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Narratives of Indigenous Elders from Novo Funil Village/ MA, on the History, Culture, and Strengthening of the Guajajara Cultural Identity

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Abstract: The narratives of Indigenous elders are essential for transmitting traditional knowledge to the new generations of each people, in every village. It is through orality that stories, culture, myths, rituals, languages, healing practices, and concepts of good living are handed down, thereby strengthening cultural identity. However, most Indigenous youth—who have access to other cultures, which is important—do not seem to value what is specific to their own cultures, nor the narratives of those who carry within their memories the knowledge necessary to preserve each people's distinctiveness. Moreover, most of the formal schools in the villages do not emphasize the importance of Indigenous cultures as specific educational content. In this regard, this paper analyzes the contributions of the elders' narratives from the Novo Funil village to the strengthening of the Guajajara people's cultural identity. What makes this work relevant is the transformation of its findings into pedagogical material for the local school and those in neighboring villages. This qualitative study employed the Oral History methodology, as it enables the description of everyday aspects of a culture or group. Participants included elders, youth, and teachers from the Kwarahy Indigenous School. The research indicated that, today, the culture of the Guajajara people is being re-signified by younger Indigenous generations.
Keywords: ancestrality; cultural identity; guajajara people; memory.

1 Introduction

From the Federal Constitution (FC) of 1988 onward, Indigenous peoples had their rights legally guaranteed, and Brazilian society was called to understand that these peoples were no longer destined for extinction. A new era begins, and scientific research, although still timid, announces to academia and society at large that Indigenous peoples were here in the past. Long before the invasion of Brazilian territory, they resisted all forms of exclusion and threats to their cultures for centuries. They remain in the present and will be much stronger in the future, redesigning their cultures, ways of living, and fighting for their individual and collective rights as Brazilian citizens, with their own specific and distinctive cultures.

Within this new historical context, historiography began a process of recognising other ways of integrating marginalised social groups into research, allowing them

to become protagonists in academic studies. In this direction, other stories involving the so-called "subalterns"[1] have attracted the interest of various researchers and fields of knowledge. However, it is important to highlight that, regarding Indigenous peoples, changes have been gradual and still timid.

In light of these advances, we can emphasise that a new era is opening, a new indigenism, and a new Indigenous history that conceives Indigenous peoples as subjects of their own histories. This way of thinking and conducting historical research found, "from the very beginning, strong allies in the anthropological field, who began to guide their research not only by academic interests, but also by the need to provide support for the struggles and demands of Indigenous peoples" (Monteiro, 2004, p. 223). In this sense, it is of utmost importance to research Indigenous issues also through their narratives, their knowledge, and their ancestral heritage.

We understand that researching Indigenous peoples through narratives is a way of grasping the traditional knowledge, memories, and stories that, throughout their trajectories, have strengthened their cultural identities. For Daniel Munduruku (2012, p. 71), it is through the "act of listening to stories told by the guardians of memory that our people educate their minds, so that the Indigenous person lives in their body what their mind has elaborated [...]". The author further emphasises that

> It is almost always the elders who have already felt the passage of time through their bodies. They are the guardians of memory. For many Indigenous peoples, these elders are the libraries in which ancestral memory is stored. Hence their importance for the maintenance of life and meaning (Munduruku, 2012, p. 71).

In this sense, traditional knowledge consists of the wisdom accumulated through a people's ancestry, transmitted orally by elders from generation to generation. Thus, rituals, myths, language, religiosity, traditional medicine, agricultural management techniques, cuisine, and the importance of territory for good living are considered traditional knowledge shared by all Indigenous peoples (Baniwa, 2006).

Accordingly, this work is an excerpt from the Master's dissertation[2] "Narratives

[1] Expression used by John Monteiro (2004, p. 221).

[2] The dissertation "Narratives of the tua'uhez from the Novo Funil village about the history and culture of the Guajajara people: strengthening cultural identity" was written by the Indigenous researcher Aline de Sousa Silva Guajajara and defended in 2023 in the Professional Master's Program in Education and Educational Practices (PPGEPE) at the Federal University of Maranhão (UFMA). The research for the dissertation was conducted between January 2022 and May 2023 in the Novo Funil village, located in the municipality of Amarante do Maranhão. The study was supervised by Professor

of the Tua'uhez from the Novo Funil village about the history and culture of the Guajajara people: strengthening cultural identity. For our methodology, we used Oral History in constructing the research data, as it is more suitable for bringing the analysed object closer to the participants. For Amado and Ferreira (2006, p. 16) note, "[...] in oral history, there is the generation of documents (interviews) that have a singular characteristic: they are the result of dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, between subject and object of study." Along these same lines, Alberti (2013, p. 33) highlights that work with the methodology of Oral History "[...] requires from the researcher a profound respect for the other, for their opinions, attitudes, and positions, for their worldview".

Thus, to understand the narratives of the elders and other participants, it was essential for us to adopt a qualitative approach. According to Deslauries and Kérisit (2008, p. 130), "[...] qualitative research can address the concerns of social actors as they are lived in everyday life. This approach provides information that will constitute a relevant source of knowledge". In this framework, during the research, the speech, gestures, silences, smiles, and the time and listening space of the female elders were respected. For the youth and teachers, we used semi-structured interviews, respecting the time and space for listening as chosen by the participants.

