

Written cultures in indigenous associations and social projects: a study of Xakriabá, Minas Gerais

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the place that the written word has been occupying in everyday life of Xakriabá communities, especially in situations related the preparation and development of social projects, in indigenous associations. The work is based on an ethnographic study of three villages. The results indicate that, among Xakriabá, the ability to read and write is performed not as an attribute restricted to the individual, but as a skill available to the collective. In this framework, orality is crucial in the negotiation between different subjects and the writing process. The uses and functions of writing that has been produced daily by Xakriabá establish and sometimes assume differences between the subjects involved. These differences, however, does not necessarily result in inequalities among them. Finally, Xakriabá see, on one hand, the situation of interacting with a mode of writing characteristic of the national society, and, on the other hand, do assigning uses and functions in accordance with local traditions.

KEYWORDS

written cultures; indigenous social projects; Xakriabá.

CULTURAS DO ESCRITO NAS ASSOCIAÇÕES E PROJETOS SOCIAIS INDÍGENAS: UM ESTUDO SOBRE OS XAKRIABÁ, MINAS GERAIS

RESUMO

O artigo analisa o lugar que o escrito tem ocupado no cotidiano de comunidades Xakriabá, principalmente em situações relacionadas à elaboração e ao desenvolvimento de projetos sociais em suas associações. O trabalho baseia-se em pesquisa etnográfica realizada em três aldeias. Os resultados indicam que, entre os Xakriabá, a habilidade de ler e escrever é performada não como um atributo restrito ao indivíduo, mas como uma habilidade disponibilizada para o coletivo. Nesse contexto, a oralidade é fundamental no processo de negociação entre os diversos sujeitos e o escrito. Os usos e funções do escrito produzidos cotidianamente pelos Xakriabá estabelecem e por vezes pressupõem diferenças entre os sujeitos envolvidos, embora não gerem necessariamente desigualdade entre eles. Constatamos ainda que os Xakriabá, ao se virem na situação de interagir com uma modalidade de escrita característica da sociedade nacional, o fazem atribuindo usos e funções de acordo com os costumes e tradições locais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

cultura escrita; projetos sociais indígenas; Xakriabá.

CULTURAS DE LO ESCRITO EN LAS ASOCIACIONES Y PROYECTOS SOCIALES INDÍGENAS: UN ESTUDIO SOBRE LOS XAKRIABÁ, MINAS GERAIS

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza el lugar que el escrito ha ocupado en el cotidiano de comunidades Xakriabá, principalmente en situaciones relacionadas a la elaboración y desarrollo de proyectos sociales, en sus asociaciones. El trabajo se basa en una pesquisa etnográfica realizada en tres pueblos de indios. Los resultados indican que, entre los Xakriabá, la habilidad de leer y escribir es utilizada no como atributo restringido al individuo, sino como una habilidad disponible para el colectivo. En ese marco, la oralidad es fundamental en el proceso de negociación entre los diversos sujetos y el escrito. Los usos y funciones del escrito producidos cotidianamente por los Xakriabá establecen y por veces presuponen diferencias entre los sujetos envueltos aunque no produzcan necesariamente desigualdad entre ellos. Constatamos también que los Xakriabá, cuando se encuentran en la situación de interacción con una modalidad de escritura característica de la sociedad nacional, lo hacen atribuyendo usos y funciones basados en las tradiciones locales.

PALABRAS CLAVE

cultura escrita; proyectos sociales indígenas; Xakriabá.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, the reality of Brazil's indigenous peoples has been marked by the increasingly intense presence of indigenous associations in the villages. This development is related to a wider process of attainment of social and political rights by indigenous peoples. In the section of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 specifically dedicated to indigenous issues, Indians are recognized as historical subjects and not as people without legal capacities as they had been, and therefore under the guardianship of an authoritarian state that called for their integration. Although the administrative practices of the state still do not comply with this provision of the Constitution, the affirmation of the right to be different present in the Constitution provided guarantees to some territories and to the right to a distinct form of education; and ultimately, it allowed the formation of indigenous associations. Managed by the Indians themselves, and supported by outside partners such as universities and NGOs, the associations fulfilled several tasks, including preparation and development of so-called social projects, through which they obtain financing from the state and civil society organisations to conduct various actions to meet their needs.

One of the direct consequences of this need to manage the associations – and develop and implement projects – has been the gradual penetration of written forms of communication into communities that, until recently, predominantly had only oral modes for the production and transmission of knowledge. This was the case among the Xakriabá people, whose land is located in the municipality of São João das Missões in the north of Minas Gerais. Written culture is preponderant in their relations with Brazilian society,¹ especially with finance entities that are part of “modern bureaucratic societies”, for whom written culture² is the cornerstone of education,³ and there are few mechanisms within national society capable of absorbing and valuing processes that are part of traditional life in the indigenous territories that are not closely linked to writing. Writing has a central role in the projects, not only due to what it represents for the national society in which the financial entities are based, and also has consequences on local forms of interaction. How does this process work? How has the increasingly strong presence of writing influenced the Xakriabá? And conversely, what have the Xakriabá done with writing?

1 Here, we refer to the political organisations of a national state questioning the indigenous people about the situations described.

2 Written culture is understood as “the place – symbolic and material – that writing occupies into or for a particular social group, community or society” (Galvão, 2010, p.218). In this sense, there is no single written culture and, therefore, the use of the plural is recommended: written cultures or cultures of the written language.

3 The use of different expressions – “written language, written materials” – instead of “writing” (“escrito” instead of “escrita” in Portuguese) is intended to emphasize that we are not only referring to the ability to write or to the product of such writing, but to any event or practice that is mediated by written language. (Galvão, 2010).

