

## LITERACY IN THE ASSURINI MOTHER TONGUE: EXPERIENCES AT THE WARARA'AWA ASSURINI INDIGENOUS SCHOOL



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**Vanderleia Assurini<sup>1</sup>, Cristian Caio Silva Moreira<sup>2</sup> and Benedita Celeste de Moraes Pinto<sup>3</sup>.**

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the process of literacy in the mother tongue of elementary school students at the Warara'awa Assurini Indigenous School, located in the Trocará Indigenous Land, in Tucuruí, Pará. The research aims to understand and value Assurini orality and culture, in addition to producing didactic materials that contribute to the teaching and preservation of the mother tongue. Adopting a qualitative approach based on the assumptions of Oral History, in semi-structured interviews carried out with the wise men of the village and other collaborators, the research enabled the collection of narratives and cultural knowledge. As a result, a collaborative workshop was developed, the final product of which was the creation of a book of Assurini stories and songs. Translated and applied in school and community activities, this material aims to strengthen cultural identity and promote the learning of the mother tongue. The work also highlights the importance of pedagogical strategies that respect and value the cultural specificities of indigenous peoples.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Education. Literacy. Mother tongue. Assurini Culture.

<sup>1</sup> Master's student in Education and Culture  
Federal University of Pará  
Tucuruí-Brazil  
Email: vanderleiaassurini524@gmail.com

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3722567968288728>

<sup>2</sup> Master in Education and Culture  
Federal University of Pará  
Mocajuba-Brazil  
E-mail: cristianmoreira562@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8829-9665>  
LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/9582361664389897>

<sup>3</sup> Post-Doctoral Internship in Education  
Federal University of Pará  
Cametá-Brazil  
E-mail: celestepinto@ufpa.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9450-5461>  
LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/7489392738166786>

## INTRODUCTION

This study is part of the field of indigenous education, focusing on the literacy process of the Assurini mother tongue, having as the locus of research the Warara'awa Assurini Indigenous School, located in the Trocará Indigenous Land (TIT), in Tucuruí, in the state of Pará.

It is important to elucidate that the main motivation that guides this work is centered on strengthening the cultural identity of the Assurini people, whose language and knowledge are at risk due to the historical processes of colonization and assimilation. Carried out by the indigenous researcher<sup>4</sup>, who is part of the Assurini community, the research aims to give visibility to the culture and language of a people who resist the forces of cultural homogenization, keeping their traditions alive in a context of adversity.

The Assurini mother tongue, as well as those of other indigenous peoples, plays an invaluable role in the construction and affirmation of cultural identity. Often, the loss of language is accompanied by the erasure of indigenous practices, beliefs, and worldviews that, while resilient, still face major challenges in the face of an increasingly globalized world.

The importance of maintaining and revitalizing the mother tongue is widely discussed in studies on indigenous education (BRANDÃO; ASSUMPÇÃO, 2009; MUNDURUKU; 2009), which emphasize the role of language as a vehicle for transmitting ancestral knowledge and strengthening social cohesion within communities. Thus, the process of literacy in the mother tongue is not only an educational issue, but an act of cultural resistance that aims to guarantee the continuity of the identity and autonomy of indigenous peoples in a world that repeatedly denies their rights and specificities.

In this sense, the research seeks to explore the possibilities of developing and applying literacy methodologies in the Assurini language that are culturally appropriate, respecting local knowledge and practices. As Brandão and Assumpção (2009) emphasize, indigenous education should be understood as an education that is based on the principle that indigenous people are active subjects of their own history, while pedagogical practices need to be built from indigenous knowledge, values and cultural practices. In view of the above, this study seeks to assimilate how the teaching of the Assurini language, based on

<sup>4</sup> The study was carried out by Professor Vanderleia Assurini as a Final Paper of the Indigenous Intercultural Degree Course at the State University of Pará (UEPA). She is currently a master's student in the Graduate Program in Education and Culture at the Federal University of Pará (PPGEDUC/UFPA), and is, therefore, one of the authors of this study.

orality and cultural narratives, can be a powerful instrument for the construction of identity and resistance for the new generations.

The study is based on a qualitative methodology, as this approach allows a deeper understanding of the participants' subjectivities, their values, beliefs and ways of life. As stated by Lüdke and André (1986), qualitative research involves prolonged contact with the research field, enabling the researcher to delve deeper into the central issues of the study and understand the nuances of the participants' reality.

