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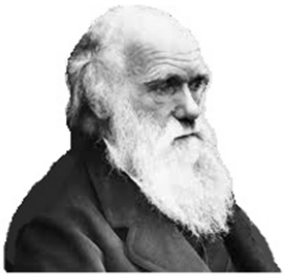

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Visual poetry and artistic creation processes of Brazilian indigenous peoples: basketry

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ABSTRACT

The art of Brazilian indigenous peoples is immensely rich. Among the most common artistic productions of these traditional peoples are body painting, ceramics, basketry, feather art, decorative pieces, work utensils, items used in traditional festivals, adornments, accessories, hunting and personal defense weapons, and musical instruments. The raw materials are sourced from nature, such as vines, leaves, bark, seeds, bird feathers, and animal teeth. The objective of this work was to analyze the richness of visual poetry and the artistic creation processes of some Brazilian indigenous peoples, with a focus on basketry.

***Keywords*:** Indigenous, basketry, Amazon rainforest, ethnoconservation

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional peoples have characteristics that distinguish them from the populations of large, industrialized urban centers. These groups possess profound knowledge of nature, reflected in their development of strategies for utilizing and managing natural resources, which sustain their way of life. Their economic activities are deeply tied to nature and, far from being predatory, they limit environmental impact through relatively simple technology. The

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economic, social, and cultural activities of these traditional peoples are rooted in family units connected to their communities and kinship networks [1].

During these activities, myths, rituals, and symbolism play a significant role. Within the technical and social division of labor, artisanal practices stand out, as the producer and their family control the work process. Economic relations with external markets are minimal, as production is largely aimed at subsistence, resulting in limited capital accumulation [2].

To ensure the social reproduction of their groups, traditional populations combine various economic activities, such as plant extractivism, small-scale farming, hunting, and fishing. The artistic expressions of Brazilian indigenous peoples are rich, incorporating symbolic elements into diverse forms of art. Common artistic productions include body painting, ceramics, basketry, feather art, decorative pieces, utensils for work and festivals, adornments, hunting tools, and musical instruments. These items are made from natural materials such as vines, leaves, bark, seeds, bird feathers, and animal teeth. This study aims to analyze the richness of visual poetry and the artistic creation processes of certain Brazilian indigenous peoples, emphasizing basket weaving.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study involved Indigenous peoples from the Brazilian Amazon, including the Apiaká, Juruna (who identify as Yudjá), Tenharim (who identify as Kagwahiva), Mura, and Sateré Mawé ethnic groups, and from the Savannah biome, the Xavante, and Bororo ethnic groups. The research was conducted with authorization from Indigenous communities and the National Indigenous People Foundation (FUNAI), the Brazilian governmental agency for Amerindian interests and culture. Interviews with the Bororo were conducted in August 2010, with the Apiaká in June 2011, the Kagwahiva in October and November 2014, the Mura and Sateré Mawé in January and February 2016 and March 2018, the Juruna in 2019; and the Xavante in February 2023.

One of the study regions, Volta Grande do Xingu (Xingu River's Big Bend), is located in the State of the Pará, Brazil, between latitudes 03°23' S and 03°38' S and longitudes 51°33' W and 52°00' W. This 130-km stretch of rapids and braided channels on the Xingu River is home to the Juruna ethnic group in the Paquiçamba Indigenous Land [3].

The Indigenous people of the Kagwahiva ethnic group live in the Tenharim Marmelos Indigenous Land, located entirely within the State of Amazonas, in the municipalities of Humaitá and Manicoré, between the geographic coordinates 7°48' and 8°53' south latitude and 61°35' and 62°10' west longitude [4]. In the past, before the construction of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, these Indigenous people lived together in a single village on the banks of the Marmelos River, in the area where the highway now crosses the river [5].

Indigenous people of the Mura and Sateré Mawé ethnic groups live in the Rio Urubu Indigenous Territory, located in the municipality of Itacoatiara, in the state of Amazonas, on the left bank of the Amazon River. This territory lies between latitudes 02°59'S and 03°12'S, and longitudes 58°04'W and 59°48'W [6]. The Indigenous Apiaká studied reside in the Mairowy village, located in the state of Mato Grosso. It is situated between latitudes 7°39'S and 8°32'S, and longitudes 57°50'W and 58°21'W, on the left bank of the Teles Pires River [7].

