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Gabriel de Figueiredo da Costa, Ana Valéria de Figueiredo, Zulmira Rangel  
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# **The EréPomteca project**

## **Art and play for the re-education of ethnic-racial relations**

Gabriel de Figueiredo da Costa

*UFRJ, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

Ana Valéria de Figueiredo

*UERJ, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

*& UNESA, Universidade Estácio de Sá – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

Zulmira Rangel Benfica

*UNESA, Universidade Estácio de Sá – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

### Abstract

The EréPomteca project comes from the words Eré (playing, in Yoruba language), Pom (playing or handling, in ancient Tupi language) and Teca (collection, from the Greek language), meaning a library of African and Indigenous toys and games. The main aim of the project is to understand how the games and playing practices of African and Indigenous matrices that are present in Brazil could provide potentialized and effective pedagogical actions for the education of ethnic-racial relations. This is achieved by investigating games, toys and playthings of African and Indigenous origins in educational and artistic practices, in defense of an anti-racist education supporting diversity in studying and teaching spaces. The following goals stand out: the validation of didactic methodologies with ethnic-racial games for use by educators; the preparation of a digital inventory of Afro-indigenous games, toys and playthings; the development of videos/classes; and continuing education for teachers from public and private schools.

Keywords: African toys; indigenous toys; ethnic-racial relations; heritage; decolonial studies

Eré: playing, child or child's play in Yoruba. Pom: playing or handling in Tupi. Starting from these words linked by the semantic fields of playfulness, EréPomteca is a proposal for a scientific initiation project that has been developed in the laboratory of pedagogical practices, the Brinquedoteca BrincArte Estácio Nova Iguaçu (RJ), and brings the theme of "playing for the re-education of ethnic-racial relations." It's important to mention that, in this article, by "re-education" we mean a new form of education, more diverse and multi-cultural, different from the one that has been offered in the past and which presents the potential to change the limited world-view that the latter offered.

BrincArte is a university playroom, and its principle is that this space is not just a "place to keep children" but rather a laboratory for teaching, research, extension, a locus for the study of playful-pedagogical practices, and training of teachers. It is, above all, a space for free play that opens up possibilities for the implementation of studies and research related to child development, education, teacher training, among other areas of knowledge, in an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary way.

The Brazilian Toy Library Association<sup>1</sup> defines a toy library as a "[...] space conceived, organized, and managed by a toy librarian to promote spontaneous and creative play for children and meet the ludic needs of people of all ages," and the International Toy Library Association<sup>2</sup> (2023) observes that "Toy libraries, as often as possible, serve as a community resource, offering information, guidance and support to members in addition to making playthings available for play or loan. Toy libraries generally serve people without regard to language, national origin, race, age, sex, ability or religion." In this way, our university toy library is not only a place where people can gather to play, but also part of a broader training facility, one not only for children but also for students in the pedagogy course.

For the Pedagogy course and, in general, for the teaching programs, it is a space for the interaction of the culture of play as a dimension of humanity. Play is regarded as a serious activity, and in this laboratory, we aim to train toy librarians to think, study, and put this playfulness into practice. We are thinkers of playing, and as such, we must understand it in its various stages, connections, and possible dialogues.

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<sup>1</sup> ABBRI, Associação Brasileira de Brinquedotecas (2023). Brinquedoteca - O que É. <https://en.brinquedoteca.org.br/o-que%C3%A9brinquedoteca-e-brinquedista>

<sup>2</sup> ITLA, International Toy Library Association (2023). Toy Libraries. <https://itla-toylibraries.org/home/join-us/>

Thus, we study, practice and bring attention to inclusive toys, traditional toys, and mainly indigenous toys, and African and Afro-Brazilian toys; these toys and games that have been with us all throughout history and are fundamental foundations in this training space.

### **The EréPomteca Project**

This is one of the projects that we have been undertaking since 2022 at the Brinquedoteca BrincArte with students from the Pedagogy and Teaching programs and with the children who frequent the space. In the project, we use the term "re-education" to refer to ethnic-racial relations because, as Gonçalves e Silva (2007) points out, we were already educated, or rather, miseducated about these aspects, and we need to be re-educated in this perspective of ethnic-racial relations.