The relevance of this research stems initially from the chosen methodology: listening to the elders, youth, and Indigenous teachers and analysing and disseminating their narratives in a work that will be shared in academic circles and read by researchers. It also opens the possibility of rethinking the content of the Indigenous school in the Novo Funil village, prioritising materials that are specific to the Guajajara people.

This article is structured into five parts. The introduction presents the topic in context, outlining the problem, objectives, motivation, methodology, and finally the structure of the work. Next, the second section presents the characteristics of the Guajajara people. The third section addresses the origin myth of this people, the Maíra. The fourth section discusses the traditional knowledge of the Guajajara people for strengthening their culture, based on participants' narratives. The finals considerations seek to meet the general objective of the work by reflecting on the results achieved.

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2 The Guajajara People: Who Are They?

Oliveira and Freire (2006) discuss the existence of Indigenous peoples prior to the arrival of colonisers. Brazilian lands have always been inhabited by large linguistic families such as Tupi-Guarani, Jê, Karib, Aruák, Xirianá, Tucano, among others. Regarding the Tupi people, the authors note that there are several hypotheses about their dispersion across Brazilian territory. The history of the Guajajara people, however, is closely linked to the history of Maranhão, as they were the first to inhabit this state.

There are some hypotheses about the origin of the name Guajajara; some speculate that it may have been created by the Tupinambá[3]. This people (i.e., the Guajajara) is considered a symbol of resistance, having survived conflicts, massacres, slavery, and epidemics that devastated Indigenous populations, as Sá (2014, p. 47) affirms:

> The invasion of colonisers into their lands and the imposition of their cultures, based on the ways of life of Western Europe meant that they no longer had the freedom to live their customs, religion, and culture as they had before. In this tragic and cruel history, many were killed, either by firearms, forced labour, or epidemics, contributing to the extermination of many Indigenous nations.

For the Guajajara people, there is a conceptual distinction between Guajajara and Tenetehar, although they refer to the same people. Tenetehar means “the true man” or “real man,” one who has no mixing with “whites.” Regarding this, Barboza (2015, p. 18) states that

> When we asked the Tenetehara/Guajajara of the villages we researched how they self-identify, the response was unanimous: they identify as Tenetehara, which for them is the “true Indigenous person,” without admixture. They also emphasise that there are not as many Tenetehara today, because many have mixed with whites, becoming mestizo, and are therefore no longer considered Tenetehara.

Following this definition, it is important to mention what oral sources say about this self-designation. For Mariquinha Tenetehar, a participant in the research, the word Tenetehar has been used to define a people since the beginning, as it was created by Maíra. She explains:

[3] Available at: https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Guajajara

> [...] ever since I was little, my tumui always said Tenetehar. You never heard Guajajara; it was Tenetehar, which means we are the true Indigenous people, the pure Indians, without mixing with other peoples, and we also use it to distinguish ourselves from the Karaiw, our other relatives who are not Tenetehar. Since Maíra created us, he already referred to us Indigenous people as Tenetehar. The word Guajajara appeared later, after our people started mixing with others, and then they began to be called Guajajara. But in my childhood, we never heard of Guajajara (Tenetehar; Mariquinha, 2022)[4].

Supporting Mariquinha Tenetehar, Maria Raimunda Tenetehar, also a participant in the research, says:

> Guajajara, for me, are those who are mixed, Indians mixed with Karaiw; that's how my grandparents used to say it, because in the past there were only pure Indians; today there is a lot of mixing. The Karaiw use the word Guajajara a lot, but we Indians use Tenetehar more, because that is how I learned it from my grandparents. The younger ones also use Guajajara more than Tenetehar, but both forms are correct because all are Indians in the same way, mixed or pure (Tenetehar, Maria Raimunda, 2022).

According to these narratives, those who have mixed ancestry are called Guajajara, while Tenetehar are the so-called "pure" Indigenous people, without mixing, as affirmed by the Guajajara[5] elders. The Guajajara people's contact with non Indigenous people dates back to 1613, when interactions led to many revolts and tragedies on the Maranhão forest coast, during the bloody war between the Portuguese and Tupinambás. Almeida (2019, p. 19) states:

> [...] the first records of their contact with white people date to 1613, when the Maranhão coast and forests still witnessed the bloody war of the Portuguese against the Tupinambá, who perished even before the end of that century. While the Tupinambá population decreased, like that of many Jê-Timbira tradition peoples, the Tenetehar fluctuated over these last four centuries but managed to recover demographically. By the mid-20th century, they stabilized and have since grown above national levels.

In 1615, on the banks of the Pindaré River, the French offered protection to Indigenous people against Portuguese enslavement. However, this "so-called protection" meant submission and servitude for the Guajajara people. Tired of being exploited and having never accepted this condition of slavery, they were forced to react, using their strength to defend themselves. This led to the largest known episode of violence in the history of contact between Indigenous and non Indigenous

[4] The accounts presented here come from interviews conducted in Novo Funil Village between October 2022 and June 2023. They are published in the Master's Dissertation "Narratives of the Tua'uhez from the Novo Funil village about the history and culture of the Guajajara people: strengthening cultural identity" by Aline de Sousa Silva Guajajara, defended in 2023.

[5] In this work, we will use the term Guajajara.

peoplesthe Alto Alegre massacre. Regarding this, Almeida (2019, p. 37) notes:

> On March 13, 1901, a large group of Tenetehar, at the first rays of the sun, invaded the chapel of the village of Alto Alegre, 72 kilometres from Barra do Corda, the municipal seat. That day, friars, nuns non-Indigenous residents, and other whites attending mass were killed.

