

# Religious Marks: Mapping the Indigenous Religions in the Urban Landscape of Belo Horizonte

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## Abstract.

This research article presents an in-depth exploration of the visible manifestations of indigenous presence and Afro-religious groups within the urban landscape of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Through a comprehensive analysis of cultural events, artistic interventions, and land occupations, it investigates how these manifestations contribute to the city's rich cultural diversity and interact with its evolving urban fabric. The study also examines the intricate relationship between these religious practices and the pressing issue of climate change, particularly focusing on the challenges posed by environmental degradation and transformations in the urban environment, as well as the adaptive strategies adopted by these communities. Furthermore, it explores the deep-rooted connection between religious practices and nature, delving into the beliefs, rituals, and interactions with the environment within these religious contexts. Additionally, the research endeavours to elucidate how the traditional knowledge and spiritual practices of believers in shamanic and Afro-religious traditions offer unique perspectives and potential solutions to confront the impacts of climate change. Moreover, it identifies and analyses the challenges faced by practitioners in terms of environmental conservation, shedding light on the complex interplay between religion and the climate crisis in the urban context of Belo Horizonte. Through this multifaceted investigation, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights into the intersection of religion, culture, and environmental sustainability within contemporary urban settings.

**Keywords.** Indigenous religion, urban perception, urban symbols.

## 1. Introduction

Since 2019, I have dedicated my work to the Postsecular Architecture Research Network, a research and study group whose primary objective is to unveil the complex relationships between religious practices, the urban imaginary and the dynamics of urban practices. This study group, although it transcends borders, is based in the city of Belo Horizonte, located in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Therefore, my research focuses on analysing the phenomena that occur within this specific context.

Recently, in 2023, we had the pleasure of publishing the book "Epistemic Ambivalence" (FREITAS et al. 2023), in which we thoroughly explored the influence and interaction of two distinct religions, Neopentecostalism and Candomblé, in the social and cultural fabric of Belo Horizonte. This work not only

consolidated our previous investigations, but also inspired us to expand our research horizons.

In this sense, we began a process of mapping new religious expressions and their manifestations in the urban landscape of Belo Horizonte. Our goal is to broaden the understanding of the multiple layers of meaning that permeate the city, especially with regard to the religious sphere. The present article is a direct contribution to this mapping effort, focusing specifically on the identification and analysis of markers of indigenous religions in the urban landscape of Belo Horizonte and surrounding areas.

Furthermore, we seek to open the way for new lines of investigation, exploring the implications of these findings for urban studies. In particular, we are interested in understanding how the presence and visibility of these religious markers can influence local inhabitants' perception of urban space, and

how this, in turn, can affect the construction of individual and collective identities. Ultimately, we hope that this work will not only enrich our knowledge about religious diversity in Belo Horizonte, but also contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics that shape contemporary cities.

## **2. Research context: the city of Belo Horizonte**

Given our intention to conduct research in Belo Horizonte, a city nestled within the vibrant tapestry of Brazil, it is imperative to delve into its religious and demographic tapestry. Belo Horizonte, serving as the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, occupies a strategic position in Southeast Brazil, due to the fact that it is in the path that connects the middle of the country to important ports in the seaside. Originally conceived as a meticulously planned urban center, it emerged from the visionary blueprints crafted by the esteemed engineer Aarão Reis and his technical committee. However, the city's growth has transcended the confines of its initial design, leading to a sprawling urban landscape that far exceeds its original boundaries.

Presently, Belo Horizonte stands as a cornerstone within the third-largest urban agglomeration in Brazil, known as the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (RMBH). As of 2022, the city boasted a population of 2,315,560 inhabitants, solidifying its stature as a bustling metropolis. Remarkably, Belo Horizonte claims the distinction of being the second city in Minas Gerais with the largest indigenous population, comprising 2,692 individuals. While this figure may seem modest in proportion, it carries considerable weight within the broader context of the state's demographics.

Moreover, traces of indigenous heritage permeate the urban fabric of Belo Horizonte, serving as poignant reminders of the city's rich cultural mosaic. From architectural motifs to cultural festivals, the indigenous presence reverberates throughout the cityscape, underscoring the enduring legacy of its original inhabitants. Thus, to fully comprehend the dynamics at play within Belo Horizonte, it is essential to appreciate the intricate interplay between its diverse populace and the historical forces that have shaped its identity.

## **3. From the production of space to religious imagery**

Lefebvre (1974) made an important contribution by connecting city and space under a single social theory, introducing the idea that space is a social product. This implies understanding space as a result of social activities and human work. Thus, studying space also means studying humanity, work and social relations, revealing a field of forces that involves conflicts and cooperation between different

agents through everyday spatial practices. The social production of space is marked by tensions, and studying urban space means revealing the social relations that guide its creation, use and reproduction. Urban space is a scene of diversity, novelty and spectacle, reflecting various cultural forms of appropriation.