Toys have been actively used as a tool for teaching a colonized mindset to children and even for the relativization of genocide, as it is the case of the "cowboys versus Indians" toy sets, famous in the USA but also exported to Brazil (Bird, 2004), and also the large number of cooking toys branded for girls, and car washing toys branded for boys, together with other gender-typed toys and games (Blakemore and Centers, 2005). Thus, working with decolonial toys can also serve for an active anti-racist and anti-xenophobic education, in order to contrast with these easily accessible and somewhat problematic toys.

The EréPomteca project aims to think about games and toys that we often engage in our daily lives, from which we do not know the origins and matrices, and also new toys and games that are not easily accessible for the general public. Gonçalves e Silva (2007) points out that "as we build our identities – national, ethnic-racial, personal – we apprehend and transmit a worldview that is expressed in the values, postures, attitudes we assume, the principles we defend, and the actions we undertake" (p. 491). In this sense, we work on research linked to our training of new teachers, at the intersection of the individual and the collective, seeking to strengthen and expand knowledge of education for ethnic-racial relations.

As one of the specific objectives, we aim to organize an inventory of games, toys, and playthings of Indigenous and African origins that will be made public, an open-access collection for teachers and interested parties, with the intention of disseminating and contributing to the presentation of this ancestry that is often not mentioned and is so present in the historical origin.

For our research, we started with some questions that had been challenging us for some time in our work: What is the prior knowledge of students about games, toys, and playthings of African and Indigenous origins? What are the main games, toys, and playthings that have been practiced in formal and non-formal early childhood education and their socio-historical origins? How have these playthings been adapted in contemporary times? What are the pedagogical aspects of these games, toys, and playthings?

We bring these questions into a teacher education program because we are talking about teacher training, and working for and with diversity is considered by us as one of the pillars of their education. There is a common thread that brings toys into the contemporary context but also connects them to their ancestry, which is closely associated with this possible update.

We understand the study of play culture – as defined by Brougère (2002) –, in the case of the EréPomteca project, with focus on African and Indigenous toys, as a social necessity for anti-racist education regarding diversity, with the perspective of improving the quality of life for everyone. This is linked to teacher education in teacher education programs and personal education in teaching roles, whether they are in formal or non-formal educational settings, school organizations, or non-school organizations.

We also have as a premise for the project a broader concept of play that is tailored to bring awareness to diversity and different cosmoperceptions, which includes what "playing" means within these ethnic-racial matrices. As Oyěwùmí (1997, p. 14) notes,

The distinction between Yoruba and the West symbolized by the focus on different senses in the apprehension of reality involves more than perception — for the Yoruba, and indeed many other African societies, it is about “a particular presence in the world — a world conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together.” It concerns the many worlds human beings inhabit; it does not privilege the physical world over the metaphysical. A concentration on vision as the primary mode of comprehending reality promotes what can be seen over that which is not apparent to the eye; it misses the other levels and the nuances of existence.

This is an issue that the project addresses because, for example, in the cultures of indigenous peoples, the separation between work and play does not exist, and in their cosmoperception of the world, "playing" and "toys" are likely to be understood differently. According to Brougère (2002, p. 27):

One of the characteristics of playing is not to have any specific behavior that would clearly distinguish the game from any other behavior. What characterizes the games is less about what one does than the way in which it is done, the state of mind in which

it is done. This leads to giving a lot of importance to the concept of interpretation when considering an activity as playful.

Therefore, this is also one of the focal points of our project: understanding how the roots of these cosmoperceptions are embedded in the studied toys and playthings. Therefore, as Domingues-Lopes, Oliveira, and Beltrão (2015, p. 28) point out, in indigenous societies, there is no interruption for play, as in Western productive and capitalist societies, because work and leisure are not seen as antagonistic categories. For the authors, play among indigenous children

[...] occurs during breaks in the routine because, as there is no formal space for learning, either before or after the arrival of the Europeans, the village and the territory are spaces of sociability and education, with sociopedagogical events occurring, for example, on the way to the fields, in the forest, by the river; while engaging in daily activities, as learning is done by doing .

It is very interesting to address and understand the logic of play in different cosmoperceptions. In African and African-diasporic matrices, playing is one of the civilizing values that shape the human thinking and does not belong solely to childhood, but is intergenerational. We also have the premise that play in education is about exploring the roots of this process that permeates human development for everyone in the environment that surrounds us, with individual and collective constructions that intersect.

