

## THE REPRESENTATIONS OF ANCESTRAL SEXUALITY IN ROCK ART, SERRA DA CAPIVARA NATIONAL PARK, PIAUÍ, BRAZIL

### LAS REPRESENTACIONES DE LA SEXUALIDAD ANCESTRAL EM EL ARTE RUPESTRE, PARQUE NACIONAL DE LA SERRA DA CAPIVARA, PIAUÍ, BRASIL

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**Abstract:** This essay aims to present some sexual representations in rock art in the Serra da Capivara National Park (PNSC), in southeastern Piauí, Brazil. Since immemorial times, humans have created ways to express themselves, and rock art, engravings and/or paintings were sociocultural forms found to store and safeguard the most varied everyday information of group interests. More than 1,000 archaeological sites are known in the park, representing subjects related to the sociability of ancestral life, such as hunting, gathering, fighting, ceremonies, sexualities and much more. These depictions have been studied since the 1970's and allowed the creation of a national park recognized as a World Heritage site. Although the paintings depict scenes considered by Western observers as obscene, barbaric and immoral, it is necessary to remember that primitive sexuality was not separate, private subject, to be hidden from the eyes of the social human life, as it is considered by us in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Key words:** sexuality, rock art, prehistoric life, Serra da Capivara National Park, Piauí.

**Resumen:** Este ensayo tiene como objetivo presentar algunas representaciones sexuales en el arte rupestre del Parque Nacional Serra da Capivara (PNSC), en el sureste de Piauí, Brasil. Desde tiempo sinmemoriales, el ser humano ha creado formas de expresarse, y el arte rupestre, el grabado y/o la pintura fueron formas socioculturales encontradas para almacenar y salvaguardar la más variada información cotidiana de los intereses de los grupos. En el parque se conocen más de 1.000 sitios arqueológicos, que representan los asuntos relacionados con la sociabilidad de la vida ancestral, como la caza, la recolección, la lucha, las ceremonias, las sexualidades y más. Estas representaciones han sido estudiadas desde la década de 1970 y permitieron la creación de un parque nacional reconocido como Patrimonio de la Humanidad. Aunque las pinturas representan escenas consideradas por los observadores occidentales como obscenas, bárbaras e inmorales, es necesario recordar que la sexualidad primitiva no era un tema separado, privado, a ocultar a los ojos de la vida humana social, como lo consideramos en el siglo XXI.

**Palabras clave:** sexualidad, arte rupestre, vida prehistórica, Parque Nacional Serra da Capivara, Piauí.

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## Introduction

The body assumes and occupies since the beginning of humanity infinite places, meanings, interpretations, multiple importance that guide us and allow the maintenance of traditions, cultures, and all life in society. The body is born and transcends as a temple, which takes and carries marks and processes of different existences and (re)existences over time that permeates its physical form. It is not possible to talk about sexuality without considering the body: it is through and through the existence of the body that sexuality is realized.

Fausi dos Santos highlights in his thesis (Santos, 2019), Body and sexuality in different supports: From prehistory to the Digital age, authors such as Otto Rank and Joseph Campbell, who analyzed rites of passage in different indigenous, African and Asian ethnic groups, which, through specific actions concerning the bodies involved – always strictly linked to each of the particular beliefs and cultures –, allowed these subjects a new existential condition within the community. The author emphasizes an excerpt from Campbell in *The Power of Myth*, which well illustrates these rites of passage, which were also rituals of the body: “The rituals of the primitive initiation ceremonies always have a mythological basis and are related to the elimination of the infantile ego, when the adult comes to the fore, be it a girl or a boy” (Campbell, 1990, p. 147).

Santos (2019) also resorts to Pierre Clastres and his work, *Society against the State: Research in Political Anthropology*, in which he states how each ethnic group has its own and particular techniques of adhering, through rituals, a new identity to subjects and their bodies and it is through these ceremonies that the body becomes the main element of mediation between belief, laws and the social role in effect in each of the groups and societies (Clastres, 2003).