According to Lefebvre (1974), space represents social reality in the present moment, while time represents the production process that took it to that point. Understanding space is understanding integrated systems in the present, including their temporal dimension. Understanding time means understanding the events that led to the production of the present, within specific social contexts. Lefebvre's (1974) social theory of space production is three-dimensional, involving spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation. These dimensions range from the materiality of space to its linguistic and symbolic representations, allowing a reading of space as an instrument of social norms and a social experience.

Space, then, is a product of human action, intimate to the social relations and spatial practices that shape it. Cities are reflections of social work over time, influenced by the experiences and actions of those who live in them. The right to the city, conceptualized by Lefebvre and other authors, addresses the importance of participation and justice in urban constructions. A critical urban theory, as proposed by Brenner, highlights the need to examine inequalities and exploitations in urbanization processes, aiming for more equitable and conscious alternatives. Lefebvre emphasizes that the essence of the city lies in the practices and codes that constitute it, emphasizing the importance of considering social and institutional relations, including issues of class and property. Therefore, to truly understand urban space, it is essential to deeply analyse the historical and social contexts that shaped it.

In Henri Lefebvre's work, the conception of space goes beyond the geographic scope, becoming fundamental in the analysis of social, cultural and political dynamics. This segment of the doctoral thesis will address the relevance of the definitions of space proposed by Lefebvre, exploring concepts such as "lived, conceived and perceived space" and the theory of "production of space". We will also investigate the concept of "right to the city" as a critical tool for understanding urban struggles and citizen participation, as well as the role of "representations" in the construction of spatial meanings.

Bearing in mind, therefore, that perception directly affects the production of space, everything that affects perception is likely to, consequently, affect the production of space itself. In this sense, religious practices, as they are both an experience of the body and an experience that transcends materiality, start to have a direct impact on the perception of space,

configuring different imaginaries about urban reality and, in such a way, directly influence practices of spaces and in the (re)production of urban space itself.

#### 4. The marks of shamanism in the landscape of Belo Horizonte

We have mapped the marks of the indigenous presence and shamanism in the landscape of Belo Horizonte through newspapers, interviews and cultural enjoyment in the city. Weekly, on Thursdays, the Abya Yala Fair takes place in Afonso-Arinos square, in Belo Horizonte. The fair is known for being the 1st Indigenous & Immigrant Fair in BH (Almeida & Teixeira, 2022), where the trade of handmade pieces by the Kambiwá, Pataxó tribes and the Aymara women of Bolivia takes place, as well as fabrics and typical Peruvian food.

Among the various blind gables that receive urban art murals in Belo Horizonte, it is possible to map different paintings made by indigenous groups or whose narrative is related to these groups: mural by Daiara Tukano and Sueli Maxacali, in addition to the painting on the asphalt of Raul Soares square, made by the Shipibo group. Daiara Tukano brings, in her works, motifs related to wisdom and indigenous ancestry and, in the case of Belo Horizonte, she painted the boy Rio on the lap of his mother Selva, remembering that to have water, the forest is necessary, in the work *Selva Mãe do Rio Menino*. In 2021, Daiara also participated in the Climate Hub, of the North American newspaper *The New York Times*, to discuss how art can help in conversations about climate change. At the same gable painting festival, there was a landscape intervention proposed by the Maxacali indigenous group, specifically by the artist Sueli Maxacali. The work was conceived based on the knowledge of a ritual of the Tikmu'un, an indigenous people who inhabit a territory between Minas, Bahia and Espírito Santo. Beetles, large fish, a dog, a striped alligator, a star, the Sun, the Moon, a black man and a bat are figures that make up the panel. Finally, the Shipibo intervention was a ritual painting by artists Sadith Silvano and Ronin Koshi, from the Peruvian Amazon, depicting a large Anaconda on Amazonas Avenue, around Raul Soares square in Belo Horizonte. To celebrate the life and ancestral wisdom of the Shipibo people, the mural is based on Kenês graphics, geometric and labyrinthine patterns that have become Peru's cultural heritage. In ayahuasca ceremonies, Shipibo guides often sing their medicinal and healing songs while visualizing shapes and designs.

Furthermore, in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte, there is the presence of an indigenous occupation, on the Santa Teresa farm (Canuto & de Campos, 2019). This occupation was due to the organization of indigenous families living in Belo Horizonte and the Metropolitan Region, unemployed and unable to pay rent, who assessed the need to have land and a common place for coexistence and

collective production.

At the Federal University of Minas Gerais, the Indigenous Intercultural Degree course is also offered. The Intercultural Training Course for Indigenous Educators has been operating at the Faculty of Education of the Federal University of Minas Gerais since 2009 and aims to train and qualify indigenous teachers, in the form of a full degree, with an intercultural focus, to teach in the final years of Elementary School and Teaching Medium, with four areas of qualification: Languages, Arts and Literature; Mathematics; Life and Natural Sciences; and Social Sciences and Humanities. Students on the course belong to indigenous groups and develop social projects within their communities. With the presence of students on the university campus, the indigenous presence in the municipality increases, albeit in a relatively low quantity and in a restricted area, over time. With the social projects of your community, an interface is created with teachers and local leaders to prepare and manage them. The requirements of each project will configure the axis of articulation of the different fields of knowledge involved in carrying them out. In this sense, as with university extension projects, indigenous students involved in different academic paths will be called upon to work together to meet the demands of each Social Project in which they are involved (UFMG n.d.).

