

## The Indigenous People of the FULNI-Ô in Pernambuco: Language and Education to Preserve Identity

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### Abstract

*The 1988 Brazilian Constitution fostered the advancement of Indigenous people's education, with a double aim: guaranteeing equitable access to universal knowledge (the national education system), while also preserving and cherishing their cultural and identity elements (the Indigenous schools). The establishment of these new educational institutions, the Indigenous schools, notwithstanding the inherent complexities, has been implemented through a set of political and legislative edicts (such as Law 9.394/1996, Law 13.005/2014, CNE/CEB Technical Opinions No. 13 and 14, CEB Resolution No. 3). There are currently (2023), according to the data of the Ministry of Education, 3,411 indigenous schools, of which 2,555 are in the North region (66.11%) (Amazonia); 656 in the Northeast region (19.23%); 268 in the Midwest region (7.86%); 160 in the South region (4.69%); and 72 in the Southeast region (2.11%). Over the years, these schools have become powerful instruments for safeguarding the rich Indigenous heritage and facilitating a more harmonious and balanced dialogue with the non-indigenous society.*

*Gersem Luciano Baniwa (2006), Indigenous anthropologist, clarifies the distinction between indigenous school education and traditional indigenous education (Campani, 2024). For him, both are spaces for the transmission of knowledge, but the traditional indigenous education has historically been set aside to the detriment of the ideological objectives inherent in the school education: integration of indigenous peoples through, first, acculturation, then assimilation.*

*The current increase in indigenous schools and in school attendance – at all levels – of Indigenous people, calls for reflections and struggles about the ways to include (and enhance) traditional indigenous knowledge, through specific learning methodologies – such as in school management – that guarantee the autonomy of educational projects, whether scholastic or not, taking into account the characteristics and needs defined by indigenous peoples.*

*Indigenous schools are the place where traditional indigenous knowledge is transmitted, but what are their specificities and how do they adapt to the school structure, which is not proper to the indigenous tradition? As the indigenous activist **Casé Angatu Xukuru Tupinambá** explains indigenous education is omnipresent in the villages, preceding the school: "We indigenous people have an education that predates indigenous schooling itself. This knowledge that we have in our villages and communities is an ancestral education that comes from our origins. We respect our elders as bearers of this knowledge, of the wisdom of healing, of preserving nature and of thinking about a world where many worlds fit together."<sup>1</sup>*

*Another important point is the distinction between knowledge and knowing. Casé Angatu Xukuru Tupinambá argues that wisdom comes before knowledge. Wisdom is something linked to nature, it is something ancestral. "What's more, it's not just a question of Indigenous peoples; all peoples have ancestral wisdom. If we respect ancestral wisdom, whether it's indigenous, black, European, or Asian, it doesn't matter; this wisdom will certainly be directed towards respect for nature. So what we're trying to do is make the academic political world realize that respect for ancestral wisdom is natural."<sup>2</sup>*

*Casé Angatu Xukuru Tupinambá argues that ancestral wisdom is opposed to developmentalism, which is destructive, because it is market-oriented. Indigenous thinkers have pointed out how the developmentalist-capitalist system, in itself, destroys ancestral wisdom. Reflecting over Indigenous knowledge has joined a more general upsurge in awareness regarding the deleterious repercussions of capitalist endeavors on the environment. This burgeoning consciousness has been remarkable in the course of the past three decades (Green D., Raygodoretsky, G., 2010).*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://caseangatu.blogspot.com>

<sup>2</sup> <https://caseangatu.blogspot.com>

*Indigenous knowledge appears as an alternative philosophical principle, opposed and in opposition to capitalist rationality, which excessively exploits human beings and nature, and to Eurocentrism, as an ideology that has dominated modernity. As Monica Bruckmann (2011, p. 334) has perfectly expressed: "Starting from a deep critique and break with the Eurocentric vision, its rationality, its model of modernity and development inserted in the structure of colonial power, the Latin American indigenous movement positions itself as a civilizing movement, capable of recovering the historical legacy of the origins of civilization to rework not one, but several Latin American identities; not just one way of producing knowledge, but all the forms of knowledge and products with which they have coexisted and resisted domination for more than five hundred years. The indigenous element is becoming the center of the discourse and construction of a vision of the world, of a political subject and of a collective and emancipatory project." (Bruckmann, 2011, p. 334).*