In addition to the marks on bodies and various rituals, other registers to mark expressions, awareness of oneself and of the world are cave paintings and artifacts carved by stones in pieces of ivory. It is through these records that we can observe, study, analyze and launch theories and possibilities about the first human societies, and already a desire and attempt to establish dominion over time and space. Rock and ivory are key points when studying and speculating on symbolologies and meanings that go beyond the so-called prehistory, through the connections that these and other close elements may have with the supernatural and the sacred. Santos emphasizes the fact that, until the present day, Catholic Churches have altars with elements of rock or marble, as a sign of connection between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

The body was and continues to be a central element in societies and cultures, regardless of the ways and forms in which this centrality is shown and/or materialized. Investigating sexuality is investigating the body. Sexuality has always manifested itself through bodily expressions, of the body. Sex, sexuality, fertility, reproduction, pleasure and orgasm have always been present since the first human groupings; these are subjects that permeate the collective unconscious of all societies, and that, most likely, will remain here, between us and those who come later.

Rock records or signs are paintings and/or engravings perpetrated on the rocks, produced by the first inhabitants of Brazil, thousands of years ago, spread throughout the national territory. In this essay, our focus is on the Serra da Capivara National Park (PNSC, in Portuguese) and its surroundings, in the state of Piauí. They evoke an atmosphere that they had the

objective of revealing aspects of the history of the first inhabitants of the Northeast region (Cotes *et al.*, 2023; Justamand, 2010; 2012a; 2016; Justamand *et al.*, 2017a; Oliveira *et al.*, 2018, 2019).

These rock records are impregnated with human histories and can be considered communicative and educational elements. Due to their characteristics, scientists (archaeologists and anthropologists) call the sets of these paintings with equality and/or similarity traditions. Of the many known in Brazil, this article was concerned with dealing only with some scenes, belonging, admittedly, to those of the Northeast Tradition that are related to the theme of sexuality (Barreto, 2010; Cotes *et al.*, 2023; Funari *et al.*, 2018; Gomes Filho & Justamand, 2018; Justamand, 2007; 2010;; Justamand *et al.*, 2020; Prous, 2006).

The records on the walls were part of a practice of what was “visible”, a codification of everyday life and, why not, of customs (Thompson, 1998). Looking at this past allows us new discoveries and the certainty that, in another moment, social and natural relationships were much broader and more fundamental for the survival of our species. The pictorial records suggest what Tim Ingold calls the “lifeline” (Ingold, 2007; 2015), where our ancestors recorded the path built from the perceptions of all their senses during their walk. In this context, dialoguing with Ingold (2007; 2015), perception is the seduction scrutinized in rock paintings from the Northeastern Tradition that represent the body and thought in motion in that period.

The rock signs, most likely, acted as one of the forms of integrated transmission of the accumulated knowledge of a given culture. The rocks served as a kind of ‘blackboard’ for the populations that produced them, showing practices maintained over time (Ki-zerbo, 1982). Through them, the groups exchanged information, which enabled them to enjoy the real conditions of life (Justamand, 2010).

## Development

Archaeological research in Brazil began in the 19th century, with the work done by the naturalist Peter Lund. Then, D. Pedro II, Brazilian emperor, with his encouragement and political interests, designated an area within the National Museum dedicated to Archaeology. Along the 20th century, studies took shape closer to those of today, especially after teams of specialists and researchers participate in foreign missions (Justamand, 2019).

Amongst others, one important research group was the Franco-Brazilian Mission. This mission was responsible for developing and encouraging studies in the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Goiás, Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Piauí. Through these incentives, many archaeological sites have been found and revealed to popular knowledge and research. It is known that there are more than 1.300 recognized sites and geo sites, including the most diverse located in the Serra da Capivara National Park (PNSC) and its surroundings. Amongst these sites of archaeological concern, 900 have cave paintings. The PNSC is where the largest number of archeological sites with the most varied signs and cave scenes in Brazil are located. Transforming it into an archaeological enclave is fundamental once it is an important territory for studies and research aimed at the development of knowledge in Archaeology.

