

The art of indigenous peoples of Brazil

Whether mystical graphics, body painting or colorful bird feathers. Art is an integral part of the daily life of Brazilian indigenous people. It is an expression of their strength, tradition, and connection to the spiritual world.



Brazilian indigenous peoples wear their identities on their bodies and faces.

Around 305 indigenous people live in Brazil. I have the opportunity to meet two of them at an indigenous arts festival in the mountains of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. I will spend a whole weekend there with them, to be initiated into their artistic secrets.

With body painting and graphic art against dark energies

They paint their bodies and faces to protect themselves from bad energies and to defend themselves against evil spirits. The colors and traditional patterns send messages and are said to guarantee good luck in hunting, fishing, fighting, and travelling.



A member of the Mehinako people [1] decorated and painted with the colors of the rainforest fruits annatto (red) and jenipapo (black). On ordinary days, the painting is simple, while on festivals, in battle, and in traditional rituals, it is particularly exquisite.

With excitement I watch Waxamani drawing a graphic typical of his people. Waxamani is from the Mehinako people of the state of Mato Grosso. He is currently one of the greatest artists of his people. His work, recognized for transferring the body graphics of the Mehinako people onto canvas, has already made it to the São Paulo Biennial of Fine Arts.



Waxamani drawing a graphic typical of his people.

“What does this graphic show?” I ask. “It shows the patterns of a Jabuti turtle [2]. For us, they symbolize longevity, strength, and resilience. Each indigenous people have their own unique painting patterns, but they all typically consist of depictions of animals and elements of nature that are important to us,” he replies.



„Pintura do Jabuti“ (“Painting of Jabuti“).

"Look here," he says, showing me another design of his people. "This graphic has a very special meaning for our people. We call it the "fish graphic" ("Grafismo de Peixe"). It represents a fish called "Kulupeiyana". The Kulupeiyana fish is a very special fish for us that brings harmony, joy and peace out of the water. As that graphic is transferred to the skin, so is the spirit of this fish," he explains.



The fish graphic symbolizes a fish named "Kulupeiyana".

The power of the wind

We, the visitors of the festival, are now asked to paint each other. We can choose a graphic and are handed a small container with the black color of the forest fruit jenipapo and a fine wooden stick. I choose the "Yvytu – Força" do Vento graphic, which symbolizes the power of the wind. It is simple and consists only of two superimposed wavy lines. I keep my head still while my partner paints the graphic on my face. "For seven days now, the color will stay on your skin and protect you from bad energies," he tells me. I smile. Then it's my turn to paint.



"Power of the Wind" graphic.

But not only the human body is decorated with traditional graphics, also the body of objects such as ceramics, musical instruments, or fabrics. This creates a lively exchange between these different bodies, which represents a cosmos in which everything is connected.



Traditional musical instruments such as the maraca rattle are also decorated with the characteristic designs. In addition to preserving the tradition, the handicrafts are sold to tourists and are therefore of great importance as a source of income for the indigenous population.

Feather art - connection with the great spirit

In addition to graphic art and body painting, feather art is an important means of decoration. The “cocar” (feathered headdress) is of particular importance here.



Eduardo Frederico Flydjwa, spiritual leader of the Fulni-ô people [3], with his cocar. A cocar is made, among other things, from harpy and macaw parrot feathers and the feathers of the green parrot.

Eduardo Frederico Flydjwa is a spiritual leader of the Fulni-ô people from the state of Pernambuco in northeastern Brazil. He is smoking his pipe when I join him. "Your cocar is very impressive," I tell him. "What does this headdress mean to you?" I ask. "The cocar is very important for us indigenous peoples," Eduardo explains to me, "it presents for us the connection between the warrior and the great spirit. It's also a bridge to the world, turning in the form of a big wheel between the present and the past." "That's interesting," I say. "Why are the cocars different sizes?" I want to know further. "The size of the cocar indicates the wearer's social position and power within the village, and it is the personal stories, struggles and journeys of the community leaders that are told through the unique meanings of the different colors of this headgear. This makes the cocar a very individual and sacred symbol of the wisdom of its wearer. It cannot be used by anyone else without the permission of the owner," Eduardo explains to me.



Sainny of the Fulni-ô people. The cocar is worn on special occasions and rituals. The smaller the cocar, the lower the position in the community hierarchy.

But feathers are not only used to make a cocar. They are also important for decorating artefacts such as jewelry.



Earrings decorated with bird feathers.

Closing ritual - dance of colors

The festival draws to its end and visitors gather for a grand closing ritual. There is music and singing and we all dance brightly painted and adorned together into the dawn. So we celebrate once again the indigenous artists, for whom their art is a constant ritual, because it is the art that makes the present to a myth, develops it further and inscribes it in the living body of their people.



Representatives of the Fulni-ô people singing and making music at the closing ritual.

I learned a lot in these exciting two days and am happy that a new era has dawned for the indigenous peoples of Brazil. A time in which they not only pass on their culture and their knowledge to new generations, but also to the non-indigenous population and thus support a rapprochement of different cultures.

[1] The Mehinako people are native to the Xingu Indigenous Park, located in the cultural area known as "Alto Xingu" in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. More information about this people can be found here:

<https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Mehinako>

[2] Jabutis form a group of turtles that spend their entire lives on land rather than in the water. Because of this, their paws are adapted for walking and have the shape of columns like elephants.

[3] The Fulni-ô people inhabit the municipality of Águas Belas in the state of Pernambuco in northeastern Brazil. They are the only indigenous group in the Northeast who have managed to keep their own language - Yathee - alive. The word Fulni-ô literally means: The Indians who lived on the banks of the river. More information can be found here: <https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Fulni-%C3%B4>