

Decolonising public policy: a way forward for caregiver support in Brazil

In the *Tambor de Crioula*, dancers form a literal and metaphorical circle of care

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“Tonight, there’s *Tambor de Crioula!*” When Hadassa was born, Dona Maria prayed to São Benedito to strengthen her granddaughter’s weak lungs and muscles. Now that Hadassa is happy and healthy, she needs to pay back the saint with rhythm and dance. She’s called the whole community – and their drums – together.

Maria’s daughter Meire arrives early with Hadassa, now 18 months old. The baby girl arrives dressed just like her mother, with a long calico skirt, turban and ritual necklaces. They primped and combed and bathed as a form of respect to Dona Maria and St Benedict, but only have flip-flops on their feet: when the drums start, their bare feet will feel the dirt floor. Hadassa loves to feel the earth under her soles.

As close to 50 drummers and dancers prepare for the event in this small plaza in São Luís do Maranhão, Northern Brazil, Maria takes Hadassa from Meire’s lap. She walks with her, pointing out the plants around the small garden in this community made up of the descendants of runaway slaves. Two older girls ask Meire if they can teach Hadassa the

different rhythms. One shows the baby how to play the drum while the other spins so that her airy white skirt balloons around her in a swirl of laughter and dance. Hadassa is euphoric.

Three-year-old Apollo arrives with his grandfather, bringing another drum. Apollo joins Hadassa on the beaten dirt dance floor. The grandfather picks up each instrument, showing how different touches and beats make each drum speak with different voices. Apollo pounds one of the drums with a proud, firm beat.

Care through play

Many Africans forced into slavery in Brazil fled to freedom in communities called *quilombos*; in the state of Maranhão, they created the *Tambor de Crioula* to celebrate their liberty. The ritual is festive – participants dance joyfully and improvise on their drums – but it is also a form of thanksgiving to São Benedito, or St Benedict Manasseri, an Afro-Sicilian saint who became associated with the Yoruba deity Ossain.

“Your blessing, grandma?” comes the voice of a small child. Like the exchange of São Benedito’s grace for a joyful dance, these words are traded for kisses, hugs, and compliments. Like the drums, the act of asking for blessings connects past and present, children and elders. As the drums begin to play, a vigorous dance gives space for the “enchanted” – those who have passed away into the world beyond – to descend. Each child here grows up under the eyes of everyone in the community, learning to respect their ancestors and trade the small graces that make for a collective.

During the Tambor, anyone can invent a verse, exchanged in call and response with the chorus: an introduction, a song of praise to patron saints or *orixás*, a homage to women, a challenge, a narration of everyday events, a farewell ... Rhythms and rhymes carry the heritage of the group from generation to generation, repeated, improvised and transformed.

Children – even the smallest babies – are always together with the adults: playing, running, inspiring laughter and requests to repeat. The child understands that she is the most important being at that moment in that place.

A circle of care for caregivers

As Meire dances into the centre of the circle, everyone’s attention falls on her. Baby Hadassa looks on with curiosity and admiration at the beauty and grace of her mother’s twirls and footwork. Other women enter the circle, chosen by a kind of pointing made with the belly-button. Hadassa joins the dance; the men beat a dozen interlinked rhythms. The community sings and responds in chorus, applause and cheers.

In the *Tambor de Crioula*, the community forms both a literal and a metaphorical circle of care for caregivers. While mothers enjoy a carefree moment on stage, their babies constantly move from one lap to the next. The experience strengthens the kind of connections in day-to-day life that form a network of mutual support, enabling mothers to share their burdens and find a safe place for their children while they work.



Photo: Natalia Correa

↑ Tambor de Crioula in action

In Portuguese, people say “*brincar*” to describe these festivals, the same word used for children’s play. “Games” for all ages, from the Tambor to rhyming games or dressing up at the carnival, integrate and socialise young children into a community of care. The community creates this supportive environment by mixing the sacred with dance, jokes, stories and shared joy.

“As a space for cultural and personal empowerment, the Tambor embodies resistance against hundreds of years of slavery, racism, and discriminatory public policy.”

