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I'M NOT AN "INDIAN," NOR DO I BELONG TO ANY TRIBE[1]

NÃO SOU ÍNDIO, NEM PERTENÇO A NENHUMA TRIBO

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Abstract
This article critically examines the terms *"Indian"* and *"tribe"*, arguing that they are historically inaccurate and often pejorative when applied to Indigenous peoples in Brazil. Through an etymological and cultural analysis, the text highlights how these labels perpetuate stereotypes and obscure the vast diversity among Indigenous communities. The discussion emphasizes the importance of self-identification, noting that each Indigenous people has its own distinct language, traditions, and social structures—far more complex than the homogenizing term *"tribe"* suggests. Visual examples of adornments and body art from groups such as the Bororo-Boe, Kayapó, and Xavante illustrate the unique cultural markers that differentiate these peoples. Additionally, the article challenges colonial narratives by asserting that Indigenous identity is not tied to primitive stereotypes but rather to ancestral belonging and self-determined definitions. The conclusion advocates for using precise terminology, such as *"Indigenous"* followed by the specific name of the people, to promote respect and accurate representation. Finally, the text suggests educational activities to deepen understanding of Indigenous cultural expressions, encouraging a move beyond superficial perceptions toward meaningful recognition of Brazil's original peoples.
Keywords: indigenous peoples, cultural identity, self-designation

Resumo
Este artigo analisa criticamente os termos *"índio"* e *"tribo"*, demonstrando sua inadequação histórica e carga pejorativa quando aplicados aos povos originários do Brasil. Através de uma análise etimológica e cultural, o texto evidencia como esses rótulos perpetuam estereótipos e apagam a imensa diversidade entre os povos indígenas. A discussão enfatiza a importância da autodesignação, destacando que cada povo indígena possui língua, tradições e estruturas sociais próprias – muito mais complexas do que o termo genérico *"tribo"* sugere. Exemplos visuais de adornos e pinturas corporais de povos como Bororo-Boe, Kayapó e Xavante ilustram os marcadores culturais que os diferenciam. Além disso, o artigo desafia narrativas coloniais ao afirmar que a identidade indígena não está vinculada a estereótipos de primitivismo, mas sim ao pertencimento ancestral e a definições autodeterminadas. Conclui defendendo o uso de terminologia precisa, como *"indígena"* seguido do nome específico do povo, para promover respeito e representação adequada. Por fim, sugere atividades educativas para aprofundar o conhecimento sobre expressões culturais indígenas, incentivando uma compreensão que vá além de percepções superficiais.
Palavras-chave: povos indígenas, identidade cultural, autodesignação

Introduction

The content that follows addresses two extremely important issues that deserve attention, as they will serve as a foundation for truly recognizing the real profile of Brazil. "Indian" and "tribe" are seemingly simple expressions; at first glance, they may not appear

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offensive. However, if we investigate the etymological meaning of each word—and depending on the perspective—we realize that neither of these terms accurately applies to the people they are meant to describe. In fact, both tend to be pejorative. It is at this point that the present content aims to unpack or challenge these misconceptions, precisely in order to clear up misunderstandings. “I am not an Indian, nor do I belong to any tribe” — these are the statements that emerge from the point of view of an Indigenous person. These questions aim to encourage reflection on such labels, based on their actual meanings.

When the term “Indian” is used, what image comes to your mind?

Your concept of this term might differ completely from that of the person who is customarily referred to as an “Indian.”It is important to note that there are many Indigenous Peoples living in Brazil. This fact counters the idea that Brazilian Indigenous people are culturally, linguistically, religiously, and—most importantly—identity-wise homogeneous. Therefore, the notion of homogeneity among Indigenous groups does not hold up.

The reality is that the term “Indian” simply reduces and hides a vast diversity. Now, how can we begin to perceive this diversity? We may identify an Indigenous person as belonging to a specific people through their headdress—but not only that. The distinguishing features of some Indigenous groups can also be made visible through body painting, earrings, necklaces, hairstyles, and so on. What does that mean? Next, we will present images of Indigenous individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, with the aim of clarifying the distinctions between one group and another through visual means.

The image above shows a member of the Bororo-Boe people from the state of Mato Grosso. When adorned according to their tradition, they can be identified by people outside

their culture through the *pariko*, the headdress. The *pariko* is a distinctive diadem of the Bororo-Boe people and is not found in the traditions of any other group.

This second image shows a Umutina-Balatiponé warrior. Several items displayed with him reveal his ethnic origin, such as: the *hakikano* (an adornment worn along with the headdress), the hawk feather earring, the *ajikuitá okopo* (a jaguar tooth necklace), and the bracelet made from the down feathers of the curassow and the macaw, among others. It is a set of signs indicating his belonging.