These studies and researches were responsible for the first

dating of archaeological finds in the country, especially of cave paintings, and for their proper insertion in the national prehistoric cultural context (Justamand, 2010). Since the 1980's and the return of civilian rule (1985), Archaeology and its objects gained depth and more intense research; besides, as environmental research is necessary for the science's sake, Archaeology increased exponentially as a field of knowledge and as an economic development activity. Furthermore, this science started exploring new subjects, in tune with recent social issues, like sexuality. Since 1991, the PNSC has been recognized as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – a condition that guarantees the preservation of the park for future generations to visit and study (Cotes *et al.*, 2021; Justamand *et al.*, 2018; Justamand & Oliveira, 2021).

For visiting the protected area of the PNSC, it is necessary to be accompanied by a local guide at the unit. This professional needs to have an elaborate knowledge that permeates rock paintings, archeology, anthropology, history of American humans and megafauna. This involves a diverse set of knowledge that includes didactic and pedagogical aspects, similar to the educator's work to interpret rock scenes to the visitor. It is possible to visit the PNSC guided by a specific theme of paintings (Santos, 2015). Many of them are people from the region, including descendants of former 'mateiros' (people who got knowledge on local nature) and hunters (Cotes *et al.*, 2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2020; 2021; Santos, 2015). This intensifies the role that the preservation of the archaeological sites exerts as an economic alternative for the region, one of the poorest in Brazil.

Since immemorial times, humans have created ways to express themselves, and rock art, engravings and/or paintings, were sociocultural forms found to store and safeguard the most varied everyday information of group interests. We take it for granted that cave signs have contributed to countless human generations, both those that produced and those that took advantage of what was exposed by them. These rupestrian records can be considered a lifeline of this society engraved in rocks. Thus, these mnemonic mechanisms served to preserve the most different cultural intents. In particular, those that were most important to them (Justamand, 2006b; Justamand *et al.*, 2021a).

The nomenclature of rock art or signs is understood to mean all inscriptions, paintings or engravings left by humans on fixed stone supports, that is, rocks (Justamand & Oliveira, 2015b). The term rock comes from the Latin *rupes-is*, which means rock. They are real estate works, they cannot be removed from the place where they were made (Prous, 1992, p. 510). They were engraved on the walls and ceilings of shelters in caves or outdoors, as is the case with the wall paintings in the region of Pacaraima, in Roraima (Justamand, 2022). We can find interference from early artists and artisans thousands of years ago. In Europe, the dates can go back more than forty thousand years, in other parts of the world there are records with more than fifty thousand years. In Brazil, the oldest pieces are close to thirty thousand years or more, as suggested by the most recent researches in PNSC (Justamand, 2010; 2012a).

Signs or cave paintings are aesthetic representations of human life, actions and animated by sensations. They also represent in their forms some more sensitive desires. They are expressions of the human needs of the period, of what's they considered substantial in their lives and were left by the first groups of sapiens inhabitants from different locations (Prous,

2006; Barreto, 2010; Justamand, 2006; 2014a). It is believed that there was a body of specialists who made the paintings or signs, but there may be other reasons for making them (Prous, 2006)<sup>2</sup>.

Knowledge of rock art has revealed to us that children are present in the archaeological record (Lillehammer, 2000; Marques, 2018; Politis, 1998), "actores", also in the sense of staging where in our referred work, we shed light on ethnoarchaeology, in the sense of to place paintings of logs of the Kraó Indians, Timbira Oriental, in the State of Goiás where children have ritualistic participation, as alluded to by Madu Gaspar, below. They didn't function as art professionals as we know them today (who make art for a living). Rock art was part of the community's routine, reinforcing the groups' cultural traditions and/or linking to the ritual domain (Gaspar, 2003).

The rock records ensured the permanence of much knowledge over time, transmitting it to other members of the human groups that coexisted in the territory, now known as Brazil (Justamand, 2012c), leaving archeological traces in various sites throughout the country. They provide new understandings about the oldest human presence in the national territory, as they are affixed to the rocks, they are the result of great technical efforts. The cave paintings or signs represent a series of scenes, such as group and/or pair fights, in addition to issues related to survival conditions, such as hunting, specific exercises or physical activities, supposed rituals and birth scenes (Cotes *et al.*, 2023; Justamand *et al.*, 2022; Paiva, 2019).