The Indigenous Bororo studied live in the Meruri village, located in the state of Mato Grosso. It is situated between latitudes 15°23'S and 15°44'S, and longitudes 52°51'W and

53°13’W [8-10]. The Indigenous Xavante studied live in the Ubawawe Indigenous Territory, also located in the state of Mato Grosso. It lies between latitudes 14°23’S and 14°42’S, and longitudes 53°20’W and 53°38’W.

Data collection was conducted through open and semi-structured interviews [11], allowing for greater flexibility and a more natural dialogue [12]. Indigenous individuals of both genders and various ages, recommended by their communities for their knowledge, were interviewed regarding the identification, collection, and utilization of raw materials for basketry.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The baskets produced by Indigenous peoples were originally used primarily for storing and transporting food. Today, these baskets serve additional roles as decorative items. Materials such as vines, plant roots, tree trunk fibers, and leaves are used, all of which are closely linked to the territories occupied by these communities.

The art of braiding is one of the oldest practices in human history and is present in nearly all cultures. Braiding involves interweaving fibers or other raw materials in the form of threads, sheets, or strips. The braiding technique is as diverse as the final product. The process always begins by simply crossing two or more splints, which form the central part, base, or bottom. By subsequently intertwining additional splints, the desired shape is achieved. For Brazilian Indigenous peoples, basket weaving is a manual art in which graphics can be incorporated during the process, often carrying implicit and symbolic meanings. Basketry holds a prominent place in the culture of these communities, who actively work to preserve and promote the art within their respective societies.

The art of creating objects from leaf fiber is deeply ingrained among the Tenharim, who craft the *paneiro* (*pandurue'te*), the *jamanchi* (*pandykugwera*), and baskets (*panakyguera*) using various types of vines, *embiras* (inner bark), and braided leaves from Marantaceae, Heliconiaceae, and various palm trees, such as babassu (*pindoeté*, *Attalea speciosa*) and patauá (*pindowahu*, *Oenocarpus bataua*). The *paneiro* and *jamanchi* are types of panniers carried on the back, secured with two straps, typically made of *embira*, which wrap around the forehead and chest. The difference between these two baskets lies in their design: the *paneiro* is fully enclosed, while the *jamanchi* is open. The Tenharim use these baskets for collecting Brazil nuts and açaí fruits, as well as for transporting agricultural products grown in their villages, such as corn, cassava, and bananas, along with game and other fruits.

However, according to I. Tenharim (53 years old, ♂, Kastanheira village, Tenharim Marmelos Indigenous Land, November 6, 2014), the best material for making *paneiro* and *jamanchi* is *cipó-titica* (*ipoeté*, *Heteropsis flexuosa*) [13, 14]. The *cipó-titica* (titica vine) is not a true vine but a plant from the Araceae family, with a hemiepiphytic habit, meaning it can survive for some time as an epiphyte on trees. The part of the plant used is the roots, which grow downward toward the soil in search of water and nutrients. Once they reach the ground, these roots become highly lignified and hardened. After the bark is removed, the root can be used to make handicrafts. Another root widely used by the Tenharim for the same purpose is *cipó-imbé* (*Philodendron* sp.), another plant from the Araceae family (Figure 1).

The collection of *cipó-titica* begins with the selection of the best materials: the "vine" is pulled from the trees where it is anchored, as it is actually the root of the *Heteropsis flexuosa*

plant. If the vine does not break easily, it is a sign that the material removed will be of good quality. The "defects" in the vine, such as knots, are removed using a machete, and the bundles are brought back to the village to have the bark stripped off and to dry in the sun. After drying, the vine is scraped to make it very fine and ready for use. The importance of *cipó-titica* to the community is highlighted in the words of A. Tenharim (50 years old, ♂, Mafuí village, Tenharim Marmelos Indigenous Land, November 7, 2014): "*I can't even cut a vine to show you the technique, as it would be a waste, and cipó-titica is very valuable to us*."

The Tenharim and the Juruna demonstrated to us, during our walks along the forest trails, how to craft panniers using leaves from Marantaceae, Heliconiaceae, and various palm trees, with remarkable skill and speed (Figure 3). These improvised panniers are used as needed, for instance, "*when you come across game or a tree loaded with fruit along the way*" (J. Tenharim, 76 years old, ♂, Taboka village, Tenharim Marmelos Indigenous Land, November 9, 2014).

