



Indigenous Schools in Amazonia, Brasil: Intercultural Practices and Sustainability

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Abstract

The paper presents the institutional framework of the Indigenous Schools in Brazil, it raises the issues represented by the relationship between the school as institution and the transmission of Indigenous culture, considering the complexity of the structure of the Indigenous population in Brazil, divided in more than 306 ethnic groups, and given the intercultural relations established with the European colonizers.

It also present the field work related to a specific Indigenous school in the community of Nova Esperança, predominantly made up of the Baré ethnic group and located on the Cuieiras River – a tributary of the Rio Negro – 80 kilometers (km) from Manaus, in Amazonia. Nova Esperança is “Pisasú Sarusawa” in Nheengatu, Ñe’engatu o Ñeengatú also known as the general language of the Amazon. The interview with the school director develops the topic how indigenous education can be useful in the passage from school to work, promoting at the same time community development, employment and sustainability in respect to the environment. This is facilitated by the fact that the Baré community is located within the Puranga Conquista Sustainable Development Reserve (RDS), managed by the government of the State of Amazonas.

Indigenous education represents a tool for assuring a successful passage from school to work to the new generations of Bare. I fitting into the projects of sustainable development that are foreseen for the area, thanks also to the location in the Sustainable Development Reserve (RDS) Puranga Conquista. However, as the school director points out, sustainability is nowadays a global issue: the experience of Nova Esperança is consequently at the same time local and part of a global trend.

The Indigenous schools represent a great potential to develop original pedagogical practices in the field of intercultural education that can impact as well the transition from school to work not only in Brazil but in different contexts where Indigenous people live. The case of the community of Nova Esperança is an example going in this direction.

Keywords: *Indigenous, intercultural, community education and sustainability*

1. Introduction

The paper deals with indigenous education in Brazil, considering both the “education for the indigenous” -*educacao escolar indigena* -government’s education policies addressing indigenous population - and the “education of the indigenous”- *educaçao indigena*-, which is developed by the Indigenous communities, takes place in the villages and develops original intercultural practices.

According to the 1988 Constitution, Indigenous peoples have the right to a differentiated and intercultural school, as to multilingual and community education: art. 210, §2: *Regular primary education will be taught in Portuguese, with indigenous communities also ensuring the use of their mother tongues and their own learning processes*¹. The Ministry of Education (Decree no. 26, of 1991) is responsible for the national coordination of Indigenous School Education policies, while States (Brazil is a federal republic) and municipalities ensure the implementation of indigenous rights, as to have a school within their village, where they are taught, in addition to Portuguese, their original language and their traditional culture. The Ministry of Education has officially recognized the “*Indigenous Schools*” that are carried out by indigenous communities according to their uses, customs and traditions, enjoying autonomy, both in the use of public resources and the definition of their pedagogical and curricular projects. Various indigenous peoples are dealing with Indigenous schools, promoting community education, with a broad participation of all the community members.

¹ (§ 2º O ensino fundamental regular será ministrado em língua portuguesa, assegurada às comunidades indígenas também a utilização de suas línguas maternas e processos próprios de aprendizagem.)

Given the great cultural and linguistic differences among the over 305 indigenous peoples in the Brazilian territory, each school in indigenous villages is peculiar and different from the others. The paper will present the example of an indigenous school in a community located on the Cuieiras River – a tributary of the Rio Negro – 80 kilometers (km) from Manaus, in Amazonia: Nova Esperança, “Pisasú Sarusawa” in *Nheengatu*, *Ñe'engatu* o *Ñeengatú* also known as the general language of the Amazon, whose story we will present. The community is located within the Puranga Conquista Sustainable Development Reserve (RDS), managed by the government of the State of Amazonas. The community is predominantly made up of the Baré ethnic group. Based on the information collected in the village Nova Esperança and the interview with the school director, Joarlison Garrido, we will especially focus how indigenous education can develop original intercultural practices and promote the values of sustainability in a harmonious respect to the environment.