The relevance of this proximity is highlighted by Antônio Chizzotti (2009), for whom qualitative research captures the interdependence between the subject and the object of study, establishing a close link between academic knowledge and popular knowledge. In this case, the knowledge of the members of the Assurini community, especially the elderly, is fundamental for the production of knowledge.

Thompson (1992), who works in research processes with people's speech, highlights how orality is adequate because it makes it possible to listen to the subjects, who are sometimes arbitrarily silenced, in the analysis of their lives, their conditions and realities, giving visibility to the expressions reported by the protagonist subjects, who, on a daily basis, reinvent and resignify the logics of sociability in the spaces in which they are inserted. For the author, oral history is a history built around people, since:

It throws life into its own history and this broadens its field of action. It admits heroes coming not only from among the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become co-workers. It brings the story into the community and extracts the story from within the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the elderly, to gain dignity and self-confidence. It provides contact – and, therefore, understanding – between social classes and between generations. And for each of the historians and others who share the same intentions, it can give a sense of belonging to a certain place and a certain time. In short, it contributes to forming more complete human beings. At the same time, oral history proposes a challenge to the consecrated myths of history, to the authoritarian judgment inherent to its tradition. And it offers the means for a radical transformation in the social sense of history (THOMPSON, 1992, p. 44).

The active participation of the wise men of the village is an essential aspect of the research, as they are the guardians of the traditional knowledge that sustains the Assurini language and culture. By collecting reports through semi-structured interviews with these scholars, the study rescues and transmits basic knowledge for the construction of the didactic material that will be used in the school.

This didactic material, which consists of a book of stories and songs of the Assurini people, will be produced according to the narratives collected during the interviews, in

addition to texts authored by the researcher. The book will be translated into Portuguese with the collaboration of the wise men, in order to ensure that the cultural and linguistic contents are transmitted in an authentic and faithful way.

The proposal is to offer this book to equip the Warara'awa Assurini Indigenous School and the community spaces of the village, so that the stories and songs can be shared in different contexts, both within the school and in moments of meeting and traditional celebration. In addition, the narratives can be adapted to different age groups, with the aim of serving students in the early years of Elementary School as well as those in the final grades, considering the pedagogical needs of each group.

The issue of literacy in the Assurini mother tongue, despite being a central aspect of indigenous education, still lacks systematization and application of pedagogical practices that involve the local culture. As a result, this work aims to broaden the debates on the importance of education in the mother tongue for strengthening the identity of the Assurini and other indigenous peoples, highlighting that the teaching of the language is not only a pedagogical practice, but also a means of preserving indigenous culture and autonomy.

The research also collaborates with the broader movement to revitalize indigenous languages in Brazil, which has become a priority in recent decades. It thus seeks to contribute to the strengthening of the cultural identity of the Assurini, while offering methodological alternatives that can be adapted to other indigenous communities that face similar challenges in teaching their mother tongues. In this sense, the research is not limited to the local context, since it proposes a model of intercultural literacy that can serve as a reference for other realities.

In addition, the research aims to cooperate with the improvement of the literacy process in the Assurini language and to promote a critical reflection regarding the role of indigenous education in strengthening cultural identity and in resisting the erasure of indigenous languages and cultures. By integrating traditional knowledge into formal education, the research seeks to build a teaching model that is respectful, effective and that values the cultural richness of the Assurini people, offering students an education that connects them to their roots and prepares them for the challenges of the contemporary world.

## STORIES, MEMORIES, RESISTANCES AND ANCESTRAL TEACHINGS OF THE ASSURINI ETHNIC GROUP

Like so many other indigenous peoples, the Assurini were deeply affected by the processes of invasion and colonization, which altered their territory, social structure, and their own systems of knowledge. The history of the people is marked by forced adaptation to different scenarios, which include the displacement of their traditional lands and contact with indigenous and non-indigenous groups. The first major movement of displacement occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the invasions of Assurini lands by the Kayapó and other ethnic groups intensified.

Initially, the Assurini lived on the Lower Xingu River, but a series of disputes over resources and territories forced them to migrate to the Pacajá River, where they established new villages and began to develop new forms of social organization (PROCÓPIO, 2012).