This massacre did not only end the lives of non-Indigenous people but also of many Indigenous people, and to this day the exact number of Indigenous people who disappeared as a result of the massacre remains unknown. After this event, the Guajajara dispersed, occupied various lands in the state of Maranhão, and established the villages where they currently reside.

The Guajajara people are the most numerous in Maranhão, located in the central region of the state, inhabiting 11 Indigenous lands, namely: Araribóia, Bacurizinho, Cana Brava, Caru, Governador, Krikatí, Lagoa Cumprida, Morro Branco, Rio Pindaré, Rodeador, and Urucu-Juruá. The largest population is concentrated in the Araribóia, Bacurizinho, and Cana Brava Indigenous lands, which together house an estimated 85% of the Guajajara. It is worth noting that there are also members of this people living outside their communities, in cities, either temporarily or permanently. However, the exact number of inhabitants in this situation is still unknown.

There are many stories related to Indigenous peoples, including creation stories and tales of enchanted beings that live in the forests and waters. Maíra, or “Mother of Water” as she is also called, “lives among us and is even the most important for the Tenetehar. The arrival of the white man seems to have reinforced this. References to the times of Maíra are often used to solve the problems created by the arrival of the white people,” says research participant Maria Raimunda Tenetehar.

> [...] Maíra was very clever; he created water, the game animals, the fish, day and night. Everything that exists today for us Tenetehar was created by Maíra; we only exist because he created us. The wisdom of our people comes from him. He was very knowledgeable (Tenetehar; Maria Raimunda, 2022).

The stories and their elements, such as enchanted beings, are part of the dynamism of the Guajajara people — beings they admire, respect, and follow as inspiration. The myth of Maíra represents the origin of life for this people. Maíra is considered a hero, the creator of the people, a being of great power who, in the imagination of each Guajajara, remains alive — in the waters, fauna, and/or flora.

3 Maíra: The Origin Myth of the Guajajara People

Myths and rituals are considered as fuels, forming part of the cultural identity of each Indigenous people, accompanying them from birth. In the first months of life, a Guajajara child is introduced to village life and participates directly in rituals. The painting with jenipapo fruit is applied to children in the first months of life as a form of protection and to ward off all evils.

Although conceptually different, myths and rituals intertwine in Indigenous territories. They are permeated by memories that integrate like patchwork pieces sewn together to form a large quilt of events, supporting cultural identities. They are not just individual recollections; they represent collective doing and living on a daily basis. These are knowledges passed down by ancestors and transmitted by the elders to the new generations. It is communion, it is life. Delgado and Ferreira (2014, p. 131) state that memory

> [...] is the building block of identity and the consolidator of individual and collective consciousness. It is a constitutive element of self-recognition as a person and/or as a family. Memory is inseparable from lived experience, from the flow of temporality, and from the intertwining of multiple times; it is the crossing of imaginary lines and constitutes us as collectives.

From this perspective, memory traverses imaginary lines and constitutes us as collectives. The stories told by Indigenous elders are like reading books; once interpreted, they will not be forgotten. It is a reaffirmation of what we need to know to live Indigenous identity. Being Indigenous is to dive into the deepest roots of ancestry through memory. In this sense, we would have no myths or rituals without collective memory, since these are transmitted by the elders, albeit reinterpreted for the new generations.

Halbwachs (2006) reiterates that collective memory represents, for the individual, the past in a summarized and schematic form. Permeating individually or collectively, memories strengthen the social group. Candau (2014, p. 61) argues that

> [...] without memory, the subject empties himself, lives only in the present moment, loses conceptual and cognitive capacities. His identity disappears. He produces no more than a substitute for thought, a thought without duration, without recollection of its genesis, which is the necessary condition for consciousness and self-knowledge.

Thus, memory gives meaning and value to myths, rituals, and traditions that are experienced collectively by a given group. Still according to Halbwachs (2006, p. 30),

our memories

> [...] remain collective and are recalled by others, even if they concern events in which only we were involved and objects that only we have seen. This happens because we are never alone. It is not necessary for others to be physically present, materially distinct from us, because we always carry with us a certain number of people who are not conflated with us.

Considering that rituals and myths are stored in the deepest memories of theelders, the present is updated through lived experiences. In this sense, traditions become essential for the existence of a people culturally, spiritually, and socially. By tradition, we understand the importance of rituals and myths as practices that strengthen the identity of a people. Just like rituals, myths explain the origins of a group or of particular rituals.

For Eliade (1972, p. 12), "[...] a myth is considered a sacred story and, therefore, a 'true story,' because it always refers to realities". Similarly, Silva (2018) reiterates that myths translate a complex world and are shared with other beings that make up the totality of a space, encompassing life experiences and millennial practices that give meaning to collective memory.

From this perspective, myths are compositions that give rise to everything surrounding a given people, in the case of Indigenous peoples, including nature and cultural and daily manifestations. Baniwa (2013, p. 130) emphasizes the importance of "[...] philosophical guidance from cosmologies, mythologies, and historical events preserved in collective memory". Due to this ongoing reflection on theory and lived practice, myths and rituals are constantly updated and sometimes reinvented.