In a more symbolic aspect, in the field of politics, the election of Celia Xakirabá as federal deputy retraces the symbolic presence of indigenous groups in Belo Horizonte. Célia was the first indigenous federal deputy elected by the state of Minas Gerais, in 2022, with more than 100 thousand votes. Among Célia's proposals for the mandate are the demarcation of indigenous territories and titling of quilombos, recognition of indigenous and quilombola professionals in education and agrarian and urban reform.

In this way, it is noted that, even though there are no indigenous villages located in the municipality of Belo Horizonte, there is the presence of indigenous groups living in the territory and interfering in the landscape, in a more or less permanent way. It is therefore justified to understand how shamanic knowledge can be understood as strategies for dealing with modern climate change.

When we talk about indigenous religions, we are referring to shamanism in general. It is interesting to note that, due to the colonization process, the indigenous people were seen as people without beliefs who did not have God or gods, or even idols, they did not have any religion. This premise was used, in the colonial period, as a justification for exploitation and catechization, accompanied by the enslavement and genocide of these groups. However, even in contemporary times, indigenous groups survive in Brazilian territory and throughout Latin America, aggregating different forms of religiosity. It is important to note that there is not just one

indigenous religion, but several, related to the specific cultures of each tribe. However, there are points in common between the different Brazilian indigenous religious manifestations, based on sets of myths about spiritual beings.

Two well-known examples of religions that use religious syncretism, relying on traditional indigenous knowledge, are Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, Barquinha and other dissident groups, which use the founding myth of the Kaxinawá, which says that Ayahuasca is healing agent and dispeller of illusions. Ayahuasca is a drink prepared from plants and is often associated with rituals of different social groups and religions, in addition to being part of the traditional medicine of the people of the Amazon.

Throughout the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, for example, it was noted that Afro-indigenous religions organized themselves to carry out protective rites and collective strengthening around the cultivation of plants and contact and dealing with nature. In other words, there are also common traits between shamanism and African-based religions, with regard to the relationship they establish with nature, especially with plants. Both shamanic and African religious experiences and practices, therefore, are at risk in the face of climate change.

Ailton Krenak is an indigenous leader, environmentalist, philosopher, poet, Brazilian writer of the Krenaque indigenous ethnicity and Immortal of the Brazilian Academy of Letters. The author has several books of significant relevance with regard to a change in global attitudes towards the climate crisis. Krenak's purpose was and is always to contribute to the visibility of forest people, which legitimizes their survival. According to the activist, "the reaction of people anywhere in the world today to any attitude that seeks to suppress a certain community of humans is violent" (Krenak apud. Moreira, 2022). In an interview for a publication launched by Conectas, he showed the relationship between the climate crisis and colonialism, "The climate crisis has always been announced by indigenous peoples".

Thus, both as indicated by Krenak and from what we can assess through other studies, indigenous people have been affected by the climate crisis for centuries and their ways of life, combined with shamanic practices, are indications of possible solutions to the harmful crisis in where the planet is. Therefore, the research will seek to investigate which shamanic practices are related to combating the climate crisis and how they materialize in the urban space of Belo Horizonte. This measurement can be made through interviews with Célia's electorate, with Indigenous Degree students, with indigenous groups living in the city and with artists who mark the urban landscape with artistic interventions.

## 5. The research possibilities

From the analyses, therefore, we noticed that several

research possibilities are open, outlining an interesting research route.

This research seeks to investigate the visible manifestations of the indigenous presence and groups of African religions in the city of Belo Horizonte, examining cultural events, artistic interventions and land occupations as tangible expressions of these cultures. The objective is to map and analyse how these manifestations contribute to the city's cultural diversity and how they interact with urban space.

Furthermore, the aim is to understand how shamanic and Afro-religious religious practices are being affected by climate change and transformations in the urban landscape. It will be investigated how these spiritual traditions face challenges related to environmental degradation and changes in the urban environment, and what strategies are being adopted to deal with these threats.

Another aspect of interest is the relationship between religious practices and nature. The links between the beliefs and rituals of these traditions and the environment will be examined, seeking to understand how interactions between human beings and nature are conceived and practised within these religious contexts.

The research also aims to investigate how the practices and way of life of believers in shamanic and African religions can offer perspectives and solutions to face climate change. It will be analysed how the traditional knowledge and spiritual practices of these communities can contribute to resilience and adaptation in a context of environmental crisis.

Finally, considering previous studies on the relationship between religious practices and environmental preservation in Belo Horizonte, the challenges faced by practitioners of these religions in relation to environmental conservation will be identified, highlighting how these challenges highlight the complex interaction between religion and the climate crisis in the urban area.

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