The Mura and Sateré Mawé also craft *paneiro* and *jamanchi* using the same raw materials as the Tenharim: *cipó-imbé* (*Philodendron* sp.) and *cipó-titica* (*Heteropsis flexuosa*) (Figure 2). However, for these Indigenous peoples, *cipó-imbé* is primarily used for making brooms, while *cipó-titica* is more commonly used to make baskets for transporting cassava, agricultural products, Brazil nuts, wild fruits, and game. The Mura and Sateré Mawé also create baskets from other plant materials, such as vines, *embiras*, braided leaves from Marantaceae and Heliconiaceae (similarly to the Tenharim and Juruna), various species of palm trees, and splints from the arumã (*Ischnosiphon polyphyllus*), a plant from the Marantaceae family that grows in flooded areas along the Amazon River and its tributaries [15, 16].

Basket weaving is an important activity among the Juruna. Baskets are used to transport objects or store food and are often handcrafted directly in the forest, using leaves, vines, or braided fibers from tree bark. During a walk along a trail in the Lakariká village on August 5, 2019, where not only Juruna artisans participated but also many members of the Indigenous community, eager to learn or simply curious, several pieces were produced: a *jamanchi* made with leaves from the açaí palm (*Euterpe oleracea*), a *cofo* (elongated basket) crafted with young leaves from the babassu palm (*Attalea speciosa*), and a small basket (*paneiro*) made with fibers from the arumã herb (*Ischnosiphon obliquus*). The *paneiro* can also be crafted using straw from the açaí (*Euterpe oleracea*) and buriti (*Mauritia flexuosa*) palm trees (Figure 3).

> "In the past, when walking in the forest, there were no bags—you had to use what was available in the forest. When there were no containers for storing flour, rice, or corn, we put everything in panniers [...]. I still use panniers when collecting Brazil nuts, but I mostly use panniers made from *cipó-timbó* (*Serjania* sp.) and *cipó-titica* (*Heteropsis flexuosa*). It's important for young people to learn how to make panniers because one day they will need them. There are many things we didn't learn from the elders, and now we miss that knowledge" (O.P. Juruna, 50 years old, ♂, Lakariká village, Paquiçamba Indigenous Land, May 8, 2019).
>
> "I taught myself how to make straw baskets. I didn't know how to make anything at first. But we had to carry fruits from the forest to our house—carrying açaí fruits, bacaba fruits, and Brazil nuts. Now, using *cipó-titica* and *cipó-imbé*, I make *cofo* and *paneiro*" (E.F.P. Juruna, 69

> years old, ♂, Furo Seco village, Paquiçamba Indigenous Land, April 4, 2019).

During a walk through the forest, M.P. Juruna (75 years old, ♂, Paquiçamba village, Paquiçamba Indigenous Land, August 2, 2019) paused for a few minutes and, with remarkable skill and speed, crafted a *pacutu* (a type of basket made with braided leaves from the açaí palm tree, *Euterpe oleracea*), which he used to carry his belongings during the hours of walking along the trail. The elderly Indigenous man explained that the type of basket made depends on the need to transport a specific product. For example, the *jamanchi*, which can be made with palm leaves or braided vines and is worn on the back like a backpack, is particularly useful for carrying an animal killed during a hunt. In contrast, more closed baskets, such as the *paneiro*, also made with palm leaves and braided vines, are primarily used to transport fruits and Brazil nuts. As a result, the baskets vary in size and shape depending on their intended use, as well as in their manufacturing technique. In this way, each piece is created to suit its specific functionality.

J.J. Juruna (39 years old, ♂, May 8, 2019), an important craftsman from the Mïratu village, Paquiçamba Indigenous Land, knows how to make various green straw baskets, such as *pacutu*, *paneiro*, and *cofo*. He mentioned that he offered to teach the craft at a meeting, in case anyone was interested in learning. He learned the techniques by watching older people practice them: "*I don't know how to make jamanchi from vines because I've never seen them made, but I saw a friend's father make them 30 years ago, I learned, and I haven't forgotten*."

The Juruna make different types of baskets from the açaí leaf (*Euterpe oleracea*). The leaves that fall from the palm tree are stronger and are preferably used. The basket handles are made from *envira* (fibers) from some species of Annonaceae.

