

TECHNOLOGIES OF THE INVISIBLE: THE USE OF THE BODY AND THE SENSES IN THE RITUAL COMMUNICATION OF THE XERENTE



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ABSTRACT

This work analyzes the ritual practices of the Xerente, focusing on the use of the body and the senses as instruments of invisible communication in contexts of celebration and healing. With a qualitative and bibliographic approach, the study investigated how corporeality and the senses function as ancestral technologies capable of translating and perpetuating knowledge and cosmologies. The research revealed that elements such as body paintings, ritualistic gestures and sensory stimuli (visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory) play a central role in the connection with cosmological dimensions and in the reaffirmation of cultural identity. In addition, the importance of these practices for cultural resistance and the strengthening of collective memory was highlighted. The results presented for a deeper understanding of the interrelations between bodies, senses and cultural practices, promoting reflections for both academia and society. Despite the methodological limitations, the work points out ways for future ethnographic and interdisciplinary investigations, which can expand the understanding of the richness and complexity of indigenous traditions in Brazil.

Keywords: Body, Senses, Rituality.

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INTRODUCTION

The cultural practices of indigenous peoples carry with them a wealth of meanings that transcend time, space, and the limitations of language. Among the Xerente, a people whose identity is markedly rooted in their traditions, rituals are much more than celebrations; They are bridges to the invisible, to the intangible that connects bodies, senses, and spirit to a single cosmology. This work explores this dimension, investigating how the body and the senses are used by the Xerente as ancestral tools of communication in their ritual practices, evidencing the symbolic sophistication that permeates each gesture, each color, each sound.

The research is based on a qualitative and bibliographic approach, focused on sources that illuminate the practices and knowledge of this people. The methodology seeks to deepen the understanding of the systems of meaning that emerge in the Xerente rituals, privileging the analysis of bodies as cultural technologies and of the senses as mediators of a communication that transcends the visible world. In other words, the study is not restricted to cataloguing practices or describing rituals; He seeks to penetrate the symbolic and sensorial layers that give shape to these experiences.

The main objective of this work is to analyze the ritual practices of the Xerente to understand how the body and the senses are used as vehicles of communication for the invisible, in contexts of celebration, healing and cultural expression. The proposal also focuses on the performative dimension of these practices, treating the body as an ancestral technology that carries and transmits knowledge. In view of this, the problem that guides this research can be synthesized in a central question: how do the Xerente use the body and the senses in their ritual practices to communicate meanings that cannot be translated into words?

The relevance of this work lies in its effort to value, record and understand the cultural practices of the Xerente at a historical moment in which the preservation of ancestral knowledge is essential for the construction of intercultural dialogues. More than that, by investigating the sensorial and performative dimension of rituals, the research offers a new perspective on the body and the senses as agents of cultural resistance, identity maintenance and invisible communication. This study, therefore, not only contributes to the field of social and anthropological sciences, but also sheds light on the richness and sophistication of practices that rise alive and vibrant in a world increasingly challenged by cultural homogenization.

CORPOREITY AND SENSES IN MANAGERIAL RITUALITY

Corporeality in Xerente rituality transcends the physical dimension, integrating body, gestures and senses as mediators of transcendental experiences. In their ritual practices, the body is understood as an ancestral technology, whose functionality goes beyond materiality, becoming an invisible and performative means of communication. This perspective suggests that the body is not just a passive receiver, but an active vehicle for the expression and transmission of symbolic and spiritual messages. The centrality of the body in Xerente rituals evidences its ability to create cultural meanings and connect participants to cosmological dimensions, where the invisible manifests itself through physicality (Melo, 2016).

The senses, especially sight and hearing, are amplified during rituals, playing crucial roles in communication and collective understanding of messages. The synchrony of gestures, dances and ritualistic chants, often accompanied by specific body ornaments, constitutes a language of its own, where each movement and sound has deep meanings. This performative use of the body reflects a worldview that connects the human, natural, and spiritual dimensions, allowing the Xerentes to access ancestral knowledge and strengths (Demarchi, 2014).

