

Since the Beginning of the World: Decolonial Knowledge and Healing Practices among Pitaguary Elders in Brazil

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Affiliation	Abstract
<p>¹Researcher at the Advanced Centre for Action-Research on Conservation and Ecosystem Recovery in the Amazon (CAPACREAM-CNPq), Brazil. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3947-7140</p> <p>²Professor at the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB), Brazil.</p> <p>²Research Associate (School of Biological Sciences, University of Bristol). https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0595-5861</p>	<p><i>This paper presents a decolonial trajectory of Participatory Action Research (PAR) conducted with the Pitaguary Indigenous people of Ceará, Brazil. The research emerged in response to a collective demand to strengthen the psychosocial care network for Pitaguary elders, the guardians of ancestral knowledge and traditional healing practices. Through community-based actions including workshops, storytelling, and artistic production, the project co-constructed a space for the revitalisation of Indigenous knowledge. Drawing on oral histories and field diaries, the paper explores Pitaguary's understanding of health as deeply interconnected with territory, ancestry, spirituality, and art. Traditional practices such as ceramic and straw weaving are highlighted as both therapeutic and acts of resistance. By privileging indigenous epistemologies, the paper affirms health as a collective, relational, and aesthetic process, challenging Western paradigms and contributing to epistemic justice and the defence of cultural sovereignty.</i></p>
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Keywords: Decolonial Knowledge; Healing Practices among Pitaguary Elders in Brazil.

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Background

This paper documents a decolonial trajectory of Participatory Action Research (PAR) conducted with the Pitaguary Indigenous people of the Monguba Community, located in the Global South, in the Northeast of Brazil, specifically in the state of Ceará. Latin America was invaded and colonised by various European nations. The Pitaguarys are one of several Indigenous people who have historically resisted these colonial oppressions. This PAR was conducted in response to the Pitaguary's leaders' interest in strengthening the care network to meet the psychosocial needs of Pitaguary's elders. Then, we designed an action project whose central premise was to promote a participatory process with the community, based on strengthening the elderly group, older people who are considered the guardians of Pitaguary Indigenous knowledge.

The group was built through the joint planning and execution of community and therapeutic activities (workshops, group discussion, storytelling), health promotion (body practices, cultural and artistic activities) and valuing the stories and memories of those who have been building the resistance of Pitaguary people for decades. Audiovisual records of these activities can be viewed in the short film, created as an audiovisual product of restitution to the community, which is more accessible than academic texts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kmxMCLMTSA>. In this paper, we bring some excerpts from oral communication and field diary records, but more can be found in the master's thesis (Pellicer, 2025).

With Pitaguary Elders we learned a definition of health that goes beyond all the concepts we knew from a Westernised and modern perspective, as it mobilises social, ancestral, and more-than-human spheres, as well as an essential relationship with nature and the traditionally inhabited territory. Thus, health is preserved by community life, walks in the forest, the use of herbs, spirituality, consultations with shamans, weaving and other artistic expressions. According to Casé Angatu (2021), a Tupinambá Indigenous historian, the affirmation of the peoples' existence is based on ancestral knowledge learned through rituals, dreams, conversations, and songs from the enchanted, elders, healers, shamans, and other figures of reference in the Indigenous territories. This knowledge is not inferior to scientific knowledge; despite being excluded from hegemonic science, it has its methods by which certain practices have been rooted and passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition.

By responding to the community's demand to support and strengthen Pitaguary knowledge, we recognise that we have tried to counter the current of coloniality and the production of epistemicide. In addition to the commitment we made to Pitaguary's leaders and elders, we were guided by their own system of knowledge. Thus, as the black Brazilian *quilombola* thinker Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2023) advocated, we employed a counter-colonial approach, adopting different positioning, methodologies, and onto-epistemologies from those of the hegemonic and Western ones in our research, writing, and, above all, in the affective relationship we established with the community.

Healing Ancestry: Indigenous knowledge and the Pitaguary way of life

Considering Indigenous health knowledge and practices is an invitation for us to open ourselves up to other ontologies and epistemologies, thereby enabling us to build genuine convergences (Bispo, 2023). The possibility of imagining a cartography of traditional Pitaguary's practices, which, as roots, have sustained health in Monguba Community since the beginning of its world, is therefore presented here as an act of epistemic justice with ancestry, a document of historical and collective memory.

The call is to open our listening and other senses to the healing powers that the people can invoke, associated with Nature and the enchanted, the healers, prayers, knowledge experts, and shamans within (and outside, in confluence) their ancestral practices. Vivian Camacho (2023), a midwife from the Quechua tradition of the Bolivian highlands, argues that traditional indigenous medicines are related to the diversity of cosmovisions, since they respond to a set of fundamental (i.e. ontological) and experiential questions faced by peoples throughout history: "each people has something to do to sustain

and support life" (p. 52). In this way, they build their epistemologies, which are elaborated from social, historical, situational, symbolic and political dimensions.