This third illustration features the Kayapó people, whose ornamental elements allow us to identify an individual as belonging to this group. In addition to the headdress,

there are also body paintings. Although it is not shown in the illustration, there is a particularly significant male adornment: a rounded and flattened wooden piece worn in an opening in the lower lip. It is through this lip ornament that one can recognize an individual as a member of the Kayapó people, since this custom and its specific craftsmanship are not found in any other group. This type of adornment is usually worn by elders.

This drawing depicts a member of the Pareci–Hality people. The individual is adorned with several items such as bracelets, a headdress, and necklaces. Among these, the most significant component is the *haulo* (headdress). It is through this item that we identify a member of the Hality people.

In the fifth drawing, we can see a Xavante individual. His profile features remarkable ornaments. The most common ones are the *dañorebzu'a* (neck tie) and the *daporewa'u* (earring). The wooden earring worn by Xavante men is essential, as it marks the passage into adulthood through a ritual that spans several months of continuous activities.

The Rikbaktsa people are mainly known for their feather art: headdresses, bracelets, earrings, and feather caps. Another common ornament, especially among elders, is a rounded wooden earring, about 10 centimeters in diameter.

After observing the images, reinforcing the idea of diversity, we now present a link to a video that poetically shows the names of all the Indigenous peoples who shape the multicultural identity of Brazil:

http://migre.me/osnic

Did you imagine that our country is composed of all this cultural richness presented in the video?

In Brazil, there are two major linguistic roots: *Tupi* and *Jê*. Just like Portuguese, French, Italian, and Spanish evolved from Latin—and Latin from Indo-European—many Indigenous languages branch out from *Tup*i and *Jê*. Besides these two main roots, there are also other language families that are not derived from either, such as *Aruák, Karib, Pano*, among others.

Just to clarify, all the terms mentioned are the names of Indigenous peoples, each with their own language. It is important to emphasize that if a Guarani person tries to communicate

in Guarani with someone from the *Xavante* people, the communication will not succeed, since they belong to different peoples and, therefore, speak different languages. In this case, *Guarani* belongs to the *Tupi* root, while *Xavante* belongs to the Jê root.

According to the video, one can say it exceeds all expectations, as Brazil has never seen itself through this lens. Indigenous peoples are distributed across all Brazilian states. The daily life of each people is diverse. Just as there are peoples strongly connected to their traditional practices—such as language, dance, body painting, hunting, fishing, agriculture, etc.—there are also peoples or members of peoples who live in urban contexts, ranging from small towns to large metropolises.

Deconstructing stereotypes about Indigenous peoples means understanding that, although many communities maintain a living culture inherited from their ancestors, this does not prevent them from living in or engaging with external cultures. And when they do, it does not strip them of their identity. That is, if an Indigenous person speaks Portuguese or English fluently, wears Nike sneakers, or owns the latest iPhone, this does not mean they are any less Indigenous or lose their right to identify as such.

There are peoples who no longer speak their traditional languages or practice certain cultural knowledge. However, those are not the defining criteria that erase or define a people's identity.

Based on the previous images and their descriptions, we have seen some concrete ways through which it is possible to identify an Indigenous person as belonging to a particular people. But what if they are not dressed in traditional attire—how can we recognize someone as being from an Indigenous background? Would it be through physical traits such as hair, eyes, skin tone, height, etc.?

If one chooses to rely on such criteria, there's a significant risk of falling into stereotypes. Physical characteristics among Indigenous peoples are not as uniform as one might think. When we adopt a holistic but superficial view like this, we risk placing Indigenous individuals within a caricatured model. After discussing the concrete features that could guide identification, we now turn to subjective characteristics.

One of the keys to accessing identity through abstract elements is language. However, there are peoples who, unfortunately, have lost the ability to continue practicing their native languages. Beyond language, there are still specific forms of knowledge that are continuously

practiced—such as social organization, political structures, worldview, agriculture, education, epistemology, memory, and more. These and other factors point back to the ancestral roots of each people. The name of the people is a way of expressing all this cultural heritage, encompassing both concrete and abstract elements.

"Indigenous" is often imagined as someone who lives in the forest, naked or wearing a loincloth, hunting with a bow and arrow, and performing rain dances. This image is more closely aligned with a stereotypical model. In reality, this is not how Indigenous peoples would identify themselves. For example, someone from the *Balatiponé* Indigenous people, even if they present themselves to someone as "Indigenous," will carry with them the meaning constructed by their own people. That is, each Indigenous group has its own concept of what it means to be "Indigenous"—a notion that may not have been influenced by school textbooks or dominant historical narratives, but rather built upon their own cosmogony and worldview. Each people has its own dances, songs, clothing, symbols, and art, which may be quite different from the version imagined by those unfamiliar with these realities.

Shall we dive deeper and try to understand this better together?

Next, you will learn the etymology of each word. Do you know the difference between the terms: *índio* (Indian)**,** *indígena* (Indigenous)**,** *and silvícola (*primitive forest dweller)?