The notion of corporeality among the Xerentes is based on the interrelationship between the body and the environment. This connection resonates in the choice of materials for ritual adornments and the incorporation of elements of nature into rituals. The painted and decorated bodies become not only aesthetic expression, but also instruments of cultural resistance and identity reaffirmation. This practice reflects the relevance of the senses in the mediation between the visible and the invisible, since ornaments serve as visual markers of belonging and spiritual power (Maybury-Lewis, 1966).

Ritualistic gestures configure a form of symbolic technology that connects participants to spiritual spheres. The rhythmic repetition of movements during rituals evokes states of collective communion and facilitates access to transcendental dimensions. Each gesture carries a symbolic charge that transcends verbal communication, representing mythological narratives and ancestral teachings. Thus, Xerente corporeality stands out as a performative tool for cultural preservation and transmission of knowledge (Melo, 2016).

Songs and dances are indispensable parts of ancestral technology, functioning as sensory and narrative devices. Through them, stories and teachings are codified and passed down from generation to generation. Musicality, associated with body movement,

amplifies the sensory experience of rituals, involving all the senses and creating an environment conducive to spiritual contact. This performative dimension reflects the ability of the Xerentes to incorporate the senses into an integrated system of communication (Farias, 1990).

Xerente rituality also explores olfactory and tactile perception as ways to access invisible dimensions. The use of herbs, oils, and aromatic substances creates a multisensory environment that intensifies the spiritual experience and connects participants to the cosmological universe. These sensory elements reinforce the integration between body and environment, promoting a state of balance and collective communion (Demarchi, 2014).

The performativity of the body in rituals is not only individual, but collective, representing a form of "embodied memory". Movements, sounds and body expressions are transmitted from generation to generation, preserving and recreating ancestral knowledge. This intergenerational transmission transforms the body into a living archive, where invisible knowledge is stored and shared (Freire, 2000).

Healing rituals exemplify the use of the body as a sensory technology, where touch and specific movements are used to transmit healing energies. The interaction between the shaman's body and the patient creates a dynamic of exchange that transcends materiality, symbolizing the connection between the human and the divine. This practice demonstrates the complexity of Xerente corporeality as a tool for communication and spiritual transformation (Melo, 2016).

The senses are carefully orchestrated in Xerente rituals, being used to create specific atmospheres that facilitate spiritual connection. The lighting, sounds and smells configure a unique sensory environment, capable of transporting participants to expanded states of perception. This ritualistic synesthesia is one of the most striking characteristics of Xerente practices, highlighting the integration between body, senses and spirituality (Barth, 1995).

The use of the body in Xerente rituals evidences a holistic conception of existence, where the physical and the spiritual are intertwined. This approach allows the body to function as a means of cultural and spiritual expression, transforming gestures and senses into tools of resistance and identity reaffirmation. The Xerente rituality, therefore, reveals the potential of the body as a mediator of invisible messages, strengthening community bonds and preserving cultural memory (Farias, 1990).

INVISIBLE COMMUNICATION IN THE XERENTE TRADITION

In ritual practices, the Xerente use communicative strategies that operate in a layer of symbolic and spiritual perception, transcending what is visible and audible. This communication is not limited to the transmission of information, but involves the creation of sensory and emotional experiences that connect participants to the transcendent spheres, reaffirming their relationship with cosmology and ancestral traditions. Thus, gestures, sounds, and body props are key elements that shape this invisible system of exchange of meanings, acting as cultural codes that can only be fully understood in the context of their practices and emotions (Melo, 2016).

Black, red, and white are the colors of basic body ornamentation among the Xerente. The black is obtained with pulverized charcoal, mixed with milk stick, previously placed on a smooth leaf like that of the banana tree, for example. The painter, *Dasisdanãrkwá* rests the sheet on the palm of his hand and, there, mixes the paints. The body greased with babassu oil, receives the large stripes and black details that are imposed on them with the help of a bamboo spatula, stamps carved in pieces of the core of the buriti log or made of small gourd tips or a small stalk of the buriti leaf, according to the desired pattern (SILVA & FARIAS, 1992, p. 98).