According to reports from community elders such as Inatarawaho Assurini, the arrival of new ethnic groups, as well as non-indigenous workers, has created a constant strain on interethnic relations. Known for their resilience and adaptability, the Assurini have reshaped their hunting, fishing, and farming practices, establishing a new relationship with the land and natural resources. The stories about conflicts with other ethnic groups are not limited to events of physical aggression, but also involve symbolic aspects, such as the exchange of knowledge, rituals and alliances that helped ensure the survival of the group. In this sense:

The Kayapó quarreled with the Assurini. He also killed, he killed his wife, he killed everything, he took his son to raise in the woods. An Indian could not see another no, an angry Indian. Wherever he saw his tracks, he went after him, until he found him to kill, he killed at night, during the day. As soon as they killed the late Pedro's mother (Sakamiramé), he killed his mother, took two of his brothers and raised him in his village, which is still so alive. Then when we fought with someone like that, we would go after him until we killed again. Where he fought, everything spread, each one went to one side so as not to leave a trace so as not to go after him, he went through the water far away and then left by land. There was no trace of him, he fell into the water, he went through the creek and the water so as not to see a trace of him. Kayapó, Parakaná, Parakaná killed four Assurini women and shot the old Nakawa'é. We didn't fight with them, because they lived on the other side of Tocantins. Now Kayapó and Parakaná, everything fought, wherever they came agreed, they fought, they killed (Inatarawaho Assurini, 84 years old. Interview conducted on 05/18/2024).

Inatarawaho, who spent his childhood watching adults deal with strangers and attacks from other peoples, says his grandmother always taught him the importance of

maintaining cultural integrity in times of crisis. These teachings, passed down through generations, have been invaluable to Assurini resilience. Ancestral wisdom, such as the ability to read the signs of nature and use medicinal plants to treat diseases, was one of the pillars of their resistance in the face of new challenges, such as the presence of diseases brought by non-indigenous people.

In this context, the Assurini, like other indigenous peoples of the Amazon region, have suffered the consequences of contact with Europeans since the beginning of the seventeenth century, a time when the exploitation of Brazil by the Portuguese colonizers intensified. The imposition of a new social order, the spread of diseases such as influenza, smallpox, and measles, which were unknown to indigenous peoples, had a devastating impact on native populations.

For the Assurini, the encounter with non-indigenous people also meant the loss of many of their lands and territories. Mining and logging exploitations, as well as pressure from the Brazilian state and local businessmen, have resulted in a series of illegal invasions of the Assurini territory, forcing the displacement of families and the fragmentation of their villages.

This territorial encroachment did not only take place on a physical level, but also on a cultural level. During the 1940s and 1950s, the action of agents of the Indian Protection Service (SPI), which, theoretically, aimed to protect indigenous populations, repeatedly imposed acculturation norms, such as the prohibition of traditional rituals and the encouragement of teaching in Portuguese in schools. In the context of a policy of integration of indigenous peoples, the Brazilian State promoted cultural "whitening", forcing the Assurini to move away from their ancestral practices (PROCÓPIO, 2012).

However, resistance to "acculturation" was not limited to passive resistance. The search for the strengthening of cultural identity and the preservation of the Assurini language has become an active movement within the villages. Leaders such as Takamona Assurini, one of the oldest teachers in the villages, used the community schools as a space for teaching reading and writing, but also as a place to revive traditional knowledge:

Takamona taught us how to make all things, handicrafts, arrows, bows, paneiro and everything that people did: *tatapekwawa*, *tapetia*. I studied with him and he taught, he is my brother Takamona. He taught them how to hunt too, took them in the woods, caught tortoise, killed game. He taught us to dance, he danced for us. He said: dance like this and we danced for him, all the kids danced. If he made a mistake, he would say: it's not like that and stop, sing and dance until he got everything right (Inatarawaho Assurini. Interview conducted on 05/18/2024).

The resistance of the Assurini also manifested itself in the form of internal political organization, with local leaders uniting to ensure the autonomy of the villages and control over their cultural practices and the guarantee of their territory. The struggle for land was not just a territorial issue, but a matter of cultural survival. When the Brazilian state and development projects forced the Assurini to abandon their lands and their way of life, the struggle for land also became a struggle for the preservation of the language, traditions and ancestral knowledge. The resistance to the destruction of the Assurini territory was therefore a resistance to the destruction of their own identity.

In addition, the Assurini women were instrumental in creating and strengthening solidarity networks within the community. During periods of resistance against external invasions, women organized and held cultural meetings, festivals and events that promoted the reunion with traditions. They were also responsible for educating their children regarding the cultural and spiritual values that sustain the indigenous way of life (RIBEIRO, 2017).