Based on these affirmations, we understand that myths are relevant for the understanding and guidance of all in Indigenous communities. For the Guajajara people, the myth of Maíra explains their own existence and everything around them. Maria Raimunda Tenetehar (2022), also a research participant, narrates the origin of Maíra[6] and how he manifests among the Guajajara. She begins by saying:

> [...] It all started like this: Maíra's mother became pregnant, and she had an argument with her old husband and they separated. Early in the pregnancy, Maíra, who was already enchanted inside the womb, said: "Mother, shall we go after father?" The mother replied: "My son, we don't know where your father went." He said: "I know where he is." They set out to find the father but

[6] The Myth of Maíra, narrated by Raimunda Tenetehar, can be found in full in the Master's Dissertation "Narratives of the Tua'uhez from the Novo Funil village about the history and culture of the Guajajara people: strengthening cultural identity" by Aline de Sousa Silva Guajajara, published in 2023.

> got lost in the forest, yet continued walking and found an old man building a house, who gave shelter to Maíra's mother, and she became pregnant by him. The journey continued the next day. They arrived in a village, but the people there ate humans: the village of Cupelobos. They found an old woman who offered to take care of them, with malicious intent—to kill them and eat them roasted. She killed Maíra's mother and tried to remove the children from her womb. But she could not succeed. She tried to impale and cut them into pieces, but nothing worked because Maíra, with his powers, did not allow it. Maíra and his brother transformed into agoutis and later into children to escape the old woman's malice. They planned revenge against her and the others in the village. Maíra created water, fish, and a large lagoon. But soon they left that village and encountered a creature called Árangan. The creature transformed into a man and began making a bow and arrow. Maíra transformed the bow and arrow into a giant snake. Today there are vine snakes because Maíra created them. Maíra and his brother continued walking and reached a place with a serpent no one could kill. The people there had already heard of Maíra and his intelligence. When Maíra arrived, they asked: "Are you Maíra?" "Yes, I am Maíra, and I will kill the serpent." He placed the children to attract the serpent to the lagoon and waited. Suddenly, he saw the serpent approaching the children. Maíra and his brother killed the serpent. After killing it, they split it in half and transformed: one arm into thunder, the head into the sound of thunder, the legs into the wind. Some say Maíra does not exist, but he does. We may not see him, but he sees us. When it rains, it turns dark. Those dark clouds are the thunder. They were the ones who transformed the serpent's parts into these things. After that, they went to find their father, and upon finding him, said: "I am your son. You left me in my mother's womb." He then recounted the entire story to his father. After listening for hours, his father said: "Yes, my son, you found me. I am here, but I am not the same." Maíra transformed his father into a young man. Returning, he told his father: "Before we leave, I want to break the darkness." Then, he dispelled the darkness and created day and night. After so many inventions, mischiefs, journeys, and overcoming obstacles, Maíra said to his father: "Father, we can no longer live like this. We have done much mischief. Now that we are together, we must leave and find a safe place for us." And it was from then on that they went to live in the water. Maíra created everything for us and created us. This is how the Tenetehar people emerged, along with everything they need to live, like game, day and night, water, and all that comes from it (Tenetehar, Maria Raimunda, 2022).

From this narrative, we understand it is an experience of connection and reunion. In the Novo Funil village, Maíra is always praised for his intelligence, cunning, and enchantments. Everything comes from him: he created the fauna and flora, supernatural powers, rituals, and myths. Thus, everything is connected with nature. Regarding this, Zannoni (2021, p. 118) states: "[...] before Maíra, space was a bottomless world; nothing existed [...]". Therefore, for the Guajajara people, there would be no need to explain the creation of humans, as they are part of Maíra and, thus, his descendants. Life began with Maíra. They relate to him daily, imitating him as a life ideal, and his actions inspire individuals at every moment of existence.

4 The cultural identity of the Guajajara people and traditional knowledge

This study aims to analyse the importance of the traditional knowledge of the Guajajara people in strengthening the cultural identity of the Novo Funil community, as well as how it is experienced in the school curriculum at the Kwarahy Indigenous State School by teachers and students. The narratives were analysed through triangulation between the traditional knowledge recounted by Maria Raimunda Tenetehar and Luciene Alves da Silva — two elder Guajajara women — two teachers, and two young indigenous participants, alongside theoretical foundations and in situ observations.

Regarding indigenous schools, it cannot yet be affirmed that all indigenous territories have educational systems designed and planned by indigenous teachers and communities, prioritising the specific learning principles of each people. Indigenous School Education was linked to the Indian Protection Service (IPS) and the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples (NFIP) until the 1990s. From 1991 onwards, it became the responsibility of the State, through Decree Nº 26 of 1991. Since then, it has been under the Ministry of Education (MEC). Silva (2012, p. 12) clarifies that indigenous school education was

> [...] regulated through various legal texts, starting with Decree Nº. 26 of 1991, which removed the exclusive responsibility of the National Indian Foundation (NIF) for conducting education in indigenous communities, assigning coordination of actions to the Ministry of Education (MEC).

From this perspective, indigenous school education has a distinct organisation and conception, considering the 1988 Constitution. It became a right for each people, including their languages, cultures, traditions, rites, myths, and ways of living. The first steps taken by the State of Maranhão, together with the State Secretariat of Education (SSEEDUC), involved implementing differentiated indigenous school education, with a focus on their specificities, interculturality, and bilingualism. According to Silva (2012, p. 12): “The State of Maranhão, aiming to meet MEC directives through SSEEDUC, initiated in 1992 the first actions with indigenous communities to implement a differentiated educational system in the villages”.