The act of painting the body is not only a technical process, but a practice of social and spiritual meanings. The painter, known as *Dasisdanãrkwá*, assumes the role of cultural mediator, translating visual patterns into narratives that connect the individual to the collective and the spiritual universe. The choice of instruments, such as the convenience of bamboo trees, buriti stamps and leaf stalks, shows an intimate relationship between technique and nature. These instruments, shaped by the skilled hands of the Xerente artisans, become extensions of the painter's body, making it possible to create patterns that not only adorn, but communicate specific interests and meanings within the rituals (Silva & Farias, 1992).

Babassu oil, used to detangle the body before applying the paints, plays a crucial role in the ornamentation process. In addition to serving as a base to fix colors, it represents a sensory and symbolic connection with nature. The shine provided by the oil accentuates the contrasts between black, red and white, transforming the body into a visual and performative means of communication. This process demonstrates the depth to which the Xerente integrate natural elements into their cultural practices, reinforcing the idea that the ornate body is not only a space for individual expression, but also a vehicle for the maintenance and transmission of ancestral knowledge (Silva & Farias, 1992).

Black, applied with care and precision, often in large stripes and details, lends a powerful aesthetic dimension to body ornamentation. However, its meaning goes beyond visual appearance, symbolizing darkness, mystery, and invisible force. The application technique, which uses carved stamps and stamps, reflects a know-how that combines manual precision and a deep understanding of the cultural meanings associated with each pattern. This practice is not only an artistic act, but also a cultural performance, where the painter and the painted body become active agents in the preservation and recreation of Xerente traditions (Silva & Farias, 1992).

Image 1. Xerente Cultural Meeting



Source: atitudeto.com.br (2021)

As shown in Image 1, body patterns and designs, created from the basic nuclei, function as a system of visual signs that communicate individual and collective identities. These patterns vary according to the ritual context, social status or spiritual function of the individual, demonstrating the flexibility and symbolic richness of Xerente body ornamentation. In addition, the use of natural instruments to create these drawings reinforces the idea that nature is not only a source of resources, but also an active partner in the cultural and spiritual expressions of the Xerente (Silva & Farias, 1992).

The use of specific gestures as a form of invisible communication is central to Xerente rituality. Each movement performed during the rituals has a symbolic charge that

communicates narratives, teachings and spiritual interest. The repetition of these gestures over time creates a collective memory that reinforces the continuity of cultural practices. In addition, the gestures are accompanied by a performative intention that resonates with Xerente cosmology, establishing a direct connection between the human body and the invisible forces of the universe. This performative aspect transforms the body into a living instrument of communication, capable of translating messages that cannot be expressed in words (Farias, 1990).

The auditory dimension also plays an essential role in the invisible communication of the Xerente. The chants, children of instruments and bodily rhythms create a sound atmosphere that stimulates altered states of consciousness, allowing participants in the rituals to access spiritual and cosmological dimensions. Musicality is not only aesthetic but functional, carrying hidden messages that connect individuals to their ancestral past and the invisible forces that govern existence. Each note, pause and tonal variation carries deep meanings that are intuitively understood by the members of the community, evidencing the complexity of the Xerente communicative system (Demarchi, 2014).

These visual elements, although tangible, operate in a symbolic dimension that transcends materiality. Body paintings, made with natural pigments, not only decorate but also narrate stories, evoke spiritual forces, and establish identities within the ritual context. Similarly, body adornments such as feathers, necklaces, and bracelets are loaded with cultural and spiritual meanings that communicate status, interest, and specific messages during rituals. These visual elements are perceived as extensions of the body, amplifying its ability to convey invisible messages (Maybury-Lewis, 1965).