### **Toys as tools for aesthetic education**

Thinking of play in education is delving into the roots of the formation of the individual as a human being in constant interaction with the environment that surrounds them. Toys can be tools that allow children to see, hear, smell, touch and taste life. The educational environment, whether it's in schools or non-school settings, is filled with playful activities that have been central to human interactions from a very young age.

We do not develop ourselves in isolation; we always develop in the presence of others. As Freire (1998, p. 36) enlightens us: "I believe I can affirm, at this point in our considerations, that every educational practice demands the existence of subjects, one who, while teaching, learns, and another who, while learning, teaches."

In this dialogical movement, we build our processes of intervention in the world, and they, in turn, influence us. In these processes, we deal with cognitive, motor,

emotional, aesthetic, and many other dimensions that shape us as humans in dynamic motion.

So, thinking about aesthetics etymologically, that of engaging the senses in this dimension of poiesis (creation), is an opportunity for dynamic development both individually and collectively. What is poiesis? It is precisely the poetry of each one of us, in the idea of self-construction and self-expression in the world. This is also within the realm of aesthetics, the individual poetry that is simultaneously collective.

Initially, we thought about memories, childhood memories, memories of play, and we brought up the question: why, in Brazil, do we know so little about games of African and Indigenous origins? For example, when we think about children's songs, we have nursery rhymes, and many other children's songs, that speak of kings and queens, which are more related to our Iberian heritage than to our Indigenous and African heritage.

Another issue we address in our research is the increasing need for curricular studies of African and Indigenous/originating history in teacher education programs. Given these central issues, the need to focus on Afro-Indigenous matrices is also based on Brazilian Laws 10,639/03 and 11,645/08, amending article 26 of the *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* 9.394 (BRAZIL, 1996), which makes it mandatory to study Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous culture and history in the curricula of public and private Elementary and High School establishments. This responsibility is extended to teacher education programs because these students will work in educational spaces as educators, administrators, and education professionals (BRAZIL, 2008).

These questions become even more pressing when we consider Brazil as a country with Indigenous and African ancestry. Expanding on this idea, Gonçalves e Silva (2007, p. 490) points out that

the above-mentioned legal text emphasizes that the process of educating relationships between people of different ethnic-racial groups begins with changes in the way they address each other so that feelings of inferiority and superiority are immediately broken, judgments based on prejudices are disregarded, and hierarchical positions forged in racial and social inequalities are no longer accepted.

As a project, we also need to consider the short-term, medium-term, and long-term outcomes we want to achieve. Forming teachers to work with games, toys, and playthings of African and Indigenous origin, raising awareness and even consciousness about the importance of these activities in the development of children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly. Exploring the socio-historical origins

of games and play in their fundamental elements opens up possibilities for the expansion of intercultural dialogues with the knowledge we deal with in our daily lives, in everyday practices and knowledge that we often do not realize that are rooted in ancient traditions.

### **Mapping the Brazilian heritage through toys and playthings**

When developing our previous research, "Memories of Play Among Pedagogy Students," between 2018 and 2019, we asked pedagogy students: "What immediately comes to your mind when you think of childhood games?" We created a chart with the main answers, and the most frequently mentioned game was *pique* or "tag" in its various forms like *pique-esconde* (hide-and-peek), *pique-bandeira* (capture the flag), and simply tag. As a traditional game present in many cultures, Kishimoto (1995) points out that it's a part of popular culture and represent the spiritual production of a people at a certain point in history, with characteristics attributed to folklore, such as anonymity, tradition, oral transmission, preservation, change, and universality.

The second most frequently mentioned game was dodgeball, which, according to Kishimoto (2001, p. 61), has its origins in Ancient Greece, where it was known as *faininda* and was practiced by soldiers as training to improve their dodging and evasion skills. Continuing the list, the subjects mentioned dolls and soccer, and everything related to the ball. Kishimoto (2001) comments that playing with dolls may have originated from rituals of ancient cultures where they were used as symbolic representations of gods or mystical entities, and archaeologists have found them in various materials such as wood, clay, and stone. Over time, these toys were adopted by children and can be found in various cultures around the world as a widely observed playful activity. Furthermore, the game of ball, according to research, is even older, with records of ball games in various cultures dating back to antiquity.