2. Indigenous Education: The Main Issues

According to the 2020 Basic Education School Census, there are 3,359 Indigenous schools in Brazil – the majority offering just the Elementary level- a third of them in Amazonas. To continue studying, teenagers need to change cities and face the inadequacy of urban schools' proposals for their reality. Indigenous schools represent an important instrument of transmission of Indigenous culture to the new generations. Many issues, however, do exist -both practical/concrete and epistemological – that is the construction of the knowledge to transmit and the pedagogical instruments for this aim.

Many problems concern infrastructure (sanitary sewage, electricity, internet connexion), didactic materials (the 305 indigenous peoples speak 274 different languages) and personnel- - some of whom lack basic training and very few have attended higher education². It is, nevertheless, positive the emerging of a large contingent of indigenous teachers, dedicated to building a properly indigenous form of schooling, united in local and regional organizations hosting periodic meetings and producing pedagogical documents.

Besides the practical problems Indigenous schools face, fundamental epistemological questions concern the ambiguous relationship between school and indigenous societies. As Freire (2004) states, historically schools have served as a denial of identity, contributing to the disappearance of Indigenous languages, oral tradition, knowledge and art. Schools role was to make indigenous students forgetting about their cultures and abandoning their indigenous individuality (Freire, 2004, p. 23). How is it possible, then, to “teach” Indigenous culture in the school institution -historically an instrument of assimilation, which- with its timetables and calendars-, comes into conflict with home education, preventing children from participating in hunting, fishing and agriculture activities, crucial parts IN the transmission of the Indigenous culture, which was an oral culture? How can indigenous education combine an oral tradition and a written tradition?

Issues raised by the relationship between oral tradition and written tradition show how complex it is for the two education models coexist. Efforts have been made to preserve and revitalize Indigenous languages: bilingual education programs have been implemented to teach them alongside Portuguese in Indigenous schools. This is certainly positive, but it has also ambiguous effects, as Ladeira points out: “*literacy of indigenous peoples in their vernacular language is, assuming that writing is worth more than spoken, “elevating” indigenous languages. (...) But the indigenous languages in Brazil are originally unwritten, stapled. The adoption of a written regimen for them could result in an even more radical devaluation of a regime of oral transmission that prevails not only in languages, but also in many other fields of knowledge.*” (Ladeira, 2014, p. 435)³

These difficulties cannot be overcome by traditional education patterns. Indigenous education must follow innovative approaches and new pedagogical practices in an intercultural perspective⁴. A different type of school as part of village life, stimulating and respecting the times and ways culture is transmitted according to oral modalities, must be implemented. The appropriation of books by

² <https://educacaointegral.org.br/glossario/educacao-escolar-indigena/>

³ Ladeira, 2014, p. 435, traduction of Giovanna Campani

⁴ <https://www.institutoclaro.org.br/educacao/nossas-novidades/noticias/7-livros-para-entender-a-educacao-escolar-indigena/>

indigenous students should be valued but confining the transmission of culture exclusively within school walls should be avoided.

3. The Bare People In Nova Esperanca – Amazonia

An example of innovative and intercultural approach is offered by the Puranga Pisasú (Boa nova-Bonne nouvelle in Neengatu) Municipal Indigenous School in the community of Nova Esperanca, located 80 kilometers from Manaus on the Cuieiras River – a tributary of the Rio Negro in the Brazilian Amazonia region. In 2020, 2021 and 2022 I had different contacts with the leaders of the community of Nova Esperança, online and face-to-face in Manaus; in January 2023 I was finally able to stay in the village hosted in a family, carry out participant observation and do interviews. The great majority of the habitants belong to the Bare, who have been generally described as an “acculturated” Amazonian people whose contact and mixing with other Indians and even with the white people who migrated to the region is very old, dating back to the XVIII century (Maia Figueiredo, 2009). The Bare do no longer speak their original mother tongue (a language of the Arawak family) but Nheengatu and Portuguese. Imposed by the missionaries in the XVIII century, Nheengatu has today assumed another meaning: for the Bare it represents a mark of their cultural identity and a form of resistance to the imposition of the Portuguese language by the government authorities and the Salesian missionaries during the XIXth and XXth century.