Furthermore, some scenes found in the PNSC may infer the genesis of modern sport or the body culture of movement in Brazil (Cotes *et al.*, 2023), as well as in other rock paintings records in the world, such as those ones that remind of the observer traditional sports using horses (Günaşdi & Karcioğlu, 2022). Lots of inferences are possible to be made about ancestral times beyond everyday activities, such as eating, protection, and health concerns. There were indeed ways of working, however love and life were also present among the groups, as evidenced by the paintings molded in the rocks of Piauí (Martin, 1984; Pinker, 2004) and other traces left by the first occupants of the *brasilis lands*.

But in addition to these, in large amounts, especially in Serra da Capivara, multiple sex scenes are represented (Justamand *et al.*, 2022; Lira, 2017; Negreiros, 2015) – some depicted as groups of humans in action, others standing still with duos and/or trios, depiction among humans and even between humans and animals. In some cases, the scenes show the phalluses and vulvas of the humans represented (Belarmino, 2019; Justamand, 2010; 2014c; Justamand & Funari, 2016; Justamand *et al.*, 2017b; 2021b; Paiva, 2019). One relevant semiotic question in the PNSC is the representation of genitalia with circles, semicircles and sticks. Perhaps our conceptions on both sexes permit us only seeing vaginas and penises, according to a heteronormative prejudice on the matter (Buco, 2011; Justamand *et al.*, 2021a; 2021c; Lira, 2017; Santos Junior & Lira, 2017). Besides the representation of an "other" sign, was sex in the domain of pleasure or reproducibility? What marks did it leave on bodies and rocks? This domain of semiotic equivalence between a rocky body and a human body requires a network of relationships, including sensory ones.

According to Castro (2010), scenes that show a figure with an erect penis are not necessarily related to sex. According to his analyzes of the sexual scenes in *Toca do Baixão da Vaca*, in *Toca da Entrada do Pajau*, in *Toca do Pinga do Boi*, in *Toca do*

*Caldeirão dos Rodrigues I*, in *Toca do Sobradinho I*, in *Toca do Baixão do Perna IV* and in *Toca do Inácio II*, the author states that the theme of sexuality is much more expressive in what she calls “Serra da Capivara style”. Another issue is that the anthropomorphic representation of male genitalia is recurrent in general, while the representation of female genitalia is common only in the context of sex scenes and childbirth.

It seems to us that sex was a trite fact (Gomes Filho *et al.*, 2018; Justamand & Funari, 2017). The prehistoric painters, recorders and/or signers, from all over the world, showed representations of human copulas in the most varied positions (Funari & Justamand, 2014; Justamand, 2014c; Justamand & Oliveira, 2015; Justamand *et al.*, 2020a; 2021c; Taylor, 1997). For example, in African cave paintings, there is a series of masked men with gigantic erect phalluses, about to penetrate women in a gynecological position (Ki-zerbo, 1982). Like language, gestures are subjected to a network of meanings in a dynamic process of meanings. What is read is translated into a culture according to its codes, so are gestures, in a way. The gestures of mating, copulation, sex, physical contact in prehistory can “tell” us, narrate this dimension of what they wanted to express and, who knows, leave it to future generations. In the PNSC, as mentioned above, sex scenes are common, and involve depictions between couples, in trios and in groups, with possible representations of zoophilia and pedophilia, as it can be seen in the following Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The *Boqueirão da Pedra Furada*. Supposedly sex between people with shapeless sizes or the representation of pedophilia (1) (Source: Michel Justamand).

(1) We understand that some terms used in this work, such as “pedophilia” and “zoophilia” are modern attributions. In addition to being anachronistic, they may retain a more ethical than emic meaning. Thus, for those societies, it could be a mythical representation or even a ritual (initiation, passage, etc.) in which the act itself would not configure the same meaning as today. However, we chose to use these terms conventionally, as we believe it will facilitate the reader’s understanding.