Here, we want to focus on the Pitaguary community, its everyday and ancestral healing powers that were shared with us, especially by the Indigenous grandmothers and elders over the last two years of community-engaged research. As Valdira, one of the group's Indigenous participants, says about her ancestral heritage and wisdom: "This is our thing. It has been here since the beginning of the world. And we cannot lose this tradition. We have to continue until we reach the end" (Excerpt from oral communication, 2024).

In her speech, we highlight the relationship between historical resistance "since the beginning of the world", and cultural resistance, their "tradition", the ancestral wisdom and practices that the Pitaguary grandmothers and grandfathers recall and reinvent with the younger generations. The struggles for territory and the defence of the place of traditions are also struggles for meaning and knowledge (Porto-Gonçalves, 2002). Collective memory, therefore, keeps alive the symbolic and identity dimensions of people with their places, from which they claim their existence and cultural belonging. Community histories and practices are recalled and shared as a means of confronting the colonial power that, for centuries, has sought to suppress, fabricate, shape, and homogenise diversity by its interests.

It is important to note that for the Pitaguary people, each of these traditional skills and practices was learned by "seeing and doing", daily in the territory, usually from women and older people, as Liduina, Pitaguary's grandmother, told us:

My memory is that I learned by seeing and doing. No one taught me. I saw my mother making medicine from the bush and sending me to get herbs, roots, and I would ask what they were for because I was curious. That is how I learned, by seeing it day by day (Excerpt from oral communication, 2024).

What lies on the margins of written language and formal education continues to exist and resist the passage of time. Much of the necessary knowledge has been. It is transmitted through joint acts, gestures, habits, sounds, smells, and in the assiduous observation of others, in practicing learning by doing day by day, not just by reading what is written on paper, without feelings, without breathing (Benites, 2023).

In the Pitaguary territory, there is a multiplicity of knowledge, practices and places when it comes to health. We know that our written work does not cover all of them, nor does it intend to. Rather than attempting to create comprehensive documentation – after all, we acknowledge the limitations of what can be shared – it is essential to highlight those that were most recurrent in the narratives of the old trunks. In addition to what we want to listen to/research, from our perspective it is not the objectivity of the facts and data that matters, but rather the meanings attributed to the narratives by the narrators themselves, what they choose to tell, their ways of saying and making themselves understood, in short, their narrative sovereignty as knowers and active participants (Seawright & Maceno, 2023).

For this article, we will look at some of the Indigenous Pitaguary traditional practices that touch on the dimensions of health, art and culture. These practices were observed during meetings with the elders, thereby referencing Indigenous knowledge that was documented in a participatory manner with the guardians of the history and culture of the Pitaguary people. Given the wealth of knowledge passed on by the older people, it is clear that for the Pitaguary people the concept of health is intrinsically linked to the collective memory of the ancestral group and the territory they occupy. What is evident in the stories passed down from generation to generation through everyday practices is a dynamic worldview that is constantly renewed through the mutual care between people in the community. In this complexly interconnected scenario, a vision of health emerges as an integral part of the collective lives of individuals about their natural environment. It is precisely through these manifestations – chanted and interwoven with devotion and art – that we are now embarking on artistic journeys as a means of healing and preserving history alongside the Pitaguary's elders.

Health as an act of creation and creativity

Nourished by the thinking of the Indigenous artist and intellectual Merremi Karão Jaguaribaras, we can try to understand each collective as a world, and each world as an expression of life, in various languages and forms, such as songs, prayers, paintings, dances, braids, poetry and handicrafts. Each of these languages "represents their inner strength connected to other forces that feed existing life," and in this sense, "art is one of the portals of voices, visions and feelings" (Karão-Jaguaribaras, 2022, p. 44).

When we refer to Indigenous art, we refer to the cosmologies and the associated knowledge networks. For the Guarani Indigenous curator Sandra Benites (2020, p. 274), "any production of art and culture is linked to the question of knowledge and is always focused on ancestral memories". In this sense, the processes of artistic elaboration help to awaken memory, to recompose and come into agreement with these ancestral memories. Being Indigenous in Brazil, this is not an easy restitution; some of these layers of memory are sad, made up of intergenerational traumas, but remembering collectively is one of the keys to preventing the continuation of a violent legacy and thus making it increasingly possible to create new futures. Looking at reality aesthetically, then, expands the possibilities of seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking, which are crucial for developing and transforming relationships with otherness and different worlds (Santos & Zanella, 2020).

To strengthen Pitaguary's memories, stories, knowledge and traditional healing practices, many of the meetings with the elders were mediated by art, which we understand as the power of collective sensitivity (Geertz, 2013). The aesthetic experience, then, facilitates the expression of the life potential inherent in every human being, favouring processes of organic, existential and social regulation (Góis, 2008). Thus, we analysed how art takes on a therapeutic dimension for the Pitaguary people, making them experts in the healing powers that some of these artistic practices have in their daily lives.