The relations between indigenous peoples and writing have been analysed, over the past few decades, in studies of various natures. One of the purposes of these studies has been to understand the specific characteristics of writing in relation to the forms of knowledge typical of some peoples (Cesarino, 2012; Macedo, 2009) or the orthographization of some languages and issues concerning writing and translation (Franchetto, 2008, 2012). Many studies have approached the presence of writing derived from the school context, exploring the dynamics of appropriation and its consequences in schools and in communities (D'Angelis; Veiga, 1997; Gerken; Teixeira, 2005; Gerken *et al.*, 2014; Mendonça, 2014; Neves, 2009, and others).

Other studies, in turn, have sought to analyse the phenomenon of indigenous associations themselves, such as the research conducted by Albert (2001), who analysed associations in the Amazon during the 1970s and 1980s, in the context of the struggle to guarantee rights to conduct fundraising, gaining access to what he called the international and national “projects market”; however, there is no reference in his work to the presence and consequences of written documents within the associations. The specific focus of our study is precisely to analyse, in the context of indigenous associations and according to the standards that are imposed by and the interface with funding agencies, the role that written language and written documents have occupied in the daily lives of communities. For this purpose, we analyse the most common forms of writing observed in literacy events,⁴ that occur in situations related to associations, and, particularly, to the preparation and development of projects.

This work is part of a collection of studies conducted in recent decades in several countries globally,⁵ which, rather than describing, in a dichotomized manner, the differences between oral and written cultures,⁶ seek to identify the social, historical, and technical conditions around which – in different historical cases – were built certain written cultures, generating a particular set of political, social, and cultural impacts. These studies also seek not only to understand how written language had and continues to have an impact on the way of life of individuals and communities, but also to comprehend how individuals and communities have appropriated and are continuing to appropriate such written practices.

The article is based on an ethnographic study at three villages – Itapecuru, Caatinginha, and Barreiro Preto – located in the Indigenous Land of the Xakriabá (TIX), conducted in approximately 15 months of fieldwork. The procedures of participant observation and interviews were used to collect data, ensuring the presence of a researcher at different moments of proposing and executing the projects, in addition to other contexts of daily life in Xakriabá villages.

4 For a discussion of the concepts of literacy events and practices, see Heath (1983) and Street (1984).

5 See Graff (1991), Chartier (2002), Barton and Hamilton (1988), and Street (1984).

6 For a summary of the first studies on oral and written culture, which started in the 1960s, see Galvão and Batista (2006).

During the fieldwork, twelve legal entities related to the communities were observed within the Xakriabá Indigenous Land: ten indigenous associations, the Organização da Educação Indígena Xakriabá (OEIX) [Organization of the Xakriabá Indigenous Education], and the Organização dos Grupos de Roça Xakriabá da Aldeia Itaperucu (OGRXAI) [Organization of the Xakriabá Farm Groups of the Itaperucu Village], which since the introduction of systematized information in 1997 at the no curso de Formação Intercultural de Educadores Indígenas (FIEI) [Intercultural Training for Indigenous Teachers course], has been involved in at least twenty-eight food security, culture, and health projects, managing a total of approximately R\$ 1,560,632.00, not including the projects for which there was no direct application of financial resources by the associations.⁷

The initial process of the Xakriabá's contact with non-indigenous people began with the arrival of pioneers to the region in the mid-sixteenth century, when the region was densely populated by various ethnic groups. In 1728, the indigenous peoples received a Land Grant due to the closure of the mission located in São João dos Índios (as it was called at that time). From the second half of the eighteenth century, there was a progressive and rapid arrival of colonizers and a dramatic reduction in the indigenous presence in the region (Santos, 2013).

In the early twentieth century, the Xakriabá appear to have been the only indigenous people in the “Cerrado”, in northern Minas Gerais state, about whom some information could be found. For a long time, they welcomed poor peasants from other regions and Afro-Brazilians liberated from enslavement, until the rural development of the mid-twentieth century became a threat to conviviality in the territory. Land conflicts became a characteristic of the region, and only after fierce disputes was approval of the indigenous territories granted in 1989. Since then, they have continued to face the daily challenge of survival. The Xakriabá population is now estimated at around 8,000 natives, distributed in several villages and sub-villages over an area of 53,074.92 hectares: which is equivalent to more than 70% of the area and population of the municipality of São João das Missões. The Xakriabá experienced a history of long and complex contact with Brazilian society; and as a consequence they now live in interaction with it, without, however, becoming assimilated by this contact. One of the consequences of this long and permanent contact is the absence of an indigenous vernacular language among the Xakriabá, who speak a specific variant of Portuguese.⁸

7 Before the intense work at these three villages, a survey was conducted of the projects executed by all the associations. The villages studied were those where the largest number of initiatives had taken place, and whose associations are called upon by the others to support their movements and assist in conducting activities related to the projects. Regarding the differences between the two ideas of “association” and “organization”, see Santos (2006).

8 The Xakriabá are developing a revitalization process of the Akwen language, which results from their contact with the Xerente. There are no linguistic studies on the Portuguese spoken and written by the Xakriabá.

The Land Grant document of 1728 was registered by the Xakriabá in Januária; and successively in Mariana when the Land Law was proclaimed in 1850. This marked a shift from the colonial system of land grants (known as the *sesmarias*) to a system of land ownership that authorized those who worked the land for agriculture to register that land in their name. This fact reveals a particular genesis of the relationship of this indigenous people with the Brazilian state and with the society around it, precisely through practices associated with written culture, as is the case with the practices for proposing and implementing projects through their associations.

In this article, we first present an overview of the presence of written language at the Xakriabá Indigenous Land, and then analyse the presence of written documents and practices, specifically in situations related to associations and social projects.

