



## **Children and Youth Literature Written by Indigenous People in Brazil**

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(With contributions from Alexandra Figueiredo)

Brazil

Throughout the world, there are more than 250 million speakers of the Portuguese language. Divided among eight countries, this number is estimated to rise to 335 million by 2050. In a worldwide assessment, Portuguese ranks as the seventh most common mother language, but it rises to fifth in all classifications when the criteria include second languages.

Portuguese is spoken all over the Brazilian territory, by a population of 192 million people occupying more than 8,000,000 square kilometers. This is why Brazil comes up whenever the focus is the majority of Portuguese speakers. Amidst this vast number, there is the indigenous population.

In 1500, Brazil was “discovered” by the Portuguese, but the native population was composed of indigenous people. They are now 750 thousand, divided about 250 different peoples in all Brazilian regions, with an estimated 50 or 60 indigenous groups living in isolation from the national society who therefore do not speak Portuguese.

The country boasts 180 indigenous languages and dialects; however, approximately 60 indigenous languages currently run the risk of disappearing. By looking into the history, we will see that only recently has the right to their Indigenous languages, as well as the very Portuguese language, been acquired by the natives. Up until 1980, there had been a governmental policy imposing the Portuguese language to every Brazilian, and it was only after the 1988 Constitution that the indigenous peoples conquered the right to a bilingual education: they would have Portuguese lessons as well as lessons in the language spoken by the indigenous community served by their school.

As of 1990, experiences were promoted in indigenous schools with indigenous teachers, though literacy continued to be practiced only in the Portuguese language. At

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the same time, the Brazilian State started to offer higher education to indigenous people who could take teaching positions in their communities.

In 1998, the Ministry of Education (MEC) developed the National Curricular Reference for Indigenous Schools, reinforcing the importance of this school trend amidst our society. Despite the effort, though, the indigenous school is only now picking up on the road to autonomy. According to the indigenous peoples themselves, the MEC continues to set bureaucratic impositions that curb the independence of this type of institution. And they long to disconnect their schools from the MEC requirements.

In this type of atmosphere, in late 1990's and early 2000's, the indigenous movement for recognition and appreciation of their culture created a new type of footprint in Brazilian society. Books written by indigenous people, in Portuguese, and some bilingual ones, inaugurated the reporting of the rich indigenous culture by themselves and no longer as a recount by the "whites". Mindful of this movement, the FNLIJ (*Brazilian Foundation of Children and Adolescent's Book*) has recognized the importance and the quality of books by indigenous writers and decided to support the initiative by also giving awards to those books.

Back in 2004, in the Bologna Fair, the FNLIJ paid homage to indigenous writers by preparing a dedicated catalogue, and exhibited the books therein. Indigenous writer Daniel Munduruku made a speech during the Fair. Also in that year, adding to the program of the Seminar on Children and Youth Literature, held in the midst of the 6<sup>th</sup> *Salão FNLIJ do Livro (FNLIJ Children's Book Fair)*, the FNLIJ dedicated a full day to indigenous writers. Some 35 representatives from indigenous nations came all the way from remote regions such as the Amazon to meet in Rio de Janeiro.

Still in the year of 2004, in order to have the indigenous culture come out as reported by the very indigenous peoples, both to the general public and to the very indigenous peoples, the FNLIJ created the *1<sup>st</sup> Curumim Contest*, which involves reading texts by indigenous writers in schools all over Brazil. Submissions include teachers' papers written on books by indigenous people. Another such creation was the *1<sup>st</sup> Tamoio Contest*, where texts by indigenous writers are submitted.



In 2010, during the 12<sup>th</sup> *Salão FNLIJ do Livro (FNLIJ Children's Book Fair)*, 5 new books by those writers were launched – and some of those authors have already published more than 10 books!

To conclude, we believe Children and Youth Literature written by indigenous people is undoubtedly an intelligent, innovative and daring manner they have found to appreciate, preserve and promote their own ancestral culture to their children, youth, teachers, as well as to non-indigenous parents, and even to the young indigenous people who leave their villages and go to the big cities. All along the way, indigenous writing as well as languages have been duly acknowledged and appreciated.

Behold the Strength of this Linguistic Minority!

**References:**

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