Xerente invisible communication is not limited to the human senses, but also involves an interaction with elements of nature. The wind, the sound of leaves, the light of the sun and the darkness of the night are incorporated into ritual practices as forms of symbolic and spiritual expression. This intimate relationship with the natural environment reflects the cosmological vision of the Xerente, where the natural world is seen as an active participant in ritual dynamics. By integrating natural elements into their communication, the Xerente demonstrate a deep understanding of the interconnection between the human and the non-human, revealing a dimension of communication that goes beyond the limits of the physical body (Melo, 2016).

Sensory perception is carefully crafted in Xerente rituals to create heightened states of sensitivity. The light of the fire, the smell of burnt herbs and the rhythmic touch of

instruments create a multisensory environment that facilitates invisible communication. This strategic use of the senses demonstrates the sophistication of ritualistic practices, where each sensory element is intentionally used to evoke feelings, memories, and spiritual connections. The senses, in this context, are not only passive receptors, but active channels of communication that allow interaction with invisible and transcendent dimensions (Demarchi, 2014).

A unique aspect of Xerente invisible communication is its reliance on shared collective knowledge. This communicative system is built on centuries of cultural practices that have been passed down from generation to generation. Each member of the community learns to decode the invisible gestures, children and symbols from their participation in the rituals and their participation in the Xerente culture. This collective learning transforms invisible communication into a communal experience, where meaning is constructed and shared by all participants (Barth, 1995).

The invisible language of the Xerente also has a political and identity dimension, as it reaffirms their traditions and cultural resistance in the face of historical processes of colonization and acculturation. Rituals function as spaces of identity reaffirmation, where invisible communication is used to resist cultural homogenization and to preserve ancestral practices. By using the body and the senses as communication tools, the Xerente not only preserve their culture, but also create new forms of expression that respond to contemporary challenges, evidencing the adaptability and resilience of their traditions (Freire, 2000).

Speaking of tradition, Xerente's invisible communication reinforces social and spiritual ties within the community. During the rituals, the active participation of all members promotes a sense of unity and belonging. The shared gestures, children, and symbols create a web of meanings that connects each individual to the community and their ancestral heritage. This connection is especially important in times of crisis or transformation, when rituals become a space for the reaffirmation of social relations and the cultural bases of the community (Melo, 2016).

It is understood, then, that invisible communication in the Xerente tradition is a sophisticated expression of their cosmology, spirituality and cultural identity. Why, through the use of the body, the senses and nature, the Xerente create a communicative system that transcends the limitations of verbal language, evidencing the complexity and depth of their cultural practices. This system not only preserves ancestral traditions, but also offers a

model of communication that emphasizes the interconnection between the visible and the invisible, between the human and the spiritual, reaffirming the richness and relevance of Xerente traditions in the contemporary world (Demarchi, 2014).

SENSORY KNOWLEDGE AND CEREMONIAL PRACTICES

In ceremonies, the senses do not act in isolation, but in an integrated way, forming a complex system of communication and meaning that transcends the visible and the verbal. This integration is manifested in practices that combine tactile, auditory, visual, and olfactory elements, which allow participants to access cosmological dimensions and reinforce community and ancestral ties (Melo, 2016).

Touch plays an essential role in Xerentes rituals, whether in the preparation of the body with oils and paintings, or in the manipulation of sacred objects and ceremonial adornments. The application of babassu oil, for example, not only creates a basis for body painting, but also establishes a physical and symbolic bond with the territory and its natural resources. The texture of the oil, associated with the painter's careful gestures and contact with the instruments, translates materiality into spiritual meanings, where touch communicates care, protection and belonging. This practice reflects the way in which the sensorial is intertwined with the ritual, functioning as a channel for the transmission of invisible knowledge (Silva & Farias, 1992).