WRITTEN LANGUAGE IN THE INDIGENOUS LAND OF THE XAKRIABÁ

In what spaces are the productions and circulations of written materials more frequently observed in the Xakriabá Indigenous Land? What kinds of written material circulate in the villages? What roles are attributed to these materials? In general, it can be said that alphabetic writing is widespread in the villages studied, although in different ways in different villages. There is a visible distance between the village of Barreiro Preto, where the most intense local development in relation to other aspects is observed: a more consolidated schooling process, more teachers with university education, the presence of trade activity, public telephone service, well-built brick houses, television sets, and more projects undertaken by its association – and the village of Caatinginha, where, as several studies have verified, there is more precarious housing materials and difficulties in performing subsistence activities. This ethnographic research has shown that writing is predominant in certain social spaces and linked to certain spheres,⁹ such as the state, the school, and the churches of different denominations. The circulation of written material in private spaces can also be observed.

In the daily life of the village in general, written content is associated with people who have public jobs, especially school administrators, municipal officials, city council members, and other leaders who have contact with communities outside the Indigenous Land. These people have their homes transformed into a reference of communication that involves writing: they receive and distribute letters, notices, and summonses and invitations. Oliveira (2011, p. 65) conducted a study on the uses of written language in the village of Itapecuru and found that the homes of a city council member were “a kind of local post office”. These practices are, therefore, related to the state sphere, although in a very peculiar way compared to how this takes place in Brazilian society.

⁹ The expression ‘sphere’ is used here in the sense given to it by Bakhtin (1992).

Visiting the home of the “cacique” (top leader) in the main village, we could see the relationship between this space and the bureaucratic administration and, therefore, with writing. Inside, we encountered several people who had brought several documents for him to sign. Some of these people arrived with documents already drafted, such as letters, certificates, and referrals, which were signed by him after careful reading. Others requested documents for which he had templates or forms. Finally, there were people for whom he presented, prepared, and signed documents. It is important to note that the cacique had great skill in writing in other areas of village life, as the author of several poems, and had even been involved in publishing books.¹⁰ Moreover, he had been a student at the Programa Nacional de Integração Profissional [National Program for Professional Integration] with Educação Básica [Basic Education] in the modality of Education of Youths and Adults (PROEJA), at the Instituto Federal do Norte de Minas Gerais (IFNMG) [Federal Institute of Northern Minas Gerais],¹¹ Januária campus, where he acquired a basic level of schooling.

The school is another environment for the circulation of written materials in the Indigenous Land. In recent years, the institution of the school has been increasingly present in the daily lives of the villages and, by its very nature, uses written materials as a base for its operation, decisively reconfigures the role of reading and writing in the communities. In 1997, school enrolment in the Xakriabá Indigenous Land was around 1,400 students; in 2014, the number reached 2,779.¹² The creation of indigenous public schools by the state program for the implementation of indigenous schools of Minas Gerais (PIEI-MG), from 1995 to 1997, was an important event for all the indigenous peoples involved.

This program was the result of a partnership between indigenous peoples and the state department of education, the Federal University at Minas Gerais (UFMG), the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), and the State Forestry Institute. One of its first initiatives was the development of the Training Course for Indigenous Teachers, recognized by the State Council of Education/MG (CEE/MG). Since 1997, indigenous schools, which until then had been managed by the municipalities and FUNAI became state schools and began to have indigenous teachers, even those who were still in training, and indigenous school administrators.¹³

10 Poetry, in its oral and written forms – in particular the use of rhymed stanzas is one of the most common genres in the Xakriabá Indigenous Land, which is also found in other societies of oral tradition (Goody, 1977, 2012; Ong, 1998). This is often an aesthetic use to circulate information: an awareness that becomes memory.

11 Proposal developed by the IFNMG for Professional and Technological Education Integrated into the Indigenous Schooling within PROEJA: National Program for the Integration of Professional Education with Basic Education in the form of Education for Youths and Adults.

12 Data collected from the website www.educacenso.inep.gov.br, on 2 February 2014.

13 For a discussion of indigenous education among the Xakriabá see, among others: Escobar (2004), Silva (2011), Pereira (2003), Mendonça (2007), and Santos (2006).

We can now see the impact of education in both the daily life of the villages and on the broader social and political relations in the city. The indigenous mayor and several indigenous city council members in São João das Missões, teachers, secretaries, general services assistants, and health workers, have completed or are engaged in educational processes, including university level training. Many of the subjects studied, linked to associations and social projects, were, or still are, students of the PROEJA for indigenous peoples, a project that began in 2007. In this regard, Gomes (2006, p. 1) noted that:

The new social actors, arising from the mediation of school practice and the command of written language, become legitimate by intervening in cultural procedures that are important to community life, significantly modifying traditional practices carried out by the elders, and defining the shape of the literacy process underway.

The research that led to this article revealed that there are movements that reveal a particular meaning for the presence of schools in the Xakriabá's traditional ways of life. It is possible, for instance, to observe the incorporation of text genres, common in oral forms of communication among the Xakriabá, in school writing activities (such as poetry), visible in indigenous text books and in a workbook jointly prepared with the Caxixó and Pataxó for the training course of indigenous teachers (Nogueira, 2010). Another movement is to encourage the older generations to participate in school activities, whether as so-called "teachers of culture", or in daily and family relationships. The teachers of culture, who are usually older people and not always school educated or involved in reading and writing activities, were mentioned at many collective events as the people responsible for promoting the encounter of generations, through which older members manifest their cultural references and transmit them to the younger generations.

Even with increased appreciation for those who are not necessarily schooled, it could be seen, in several statements, that individuals perceive a close correlation between education and written culture. In conversations about preparing future leaders and the action of new generations, it is possible to see a certain concern among the elders about the changes that schooling, reading, and writing have caused among the young Xakriabá. One elderly Xakriabá, for instance, commented that she had only learned to "*read the language of the birds*". The young people, who are being schooled, in turn, are just "*scratching paper*", she added, however, that "*scratching on paper*" is only worthwhile if we can "*understand everything in life*" (Escobar, 2004, p. 78).

