects/experts regarding the processes and relationships in which they live. These attitudes foster collaborative research agendas, facilitate field immersion, create complicity and meaningful narrative exchanges, as well as points of identification with the research topics. Sociology trains them to sharpen their perceptions of the reality they already experience, and they respond by engaging with networks of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, integrating into debates and discussions about research procedures, and selecting their priority focuses with our respect. It's fair to say that a genuinely collaborative process has predominated in these relationships.

Regarding intercultural pedagogy, classrooms in plurilingual communities and complex interethnic relationships already make non-Indigenous teachers less inclined to maintain disciplinary, behavioural, and institutional barriers, even if these roles formally exist. Human approaches guided by a critical spirit toward Eurocentric thinking and against the production of contemporary colonialities prevail. This creates bonds of belonging between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous teachers. The practice of bridging formal Social Sciences frameworks with local lived experiences is a crucial aspect of this pedagogical relationship.

10 How does intercultural education challenge colonial hierarchies and strengthen local epistemologies by recognizing communities as knowledge producers and not just merely “informants”?

This mutual recognition is recent, spanning just over three decades at the levels of master's and doctoral research; and more recently, it is also linked to the radicality and dissemination of decolonial thought. There are many ongoing interfaces, but we already observe the emergence of an autonomous social thought

where Indigenous philosophies and sciences create clearings alongside other forms of Western disciplining, introducing new elements to previously produced knowledge or adding previously unknown elements to this dialogue. In short, a non-Western Amazonian social thought is emerging that engages critically with Western science in the Amazon. The challenge exists both at the level of coexistence within teaching and research structures and in terms of validation —whether through the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in research repertoires or in collegial decisions evaluating academic work outcomes -. As long as this dynamic continues, it will undoubtedly strengthen efforts to formulate and document local epistemologies.