According to Peterson Medeiros Colares (2018), author of a recent ethnographic study on Nova Esperanca, 117 individuals, divided in 37 Bare families and 3 non-Baré family live in the community (the number has of course grown in the last 5 years- reaching around 130). The majority work in crafts, tourism, fishing and family farming. Nova Esperança is involved in a project of Community-based Tourism (CBT) or Community-based Sustainable Tourism (CBST), a segment of tourism that addresses conservation, community involvement and leadership, promoted in the frame of the Rio Negro Community-Based Tourism Route (Tucorin)⁵, an initiative for more sustainable tourism, which generates economic incentives and values the culture of local communities⁶.

Besides community tourism, Nova Esperança represents as well an iconographic reference for crafts: in 2016, the IPÊ – Instituto de Pesquisa Ecologica⁷ and Instituto C&A- supporting inclusive fashion as a way to promote change⁸, in partnership with the State Secretariat for the Environment (SEMA) and USAID, financed the construction of the “House of Knowledge”, Uka Yayumbué Baiakù (UKA), a cultural center that benefits the local community and surrounding populations, hosting a library and organizing activities to strengthen traditions. The bilingual Indigenous School (Portuguese and *nheengatu*) is at the crossroad of these various projects, including an ecological one, the chelonian (turtles) conservation⁹: *“Chelonians represent an important resource in the Amazon, either as a source of protein at the base of the food chain of aquatic and transition ecosystems, or in the dispersion of seeds of plants from floodplains and flooded forests. The consumption and predatory exploitation of their meat and eggs by local populations has been, and still is, one of the main threats*

⁵ The Tucorin program or Roteiro Tucorin (Turismo Comunitário no Rio Negro).is managed by Instituto de Pesquisas Ecológicas – IPE. ONG Nymuendaju. Fundo Vale. USAid, Ministérios do Turismo, Meio-Ambiente, Secretarias de Meio-Ambiente do Estado do Amazonas e do município de Manaus

⁶ <https://journals.openedition.org/confins/45154?lang=pt>

⁷ <https://ipe.org.br/noticias/instituto-c-a-doa-recursos-para-continuidade-de-projeto-durante-pandemia/>
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⁸ <https://institutocea.org.br>

⁹ <https://ipe.org.br/projetos/baixo-rio-negro/auto-fortalecimento-da-cultura-bare-por-meio-do-turismo-comunitario-e-da-valorizacao-do-artesanato-na-comunidade-de-nova-esperanca/>

<https://www.ecycle.com.br/comunidade-indigena-do-amazonas-obtem-sucesso-com-praticas-de-turismo-comunitario/>

to these animals. Community-based conservation projects allied to official protection programs have been restoring populations of chelonians of the genus *Podocnemis* throughout the Amazon since 1974.”

Community tourism, crafts and chelonian conservation are developed with focus on socio-biodiversity, to support and empower the community in order to value fair work, indigenous education, qualification and also the role of women, strengthening, at the same time, the Baré cultural identity.

4. The Community and The School

The community of Nova Esperança was formed in the eighties. The decision of migrating from the area of Santa Isabel, more precisely the island of Maricota¹⁰ was taken the patriarch -father-grandfather and great grandfather of many of the present inhabitants, Seu Jonas, married to Dona Arlete, in the aim of bringing the family clan- and the new generations- closer to education and health services. It turns out that, shortly before they decided to come, there were two deaths in the family, associated with the lack of health care, a determining factor for migration (Madeiros Colares, 2018). They came to seek proximity to an urban center, where they could seek support from public bodies when they needed it. They found temporary residence on the slopes of the Cuieiras River.