This elderly women established a relationship between reading, writing, and school, but was suspicious about the role that these new skills will play in the process of building a Xakriabá subject. When her son was asked about his own education, he explained that his father taught him to pray, to respect the brotherhood, the value of friendship, and the interior work of devotion. In his words, the lack of schooling and any relationship with reading and writing in his educational process

was flagrant: “They [his parents] taught us many things... but things from here, related to nature (...) We learned a lot of good things as we worked. Work teaches us” (*idem*, p. 84).

In addition to the domains of the state and school, we can observe that the circulation of written documents is also associated, in the Xakriabá Indigenous Land with religion.¹⁴ In the villages of Caatinguinha and Barreiro Preto, Gomes, Gerken and Alvares (2004) and Gerken and Teixeira (2005) observed that practices of the Catholic Church were related to the symbolic use of writing. The authors found that, although the written word was present in religious rituals, it did not define the event taking place. In prayers, litanies and benedictions, for instance, orality and memory predominated.¹⁵ Describing the relationship between writing and orality in a religious festival, Gomes, Gerken and Alvares (2004) analysed a ritual, appropriated from the Catholic Church that was based on an old religious book that was kept by an illiterate man. Even if teachers and other educated people also participated in the ritual, the book was read by a leader who, at the time, had not attended school. Consequently, the reading was performed with difficulty. For the authors,

The book represents a symbolic heritage, it is the symbol of a type of power and knowledge built and transmitted by oral tradition. Mr. Zé becomes the master of the book, not because he could read and write, but because he occupied a privileged place in a chain of creation and oral transmission of knowledge. The analysis of this episode shows us that the symbolic order that determines the position of subjects in the village’s hierarchy of power is based on oral transmission processes. However, the symbolic presence of the book makes a clear reference to a process of assimilation of literate culture. (*idem*, p. 80)

In our research, we also observed situations related to the religious sphere in which written materials occupied similar symbolic positions. During a visit to the *pajé*¹⁶ of Caatinguinha Village, we were taken to the prayer room. Inside, there was a variety of images of saints, hanging necklaces, and pottery made by the *pajé*, containing stones, beads, and seeds. He also kept a book to which he showed respect and veneration. The book was about medicinal plants of the Brazilian Cerrado, and included testimonies on their use by rural communities. Among those testimonies, the *pajé* pointed out one that he asked us to read and that he referred to as a prayer: the prayer of a benzedeira from Vale do Jequitinhonha who characterized her mission as a divine gift. Standing erect with his head high and looking down at the book, he nodded with his head, raising his eyebrows, to something important on a

14 The relationship between religion and written culture has been the object of classical analysis in historiography (see, for example, Viñao Frago, 1993).

15 Souza (2009) found similar results in a study on the reconfiguration of Catholic religious practices following the intensification of the presence of written materials within a rural community in the Vale de São Francisco, Minas Gerais.

16 Traditional Brazilian spiritual healer.

specific page. The book seemed to be there just to confirm all the wisdom he held about the Cerrado and which he used as a *pajé*.

In the village of Itapecuru, studied by Oliveira (2011), the experience reported refers to the practices of evangelical churches in which printed materials such as the Bible and hymnals are used to follow the religious services or for reading personal reflections.¹⁷ Differently from practices in the Catholic Church, as observed in the villages of Barreiro Preto and Caatinguinha – in which the participation of illiterate members or those with poor reading skills is common – education, dissemination, and the use of writing are constituent elements in evangelical churches.

Finally, we identified another instance in which written language seems to be used with some intensity in the Xakriabá Indigenous Land: the household. This use becomes more intense in homes with antennas that capture a mobile phone network signal. Through the messages they receive and send, residents receive and transmit information to locations outside their villages. In addition to these specific domestic spaces, research has found walls and parts of houses of a few Xakriabá individuals that are used to display written materials. Oliveira (*idem*, p. 68) thus noted:

The houses of the village [Itapecuru] have adobe or masonry walls that present, in many of the cases analysed, “a large bulletin board”, on which calendars can be found, of the current and previous years to decorate the residence, photos of favourite TV actors and singers, taken from magazines and posted on that important part of the building, telephone numbers (usually cell phones) and the names of their owners written in pencil, thus forming a simple and direct agenda (...). Requests for medical examinations and prescriptions, in plain sight, so that their respective dates and daily doses are not forgotten.

The same type of wall was observed in our study. In one of the houses, on top of a large table in the kitchen at which the family usually ate, between a pretty tablecloth and a clear plastic protective cover, there were many written materials. These findings seem to provide another indication that writing has come to occupy a significant place in the daily life of the villages. It is associated with pragmatic functions (making a note to avoid forgetting), aesthetic ones (there is an implicit idea of beauty in the assemblage of the visual appeals), as well as symbolic (reading, writing, and posting written material in visible places of the house is a distinguishing factor).

This overview of the presence of written language in the Xakriabá Indigenous Land suggests that specific written cultures have been produced by this people. The uses analysed can be interpreted as a combination of practices that are quite common in spaces outside the villages with uses that have acquired their own meanings. We cannot say, in this sense, that the literacy of the Xakriabá is exclusively local

17 One of the foundations of historical Protestantism is the possibility for individuals to have direct access to the Bible, without intermediaries. Therefore, learning how to read and write is considered essential (see Viñao Frago, 1993).

or that dialog with the national society is predominant among them. As Sahlins (1997, p. 58) evoked, “integration and differentiation are co-evolutionary”

WRITING IN SITUATIONS RELATED TO ASSOCIATIONS AND SOCIAL PROJECTS

In this topic we analyse the uses of reading and writing by indigenous people in situations that, in recent years, have become increasingly intense in the Xakriabá Indigenous Land: the planning and development of social projects by indigenous associations. As outlined above, the associations’ experiences, in addition to being part of the framework of local changes, have also brought a new role – symbolic and material – to written language.