> "It is the strongest leaf; it can hold two wild pigs inside the *jamanchi*, and carry Brazil nuts, bacaba, and açaí fruits. You close the basket with a vine. The *pacutu* is used to carry Brazil nuts and cassava, and it is made with two leaves to make it stronger. I don't even know who I learned it from, I just went to the forest and did it, ever since I was a child" (A.P.S. Juruna, 68 years old, ♂, Mïratu village, Paquiçamba Indigenous Land, April 4, 2019).

Other plant ethnospecies are used by the Juruna to make accessories for different baskets, such as envira-preta (*Guatteria cryandra*) for tying *paneiro*; the banana-braba leaf (*Phenakospermum guyanense*) to line the *pacutu*; and the leaf of the ubim palm (*Geonoma deversa*) to line panniers. Among the *enviras*, the most commonly used are those from matá-matá (*Eschweilera* spp.) and from the Annonaceae family, such as envira-preta (*Guatteria cryandra*).

The Apiaká have an elaborate and highly diverse material culture. The items that most distinguish and identify them are the sieves and baskets, typically made by men, and decorated with a wide variety of complex graphic patterns that represent figures from the rich cosmology and mythology of this group. A very useful utensil is the *remancinho*, a type of basket widely used to transport products from the farm to the village. In the Mairowy village (June 6, 2011), a basket was made from the still-green leaves of the inajá palm (*Attalea maripa*) (Figure 1). The leaflets were braided together, folded lengthwise, and could result in different designs, as

we observed with some baskets that had already been made and were being used by the Apiaká, showing good consistency and apparent durability.

Figure 1. (A) and (B) The roots of the cipó-titica (*Heteropsis flexuosa*) and the cipó-imbé (*Philodendron* sp) being harvested from trees; (C) and (D) the roots are braided; (E) and (F) transformed into baskets by the Tenharim. (G) Crafting a basket with green leaves from the inajá palm (*Attalea maripa*) by an Apiaká; (H) a basket made with leaves from the inajá palm by the Apiaká. Photos by Fabio Rossano Dario.

Figure 2. (A) and (B) Baskets crafted by the Bororo using leaves from the babassu palm (*Attalea speciosa*); (C) the babassu palm is one of the most important palm species in the Amazon and Cerrado; details of baskets made by the Tenharim (D, E, G), and by the Mura (F) using vines. Photos by Fabio Rossano Dario.

The Bororo are located in the Cerrado, where the vegetation is quite different from that of the Amazon. However, there are species common to both biomes, such as buriti (*Mauritia flexuosa*) and babassu (*Attalea speciosa*) palm trees. The leaves of these two palms, which the Bororo call *marído* and *noído*, are used to make beautiful baskets (Figure 2). The Xavante, an indigenous people also living in the Cerrado, are skilled artisans who create handicrafts typically between work and study hours. Most of the techniques they use were learned from their ancestors, and such knowledge reveals that the art of craftsmanship is passed down within the family. The main piece of Xavante crafts is the basket, usually made by women from buriti leaves (*Mauritia flexuosa*), which are used to carry “in-arm” children, food, and fruits collected

from the Cerrado. The Xavante call this basket *batité*. These are high-quality pieces. To transport food and fruits, the Xavante also make a basket known as *jamanchi*, made from some types of braided vines. This basket is carried on their backs, held by two handles, typically made from *embira*, that loop around their forehead (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Detail of basketry crafted by Juruna artisans: (G) and (H) simple baskets made with leaves from the açaí palm (*Euterpe oleraceae*); and more sophisticated items, such as the *cofo* (A, B, C), made with leaves from the babassu palm; and a small basket (D, E, F) made with fibers from the arumã herb (*Ischnosiphon obliquus*). Photos by Fabio Rossano Dario.

Figure 4. (A) The buriti palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*) grows in flooded areas of the Amazon and Cerrado; from its leaves, Xavante artisans craft the *batité* basket (B, C, D, E), used to carry food and various utensils. Photos by Fabio Rossano Dario.

4. CONCLUSION

Basketry holds a significant place in the culture of the Indigenous peoples studied, serving both practical and artistic purposes. The pieces vary in size, shape, and construction technique, tailored to their specific uses. Multiple plant species, including buriti and babassu palms, are used in the creation of these crafts, reflecting the unique resources of the Amazon and Cerrado biomes. The transmission of this knowledge within families underscores the importance of intergenerational learning in maintaining these rich traditions.

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