In 1991, at the invitation of Seu Jonas, Seu José Pancrácio, his wife, Dona Sonia and three children, as well as other relatives, also arrived, totaling 17 people. What was initially a visit ended up becoming a stay, also as a consequence of the meeting with a couple, seu Getúlio, retired military officer, and Dona Domitila, retired teacher, both Baré as well and owners of a large piece of land. Seu Getulio allows that the migrating Baré people settle in its land. *“At the same time, Getúlio observes that the children are not studying, and decides, on his own, to set up and finance a school. The school begins its activities inside Seu Getúlio’s house, with teaching materials and school meals paid for by them. There was no public school in Cuieiras at that time, according to reports from residents of Nova Esperança. From then on, the history of the school and the community become intertwined. Residents often say that the school came before the community.”* (Madeiros Colares, 2018)

Initially, the school was not indigenous, but regular. There was a period in which, after Seu Getúlio’s intervention, the school was managed to be taken over by the education department of the municipality of Novo Airão, and only later was it incorporated into the Municipal Education Secretariat of the municipality of Manaus – SEMED/ Manaus, being recognized as an indigenous school only in 2014. According to the interviews with residents seu Getulio, now very old and sick was extremely interested in promoting education among the Baré, as he had himself studied to become engineer during his military career. The importance of the academic study was finally shared by the patriarch of the community: one of the children, Joarlison Garrido- now director of the school- was sent to university. In the youngest generation, a few do graduate studies as well.

This is how Peterson Medeiros Colares (2018) describe the school building in Nova Esperança: *““ On the left, on grassy ground, is the Municipal Indigenous School Puranga Pisasú - EIMPP, or Boa Nova, in Portuguese. All in masonry, painted in white and with clay tiles. It has three U-shaped mini pavilions, the largest of which contains ten classrooms, and the two lateral ones, respectively, the kitchen, pantry and food storage, and the administrative area. In the center, a kind of semi-covered square was created, which also serves as communication between the three pavilions. Flanking the school is the vegetable garden, where chives, coriander and chicory plants are grown. On the left edge, a small wooden house that houses the generator, and further on some community houses”*

¹⁰ The course of the Rio Negro between the mouth of the Uaupés and the city of Santa Isabel is the area that currently concentrates the largest population in the entire northwestern Amazon. The cities of Santa Isabel and, above all, São Gabriel da Cachoeira act as centers of attraction for populations that previously lived further inland, on the banks of the Rio Negro. The population flow from communities in the interior of the municipality towards the city of São Gabriel is characterized by the search for complementing school studies, paid work, military service and proximity to commerce with more affordable prices than those practiced by the regatões and merchant boats that move through rivers.



Fig. 1. Chelonian (turtles) conservation project at the Puranga Pisasú Indigenous School

The Puranga Pisasú Municipal Indigenous School is linked to the Municipal Department of Education of Manaus. The administrative zoning provides full support and monitoring of the school's didactic-pedagogical routine in relation to the national curriculum. The part of diversified content, specific to indigenous education, is the responsibility of the Indigenous School Education Management. The school offers all stages of Basic Education. In Elementary School, there are 68 students enrolled in the multigrade modality. In the morning the pedagogical block serves grades 1 to 5; In the afternoon, Early Childhood Education and the 6th to 9th grade classes. In high school there is a class with 22 students studying the 3rd year, via the SEDUC (Segreteria de Estado da Educação) Media Center, in the evening. The staff is made up of four permanent teachers (one of whom is the manager), two from the Itinerant Project, who work on a modulated basis, also serving other schools, two general services, a lunch lady and a speedboat driver. Of these, only one general service agent and one Itinerant teacher are not indigenous.

5. The Interview with Joarlison Garrido, School Director

The interview with Joarlison Garrido took place at the school, in the semi-covered square at the center, which also serves as communication between the three pavilions. The interview was organized around four questions: a) the meaning of *educação indígena* and the relationship with the school education; b) the transition from school to work; c) how to create jobs in the community; d) the relationship between the community activities and the market.