The associations are entities recognized by the Brazilian state and, therefore, their very existence implies a bureaucratic process of formal writing as a way to ensure their legitimacy. To create an association, an administrative board or an equivalent body, with the participation of various members, drafts by-laws and registers the minutes of the meeting at which the entity was created, at the notary office of a nearby city. The existence of the association itself, in this sense, promotes and intensifies the written culture in that community of practice (Lave; Wenger, 1991).¹⁸ As the president of the first association of the Xakriabá Indigenous Land affirmed in a statement to the researchers of this study: *“In one way or another the president of the association needs to know how to read a little or have someone by his side to help him; like a secretary, or someone like that, because... without reading at all it is very difficult to work”*.¹⁹

This association was created in 1998 by a group of people who were either illiterate or who had little prior access to reading and writing. According to that same former association president, *“if we look at the [first] book of the minutes... I think that, for us, we should have a reminder that most people had to put their finger in ink and then press it on the paper, for the print to serve as a signature because no one... most of them couldn’t sign [their name], right? I knew a little bit, you know, but most people didn’t”*.

His explanation for the decision, which he considered courageous, to take on a job that involved reading and writing skills with a resourcefulness they did not yet have, was as follows: *“we thought that not only reading could be a solution, but also the union, knowledge, customs, tradition and respect for each other and everyone working together for the same goal. That is what really matters”*.

18 We refer here to the concept as it originally appeared in Lave and Wenger (1991) and was successively addressed by Lave (2011a; 2011b), i.e. we are interested in focusing on different forms of participation in practices shared by a community, allowing them to be passed on and appropriated by different practitioners. See also the critical review proposed by Barton and Hamilton (2005).

19 The fragments of the individual testimonies were collected during two years of field-work and are recorded in the reports and field notes, as ethnography documents.

In the above sections, we can see how the Xakriabá, involved in the process of deciding to transform the local tradition of collective work into an association legally recognized by the national society, advanced to the appropriation of an exogenous tool, represented by a specific way of conceiving and using written language.

What kind of writing is required for the indigenous to actively participate in the design and development of social projects in the associations? A mandatory form of writing, and the first to be required in an association, is the book of meeting minutes, which is essential for the development of projects. Minutes use a formal type of writing, although based on orality. Fraenkel (2010, p. 165 ss.), referring to the “*corpus*, inventory and typology of written materials” in the ethnographic research she conducted within the scope of the study, drew attention to the nature of meeting minutes as a “pre-established category”. As a legal document, intended for Brazilian institutions and related to the operation of the association and for accompanying social projects, the minutes are carefully drafted. The Xakriabá, as shown in the excerpt below, seem to understand the specificity of this kind of writing, because they assign it a role that not merely registers what happens at meetings, but also involves, fundamentally, a negotiation between the dynamics of real life exchanges – based on orality – and the specific demands of this textual genre. The meetings are seen as collective spaces, where people can and should present whatever they deem necessary, often going beyond the agenda planned for the meeting. The minutes, considering their singularity, cannot fully reflect this complexity, as stated by a leader of the village of Barreiro Preto, in a statement collected during the fieldwork:

For instance, there, at the [meeting] of the cooperative in Sumaré, it was not [called] for that reason; the cooperative members came to discuss that matter, on the problems of the associated members... of the cooperative members and such... and the way the cooperative should work... and then it the issue of: the Electricity for everybody [program] came up, something like that... and the minutes became very complex... at times, also due to lack of guidance, the person writing the minutes includes everything... And sometimes, we can say that the meeting was specifically for that purpose, right? And sometimes it's the project, when the people there ask for a minutes with the content they need, right? (...) So... then we started thinking of the following, we have already started to do this, when this is necessary, we can make two minutes, right? One where we put everything and another one... [laughs] so we can... right?

The testimony of the leader shows the appropriation of a “pre-established category” of the national society with its own design. The solution to make two minutes²⁰ can be interpreted not as a way to “circumvent” what the funding entity has “pre-established” but rather as a demonstration of the understanding that this

20 The same procedure was observed by Reis (2014), in his work on *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (Basic Church Communities), peasant women and cultures of written content in the region of Alto Sertão da Bahia.

text genre, as defined by the hegemonic written culture, does not serve the purposes of registering the dynamics of life's complexity. It must attain a meaning that also serves local purposes.

In this sense, beyond its legal function, the Xakriabá also consider the minutes to have the status of a document for local use. To highlight the number of people in the community unable to read at the beginning of the association's work, the first president of the village association of Barreiro Preto commented that the minutes should be saved to *"have a reminder that most people had to put their finger in ink and then press it on the paper, for the print to serve as a signature because no one... most of them couldn't sign [their name], right?"* Similarly, the president of the same association at the time of the research, also referred to the minutes as a way to tell the history of who were the successive directors of the associations. For him, the minutes were a way to remember that, since the association was founded in 1998, there had been six terms, with the participation of several people.

The role of the association by-laws is also reconfigured in the daily activities of the associations. On two occasions, we observed that this type of document was mentioned when it was necessary to solve problematic situations. At a meeting of the association of the village of Barra do Sumaré, which had been created without the participation of the local community and without the help of other associations – as recommended by tradition – the by-laws were read to collectively decide about whether that entity should continue and, if so, what changes would be necessary in the document. In another situation, this time in the village of Itapecuru, the by-laws were read aloud and explained by the president to the community, who did not know about the existence of this entity and did not consider it as part of village life:

It says here that this Organisation... is managed in our municipality by the Xakriabá people, and the main office must be here in Itapecuru, according to the by-laws, it cannot move to any other village. And there are a few other things here: in Article 2... the role of the Organisation... "strengthening, the union, the customs and respect for the culture of the people". (...) But to strengthen this Organisation of the people, we need the participation of everyone in the community, strengthening this work in the community. "Developing and implementing income generation projects and socio-e... socio-economic [reading with difficulty] activities that have been collective But we... when these by-laws were approved, we... made a project, sent it to Brasília, to the Zero Hunger offices... (...) most of this project was not executed because it lacked participation of the majority of the community... which was the community garden and the chicken raising activity that we started... and then stopped.