*Emphasizing the pivotal significance of indigenous peoples in shaping our collective future, particularly in the context of fostering sustainability, assumes paramount importance. What is needed is a work of "decolonization," so that people in education (from primary schools to universities) can decolonize their knowledge, in the sense of realizing how it can serve ancestral wisdom instead of developmentalism. This has been possible as "In the three centuries of colonization, different indigenous groups were transformed and mixed, building new forms of identification that had a strong reference in the villages in which they lived" (Almeida and Moreira, 2012, p.6-7). Many of these peoples have, over the centuries, developed specific systems of resistance to preserve their identity, while at the same time developing strategies to influence the surrounding culture. From this perspective, the case of the Fulni-ô, an Indigenous tribe from Pernambuco, Northeast of Brazil, is especially interesting. The second part of the paper is consecrated to their experience. The contacts between the Fulni-ô and the colonial society first, and then the Brazilian state, are ancient. Nevertheless, they have preserved strong identity and traditions. Their case shows how indigenous knowledge can be preserved in spite of centuries of contact with the colonial authorities and society.*

**Keywords:** Language, Cultural Identity, Indigenous, Education

## **The Fulni-ô from Pernambuco**

Fulni-ô means "the people of the riverbank", but, today, the Fulni-ô indigenous reservation is 300 kilometers away from the nearest river. The Fulni-ô tribe was, at the beginning of colonization, disputed between the Portuguese and Dutch colonialists. Like other tribes, the Fulni-ô were pushed inland by the Europeans who wanted control of the coastal areas. In order to control the tribes, the Portuguese settled them in villages. The first news about these villages date back to the 18th century. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the Fulni-ô people were known by the name Carnijós. The tribe's history begins when the Portuguese arrived in Brazil and conflicts arose with the "white men", as the Fulni-ô call them. They are aware that they occupied a large area and, as time went by, they became trapped in an increasingly smaller space. *"The Fulni-ô are one of the Brazilian indigenous groups with the longest contact with national society. For this reason, they were placed, together with the rest of the northeastern groups, at one end of a continuum "which has as its opposite pole the tribal populations that only in our days have established the first systematic contacts with representatives of Brazilian society."* (Amorim 1972:2). However, far from being assimilated, they have kept a strong identity.

Generally, the Fulni-ô define themselves as Indians, as for them this concept includes the Fulni-ô. They define themselves as Indians when they oppose themselves to the members of the national society, whom they call by different names: "civilized", "whites", and "Brazilians". These denominations are used indistinctly and are the same ones that the inhabitants of Águas Belas use to identify themselves before the Fulni-ô. When they have to identify themselves before other indigenous groups, then the Indians of Águas Belas call themselves Fulni-ô. There is a word *la-tê* that the Fulni-ô use to designate all non-Fulni-ô Indians, which is *Setso*. Thus the *Setso*, together with the Fulni-ô, are included in the concept of Indian. In general terms, they consider as *Setso* those groups that preserve certain characteristics of their original culture and that have their own language.

The reserve is in the municipality of Águas Belas. This is an inland part of the State of Pernambuco, 340 km west of the State capital, Recife. The entire area of the municipality of Águas Belas, 887 (eight hundred and eighty-seven) km<sup>2</sup>, corresponds to the land that the Fulni-ô claim to have received from Princess Isabel, whose document was "signed in gold", according to their report, for their participation and for their deaths in the Paraguayan War (1870). Although the Indians are the



legitimate owners of the land, a right acquired since 1928, when the area was legitimized and demarcated, the indigenous reserve is almost entirely occupied by non-Indians through leases, both in the urban area (construction of houses) and in the rural area (establishment of small agricultural and livestock properties). Currently, the Fulni-ô indigenous land comprises an area of 11,505 (eleven thousand five hundred and five) hectares or approximately 115.5 (one hundred and fifteen point five) km<sup>2</sup>. There are approximately seven people living in the reserve.