The paintings with scenes of group sex (Figure 2) and of zoophilia (Figure 3) draw attention, as they refer to a period without, apparently, the moral and ethical restrictions of the



**Figure 2.** *Toca do Baixo do Perna IV*. Scene of the supposed collective sex (Source Michele Justamand).

Western religious tradition, based on Judeo-Christian guidelines (Colling *et al.*, 2019), neither the scientific discourse that pathologizes sexual practices. They demonstrate a desire for liberation and transcendence, it seems to us (Martin, 1984). Thus, these rock scenes produced thousands of years ago, in the rocks of the PNSC, exudes the sensation of contributing to amplify the forms of communication and to increase the socialization of the groups of the period (Justamand, 2012b).

It is possible that the representations of collective excitement as seen in Figure 4, the phalluses would simulate “swords”, that is, they would symbolize power, virility and strength (Costa, 2003; Justamand & Oliveira, 2021). Since early times we can visualize scenes of gatherings exclusively conducted by those who bears male genitalia, if our ancestors did relate phalluses to what we call today as male or masculine. Even today it is possible to find male-exclusive places, such as the Army or the Church. As experienced today, these kinds of places/moments are quite opened to homoeroticism – why not in prehistoric times?

In the cave paintings recorded on the rocks of the PNSC, there are also dance scenes that demonstrate the sensuality of the first inhabitants, as it can be seen in the following Figure 5. The release of sexual energy was the purpose of primitive sexual practices, as, it seems to us, our ancestors perceived sexuality as a multidimensional phenomenon subsumed to daily life (Justamand, 2010; Justamand *et al.*, 2020b).

Although the paintings depict scenes considered by Western observers as obscene, barbaric and immoral, it is necessary to remember that primitive sexuality was not separate, private subject, to be hidden from the eyes of the social human life, as it is considered by us in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The practices, sexual experiences are different in the diversity of cultures. This prerogative can be cast to prehistory as well. Of course, we cannot directly compare it to the current religious and moral rules; this sexuality is of another modality of connection between the human and the Being. Our primitive sexuality might be arranged as a primordial cosmic force, if it is possible to compose it with the idea of the god Eros - the one who would have the power to harmonize the rhythms of human life with those of nature (Diawara, 1973).



**Figure 3.** *Toca do Caldeirão dos Rodrigues.* Scene of the supposed practice of zoophilia (Source Michele Justamand).



**Figure 4.** *The Boqueirão da Pedra Furada.* Scene supposedly of representations of excited men (2) (Source: Michele Justamand).

(2) In most of the rock records in Serra da Capivara, male figures are characterized by the phallus, used by artists, possibly, to demarcate sexual differences between male and female representations. Thus, it may be that "excitement" is not alluding, for example, to some everyday, mythical and/or ritual representation in which, collectively, they were, in fact, excited.



**Figure 5.** *Toca do Baixa do Perna.* Supposedly dance scene (Source: Michele Justamand).

## Conclusion

Since the 1970's, the PNSC has been a reference site for studies and reflections on the ancestral human presence and the records of the social life of these groups. Countless contributions have been possible since the French Mission led, at the time, by Niède Guidon (1991), and, given its importance for national – and international – history, the park was elevated to the category of World Heritage by UNESCO, in 1991 (Pessis, 2013).

As we can see, imagine and demonstrate along this essay, ancestral groups that occupied southeastern Piauí had a profoundly different view of the sexuality, without the prejudices we can observe in contemporary times. They left innumerable figurative possibilities registered, such as group sex, in pairs, collective excitement, zoophilia and perhaps pedophilia. It is worth considering that these referred and named acts may be due to the projection of the cognitive and conceptual universe of the researchers, the realistic degree that one thinks of situating the rock art, the context between the “scenes”, the graphics, when taken separately or together. This is a principle of analysis that we can also adopt in future publications.

Many other forms are still under analysis for future publications. We hope to have shown that rock depictions, from immemorial times, whether they are called signs or records, contributed to the daily lives of pre-historic humans and could even present suggestions for our current sexuality.

## Notes

1. This article was partially and originally published in Portuguese, in the journal *Studies in Social Sciences Review*, Curitiba, v.2, n.2, may/aug., 2021, with the title *Novas notas sobre formas da sexualidade ancestral nas rochas do Parque Nacional Serra da Capivara – PNSC/PI*. In this new writing, new bibliographic updates and name were added.
2. The stamped hands, present several graphic expressions, from size, outline, internal painting in the palm of the hand.

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