We can affirm that in this case, the by-laws – and the orally transmitted writing – was used as an instrument of legitimacy and authority to provide greater support to the oral arguments used by the president of the association.

In both cases analysed, the statute – a document the existence of which is first justified by the need to legalise the existence of the associations for the official

Brazilian agencies – were used as local documents, despite their formal and abstract language, which is distant from the language used commonly in the village.

Another type of written material present in associations is the “organisational book”, which records the payments and/or the monthly contributions of an association’s members. In the village of Barreiro Preto, the Xakriabá used as a *new book*, for that purpose, printed material of the same type as that used in the school as the Register of Final Results. In the book, which is divided by the number of villages that comprise the association, the names of members are registered, with their respective numbers, and references to the months for which contributions have already been paid. The book also serves as a basis for communication between the association and its members. During one of our visits, it was used to notify them, personally, of a special assembly.

Thus, it can be observed that, similar to the minutes, the organization’s record book involves appropriation of external elements related to written culture for local uses. The chosen format and the recording of information in the book follow a logic derived from contact with the bureaucratic requirements demanded from the Xakriabá by financing agents: the matrix for filling in the tables, the numbered list to help find information, the division of the book into parts equitably distributed among the villages that comprise the association. Therefore, the way details are recorded in the book reveals a command of the logic of administrative writing for its intended purposes.

A fourth type of writing directly related to the activities of the associations is the project itself, which must be detailed in a written document, as required by the funding entities. The Xakriabá have a clear understanding that only through this normative writing, and its approval, can they access the requisite resources. The president of the Barreiro Preto Village association explains that it is “*only ink and paper*”, and that the most important issue is “*to negotiate in order to meet the regulations, since the document itself cannot become a house*”. With this expression, the president displayed a very particular understanding of the question: What are the functions and the consequences of those written words (the projects) in the implementation of a matter that mainly relied (and continues to do so) upon oral negotiations? In response, he explained that the project begins “*in the head*”, in a mental formatting of what is required and what is spoken by all the members of the community, before it is committed to paper:

It [the project] is a document that... gives us every assurance that we will have the resources to buy this and that, right...? But the thing is that, if the community itself doesn’t do its own work, it will never become a project. Sometimes we say this: – I want a building here at Vargens, a flour mill... sometimes we plan it in our minds, as if we were going to have that, see? But, to get it we have to go step by step, until we reach that point over there. It was put to paper, the paper was approved, followed its due course... was approved... then, now, we have to start organising the community. That paper by itself doesn’t become a building, right?

This statement from the interview shows that, in the preparation of a project, the big challenge is to record on paper what was first planned in the mind, because what is written does not correspond exactly to the plan. Discussing the design in one's mind, the president breaks with the belief about the "speech on paper", that is, with the fact that everything we say can be transcribed and what is written can be read aloud and understood according to the intention of the author (Olson, 1997, p. 19). He recognized, therefore, the particularities of spoken and written words: writing is used to record on paper, in an incomplete way, what was projected in the mind and collectively discussed. It then becomes a formal document, which on its own is insufficient to guide the activities that it proposes.

It is interesting to observe that the Xakriabá very often use poetry in process of preparing oral arguments in the community and deciding what should be included in the projects. The *cacique*, for example, wrote some verses to evaluate the importance of considering the food and nutrition safety in the definition of projects:

No one ever knows everything
 We have a lot to learn
 Nutritionally speaking
 I only know how to eat and drink
 But I don't feel safe
 When I think of the future
 Of the children who will be born.²¹

The development of projects also involves writing a report, which, in turn, receives a new internal meaning. The meetings at which reports are presented become moments for providing accountability to the community benefited about progress, making the community aware about the importance of the association to expand the number of members or to undertake new ventures and gain credibility. The following statements illustrate the strategy that the president uses to raise awareness and promote activities related to projects, giving another meaning to formal writing elements. They also provide evidence that, for the report to be understood by a greater number of people, it must transcend written language; consequently, new ways are created to view the process of the planning and realization of the projects:

Those who see that building over there [pointing to the flour mill] might say: Quah!... It goes unnoticed [the work done]. But if you could see the landfill that was done there... We have the DVD showing the place being cleared (...) soon we were building with bricks... soon after... there was the day of the meeting at the flour mill for accountability... (...) To be able to see it, step-by-step... We can see it, it is good to have everything we do recorded... (...) the fact is that, many times, when we have a meeting, everyone knows how much work

21 *Ninguém nunca sabe tudo/Temos muito a aprender/Na área nutricional/Eu só sei comer e beber/Mas não me sinto seguro/Quando penso no futuro/Dos filhos que vão nascer.*

under pressure was necessary, but they never know how intensely the person worked, right?

In the explanations given, the president shows that he perceives the need to register the process, so that everyone can follow it without allowing it go “*unnoticed*”; through the temporal organisation of the images, without making any reference to written reports, steps were taken to provide a way to “*tell*” the process to all the members of the village. He seems to feel that the written content cannot transmit “*what needs to be perceived*”, i.e. not everything *can be put to paper with ink*. Therefore, he recognized the limits of writing itself.

Correspondence is another form of writing directly linked to associations and projects, used help solve problems. Our analysis of the use of correspondence for this purpose by the Xakriabá revealed the inherent difficulties faced – and, simultaneously, the tactics²² devised in response – to conduct the activity mediated or controlled by paper. During one of our visits to the Indigenous Land, the president exhibited a copy of a formal letter from the association addressed to the “*Carteira Indígena*”,²³ requesting that funds provided for one item be reallocated to purchase another item, with the proper justifications. Only in this way, after providing the necessary explanations in writing, and receiving the formal consent of the financing entity in writing, was the association allowed to spend part of the resources, originally allocated within the project to buy wood for the construction of the flour mill, to purchase iron hardware. This type of correspondence is often accompanied by visits and phone calls (Mendonça, 2014), where, once again, oral forms of communication are used.