Teacher training for indigenous educators in Maranhão was one of the most significant measures for implementing indigenous school education. Among these initiatives was the Indigenous Teaching Course in Maranhão, launched in 1996 for indigenous teachers already active in classroom teaching within indigenous

communities. Additionally, the Intercultural Indigenous Teaching Degree offered by the State University of Maranhão has significantly contributed to the professional development of indigenous teachers in primary and secondary schools.

Another noteworthy initiative is the Intercultural Teaching Degree at the Federal University of Goiás (FUG), which has included several indigenous teachers from Maranhão in efforts to reaffirm their cultural and intercultural identities. This higher education programme aims to improve teaching and learning quality within indigenous communities, enabling teachers to assume leadership roles in village schools and develop curricula aligned with their realities, needs, and traditional knowledge.

According to Baniwa (2006), indigenous school education must be based onthe educational principles and learning methods specific to each indigenous people. He asserts that:“The entire social, cultural, and economic organisation of an indigenous people is related to a worldview and way of life, that is, a specific cosmology organised and expressed through myths and rites” (Baniwa, 2006, p. 43).Thus, indigenous languages, histories, and cultures form part of daily life and contribute to strengthening indigenous identity.

A tailored curriculum, including community participation, is necessary to prioritise sociocultural practices. Bergamaschi and Medeiros (2010, p. 59) reiterate that: “[...] the struggle began in the 1970s with a movement for the organisation of indigenous peoples, supported by the Church, universities, and NGOs, asserting their demands for differentiated education, land, and health rights”.

According to the Law of Guidelines and Basis National Education (LDB, BNE (Brazil, 1996), Article 78, Clause I, the objectives of indigenous school education include providing bilingual, community-based, specific, differentiated, and intercultural education. In this context, education should “enable Indian peoples, their communities, and nations[7] to recover their historical memories; reaffirm their ethnic identities; and value their languages and sciences”.

Marinho (2022, p. 51) notes that: “[...] schools and indigenous education come to assume the construction of their educational processes based on intercultural relationships, where interaction and dialogue produce new meanings about various

[7] We emphasize that we are aware of the pejorative connotation of the word “índio” (Indian in Portuguese) and that, throughout this work, we have chosen to use the term “indígena” (indígenous in Portuguese). However, in this section, we will retain the word “índio” as it appears in the wording of the law.

cultural contexts". In this sense, schooling becomes challenging, as it must primarily strengthen cultural identity through traditional knowledge, prioritising indigenous wisdom.

Teachers play a fundamental role in transmitting knowledge, particularly in valuing the mother tongue in the classroom. Regarding language teaching, teacher Luciene Alves da Silva Tenetehar explains in an interview:

> [...] here at school we do not teach in the mother tongue. Previously, there was a teacher exclusively for language instruction, and for me, teaching other subjects in the language is very difficult because not all Portuguese words have a translation in our language. We lack support materials for this, and I feel great difficulty. But I consider it very important that the language is taught in the classroom (Tenetehar; Luciene Alves da Silva, 2022).

Supporting teacher Luciene, student David Messias Oliveira Tenetehar states:

> If the language were taught at school, many young people today would know how to speak the mother tongue. Here in the village, many do not speak it. I myself do not know how to speak because my grandmother, who knows, did not teach my mother. Sometimes I feel ashamed when the tua'uhez speak to me and I cannot respond; it makes me sad (Tenetehar; David Messias Oliveira, 2022).

These statements reveal that the participants consider teaching the mother tongue in school essential, as it represents a means of cultural recovery. In this perspective, schools are indispensable for valuing and transmitting the mother tongue, serving as spaces for identity strengthening. Accordingly, traditional knowledge should be a priority in all indigenous communities, as it drives the sociocultural and linguistic life of the people. Traditional knowledge must be reinforced in schools through the teachings of elders, transmitted orally across generations. Maria Raimunda Tenetehar reflects:

> In the past, there was no school, no teacher, and today teachers do not even know about the Maíra myth. Previously, our teachers were our tua'uhez, and everyone respected them because they possessed knowledge. Today, young people go to school, but teachers do not teach our culture — at least, that is what I see — and the knowledge that the tua'uhez left us is being lost" (Tenetehar, Maria Raimunda, 2022).

Her narrative is corroborated by teacher Maria do Rosário Alves Tenetehar, who states

> [...] I do not teach our traditional knowledge in the classroom; I do not know how to do it properly. I think this knowledge should be transmitted in the daily life of the village. It is very difficult to address these subjects without specific

> materials, and I do not know as much as the tua'uhez do" (Tenetehar, Maria Rosário Alves, 2022).

From these narratives, it is evident that the Kwarahy Indigenous School perpetuates the stereotype that non-indigenous knowledge is more important than indigenous knowledge. The school, which could serve as a vehicle for valuing and strengthening indigenous cultures, silences traditional knowledge. Elder members, considered living libraries and guardians of Guajajara culture and history, do not enter classrooms nor are they listened to. William da Silva Tentehar, a fifth-grade student, reports:

> In the classroom, nothing is taught about the tua'uhez stories. I don't know if the teachers do not know them or because we never ask. I think they could contribute a lot in school, but they never go there. What we learn comes from the festivals. If they went to school, they could teach their knowledge there too, and it would be very good for us because there are many things we do not know" (Tenetehar, William da Silva, 2022).