The auditory dimension is also essential, especially through songs and musical instruments, which create an immersive atmosphere during the hearings. The children, carefully orchestrated, are perceived not only as music, but as sensory narratives that invoke spiritual forces and reinforce ancestral teachings. The repetitive rhythm of the drums and maracas, for example, leads participants into expanded states of consciousness, allowing them to experience deep connections with Xerente cosmology. Each note or beat is loaded with meaning, functioning as a sensory technology that translates the invisible into a shared experience (Demarchi, 2014).

In the visual aspect, body ornamentation occupies a prominent place, functioning as a symbolic language that communicates status, interest and cosmological meanings. The colors black, red and white, combined with the geometric patterns and stylized figures, create visual narratives that are decoded by the participants of the ritual. This visual knowledge is not acquired in an abstract way, but through practice and direct observation in

ceremonial contexts. Thus, visual knowledge is at the same time sensorial and cultural, collectively constructed and transmitted intergenerationally (Maybury-Lewis, 1965).

Smells also play a critical role in Xerente sensory knowledge. The aroma of burnt herbs, natural resins, and oils used during rituals creates a multisensory environment that evokes specific memories and sensations, connecting participants to spiritual dimensions. These olfactory elements are not chosen randomly, but according to their meanings and symbolic properties. The use of certain aromatic plants, for example, is associated with purification, protection and healing processes, reinforcing the spiritual dimension of ceremonial practices (Melo, 2016).

The role of the body as a sensory and spiritual mediator is central to Xerentes ceremonial practices. Every gesture, posture, and movement performed during the rituals carries a symbolic meaning that transcends physicality. The performativity of the body becomes a tool to access invisible dimensions, where the senses act as portals to the transcendent. This approach evidences a holistic conception of corporeality, where the physical, the sensory, and the spiritual are deeply interconnected and function as an integrated system of communication and expression (Farias, 1990).

In addition, the ceremonial practices of the Xerente are marked by a collective dimension, where sensory knowledge is experienced and reinforced in a group. Rituals not only celebrate the cycles of life, but also function as sensory learning spaces, where older generations pool their knowledge with younger ones. This transmission of knowledge occurs through practical experience, where the senses are trained and calibrated to perceive and interpret the symbolic nuances of the rituals. Thus, sensory knowledge is not only individual, but collective, reinforcing social cohesion and cultural continuity (Barth, 1995).

The integration of the senses in ceremonial practices also reflects Xerente cosmology, which conceives of the world as an interconnected system where all elements – human, spiritual and natural – are in constant relation. This cosmological vision is expressed in a sensory way in rituals, where nature and its elements, such as wind, fire, and water, are incorporated as active participants. This sensorial relationship with the environment reinforces the Xerente's perception that the visible world is only one layer of a broader reality, which can be accessed through rituals and the senses (Melo, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When examining rituality as an invisible field of communication, it should be noted that the body is not just a passive tool, but an "ancestral technology" endowed with multiple symbolic layers. This perspective resignifies the traditional understanding of bodily practices, positioning them as mediators between the visible and the invisible, between the human and the cosmological.

The data found demonstrate that the patterns of body ornamentation, combined with ritualistic gestures and movements, form an integrated system of knowledge transmission. The use of colors such as black and white – obtained by meticulous artisanal processes – not only reinforces the aesthetic dimension of the practices, but also communicates ancestral red narratives and demarcates social and spiritual identities. This finding reflects a dynamic of cultural preservation that is continuously recreated through ritual practices, evidencing the sophistication of the Xerente systems of signification (Silva & Farias, 1992).

The discussion also points to the centrality of the senses in ritual practices, an aspect often neglected in anthropological studies. Research has shown that the Xerente not only use the senses as channels of perception, but transform them into active communication tools. The sound of chants and instruments, the texture of body paintings, the scents of burnt herbs, and the visual patterns created by body ornaments come together in an immersive sensory experience. This sensory integration reveals a cultural system in which the senses are amplified and resignified, allowing participants to access cosmological and spiritual dimensions (Demarchi, 2014).