In respect to indigenous education, the director develops the intercultural approach and the intertwining of two knowledge: "*Indigenous education happens in the social context of the children:*

learning to fish, to hunt, to plant, to make their own fishing instruments, to know the right time for harvesting crops, to intercept natural phenomena, to communicate with the forest through the sounds and the animals. This type of awareness is not provided by the “official” school, it is in the everyday context, outside the school’s walls.” In respect to what the school provides: “The school mediates the conditions of knowledge, in the school you have the more scientific side of the Academy: the field of mathematics or geography, the specific areas of knowledge. Or these knowledges meet the previous knowledge of the Baré people, as indigenous people see mathematics, geography, science...In the mission of our school, both knowledges must be intertwined. This is where the famous concept of intercultural education theory arises because it is necessary to know how to acquire knowledge of the societies that are not indigenous, but you also need to know the basic knowledge of your people in all these areas. For example, we have older people in the village who don’t need a clock to know the time and do calculations using their own guideline. We have people here in the village who know how to interpret the weather: they know that it will rain tomorrow... they are natural meteorologists. This is the knowledge that needs to be intertwined and how do we pass on this knowledge.”

Joarlison is fully aware of the complexity of the pedagogical process that is involved, as testified by this sentence: *“Academic knowledge is passed on by teachers in classrooms, contextualizing it with everyday knowledge, the knowledge of the people. It’s a giant complexity: the combination of two types of knowledge is interculturality.”*¹¹

The following question concerned how this intercultural approach could support the young students to enter the labor market. There, the reasoning of the director was especially interesting, as he questioned the predominant focus on labor market by the education system, neglecting the education to human values: *“In Brazil, nowadays, schools are mainly concerned with the professional part in education, preparing students for the job market. This is good up to a certain point, because today we see ourselves that there is a loss of values. We don’t have a school that prepares young people for life. If you end up losing the moral values of the people this is negative also for your work: to be a good professional you need to have empathy, to be supportive, to have collectivity, to need to help your friends when they need it. This understanding of the interiorization of the human being is as if it were the initial stage of the individual’s formation and the young person keeps this in their structure. If he/she succeeds, he/she will be a great professional in the profession that he/she wants to make. On the contrary, we see young teenagers getting lost in bad behaviors, in drugs... losing themselves and losing the essence of the human being...”*

¹¹ “Os saberes da academia som passados pelos professores em salas da aula contextualizando com os saberes do quotidianos, os saberes do povo. E’ uma complexidade gigante: a junção de dois conhecimentos de dois saberes é a interculturalidade.”



Fig. 2. The library at the Village of Nova Esperança

We worked on this at school, we tell the young persons...you never have to forget your people knowledge, your people customs...they are in your blood. Ah, when they have obtained this awareness, we can see that we are preparing them for life, life outside and life inside. We think for their future life. Many want to go away, many want to stay here, the majority want to stay here in the community...Here we must give dignity, give sustainable work. They can go to the city to be an industrialist to work in the factory, but here we have also our factory of traditional Crafts and Artisanal Work, education, plantations...

School must prepare to leave and to stay too. Let leaving be an option and not an obligation. Let each of them, after this maturation process, decide what is best for them."

Joarlison has already introduced the importance of the activities and the opportunities that have been developed in the community of Nova Esperança. Now he details them, starting from a specific indigenous approach, expressing gratitude to the Mother Earth. *"Nature- the mother nature – offers several possibilities for the people to generate work in the environment where we are. Here comes the importance of the academy. When I left I had a closed view. When I returned to the community, having studied pedagogy, my vision had expanded like this (he makes a gesture of opening) and I managed to help my people in the elaboration of the societal project. There are different ways of producing income that also help the environment...an example, the people who work in the traditional Crafts and Artisanal Work earn more than somebody who has an employment in Manaus... and starts at six in the morning and ends at five in the afternoon. The people who do the artisanal work here have dignity and have also a social life. In a factory or in a store in Manaus, you have no autonomy in your timetable. And for a poor salary. They work, they don't earn enough, they get home super stressed. Here you have no rigid timetable. You can interrupt your work, go fishing and go back to work when you caught your fish...this is the quality of life. What is better?"*