Finally, we highlight another type of written material that underlies the operation of associations and the planning and development of projects: those related to the use of resources and accountability. Receipts, check books, copies of completed checks, purchase invoices, bank statements, and spread sheets are all examples of documents that are retained in a folder for each project. During the fieldwork, we found the president of the association of Barreiro Preto working with nine different bank accounts and eight banking cards, for which he had the same password. Although complex, dealing with financial resources was not particularly problematic in this experience.

During the fieldwork, we found this association to have an understanding of the dynamics of banking and that it created tactics to speed up financial movements and thus reduce banking fees, which are not covered by the grants and must be paid by the association. One episode, however, showed that some capitalist dynamics are still not locally assimilated. We attended a meeting of the association, which was called to approve a change in its by-laws to regularize the association’s bank

22 We use the concept of tactic in the sense given by Certeau (1994).

23 A specific funding programme for indigenous communities, implemented by the Ministries of Environment and Social Development (MMA/MDS) since 2004.

account, as well as other issues. To justify the need for change, the president said at the meeting:

The bank phoned me urgently because no checks (...) the bank could not accept more checks because the by-laws was not on file there... One thing nobody noticed... not even the bank had noticed, was that when the association opened the account the by-laws were the same, little had changed, but there was still that message at the end saying that the by-laws were temporary, for two years, so they expired in 2009. Now they were sent back from the Central Bank, for us to change this part, write a new minutes, go to the notary office for authentication and then send the new document to the bank.

This situation shows the potential consequences of uses of writing in relation to Brazilian society. When the president stated that not even “*the bank has noticed*”, he suggested the existence of a bank’s co-responsibility for the operation of the association which, in reality, does not exist, at least not in the same manner as similar relationships occur within the village. In fact, the bank had found irregularities, blocked the account, and solved the problem for the financial institution. The association, harmed by not being able to use checks, had to follow the bureaucracy by presenting the altered by-laws to regularize the situation. The lack of command or agility in relation to the needs of the financial agencies, which always involve writing, also shows that there are nuances of the national society that have not been absorbed by the indigenous peoples, especially those relative to individual interests and protection.

Bank bureaucracy proved to be even more complex for the association based in the village of Itapecuru, the Organization of the Farm Groups. While implementing a project with funds from the “Carteira Indígena”, payments were not made with checks and the bank statements, printed by ATMs were already illegible due to long time prior to the Xakriabá received the visit of the agency staff. The accountability folder was compiled with great difficulty. In a meeting with the community about the problems faced, the president of the association explained that the bank had “consumed R\$ 600.00 of the R\$ 1,000.00 left in the account from the project”. The tone of his speech demonstrated the seriousness and sincerity of his trust in the bank regarding the safekeeping of the association’s money, but it simultaneously reveals an ignorance of banking mechanisms and of the process of operating projects funded by external resources.

Furthermore, when presenting accounts, the Xakriabá use rhymes, showing no dichotomy between oral and written genres. The poem below, for example, was read at the meeting to present the accounts for the project of the flour mill in the Custódio village:

At the Caatinginha village we had a meeting
 Where income and food sources were discussed
 It was a productive meeting and with much guidance
 Leaders, the community and the president of the association

Teachers and students were also present
Working to improve our environment.
Carteira and FUNASA came to explain
About some adjustments for the project's improvement
The mill and the community also came to help
Since we all plant sugarcane so we can buy food
With this project everyone wants to preserve
the environment of the Xakriabá people.²⁴
(Poem by Quitéria Ednela Faria Mota, Xakriabá teacher, read on 5 February 2011)

At the meeting to present the accounts of the Caatinginha's sugarcane mill, which was the main theme of Quitéria's poem, another teacher also wrote a poem narrating the story of the association's projects in the village of Barreiro Preto. At all times, the poems were used to refer to the subjects of the meetings and the audience listened to them with great satisfaction.

Another aspect related to accountability that has been seen locally from a new perspective is the demonstration of transparency when spending funds. In capitalist society, there are expenditure controls for public and private entities, elected boards, and legal entities, which must be documented and proven. Conversely, the Xakriabá seem to have no concern about the transparency of the process, because they assume it to be inherent in their culture, related to the very essence of their social cohesion. What, then, is the sense of accountability procedures? The meetings to present the accounts gain much greater legitimacy by emphasizing relationships and social bonds – visual contact, speeches, trust in relationships – through which they occur, than by formal requirements, demanding certain levels of literacy and numeracy. Therefore, accountability, as a practice, is based on the explanations the associations provide the communities about the actions that justify their existence and demonstrate their importance.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As we have seen throughout this article, the presence of associations and projects, along with schools, churches, the State, and among other agents of literacy in the indigenous territory, has brought new domains, both material and symbolic, of written language in various villages. In this sense, the question we initially posed still remains: "Does the appropriation of writing and or schooling promote some kind of inequality in social relations within the Xakriabá Indigenous Land?"

24 Na Aldeia Caatinginha teve uma reunião / Onde foram discutidos fontes de renda e alimentação / Foi um encontro produtivo e com muita orientação / Lideranças e a comunidade e o presidente da associação / Professores e alunos também estavam presentes / Buscando melhoria pro nosso meio ambiente. / A Carteira e a FUNASA vieram pra explicar / Sobre alguns reajustes pro projeto melhorar

From one perspective, we may observe that the leaders, even when they cannot read and write, continue to play key roles in the daily lives of the villages, including the planning and execution of projects. This was clear at one of the meetings we observed, which was attended by the leaders of all the villages, the presidents of the health councils, health workers, representatives of the Special Board for Indigenous Health (SESAI), the mayor, two of his aides, the secretary of health and another public official. Some of the Xakriabá at the meeting could not read. The presence of written documents at the meeting, orally presented by the speaker, did not appear to pose a problem or cause unease for the people who could not read or write.