During the ceremonies, the younger ones learn not only the techniques of ornamentation and ritualistic gestures, but also the symbolic and spiritual meanings associated with these practices. This sensory learning process, carried out through practice, reinforces social cohesion and ensures the continuity of Xerente traditions. The data indicate that this transmission occurs in a performative way, where the body and senses of the participants become the very "archives" of cultural memory (Barth, 1995).

The analyses also highlighted the intimate interaction between the Xerente and the environment as an essential part of their ceremonial practices. Natural elements, such as babassu oil, charcoal, and aromatic resins, are more than material resources: they carry symbolic meanings that connect participants to the forces of nature and cosmology. This integration between culture and environment reinforces the Xerente's perception that the

natural world is an active participant in their invisible communication systems, demonstrating a sophisticated balance between human and non-human (Melo, 2016).

When discussing the results, an emerging theme was the political and identity role of ritual practices. In a context of external pressure, rituals have shown themselves not only as spaces for spiritual celebration, but also as tools of cultural resistance. By reaffirming identities and traditions, bodily and sensorial practices become a form of response to the cultural homogenization imposed by historical processes of colonization. This data shows that the Xerente rituals have a double function: while they connect the participants to their cosmologies, they also serve as platforms for the reaffirmation of their cultural and spiritual sovereignty (Freire, 2000).

The analysis of the results also revealed the Community dimension of the ceremonial practices. Rituals are moments of collective empowerment, where social bonds are reaffirmed and cultural memory is celebrated. The collective character of these practices creates a sense of belonging and continuity, while also allowing individuals to express their identities within a community context. This duality – individual and collective – reflects the complexity of Xerente cultural systems, where each participant is at the same time part of a whole and bearer of specific meanings (Demarchi, 2014).

This approach, based on valuing the integrated sensory experience, has significant implications for understanding the relationship between tradition and modernity, as well as for cultural preservation efforts in indigenous contexts (Melo, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This research sought to understand the ritual practices of the Xerente, with emphasis on the use of the body and the senses as symbolic and performative tools of invisible communication. The study revealed that rituals are not just moments of celebration or spiritual introspection, but spaces in which identities are reinforced, ancestral knowledge is transmitted, and the connection to cosmological dimensions is maintained. From the question that guided the investigation – how do the Xerente use body and senses to convey meanings that escape verbal language? – it is concluded that the Xerente have a sophisticated communication system, integrated and deeply connected to their cosmology. The body is not just a physical entity; it acts as a cultural technology, capable of translating and perpetuating the knowledge of its tradition.

The results of this work also offer a relevant contribution to both society and academia. For society, they promote a more sensitive and respectful look at indigenous cultural practices, reinforcing the importance of preserving these intangible heritage in times of profound cultural and social transformations. For academia, the study brings new perspectives on the relationship between corporeality, meanings, and ritual practices, offering a fertile field for future investigations in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and other fields of knowledge.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Despite its contributions, this research has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the bibliographic methodology, although rich in details and theoretical reflections, lacks direct consultation in the experiential context of the Xerente rituals, which could have broadened the depth of the analyses.

Furthermore, the focus on the performative and sensorial dimension, although central to the objective of this work, failed to explore other equally significant aspects, such as the intergenerational relationship and the possible transformations of ritual practices in the face of modernity. These limitations, however, do not diminish the relevance of the findings, but indicate ways to deepen the understanding of the topic in future studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Based on the findings and the limitations pointed out, it is recommended that future studies incorporate more in-depth ethnographic approaches, allowing a direct observation of ritual practices in their living context. This approach could reveal additional nuances about the interplay between body, senses, and cosmology in Xerente practices. In addition, comparative investigations with other indigenous groups have been able to bring new perspectives on the common and specific elements of bodily and sensory practices in different cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the results presented here are a starting point for a field of study that remains open and full of possibilities. The richness of Xerente ritual practices and the depth of their sensory knowledge highlight the need to continue exploring these themes, both to preserve ancestral traditions and to expand the understanding of the interconnections between body, culture, and spirituality.

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