If we consult a portuguese dictionary intending to find the definition of the word *índio (Indian)*, there won't be a precise or consistent meaning for it. The term *índio*, one of its meanings—particularly the one related to the arrival of Europeans in Brazil—emerges from the idea that these navigators were heading to the Indies, but due to a navigational error, they anchored their ships on American land. Realizing that the territory was already inhabited, the Europeans called all the inhabitants "Índios" (*Indians*), even though they knew they had not reached their intended destination.

Another definition of *índio* is associated with numismatics, the science that deals with coins. During the time of King Manuel I of Portugal, a silver coin was called *índio*.

The third definition of *índio* is related to scientific terminology, which comes from Latin. It refers specifically to a metallic chemical element (symbol: In), with atomic number 49 — *indium* (in Portuguese, *índio*).

The second term, *indígena* (Indigenous), refers to ancient origins and ancestry. It describes individuals who belong to a people that has established residence in a particular place so long ago that their descendants cannot precisely measure how long it has been. Many Indigenous groups also believe that their origin took place right here, on Brazilian soil.

A more concise explanation of the term *indígena* would be "originating from the land". The antonym of *indígena* in portuguese is *alienígena* (alien/foreign), and the term is equivalent to *aboriginal*, *native*, or *autochthonous*.

Silvícola (primitive forest dweller) refers to the forest, or to people who live in the forest—a concept that often carries connotations of “savage.” This is one of the reductionist ideas historically applied to autochthonous societies, equating their value to that of irrational beings. In line with this idea of being “savages,” it is still commonly said or thought today that Indigenous people are not part of civilization, or that they are not "civilized."

While they may not belong to *Western*, *European*, *Asian*, or other forms of civilization, they certainly do belong to *civilized societies*. In the case of our country, if we take a broader view, we can see that there are many civilized societies—existing long before the arrival of European civilization. Of these terms, which do you believe is the most appropriate to use: *índio*, *indígena*, or *silvícola*?

In the end, all these terms were introduced and imposed from external perspectives. Every Indigenous person, regardless of their ethnic origin, will always have their self-designation, which is tied to their identity. An individual who belongs to a society—for example, those born in Brazil are called Brazilians, those born in Portugal call themselves Portuguese—in other words, their identities are connected to their respective societies.

Someone born in Brazil wouldn't say they're Portuguese unless they had a blood tie to someone from Portugal; therefore, they would be expected to identify as Brazilian. In the case of Brazil, this is no different within Indigenous societies. If I, as an Indigenous person, know that I belong to a particular Indigenous society, I will identify myself as a member of that specific society.

It wouldn’t be enough for me to simply say I’m Indigenous—the natural follow-up question would be:*You’re Indigenous? But from which people?* So I would also be expected to identify myself as a member of a specific people—in my case, the Balatiponé people. The same applies to someone who belongs to another Indigenous group, such as the Enawenê Nawê

people. Someone from that group would never claim to be Balatiponé unless they had a blood connection; therefore, from an identity standpoint, they would identify themselves as Enawenê Nawê.

I don't belong to any tribe

Tribe? What does your imagination conjure up when you hear that word?

In Brazil, it is common to refer to Indigenous groups living in villages or in the forest as tribes, based on the assumption that a tribe must exist in direct contact with nature, living in huts or cabins.

But why should we use the term *tribe* and not another designation? The word *tribe* gives the impression of a dependent relationship between one group and another—culturally, socio-politically, linguistically, etc. If we look at a specific Indigenous community—for example, the Umutina-Balatiponé people—they are located in the state of Mato Grosso, living in their own territory, speaking their own language, following their own internal regulations (in addition to those of the Brazilian state), with their own political leadership and independent knowledge production.

What are the criteria for calling something a **s**ociety? Linguistic? Cultural? Political? Identity-based? Epistemological? Is it possible to refer to everyone living in Germany as the "German tribe," or those from the United States as the "North American tribe"? Of course not. These examples are used precisely to illustrate that the term *tribe* is not appropriate for Indigenous peoples, who are often labeled this way.

The diverse Indigenous populations of Brazil possess highly complex systems—capable of equaling, in many aspects, those groups more commonly referred to as *societies*. Therefore, the word *tribe* fails to capture the full depth of their social, political, and cultural heritage.

Suggested Activities

Based on this content, here are some points that can serve as guidelines for designing activities:

If working with body painting or graphic patterns *(grafismo)*, it is important to try to learn the name of the people who practice it, the name of the design, its meaning, whether it is

used by men or women, the age range for its use (how young or how old someone must be), and the occasions on which it is applied. Also, try to find out what the ink is made of, how it is produced, how long it lasts on the skin, and whether the same designs are used on other objects such as pottery, basketry, wooden stools, etc.

When focusing on headdresses *(cocares)*, try to find out the name of the Indigenous group, the materials used in their making, whether the headdress is worn by men or women, and whether there are different types of headdresses. If there are, find out when and why each type is used.