When one of them, a leader, wanted to highlight an issue, he pointed to the worksheet and asked where some specific information could be found, waiting for someone else to perform the reading; he was expressing an understanding that the information presented by the speaker was registered in the document, and even though he was unable to find any meaning in the alphabetic system, he paid attention to what was written; noting the colour of the ink, the column where the names of the persons appeared, the roles they occupied and the numbers corresponding to the amounts. He, thus demonstrated his understanding of the role that written language has in the political field.

Being illiterate did not prevent him from being, in a certain sense, literate.²⁵ Moreover, the speech of those leaders who have little or no schooling is very dense, revealing “complex modes of thought” (Olson, 1997, p.28). Writing actually seems to function as a trigger for the participation of individuals: nobody reads specific spread sheets or folders passed between hands; meetings are guided by visual elements, with drawings and text; and speeches often do not refer to the written information. When considering these and similar situations, the intensification of the presence of written materials in the Xakriabá Indigenous Land does not seem to have a decisive impact on the authority and legitimacy of leaders who cannot read and write.

Conversely, in other situations analysed, these new cultures of written material that have developed in this Indigenous Land seem to contribute to building alternative roles for those who are schooled and those who are not, for those who can read and those who cannot. During the fieldwork, we realized that at least three leaders who said they could not read were responsible for the written documents concerning the villages and projects, even if they did not do the reading. We also noted, in one of the analysed meetings, that on the first day of the agenda, a folder containing written materials and a pen was given to each participant. That folder became a mark of the participants in the event: all of them carried it with care and respect, including those people who could not read or write. Among the Xakriabá – as similarly witnessed among the Nambiquara in the “A Writing Lesson” (Levi-

25 For a discussion on this, see, among others, Soares (1998).

Strauss, 1996) – carrying papers seems to be an exhibition of power.²⁶ Alternatively, it denotes the handling of a field of power that can be activated regardless of the individual's ability to understand the meaning of the alphabetic system.

Faced by the complex role attributed to written materials in the villages studied, the Xakriabá often create tactics that demonstrate that they simultaneously value traditional knowledge – based predominantly on orality – and recognize the (inexorable) need to use writing. In this sense, it is interesting to analyse the role that teachers have played in associations and the implementation of projects: they often volunteer as scribes, and are responsible for writing the minutes, drafting documents and reading and interpreting writings. Many teachers have understood and accepted that their role in relation to social projects and associations is that of a mediator. In this sense, the presence of written language appears within a set of internal articulations for which a possible solution is sought, that is to have a scribe to “record on paper” what is “being designed” by or through orality.²⁷

Scribes are not, in this process, the only individuals associated with the authorship of the project, which is undertaken as a collaborative work, involving narrators, co-narrators, and receivers (Duranti, 2000). In the systematization of social projects among the Xakriabá, it is not always the one who writes that has ultimate control over the written document. The process of recording in writing a demand discussed orally and collectively, in accordance with the requirements of an official notice, is complex and difficult. It requires transforming the demands identified in oral discussions into an intelligible form – a collective task – and subsequently to the form for registration (the project format required by the official notice). One of the people interviewed stated that “*the community speaks and they [the teachers/the educated ones] write*”. The verb “to write” and the writing itself appear to be two different things. In this sense, the leader explained: “*I said everything and M. wrote it*”. The content is identified as the writing itself and it is incumbent upon the leaders and the community. The record – which serves to represent the village before the funding bodies – is the responsibility of someone with access to a higher domain of technology.

The same teacher, when interviewed, said his role was to *decipher enigmas*: both for the writing to be understood, recognized, and legitimated by the community, and for the financing agents. It may be observed that the ability to read and write is perceived not as an attribute specific to the individual, but as a skill

26 Interestingly, in the history of the Xakriabá, the possession and political use of the Land Grant, a document from 1728, was independent of the reading and writing ability of leaders in the local historical process. As stated by Santos (2010, p. 33): “The documentation was perceived as a guarantee itself on the land and its logic was independent of the text contained in it, since Gerônimo, like many other *caciques*, was illiterate. In several reports, the papers carried by Gerônimo appear as a legacy passed on by the *elder* from generation to generation”

27 On the presence or need of a scribe to mediate the relationship between individuals with low levels of literacy and writing, see the fascinating work by Kalman (2003).

made available to the community; which is related to other skills, resulting from the different roles of the persons involved in the practice.

Orality, therefore, is fundamental in the negotiation process between various people and the written language. Without a dichotomy between these two dimensions of language, orality appeared as a strong characteristic of the internal relations, as it is the main and most legitimate form of communication used in the various collective moments related to social projects. Writing, in turn, was more related to formal aspects, necessary for the development of projects.

Reflecting on the analysis conducted in this research, we can conclude that the uses and functions of writing are produced daily by the Xakriabá, both in internal mediations and in the relations with external agents; they establish and at times presume differences among the individuals involved, which do not necessarily generate inequality among them. The higher or lower level of literacy observed in different associations and villages – which cannot be considered as an independent variable, but is linked to other economic, social, and cultural aspects – seems to provoke, in turn, a situation of inequality in access to resources and even in the results achieved by the projects. It can be argued that the more the community understands and approaches hegemonic writing, the more benefits are accessed. Moreover, the more distant the association or the village collective is from contact with the logic of bureaucratic writing, the lower will be the benefits achieved.

Finally, we can conclude that the Xakriabá, required to interact with a mode of writing characteristic of national society, attributes to writing uses and functions in accord with local traditions. Through this approach, not only do they appropriate a seemingly exogenous tool, but also recreate it. Therefore, traditional dichotomies of the theoretical debate – such as those between the local and the global, or between the universalist and particularist perspectives – seem insufficient for grasping the full complexity of the phenomena studied. In this sense, the analysis of the cases presented reinforce what other studies cited in the article have found regarding the specific indigenous dynamics that do not assign a place of absolute prominence to writing or to those who possess the technical command of its use.

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