By organizing and analyzing the mentioned games, we can already see how this ancestral heritage is present in the games we play every day, which are widely known, and people can mistakenly think they originated in European countries and were taken to Brazil during the colonial invasion process. However, in the context of a decolonial perspective, as Quijano (2000, p. 533) points out, "the decolonial proposal seeks to decolonize forms of knowledge to give voice to historically marginalized peoples and thereby destabilize the hierarchies and power relations



present in the social structure;"and, we begin to discover origins that go beyond the stereotypes of rigid knowledge.

For example, about one of the most frequently mentioned games – playing with dolls – we find records dating back 15,000 years to the Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations. When we locate Egypt, a country in the African continent, we are already engaging with questions related to African ethnic-racial origins that have reached us. Lopes e Costa and Ferronato (2020) point out that it is not possible to pinpoint a single origin for the emergence of dolls. It seems that the oldest clay dolls that survived until today were the ones used for ritualistic purposes 40,000 years ago in Africa and Asia. It was likely the children of that time who transitioned idols into toys. Dolls made of wood with clay hair or wooden beads were found in their tombs.

Today, these widely distributed dolls come in various skin colors, which a few decades ago were difficult to find. For example, black or dark-skinned dolls were rare; when we did find them, they were often stereotyped dolls. When we seek the socio-historical origin of this toy, we come across records that are ancestral and deeply rooted in these earlier civilizations.

For instance, among Indigenous peoples, we find the Ritxoko dolls amongst the Karajá people, which contrast with the history of the "discovery" of Brazil. The Karajá dolls can be found in 76 museums (47 in Brazil and 29 in other countries), due to the great interest of collectors who acquired one or more of them in their expeditions, and then transferred them from their particular collections to institutional ones.

Brazilian Indigenous peoples have been here for many years before the invasions that keep happening since 1500, and it is still essential that these playful expressions be studied and brought to attention, so that this people can be protected, as well as the cultural aspects that are represented. In their article de Castro Mendonça, de Figueiredo da Costa, and Kàlàriki Idjawaru Karajá (2022, p. 7) pose the following question:

When shaping clay with the tips of their fingers, are they creating history or drawing memory? Is this ritxoko-making a tactile revelation of what the Iny woman imagines and interprets about her society and culture, sculpting them into forms that can be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands?

It is noteworthy that in this case, and in many others, the process of making indigenous toys is closely related to the technologies of each people, and the study of these toys can reveal an intricate network of scientific and even commercial

developments since the gathering of the initial materials all the way through the making of the final product. For instance, the process of making Karaja dolls involve knowledge about: (i) clay drying and firing techniques; (ii) ashes from trees as anti-plastic; (iii) handling the toxic smoke from wood burning; (iv) "ixarurina roots" as a color fixer; (v) annatto (urucum) red pigment; (vi) genipap (genipapo) black pigment; (vii) highly aromatic natural resins for the hair; (viii) drawings with rich geometric patterns; (ix) textile and weaving techniques for the clothes (de Lima and da Silva, 2011). So, these toys can also be a tool for bringing awareness about the ancestral technologies of indigenous peoples, for example regarding the recent "ethno-sciences" branch of scientific studies.

Another toy mentioned by the students was the shuttlecock ("peteca", in Brazil); its name, in Brazilian Portuguese, comes from "pe'teka" in Tupi, which means "hitting with the hands". Originally, amongst Brazilian originary peoples, this toy was made of corn husks and decorated with bird feathers, but depending on the context, it was also manufactured with other materials, according to Santos<sup>3</sup>:

The shuttlecock was made of natural fibers, with a focus on banana tree bark (*embira*) and corn husks. Traditionally, some shuttlecocks do not have feathers, with straw filling and wrappings. Others, composed of large and colorful feathers, gave rise to the shuttlecock as we know it today in its sports form.

Regarding the students' responses, the ball was also frequently mentioned. In its simplest form, the ball is a sphere. However, these spheres have been crafted from materials of a different nature over time and by different peoples. According to Alegria (1951, p. 348), in Central America

the balls are made from tree roots and herbs, and juices and a mixture of things, so that all together this mixture looks somewhat like black wax. They gather these and other materials, cook them all, and make a paste; they shape it into a ball, the size of a windball in Spain, some larger and some smaller; this mixture gives it a black appearance, and it doesn't stick to the hands. After it exudes, it becomes somewhat spongy, not because it has any holes or voids, like a sponge, but it becomes lighter; and it is soft and somewhat heavy.