## REVITALIZATION OF THE ASSURINI MOTHER TONGUE: EDUCATION, PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

The revitalization of indigenous languages is one of the greatest contemporary challenges in Brazil, which has one of the greatest linguistic diversities in the world. However, historical processes such as colonization and the forced integration of indigenous communities into the Western model have put many of these languages at risk of extinction. According to the IBGE Demographic Census (2010), more than 20% of Brazilian indigenous languages have disappeared in the last hundred years. In this context, education emerges as a strategic space for resistance and cultural revitalization.

According to Munduruku (2009), formal education, in recent decades, has become a major barrier and one of the greatest fields of struggle for indigenous peoples. With the expansion of school education in Brazil and the insertion of indigenous youth into the broader educational system, many feared that the pressure for cultural assimilation and the learning of the Portuguese language would lead to the extinction of indigenous languages and cultures.

Belonging to the Tupi-Guarani linguistic family, the Assurini language is an example of the struggle for survival. In such a way that the Warara'awa Assurini School, located in the Trocará Indigenous Land, has played a central role in this process, using education as

a tool for cultural and linguistic preservation. Specific pedagogical practices are integrated into the process of revitalization of the Assurini language, highlighting the role of education in the transmission of ancestral values and knowledge.

Throughout the history of this ethnic group, the contribution of teachers such as Teapykawa Assurini has been indispensable in the educational process. Alongside other indigenous educators, Teapykawa introduced a methodology in community schools that taught traditional subjects and integrated cultural and spiritual practices. The Assurini language, in particular, was one of the foci of resistance, since, without mastery of the native language, many of the cultural and spiritual aspects of the people would be irretrievably lost.

Thus, the presence of women in schools was crucial. Many of them became educators to ensure that traditional education was transmitted and to fight for an education that respected indigenous identity and did not impose the colonizing education system. This women's educational movement exerted a profound influence, given that, by teaching the Assurini language, women also enabled the perpetuation of spiritual knowledge, cultural practices, and oral traditions (RIBEIRO, 2017).

Throughout history, Assurini schools, although simple, have come to be seen as centers of cultural and political resistance. They were places of reaffirmation of the Assurini identity and played an invaluable role in the preservation of the language and rituals. Education was not limited to the school environment, since it extended to the use of cultural artifacts, such as baskets, musical instruments and traditional clothing, which were manufactured and used by the students themselves, establishing a link between learning and daily practice.

However, the educational movement within the villages was transformative. Instead of just being a means of imposing the dominant culture, education began to be seen as a tool for strengthening indigenous identity (LUCIANO, 2006). In the 1990s and 2000s, the Assurini undertook a struggle for the creation of the bilingual school, in which the Portuguese language would be taught along with the Assurini language. The importance of this initiative is twofold: it ensures that young people acquire the skills they need to navigate the modern world, while reinforcing their connection to their cultural roots.

The formation of young leaders within the village is also an important aspect of cultural resistance. Many Assurini now have access to higher education, often at federal universities and indigenous education programs. At the same time that they integrate into

broader spheres of Brazilian society, young people also become active advocates for the preservation of Assurini traditions.

The strengthening of indigenous organizations, such as the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) and the global indigenous movement, play a strategic role in this process. These movements help to put the indigenous issue on the national and international agenda, pushing for public policies that respect the territorial and cultural rights of indigenous peoples.

In this way, learning among the Assurini is essentially an experiential process. From childhood, young people learn by observing and participating in everyday activities with their parents, grandparents, and other older members of the village. The most common activities, such as fruit gathering, cassava planting, and fishing, are passed down from generation to generation, so that young people become experts in their family's traditions (NUNES, 2017). At the same time, the teaching of the stories of the ancestors, which explain the origin of the Assurini people and the relationship of the human being with nature and spirits, is vital for the maintenance of their worldview.

In this sense, one of the most innovative strategies adopted at the Warara'awa School is the integration of pedagogical practices that reconcile orality, writing and specific cultural contexts. Oral narratives, such as the creation of sacred animal stories, are incorporated into the lessons as part of the curriculum. These reports are transcribed by the students, promoting the practice of writing and ensuring the permanent registration of the mother tongue.