In the last part of the interview, questions concern the reasons why the products done by the traditional crafts and Artisanal Work that allow many people in the community to live with this income. In fact Indigenous people in the Amazon have rich traditional craftsmanship skills, producing handicrafts such as pottery, basketry, weaving, wood carving, and jewelry, but not all the communities succeed in reaching global markets as some wood sculptures produced by the Bare of Nova Esperança that are sold all over Brazil in different shops and are presented in International Fairs. Joarlison links the success of their products with the principle of Sustainable Forestry and of Non-timber Forest Products (used for jewelry for example) through sustainable practices and their knowledge of the ecosystem: *"We are in a region that gives possibilities, and we are constantly experimenting these possibilities. What works, what can be improved. The craftsmanship is at an*

advanced stage. Today we have the market: our production capacity is lower than market demand. It wasn't like that since the beginning. Because we went through a process of maturation...all our crafts are products from the forest...they are forest products, but we don't need to deforest...others deforest, but we don't need it...here comes the question of mentality. In the forest there are many trees. There comes knowledge that does not come from academia: the quality of wood. This one is good, it has a nice color, it lasts for a long time. The selection of raw materials is the result of the people's knowledge, so here you go...selecting this and not that. Here comes the technique comes as a process of taking what is found in the forest...what falls down naturally...and our craftsmanship gives it new life...for everyday use. There are several functions for our products - decorative, domestic...and so the market embraces us because we try to show the market that we follow the principle of sustainability with this practice. We have shown that using only what has fallen into the forest due to natural events, we make quality crafts and we are maintaining our forest and that way we can also develop other activities, thanks to our knowledge of the forest. Another tourist activity is hiking in the forest for tourists. "

Joarlison then analyzes how the market valorized their products, a valorization which led them to be sold by large distribution chains and present at various fairs. *"It's an important question. It has to do with the fact that we transmit the principle of trust to us – about the sustainability of our products. Today the world talks about sustainable development, everyone talks about sustainability. What we see a lot is the absence of public politicians to promote sustainability. That's why the government works from theory to practice. We do the opposite. We work from practice to theory. We work on sustainability in practice. We show everybody that we work with our legs. We focus on the practice of sustainability. This is a mentality that when people from outside visit Nova Esperança, they are able to see...they can see how we practice sustainability. They can observe that our products were sustainable... This is the added value of our products: we follow the principles of sustainability (...)...No need to kill trees, economically viable, ecologically correct and socially fair. It is important to understand these principles...they are the added values to the product you are purchasing."* Here another topic is introduced, the capacity of the indigenous population to present their products as many indigenous people have excellent products but when it comes to presenting them to the market, the added value is unknown. *"It is a question of mentality and of being strategic. You are sending messages through your product. You don't just need to sell, you need to talk. What is your message to the outside world? That's where the importance of the academy comes into play in our training because when I left here my vision was small, the academy did that...opened up...contributing to projects. Our crafts -fish sculptures, jewels...is an attraction, but we can work tourism, trails, animal observatories...One of the good things of community tourism is that... it's bringing people who come here out of their stereotypical view of Indigenous and into a different view. Anyone who arrives can see that the Indigenous himself is developing his technological techniques to improve his life. What is the ingredient: combining academic training with community work...the academy allows to see the possibilities...then you develop them working together with the community."*

6. Conclusions

Indigenous schools are a main instrument for defending indigenous knowledge. Most indigenous communities are immersed in intercultural relationships with the colonial and state society since centuries, as we have seen in the case of the Baré who have constantly readapted their cultural patterns- as the case of the use of Neengatu shows. The ability to keep an Indigenous identity while experiencing constant intercultural exchanges with the "whites", appears central to the historical experience of the Baré People. The same ability seems to characterize the community of Nova Esperança and the experience of their Indigenous school through the idea of an intercultural approach which intertwine two types of knowledge and embracing the principles of sustainability that may encounter the traditional respect for Mother Earth. In the perspective developed by Joarlison, preserving the community that assures the transmission of the Indigenous culture and promoting a local sustainable development coincide. The interview suggests that it is possible to fix the balance between the traditional knowledge and the knowledge that is necessary for the new generations that are going to live in the modern Brazilian society.



Fig. 3. Entrance to the village of Nova Esperança

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