Most of the Fulni-ô live in Aldeia headquarters. It is commonly located at the headquarters called by the Fulni-ô the “large village”, as a way of differentiating it from the other two villages, that of Xyxyaklá and Ouricuri [...] The city and the main village are physically integrated. This village is where the facilities of the old Indigenous Post of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) and the schools are located. It is also where the majority of the population lives during the other months of the year.

This village is located in the middle of the urban area of Aguas Bellas, so close to the city that an unsuspecting visitor could leave the city and enter the village without realizing it. This is especially true because the village is located next to the city of Aguas Belas. The latter was founded in colonial times in the middle of Fulni-ô territory and, today, is like an island located within the lands of the indigenous reserve. Although the majority of Fulni-ô live in Aldeia Grande (Big Village), there is also Aldeia Ouricuri (a lower village - a place of Fulni-ô religious expression) and Xyxyaklá, the village of Xixiakhlá (which means many catingueiras in Yathê). The latter is also called Cipriano by non-Indians. There are several studies on Fulni-O that describe in detail their history and their current life. These are anthropological and pedagogical studies. Anthropologists have studied different factors, self-definition, endogamy, economic activities. Today, descriptions on Instagram by the Fulni themselves - of their traditions, crafts and rituals - have multiplied.

### **Toré, Cafurnas, Yaathe Language and Ritual Sacred and Secret Ouricuri**

According to Arruti: “*the Fulni-ô, despite some racial miscegenation, and having been dispossessed of their former lands by local politicians, maintain the language and customs of their ancestors, as well as their social cohesion*” (Arruti, 2004, p. 237). Clothing, housing, certain religious conventions – such as marriage and baptism – parties, schools, businesses and other benefits of consumer civilization exist within this community. However, distinguishing features are maintained and firmly defended by the Fulni-ô's. The strongest distinguishing features are their religion and language. In spite of the Christianization process, they maintain their religious beliefs that are reinforced every year through the Ouricuri ritual, a retreat where only Indigenous people participate from September to November each year, constituting a mystery and a source of much curiosity for the local non-indigenous community. Due to their hermetic culture and religion, the Indians are seen as exotic individuals, different from the non-Indian majority. Their religious habits and language are considered deviations from the civilized norm by the non Indigenous neighbors (Diaz, 2015) .



Fulni-ô in a ceremony (open to the public) in the Tijuca forest (RJ), photo by Giovanna Campani

There are other rituals that are opened to the public, as the Toré – tole – the, a sacred dance performed only on special occasions, which involves also singing. Various instruments, such as the maraca – tsaka – and the cowrie shells – khixaka – are used. It is quite common to see young Indians dancing Toré – also for tourists—but the older ones assure us that this is not the real Toré, the one performed in the rituals. The Toré ritual is not just the Fulni O', but is common to several ethnic groups in the Brazilian Northeast, such as the Pankararu, Pankararé, Kariri-Xocó, Xukuru-Kariri, Potiguara, Geripancó and Fulni-ô. It is a cultural manifestation of great importance to the indigenous people, involving tradition, music, religion and games. The ceremony also includes a circular dance, in line or in pairs, accompanied by songs to the sound of maracas, bass drums, bagpipes and whistles. Each community has its own unique Toré, with variations in tunes, rhythms and expressions. Throughout the ritual, the Encantados are invoked, spiritual entities of these indigenous traditions whose physical representation is the Praiá, a traditional garment made of straw. Composed of two parts, the mask or coat, called Tanam, and the skirt, its purpose is to preserve the identity of the dancer, who, by wearing it, following religious precepts, becomes the Enchanted One himself. The traditional songs of the Fulni-ô are the cafurnas, speak of daily life, the struggle to maintain identity and mainly evoke spirituality, considered a fundamental element for mental and physical healing. The performance of the cafurnas is always accompanied by dances inspired by animals from the Pernambuco backlands.