The revitalization of the Assurini mother tongue, as a project of cultural resistance, emerges as a response to the consequences of historical contact with the Turia (non-indigenous) and to the hegemonic pressure of Portuguese. As highlighted by Professor Vanderleia Assurini, the mother tongue is "our knowledge, our knowledge, it is the root of our sages". In this context, the Warara'awa Assurini Indigenous School is a central space of struggle, promoting initiatives that integrate the teaching of the language with cultural practices, an initiative that reaffirms the identity of the Assurini people in the face of the challenges of linguistic and cultural erasure.

**Figure 1** – The teaching of the mother tongue at the Warara'awa Assurini school



Fonte: Vanderleia Assurini (2023).

The Assurini language is fundamental as a mediator of ancestral knowledge and guardian of the people's histories, traditions and spirituality. Maher (2007) explains that, in Brazilian indigenous societies, orality is the cultural basis, but the insertion of these communities in a literate context, forced by contact, often results in asymmetrical bilingualism and, in the most critical cases, in the loss of the mother tongue. This situation, evidenced in the Assurini context, is aggravated by the gradual distancing of the new generations from the daily use of the language.

In this scenario, Thompson (1992) argues that orality is not only a communication tool, but a process of memory transmission and identity construction, being essential to face the historical invisibilization imposed by the dominant discourses. For the Assurini people, the revitalization of the language is a way to reestablish their cultural autonomy and ensure the continuity of their traditions. This is because "the wise are the roots of our culture, and without them, the language and traditional knowledge are at risk of disappearing".

Among the strategies implemented that seek to revitalize the mother tongue, the production of bilingual materials, such as storybooks and translated songs, stands out. In addition to serving as a didactic resource, these materials reinforce the appreciation of the language in the school and community context. In addition, cultural workshops, such as

graphics and body painting, have been used to connect the language to traditional meanings, promoting a practical experience of vocabulary and linguistic expressions.

Although the pedagogical practices developed at the Warara'awa School are essential for the revitalization of the language, the process faces significant challenges. The influence of the Portuguese language, which dominates everyday interactions, makes it difficult for young people to reintroduce their mother tongue. The presence of the Assurini language in classrooms is an attempt to strengthen the children's bond with their cultural roots, even in the face of the growing mastery of the Portuguese language. This practice is in line with the view of Walsh (2009), who defends an education that values pluriculturalism and local epistemologies.

However, the lack of official recognition and specific resources for indigenous schools compromises the sustainability of these initiatives. Despite this, indigenous teachers, acting as cultural mediators, seek to implement innovative and contextualized practices and promote interculturality.

The perspective of an intercultural education, integrated with community experience, reinforces the idea that indigenous knowledge is not inferior to Western knowledge, but, in fact, complementary. As Walsh (2009) explains, this view is relevant to overcome historical inequalities and promote harmonious coexistence between different cultures.

Thus, the production of bilingual teaching materials and the realization of projects that combine orality, writing and cultural practices have generated positive results. Vanderleia Assurini points out that "the revitalization of the mother tongue is a way to ensure what still survives from our culture", highlighting the transformative potential of these actions in the preservation of the identity of the people.

These pedagogical resources facilitate learning and ensure that the content taught is aligned with the reality of Assurini's daily life. In addition, intergenerational dialogues, through which the elders share stories and songs with the children, have shown significant results in the transmission of ancestral knowledge. These practices connect young people to cultural roots, promoting integrated learning.

Resistance also extends to the use of material culture, such as traditional dances, which are performed at festivals and important rituals. The preservation of the dances, for example, is not only a form of entertainment, but a way to teach young people about the history of the people, community values and the importance of respecting the spiritual forces that govern the lives of the Assurini.

From this perspective, education for the Assurini people goes beyond simple literacy, it is a mechanism for the construction and reaffirmation of cultural identity. At the Warara'awa School, the curriculum began to be designed to value local traditions and promote the use of the mother tongue in everyday situations. Through educational practices that prioritize learning in Assurini, students master the language and recognize themselves as part of a community with its own history, values, and worldviews.

Orality continues to be the main axis of the educational process. Teachers use singing, dancing and storytelling to teach the language and the cultural meanings associated with it. The introduction of creative activities, such as the composition of songs and poetry in Assurini, encourages young people to use the language in an innovative way, ensuring its relevance for new generations.