Let us start with the art of ceramic. This is a traditional practice that is still alive in the collective memory of Pitaguary's elders, and which was evoked through the clay modelling experience that took place at a community space on an afternoon of May 2024. There are numerous stories, research pieces, and traces that attest to the cultural heritage of various Indigenous societies, which have traditionally worked with ceramics as an artistic medium that extends beyond the material dimension (Kiyomura, 2017). That afternoon, it did not take much technique or guidance for the Indigenous group participants to connect with the ancestry through manual contact with the wet earth clay, as if it filled their bodies with what they know well.

The experience mobilised memories and stories strongly linked to the mothers and grandmothers of the participants who, through their hands and fire, transformed clay into everyday items for cooking, eating, storing, drinking and celebrating. The pot that some families in Monguba Community still use today to rest their water in before drinking it, the primary inspiration for the ceramic filters that came later, was made by the hands of their ancestors. These stories allowed us to understand that the art of ceramic is, therefore, one of the many traditional practices that affirm and produce life, serving as the foundation of indigenous health. Together with the elders that afternoon, we thought that working the land gives rise to creativity and expresses an ancestral way of doing things, their tacit knowledge, which has been accumulated from previous generations, marking their culture and territoriality. Thus, the value of clay as a healing process also lies in the stories it can tell (Magrini, 2019).

Alongside the art of clay, weaving is another artistic practice that is part of the daily lives of many of the group's participants. Some weave with wool yarn and scraps of fabric, creating panels, cloaks, rugs and clothing. Others weave with straw, making sieves, baskets and other objects from braided straw. According to them, the continuity of this practice in the community today serves a more therapeutic function for the elders than an identity or instrumental one, in the sense that proximity to the city and easy access to plastic objects, for example, have altered this relationship over time.

Thus, for embroiderer Maria Vilaci, weaving is her story and also her occupation. In her experience, there is no room for today's illnesses, such as depression, when she picks up the needle and the skeins of wool. She says that after a long time watching her cousin embroider, she thought, "I can do that".

Today, years later, they both meet at each other's houses to weave together (Field diary, October 18, 2024).

As for Zeca weaving consists of braiding the straw found in the forest in the hills and/or in the fields. After harvesting his raw material, he must cut it to the correct length and wait for it to dry to the point where it is still slightly hydrated, which allows it to be used. He learned this skill at a young age from his mother.

In one of the first discussions we had with the group about the conceptions of (mental) health for the Pitaguary people, Liduina said that being healthy means having the energy to exercise the wisdom that each person possesses and transforms into work, art and shared knowledge:

Each person has wisdom. So the work you have started involves others. You work on that art that you started, then from there you teach your children, you teach your grandchildren, right? Every person who wants to learn goes to see him working his art, his wisdom.

Mindful of Liduina's observation about the relationship between art, health and valuing Pitaguary knowledge, we proposed a meeting in which Zeca, as a master of the art of weaving straw, would demonstrate his weaving live until he gave it the shape of a sieve. The record of that day in the field diary can be used together with the photograph to help us imagine how this experience took place:

While the thread of memory unleashes orality, Fabricia receives the news that Zeca has turned up. We left the circle to go back with him. Even though the sun was almost hidden behind the mountains, which marks the end of the afternoon meeting, we insisted with him that it was not too late to start. "Do you think it is easy?" he asks me, while recalling his mother's teachings on the importance of keeping our word. So he gets out of bed, washes and perfumes his body, puts on his white shirt and leather hat while we wait for him under the leafy mango tree in his yard. We arrived at the community centre just in time for the afternoon tea. He accepts a cup of coffee and starts working the straw. Those who stayed and wanted to learn must observe. That is how he learned from his mother when he was seven years old. Liduina, Valdira and Fátima recall the practice and patience of handicrafts. A delicacy that does not always come from strength, but from taking the time to observe and understand how it fits together. An ancestry that is woven with the hands and that requires getting down on the ground (Field diary, August 30, 2024).

Thus, in order to better understand the state of health within the Pitaguary people, it is necessary to recognise that each artistic expression, whether shaping clay by hand or interweaving dry fibres under the shade of mango trees, also represents a political act that celebrates life itself. These activities unite the physical body with ancestral territory in a web that revitalises traditional ways of being challenging colonial narratives that have sought to erase their rich history of knowledge. Therein lies the lifeblood of the human community and the essence of continuous resistance - nourished by the traditions passed down through the generations and the small achievements of everyday life.

Final considerations

The experiences lived alongside the Pitaguary Elders reveal that health, for the Pitaguary people, is inseparable from memory, art, ancestry and territory. By valuing traditional practices such as straw weaving, clay modelling, prayers, walks in the woods and knowledge shared in circles, we were invited to shift our Western categories and listen to other ways of producing knowledge and caring for life. This work, more than an academic systematisation, is a gesture of restitution and recognition of indigenous epistemologies as central to building fairer futures. In times marked by the denial of differences and the advance of colonial logics, recording and strengthening the knowledge that has emerged "since the beginning of the world" is also an act of resistance and hope.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declared no competing interests.

Funding statement

The study was not funded by any organisation.

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