The language is very important. The Fulni-ô insist that their children learn it, because for them, having their own language is an essential attribute for defining themselves as Indians. Perhaps the interest of adults in teaching Ya-tê is increasing in light of the threat that the new generations will lose their language, due, among other things, to the influence of public schools, where children and young people speak Portuguese. The Ya-tê is important as it differentiates them from the white and from other Indians. The Fulni-ô bilingualism is characterized by being more active than passive; acquired; and asymmetrical towards Portuguese.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many researchers, linguists and anthropologists were able to study the Fulni-ô language and culture. The Melands, Douglas and Doris, missionaries from the SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) lived in the village for some time. Douglas Meland learned to speak Yaathe fluently, according to reports from some Indians. Lapenda also visited the village to get to know the tribe. His grammar of Yaathe, however, was developed based on data provided by two informants whom the linguist hosted for a long time in his home in the city of Recife. Lapenda, in personal

communication, said he had come to speak Yaathe fluently. Likewise, Barbosa's description of the phonetic-phonological aspects of Yaathe is based mainly on data from informants who were in Brasília. He also visited the village where he recorded real situations of dialogues and longer narratives. (Barbosa, 1991, 3-4). More recently, researcher Januacele Francisca da Costa began her studies on the language at UFPE, under the guidance of Professor Adair Palácio. According to the anthropologists who studied the group, bilingualism, in general, extends to 91.4% of the village population. 64.3% of this population uses Yaathe and its rules of use, both productively and receptively, among those in the group, and Portuguese in social situations involving contact with the outside group, the non-Indian population of the region. In other words, Portuguese is the official language, imposed and institutionalized; Yaathe is the internal language.

Among the sociocultural expressions that the Fulni-ô claim to have inherited from their ancestors, they also mention handicrafts. A special work are products made with the straw of the ouricuri (a plant from the palm family, which has the same name as the ritual).

### The Economic Life

In general, the Fulni-ô are very poor and depend on FUNAI's assistance to survive. When the Fulni-ô reserve lands were demarcated, they were divided into lots that were given to each Indian individually. Therefore, today, most of them live by leasing their lands to non-Indian farmers and ranchers. Few Fulni-ô cultivate the land or have livestock. Also, very few have a specialized profession, except for technicians and teachers. There are FUNAI employees, who live relatively well, some traders of essential goods, service providers, such as shoemakers, bricklayers, etc.

Like the rest of the region's peasants, the Fulni-ô participate in the national economy through the market. As peasants, they are not very different from regional peasants. We could say that in some aspects they enjoy more advantages due to the fact that their land tenure is guaranteed due to the official protection they receive. In other aspects, they have disadvantages; for example, they have difficulty obtaining credit. However, structurally, these differences do not make them different from other sectors of the peasantry. Due to the drought, the Fulni-ô are unable to live exclusively from farming, fishing and hunting. Many have to work in the city. Every year in April, some receive authorization to travel around Brazil in a procession to raise funds by selling handicrafts and giving cultural performances.



Fulni-ô preparing to sell art crafts (RJ),  
photo by Giovanna Campani

In fact, making handicrafts out of seeds, wood, and straw, especially the latter, has become the main source of income. In addition to tools, such as brooms, mats, fans, bags, and baskets, they also make decorative indigenous artifacts. Straw crafts, however, have declined considerably, and their survival is even threatened, since the typical palm tree of the region, used as raw material, ouricuri (*cocos coronata*), is believed to be in danger of extinction as a result of the uncontrolled deforestation of the caatingas and, above all, of the mountains, where it was most abundant.

The products of this incipient, although traditional, craft are colored with lines and designs that seem typical of the Fulni-ô. To do this, industrial aniline is used, whereas before dyes from various native plants that are now extinct were used, such as jenipapo, the fruit of the jenipapeiro (*Tocoyena formosa*) and urucu, the fruit of the annatto (*Bixa orellana*).

Today, although some still do it this way, there is the figure of the middleman. They buy the products from small artisans and resell them in their own village to tourists at the city fair, or they travel to the capitals where they usually visit exhibitions, congresses, conventions and hotels to exhibit and sell Fulni-ô crafts.



Politically, the Fulni-ô participate in two distinct systems, one that belongs to their group and the other to regional and national society.

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