The student's statement underscores the tension between the teachers' knowledge and the value of traditional knowledge. While recognising the elders' importance, it highlights the school's role in silencing a specific, differentiated curriculum. Maria do Rosário Tenetehar notes "the difficulty in teaching these subjects due to a lack of materials and familiarity with the knowledge of the tua'uhez". Although he recognizes the importance of indigenous elders, he states that there is no project that includes them in the school curriculum.

Schools, as vehicles for socialising knowledge and experiences, cannot ignore or repress indigenous sociocultural practices, particularly when they ensure the transmission of knowledge across generations. Elders must be incorporated as authors of their peoples' histories and cultures, forming part of the indigenous school curriculum. Mariquinha Tenetehar explains:

> I have never been invited to the school. It would be very good if teachers invited the tua'uhez to school because today I see that teachers do not know much about our festivals, how they happen, about the Maíra. Many things the new generation does not know, much has already been lost. This should also be taught in school. That is why festivals are no longer done as before because people do not know how to do them anymore; much has changed" (Tenetehar, Mariquinha, 2022).

Similarly, Juliene Tenetehar states "The tua'uhez never went to school. Everything we learn from them comes from the festivals. We study a lot, but not about traditional festivals. If they went to school, it would be very good because we would

learn more" (Tenetehar, Juliene, 2022).

The research shows that students are not interested in traditional knowledge, but schools, indigenous or otherwise, deny the opportunity to strengthen cultural diversity. Teachers, trained in non-indigenous schools, internalise the notion that Western curricula are superior, leaving little room to address or reinforce cultural diversity.

Regarding the role of elders in educating indigenous children and youth, the research highlights the absence of a community-focused curriculum. Maria do Rosário Tenetehar observes:

> There is no community school because it is difficult to build a curriculum focused on indigenous issues when the responsibility lies solely with teachers, who lack support from the community and Education Secretariats. The tua'uhez do not have the custom of going to school to share knowledge; I do not know if it is because we never invite them. But I consider it important to invite them because they know much more than we do. We should do it, we should invite them. We never invite them because it is not customary, but I think it is truly important (Tenetehar, Maria do Rosário, 2022).

This study underscores the urgent need for state responsibility in the training of indigenous teachers, guided by intercultural principles, enabling teachers to manage schools in their communities. Despite these challenges, Maranhão has yet to fully implement policies supporting truly indigenous schooling.

Teachers, students, and elders wish for schools that meet community expectations, fostering dialogue, discussion, and cultural valorisation specific to the Guajajara people. For an intercultural curriculum to thrive, it must be specific and differentiated, respecting indigenous learning times and spaces. Delgado and Ferreira (2014, p. 69) note that:

> [...] history, space, temporality, and memory are interconnected processes, where the time of memory surpasses individual time and intersects with societal history. These collective histories are often marked by traditions and conflicts in defining what will be recorded for future generations. Traditional and scientific knowledge must be constructed collectively, with everyone participating in delineating guidelines. Therefore, teaching materials must be tailored and relevant to this theme.

However, even as a constitutionally guaranteed right, indigenous peoples face denial of this entitlement. Implementing differentiated education that values each people's specificities remains challenging, especially when textbooks reinforce stereotypes and ethnocentric representations. David Messias Oliveira Tentehar notes:

> Books only talk about colonisation; they do not tell the truth about us. They show when the Portuguese arrived in Brazil and there were already indigenous peoples, how they lived in the past, naked, with bows and arrows — very different from today. They do not show how we live now. We are not as the books depict (Tenetehar; David Messias Oliveira, 2022).

Field observation confirms that the textbooks used in villages are the same as those in non-indigenous schools. Indigenous students notice this and feel excluded, saddened by misrepresentation. Baniwa (2006, p. 134) stresses that: “The teaching materials used in schools are insufficient and inadequate, hindering educational actions”.

Regarding this, Professor Maria do Rosário Tenetehar states that there are no books that deal with Indigenous cultures and histories, and when there are, they generalize as if all peoples shared the same culture and spoke the same language, as can be seen in the following account:

> We don’t have any material focused on our history and culture — at least here at Kwarahy school we don’t. The books we use are those that come from the *Karaiw* (non-Indigenous people). Ah, some books did come that talked a lot about Indigenous peoples, but those books never reached us; they weren’t distributed in the village schools. They were very good books, history books, from 1st to 9th grade, but they never arrived at the Indigenous schools. I know that because I saw them over in Amarante. I don’t know what they did with those books. But, according to the coordinator, the Secretary of Education ordered those books to be collected, claiming they weren’t meant for the Indigenous area — they were to be distributed in the city schools of Amarante. But I can’t tell you whether they were distributed or not. All I know is that they didn’t come to the Indigenous schools. *(*Tenetehar, Maria do Rosário, 2022).

Taking into consideration the powerful and significant words of teacher Maria do Rosário, we can perceive the omission of the State in every respect: the lack of pedagogical support, of initial and continuing training, and of basic resources such as desks, meals, and teaching materials. When the teacher highlights the action of the Secretary of Education in ordering the collection of the books, this further contributes to the neglect regarding Indigenous issues. Concerning the content specifically related to Indigenous peoples, research participant William da Silva Pereira Tenetehar states:

> [...] there are no books that talk only about Indigenous people, because I’ve never seen any. The books we study are those on mathematics, Portuguese, history, but none that talk about our people. The history books mention us a little, but it’s very different from how things really are today. We are not the way the book describes us. (Tenetehar, William da Silva, 2022).

