

Maintaining and celebrating rural indigenous practices in Brazilian cities

How the E'ñepa give and take care, and what they need to thrive

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All over the world there are displaced indigenous communities who, because of economic and humanitarian crises, are forced to leave their homes and communities and live in unfamiliar environments. When these groups move to new places, it is essential for governments to find ways to support their culture, customs and traditional knowledge, including practices connected to pregnancy and the early years of parenthood. Raising children in their new homes brings a significant number of challenges and setbacks, which I outline below. But there are also opportunities to integrate traditions and rituals into their new lives, which boost parental wellbeing and help caregivers adapt to their new homes.

The E'ñepa's adaptation strategies for city life

Let's take a look at one displaced community, the E'ñepa, who were forced to move from their traditional territories in rural Venezuela to Brazil due to a humanitarian crisis. Every morning, many people from this indigenous group wake up and hit the streets of Boa Vista, capital of the state of Roraima

in northern Brazil, where they sell their crafts. Such work is a vital source of income. Generally, they try to take their children with them. However, there are days when they cannot, and must leave them with grandmothers, aunts or teenage siblings. Traditionally, in their communities, sharing care like this is the norm – extended networks of caregivers help parents or primary caregivers with childcare. This was how it was when they used to live in the countryside, among their own people. But in the city things can be different. For indigenous parents who reside in shelters (temporary, government-provided housing) for displaced groups, leaving their younger children in the care of older siblings can get them into trouble. It can be characterised as “abandonment of an incapacitated person” under Brazilian law.

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There are other challenges to city life for parents in these communities. Besides not speaking Portuguese, these parents encounter a culture that is overall more individualised. As such, traditional collective practices are challenged, and they are forced to adapt and compromise. They also have less access to the natural world, which is a big change from their traditional way of life. As my wise mother said: “The city does not allow children to have a connection with nature to learn to respect the beings that exist in the world. Children raised in the city are always playing with their cell phones” (Dona Luiza, 75 years old, Macuxi).

Another challenge for indigenous parents in the city is housing. The houses look like “prisons”, because of the walls around them. Some even have electric fences, commonly used by city people to protect themselves from intruders. Traditionally in indigenous

communities, there have not been walls, which allows children to play more freely, train their skills and connect with nature. From an early age, they learn to swim, climb trees, use an arrow, and weave baskets. The kids learn so much through play, and it happens organically without the parents having to intervene at every step. In the city none of this is possible, and parents cannot count on their children learning in this organic fashion. In addition to living without walls, indigenous communities traditionally live close to family members. Their neighbour is always a relative – whether a son, a nephew or a daughter. They are surrounded by family, and their homes are built and organised in this way, creating a cohabiting environment.

When they move to the city, this type of cohabitation changes somewhat. It is much harder for extended families to live so close together, because the city operates under a completely different logic. They try to live near each other, but they rarely manage to live side-by-side. Those living in shelters are more able to maintain cohabitation patterns based on kinship.

“Shamans advise pregnant and postpartum women on how to balance between western medicine and traditional approaches.”

Overall, these housing patterns based on kinship are very helpful because when the parents need to leave, someone is there to watch the children. Or, if something happens to a parent, the extended family takes care of that caregiver, giving them special attention. This collective help is essential for each individual parent. These bonds are essential.

Reframing traditions in the city

Cultural organisations known as associations, and shelters, are where pregnant women and caregivers of young children have an opportunity to be treated with traditional medicine from their elders and, in some cases, a shaman. For indigenous groups, healing from pregnancy is considered both a



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spiritual and a physical process. The shaman meets both of these needs, and recommends herbal remedies, certain foods and prayers to help new mothers. Sometimes the shamans advise pregnant and postpartum women on how to balance between western medicine and traditional approaches – which allows them to integrate into their new environments without having to give up their ancestral practices.

Cultural centres are also places where older women can share their wisdom about childbirth and raising children with younger women. These older women try to build up younger women's confidence in preparation for labour, telling them that they are resilient, and they also encourage them to stay active and healthy during pregnancy to increase or maintain their strength. This is the type of information that is passed down informally, and requires collective spaces for transmission to happen.

Another important exchange that happens between older individuals and new families in collective settings is the passing along of lessons about childcare. In indigenous communities, caring for babies is a shared responsibility. Both men and women take part in this process, with fathers often stepping in to care for the child when the mother is busy. The philosophy of care emphasises freedom for the child, with everyone in the community watching over her or him. When these communities gather, it gives parents a chance to both learn these lessons and to practise them with people they trust. Babies are collectively cared for, children learn to be with other caregivers, hear other voices speaking their parents' languages, taste traditional food – and parents get a break.

In addition to passing on these practical skills, our collective spaces also become sites for maintaining spiritual traditions that support parents and caregivers of young children. One important tradition is the ceremony in which children are given an indigenous name, which happens at 6 months old among the E'ñepa. On this day, children are given a first name, which remains until puberty. This ceremony is a significant event, and beads (bracelets or necklaces) are given to children as protective amulets. These beads are believed to safeguard the child and are an essential part of their identity. Such rituals have a strong social and psychological purpose, reaffirming cultural identity and ensuring spiritual protection for the family of the child, as well as the whole community.

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To care for displaced indigenous caregivers across Brazil, or displaced indigenous communities anywhere else, it is essential for public policies to consider their particular cultures and histories. By recognising and respecting the ancestral knowledge and practices of indigenous communities, caregivers can be properly supported through crucial moments in life, such as childbirth and the early years of parenthood. Maintaining such rituals and customs is essential for new parents and young children because they provide a sense of identity, community support, and continuity during an already challenging time.

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