Although education has contributed significantly to the revitalization of the Assurini language, challenges remain. The scarcity of specialized teaching materials and insufficient funding for indigenous schools make it difficult to continue educational projects. In fact, public policies do not always recognize the importance of bilingual and intercultural education for the preservation of indigenous languages.

Another challenge is the influence of Portuguese as the dominant language, which often occupies a larger space than desired in indigenous schools. The lack of trained bilingual teachers also limits the reach of educational initiatives. However, the mobilization of the community, combined with academic partnerships, has shown that education can overcome these obstacles and become a space for transformation.

#### PROPOSAL OF DIDACTIC MATERIAL: "ASSURINI STORIES AND SONGS: LEARNING AND LIVING THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE"

##### **Objectives**

1. Reinforce the teaching and use of the Assurini mother tongue in a school context;
2. Promote bilingualism, relating the mother tongue to the Portuguese language, respecting cultural specificities;
3. To value stories, songs and graphics as pedagogical tools for learning the Assurini language and culture; and
4. To encourage young people to be protagonists in the revitalization and registration of their language and culture.

## Material structure

### 1. Traditional stories in the Assurini language

- Presentation of traditional narratives, with the original version in the Assurini language accompanied by the translation into Portuguese.
- Activities: guided readings to identify vocabulary and typical expressions; rewriting or adaptation of the stories by the students, creating new bilingual narratives; and creation of illustrated glossaries with keywords of the stories.

### 2. Chants and songs in the Assurini language

- Original lyrics of traditional songs, translated and accompanied by explanations about their cultural contexts.
- Activities: musical rehearsals, focusing on the correct pronunciation of words in Assurini; and production of bilingual presentations, with subtitles in Portuguese and Assurini.

### 3. Speaking and writing exercises

- Development of dialogues, short stories or poems in the mother tongue.
- Activities: dramatizations of everyday scenes or traditional stories using the Assurini language; and production of bilingual authorial texts, such as diaries or personal testimonies.

### 4. Graphics and painting workshop

- Introduction to the cultural meaning of graphics and their relationship with the vocabulary of the language.
- Activities: creation of murals and illustrations that associate words in Assurini with traditional graphics.

### 5. Pedagogical games in Assurini language

- Dynamics that stimulate language learning, such as puzzles, memory games and vocabulary challenges.
- Activities: game of "completing the sentence" in Assurini; and games of association between words and images or graphics.

## Final product: "Assurini-Portuguese bilingual textbook"

The final material, produced collectively by the students, teachers and scholars, will be an integrated record of the Assurini language and culture, with:

1. Traditional bilingual stories and songs, transcribed and translated by the students;

2. Illustrated vocabulary, highlighting the key words and expressions in Assurini with their meanings;
3. Language learning activities, such as reading, writing and speaking exercises;
4. Visual representations and graphics created by the students, connecting art to the mother tongue.

## **Impact**

This book will not only be a didactic resource, but also a legacy for the school and the community, with the potential to be used by future generations for the revitalization of the Assurini language and culture. It can also be presented at cultural and educational events, strengthening indigenous protagonism in education.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Education is the central element in the process of revitalizing the Assurini language, allowing the transmission of linguistic, cultural and spiritual knowledge. The Warara'awa School demonstrates that the integration of innovative pedagogical practices with cultural traditions can strengthen the mother tongue, while preserving the collective identity of the Assurini people.

However, it is essential that there is more institutional support for these initiatives. The training of indigenous teachers, the production of bilingual pedagogical materials, and the implementation of public policies that value cultural diversity are indispensable steps to enable the sustainability of these efforts. Therefore, education contributes to the survival of the Assurini language and strengthens the resistance of a people who struggle to keep their cultural heritage alive.

On the other hand, this ethnic group faces the pressure of development projects and environmental destruction that continue to threaten their land and their way of life. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that the Assurini culture is revitalized and transformed in such a way that it remains relevant and alive for future generations. The adaptation of cultural practices to the global context, while maintaining the essence of tradition, is one of the greatest challenges faced by the community.

Education continues to be one of the main instruments of resistance, but now, in addition to the revitalization of language and traditional knowledge, it needs to deal with contemporary issues such as access to technology, climate change, and the new forms of

communication that are shaping the indigenous world. The struggle of the Assurini people is, therefore, a multifaceted struggle that involves the past, the present and the future. Resistance to the destruction of their culture and the affirmation of their identity continue to be primordial themes in the trajectory of the Assurini, yet they continue to reinvent their way of life to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

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