Thus, we can see that the participants feel the State’s indifference toward Indigenous schools. Therefore, it is necessary to have a genuine recognition and

appreciation of Indigenous peoples—not as the current curriculum portrays them, as peoples belonging to the past. On this matter, Maria do Rosário adds:

> These books that are sent to be used in schools say very little about Indigenous peoples. They speak of Indigenous people as if they no longer existed, treating them as something from the past. They always use the word *were*, as if we once existed and no longer do. For example: 'the Indigenous people hunted,' 'the Indigenous people fished,' 'they ate this and that.' But in reality, we still hunt and fish today. For us teachers, it is very difficult to use a book that does not represent us—it is a great challenge (Tenetehar, Maria do Rosário, 2022).

Representation in textbooks is largely restricted to the colonial period, ignoring contemporary indigenous society. Baniwa (2006, p. 129) clarifies:

> [...] indigenous school education concerns schools appropriated by indigenous peoples to strengthen their sociocultural projects and open pathways to other universal, necessary, and desirable knowledge, enabling them to respond to new demands generated by contact with global society.

Thus, differentiated indigenous education depends not only on indigenous teachers but also on governing bodies. Current curricula remain whitewashed and Eurocentric, stifling traditional knowledge. Consequently, schools may contribute to ethnic-cultural disappearance.

To consider traditional knowledge is to understand that ancestry is part of each Indigenous people's cosmology, as well as the importance of their myths and rituals, which are reproduced and passed down by the Indigenous elders. The Maíra myth, recounted by Maria Raimunda Tenetehar, is vital for Guajajara identity, yet teachers are unfamiliar with it, and it is absent from classroom activities or youth-elder discussions. Maria do Rosário Tenetehar states:

> I do not know much about the Maíra myth. I remember little; it has been a long time since I sought knowledge. I heard it often as a child when the tua'uhez told us stories. We forget over time. I cannot recount the entire myth, only fragments. But I know it is important for our people. It is our enchanted being, creator of all things: water, animals, day, night, and everything we have today. This should be documented so we do not lose it; we forget much because it is not recorded (Tenetehar, Maria do Rosário, 2022).

In light of these statements, we can see that the responsibility for transmitting knowledge rests solely with the elders. In this dynamic, such knowledge may be lost, as it will not remain alive forever. Since the transmission of knowledge among Indigenous peoples occurs predominantly through orality, with the passing of the elders, the stories and myths also begin to fade away — or even cease to exist

altogether. Supporting what Maria do Rosário said, Juliene da Silva Tenetehar states that she does not have in-depth knowledge about the origin myth, as can be seen in the following account:

> I don't know anything; my mother said that he exists, and I believe that he exists, but I don't know his story. What I do know is what we all know: that he is powerful and helps us when we need it, even curing our illnesses. But as for the story itself, I don't know anything. I never tried to find out, never went to the tua'uhez to learn. If I had gone, I would know it today. I think that the only ones who really know this story are the tua'uhez (Tenetehar, Juliene da Silva, 2022).

It is clear that, even without knowing the Maíra myth in its entirety, both the teachers and the students, as well as the entire community, understand the importance of the origin myth's representation in their lives. They recognise that it is a significant gap not to know more deeply about Maíra, given that he is a powerful being who informs them about the existence of the Guajajara people.

Juliene da Silva Tenetehar speaks about the importance of rituals and the learning moments with the elders. For her, it is in the

> [...] rituals that we learn to sing, dance, and show greater respect to the tua'uhez, and about the game hunted for the festivals. When we are on watch, in seclusion, we learn many things there, such as which game meats we can eat. We learn that each of us must go through that moment because it is important for us. We learn why the festivals are important to perform, and why we must participate. And we learn all this from the tua'uhez, they know everything (Tenetehar, Juliene da Silva, 2022).

The elders are valued for the immeasurable knowledge they carry in their memories. For example, participant Juliene da Silva Tenetehar states that they know everything, and everything the younger generations know has been passed down by the tua`uhez. They hold records of the most important stories of their ancestors. Therefore, they become fundamental figures in the learning process for the Guajajara people. In this regard, Professor Luciene Alves Tenetehar emphasises:

> The words of the tua'uhez are important for our entire people, Tenetehar, because it is in these moments of storytelling that the younger ones learn. It is through the narratives, the rituals, that the knowledge our ancestors left for our people is transmitted today by our *tuauhez. These are very valuable memories. And there is knowledge that is only passed on during the rituals; that is why they are important for all of us. (Tenetehar, Luciene Alves, 2022)

They are cherished for passing on to current generations their ancestral knowledge. These are memories of great value — stories that guide spiritual, social,

political, and cultural life. From this perspective, Bosi (2003, p. 15) notes:

> The memory of the elders can serve as a mediator between the new generation and the witnesses of the past. It is the informal intermediary of culture, since there are also formalised mediators established by institutions (such as schools, churches, political parties, etc.) through which values, content, and attitudes, in short, the constituents of culture are transmitted. In this sense, memory is part of the past that remains active in the present; it is a testimony of value, the value of the chain of transmission within a given community or people. Such memory is rooted in all gestures, spaces, and communal behaviours.