Because of its link to African popular religiosity, the Tambor is an aesthetic environment, happy and motivating, valuing human connection, ritual meaning, and play. It creates wellbeing for mothers, fathers and children, reducing anxiety and breaking the cycle of toxic stress so common in a world of racism, sexism and heavy responsibility.

As a space for cultural and personal empowerment, the Tambor embodies resistance against hundreds of years of slavery, racism, and discriminatory public policy. Brazil was the last country in the western hemisphere to abolish slavery, and in the 150 years

since then, public policy has forced Afro-Brazilians into urban slums, criminalised their cultural and religious practices, excluded them from the job market, and limited their access to good schools and universities. In *quilombos*, favelas, and other spaces that Black Brazilians have built for themselves, rituals such as the Tambor form a space for passing resistance on to new generations – the foetus feeds on rhythm as on a mother’s placenta.

Building policy based on indigenous knowledge and experience

In 2022, Rita da Silva and Kurt Shaw (the brains behind *Usina da Imaginação*) worked with women from *quilombos* and indigenous communities in the states of Maranhão and Roraima to create a series of short documentaries to share their child-rearing techniques. As part of the *MIMUS* platform (Multiple childhoods, Multiple knowledges) the films show the importance of culture and inter-age play to support the physical and mental health of early childhood caregivers and children in general.

While the Tambor exemplifies this importance, it is just one example among many: the Guajajara people, for instance, celebrate a baby’s first steps with three days of music, dance, rituals and feasts; the

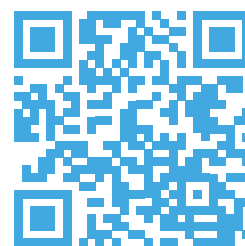


← Scan the QR code to visit the MIMUS platform online

Ye’kuana people make a point of taking their babies into the jungle every day to “weave an invisible string” that will always tie a child to nature. Festivals, music, rites, and community play are collective spaces for empowerment, cradles of resistance and support for a population that has been little understood by public policies.

For many years, early childhood policies in Brazil have often tried to force European and North American practices onto Afro-Brazilian and indigenous populations. For example, well-meaning efforts to motivate women to give birth in hospitals undermine centuries of traditional midwifery that provides essential antenatal support. Home visitors ask parents to play with plastic toys with their kids, subverting active play in nature and traditional care given by older children to younger. Nutritionists favour unfamiliar and expensive fruits such as apples

Video: Usina da Imaginação | Photo: Rita da Silva



↑ Scan the QR code to see the video *Karina Muniz: O aquilombar da Liberdade*

or pears over readily available palm fruits, such as açai berries, and cupuaçu fruit. Hospitals and schools insist on dealing only with parents and not grandparents, who commonly raise kids in Afro-Brazilian and indigenous groups.

We argue that policy must instead be built from the inside out, based on the epistemologies of diverse communities and their aesthetic forms of belonging. Policy must be made *with* them and *by* them, not *for* them, respecting their collective spaces and practices for support, care, and empowerment for young children and their caregivers. These spaces already exist: public policy must strengthen them, not undermine them. Both indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities struggle for decolonised public policy, supporting already extant practices like the Tambor, creating not a uniform childhood but multiple childhoods where dignity is possible.

This model is proven, even if it has never become national policy: the Kaingang people, for instance, have fought to use public funding for daycare to

support spaces where grandparents care for little kids, as they long have. We have been part of a movement to hire midwives and shamans in public hospitals in cities with large indigenous populations. In both Roraima and Xingu, western-trained doctors work together with traditional medical practitioners to develop policy and train medical staff.

“These spaces already exist: public policy must strengthen them, not undermine them.”

Recognising and strengthening these ritual environments and their cultural practices, favouring community life and the production of collective meaning: these elements form the basis for public policy that nurtures diverse forms of early childhood development and support for parents and grandparents, guaranteeing respect for their traditions and ancestry.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-21

With thanks to Kurt Shaw of Usina da Imaginação for translating this article for *Early Childhood Matters*.

Curious to learn more?



← Scan the QR code to read the 2020 *Early Childhood Matters* article on CanalCanoa, a platform for indigenous people to document their songs, stories and child-rearing practices on digital media.