But the ball is also found in various civilizations and among various groups, such as the Mayans – where it was used in the game called *pok-ta-pok* – and the Aztecs – where it was used in the game called *tlachtli* (Alegria, 1951). In Latin America, 3,500 years ago, there are traces not only of a stone sphere but also of other materials that transform this sphere into a ball, which brings the idea of playing

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<sup>3</sup> Santos, R. Machado, História da Peteca. <https://cbpeteca.org.br/historia-da-peteca/> (June 2020)

within the perspective that it served a ritual purpose, and then moved away from the realm of ritual to become a sphere of play, not necessarily related to ritualistic matters. Some of the oldest excavations date balls as artifacts from 2.6 million years ago in Tanzania, Africa. These balls were also spheres, it is believed that they were used as tools and, over time, were also made from other materials.

In this regard, Kishimoto (2014) emphasizes that traditional games are part of popular culture through the collective process of creation and recreation based on accumulated heritage. The ball game is an example of this dynamism, communicated from one social group to another. Stripped of the mythical-religious meaning of the past, it responds to the collective need for recreation. The transmission of this game among families and children creates the process of resistance of popular culture, which becomes tradition.

In terms of other indigenous toys that have been mapped, we can cite the Cat's Cradle, where a string is used to form many shapes, passing between the hands of two people, considering that the person who can't figure out how to handle the string to form the next shape will lose the game. In this case the toy is just a string that can be made of any material, and the shapes are explained by each person using elements from the daily life that they observe around them. There is a version of this game that was documented amongst the Kiwai people of New-Guinea (Landtman, 1914), as well as many other versions in Korea, Japan, China, Australia, and in many European countries (Jayne, 1962), and in Brazil there is a very well-known version which uses names of animals from the Brazilian fauna. This version also developed into an elastic band game where the same shapes, and many others, are replicated by a kid in an elastic band which is tied around the legs of two other children. There is also an indigenous board game from the Guarani people called *Jaguareté* (game of the jaguar) in which a jaguar-shaped token is placed on a board together with 14 dog-shaped dolls, and the jaguar should eat the dogs while they try to corner him; this game involves complex decision-making and mathematical thinking skills (de Araújo et al., 2023).

In terms of other African toys that have been mapped, we can cite the Egyptian *Senet*, as well as the sub-Saharan *Mancala* and other similar games. These boardgames were not only used for playing, but also for divination, influencing people's lives, teaching children about community values, youth initiation, funerals, and magic rituals. They became so famous that some euro-games started to include a "mancala rule" where you take some tokens from one place and distribute them to others, which is the main rule of the Mancala, and they have been cited as a great tool for mathematical education, and also in the field of physics (Danaci et al., 2023).

Our project already mapped 15 of these board games, for example the *Yoté* from West Africa, *Bao* from East Africa, *Shisima* from Kenya, and a book was published: "African Toys and Games: the playing that is born from the ground" (Aguiar and Pinheiro, 2022).

Our work of mapping indigenous and African toys has only begun, and in the next years we hope to broaden our virtual and physical collection so that the database can be made available to educators and researchers globally. The toys contained therein can be addressed in classes with the objective of raising awareness about the ethnic-racial matters that permeate the Brazilian heritage, and also in classes about mathematics, physics, technology and related themes.

### **Final Remarks**

As we reach the end of this text where we narrate our experience, we emphasize that considering the realm of toys and playthings for the re-education of ethnic-racial relations can be fundamental in the educational and formative process for teaching professionals, as well as for children, youth, adults, and the elderly.

Grounded in the principles of anti-racist education, we take this commitment as a task for everyone, regardless of the places they work, whether in formal or non-formal spaces. We need to advance in tackling racism and discrimination in educational and training environments, and raising awareness about our diverse heritage though toys and games can be an interesting way of achieving this objective. We have already mapped many indigenous and African toys, and the work will continue in the next years, so that an online database can be built, that will then be shared with researchers all over the world.

Thus, the EréPomteca Project, play for the re-education of ethnic-racial relations, developed at the BrincArte Estácio Nova Iguaçu Toy Library (RJ), aims to contribute to the training of pedagogy students with a strategy for anti-racist education in the dimension of ludic, didactic and pedagogical aspects. It also seeks to strengthen the constitutional triad that promotes the principle of the inseparability of teaching, research, and extension (BRASIL, 1988), the pillars of a socially referenced and democratic university that extends its reach to ensure and promote high-quality access to Basic Education for all.

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