Because these memories may be forgotten or even cease to exist, the elders express concern about the younger generations. Professor Luciene Tenetehar notes:

> The memories of the tua'uhez are very valuable. Today I feel sadness and pain in my heart when I look at the youth and see that they are not interested in the knowledge of the tua'uhez. Sometimes I cry thinking that perhaps my great-grandchildren will not know the stories because my children are not interested in hearing them. There are many things I do not know, but the little I know I learned from *tumui* Vicente. He loved telling stories to us. My father used to take me to listen to him. But today it is very hard to see a young person take the time to listen to the stories. I don't know what is happening to the youth of today (Tenetehar, Luciene Alves, 2022).

Most Guajajara elders are not literate in their mother tongue, nor in Portuguese. Learning occurs through their life experiences, which become a way to understand the direction they should follow. In this context, Juliene da Silva Tenetehar states:

> It is through stories that we learn many things — we learn everything: how to hunt, fish, cultivate our fields, and also about our festivals, how they were celebrated in the past and how they are celebrated now. There are many things we still do not know, which only the tua'uhez know; that is why their stories are important (Tenetehar, Juliene da Silva, 2022).

Thus, we perceive the importance of the elders' memories and narratives. The community itself recognises that they are fundamental to everyone in terms of knowledge transmission. According to Amado and Ferreira (2006, p. 20), "[...] Indigenous peoples are increasingly demanding that their oral traditions be taken seriously as legitimate visions of history."

The cultural reinterpretations of the Guajajara do not alter the essence of this people, and the purposes and meanings of their rituals continue to be maintained. Orality encompasses accounts of lives lived both in the past and in daily life. Montenegro (2003, p. 40) emphasises that "oral history reveals itself as a process of socialising a view of the past, present, and future that popular groups develop consciously or unconsciously."

The narratives of those who have lived many experiences move the entire community, and their knowledge provides direction and discernment. Even though time, space, and lifestyle may change, these narratives remain the foundation for the knowledge and daily life of the Guajajara people.

Regarding the importance of the elders' narratives for the community, and considering the knowledge passed on through them, Devid Messias Tenetehar, in an interview conducted on April 2, 2023, made the following statement: "I consider it important because it is through them that we learn how to behave within the community, and through them that traditional knowledge is passed down. From them we learn to hunt, plant, fish, and about the rituals, all those things".

It can therefore be said that the elders are held in great respect and esteem by the Guajajara people. They are regarded as keepers of knowledge and lived experiences that have been, and continue to be, shared daily, both in the educational process and in cultural aspects. They embody representations of the past, which are reproduced, reconstructed, and reinterpreted in the present, guiding the future of the younger generations.

5 Conclusion

This study analysed how the narratives of the elders of Novo Funil, Amarante/MA, strengthen Guajajara identity. Elders play a vital role in educating new generations, serving as guardians and transmitters of ancestral knowledge. Their narratives bridge past and present, preserving cultural heritage.

Despite recognition of their importance, elders' narratives are seldom echoed among youth or schools. Young people rarely seek to learn these traditions, risking the loss of cultural knowledge. This neglect impacts language, festival practices, respect for elders, and understanding of origin myths and rituals. Elders report sadness at young people's disinterest and the neglect of oral narratives, contributing to potential cultural erasure.

In this sense, such knowledge may disappear over time if it is not passed on. This becomes a major concern, since it is through the narratives of the elders that cultural identity is strengthened and that key aspects defining them as Indigenous people are preserved. The lack of attention given to these narratives impacts the language, alters the traditional rules of festivals, weakens respect for the elders, and

leads to ignorance regarding the origin myth and ritual practices.

From the analysis, it becomes clear that the elders express feelings of sadness because the younger generations show little interest in learning about their traditions and culture, and because their narratives are often ignored. Maria Raimunda and Mariquinha Tenetehar emphasized that the transmission of knowledge has always taken place through the elders' stories — a practice that is now being lost. As a result, they feel excluded and identify this as one of the main causes of cultural erasure. The research revealed that many young people from the Novo Funil village know little or almost nothing about the Guajajara people's origin myth.

This research has shown that time has altered, in many ways, the cultural practices of the Guajajara people. However, the elders believe these changes occur because the younger generations no longer take the time to listen and learn about how the traditional festivals work, and thus end up modifying practices that were handed down through countless generations of ancestors. The elders are aware of what can be changed without interfering with the core purposes of their cultural practices.

Even though the younger people often fail to pay attention to the elders' narratives, everyone in the village recognizes their importance and understands that their knowledge is essential to the entire community — especially regarding ritual practices. As for the origin myth, all are aware of its existence; nevertheless, they consistently affirm that only the elders truly know how to tell it.

When analyzing how teachers and students perceive the importance of the elders' narratives for strengthening the cultural identity of the Novo Funil community, the research found that the school still seems distant from this educational and cultural integration. Traditional knowledge has not yet reached the classroom, and students express a longing for interaction between the elders and the school.

The teachers acknowledge the importance of the narratives. However, they have not yet brought Guajajara tradition into school activities, though they regard such integration as both highly relevant and necessary for the school curriculum. For this integration to occur, it is essential to know how to implement it. In this regard, the research identified that the teachers' understanding of the traditional knowledge that strengthens cultural identity remains quite superficial, especially concerning the myth of Maíra. They recognize this gap and view its inclusion as indispensable in the school setting. The study also revealed a strong desire among the teachers to address these

topics, but they lack both pedagogical support and familiarity with traditional knowledge.

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