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# **“Coco has arrived!”: playing with the Coco from Alagoas with young children in an early childhood education context<sup>1</sup>**

*“O Coco chegou!”: brincando o Coco alagoano com crianças pequenas em contexto de educação infantil*

*“¡Coco llegó!”: jugando con el Coco de Alagoas con niños pequeños en un contexto de educación infantil*

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## Abstract

Coco is a manifestation of cultural tradition that presents a close connection between music, dance, and poetry, and is described by its representatives as a popular play activity. It is very present in several states in the Northeast of Brazil and is considered cultural heritage by the National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN). The article describes and analyzes the practice of this cultural manifestation in a Municipal Early Childhood Education Center (CMEI) in Maceio (Alagoas) led by a traditional master with children aged 3 to 5 years. It aims to understand Coco as a manifestation of popular culture and comprehend the methodology constructed by the master during its production, as well as the meanings attributed to these experiences by the children. Methodologically, the research is developed through participant observation, interviews, field notebook records, and filming. The focus is on the historical context of this cultural manifestation, encompassing attributed values and social functions in the past and present; the historical, artistic, and aesthetic elements of the Coco practiced within the context of the mentioned CMEI; and the responses and meanings attributed by the children involved in playing Coco.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education. Popular culture. Coco. Popular play activity.

## Resumo

*O Coco é uma manifestação de tradição cultural que apresenta íntima ligação entre a música, a dança e a poesia e é qualificada como brincadeira popular por seus representantes. Está muito presente em vários estados do Nordeste e se configura como patrimônio cultural pelo Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN). O artigo descreve e analisa a prática dessa manifestação cultural em um Centro de Educação Infantil (CMEI) do Município de Maceió (AL) conduzido por um Mestre de tradição com crianças de 3 a 5 anos. Objetiva compreender o Coco como uma manifestação da cultura popular e compreender a metodologia que foi construída pelo mestre na sua condução, assim como os sentidos atribuídos pelas crianças a essas vivências. Metodologicamente, a pesquisa se desenvolve por meio de observação participante, entrevistas, registros no caderno de campo e filmagens. O foco recai sobre: o contexto histórico dessa manifestação cultural, abrangendo valores atribuídos e função social no passado e presente; os elementos históricos, artísticos e estéticos e do coco praticado no contexto do referido CMEI; as respostas e os sentidos atribuídos pelas crianças envolvidas na brincadeira do coco.*

**Palavras-chave:** Educação infantil. Cultura popular. Coco. Brincadeiras populares.

## Resumen

*El coco es una manifestación de la tradición cultural que presenta una estrecha conexión entre la música, la danza y la poesía, y es descrito por sus representantes como una actividad lúdica popular. Está muy presente en varios estados del noreste de Brasil y es considerado patrimonio cultural por el Instituto Nacional del Patrimonio Histórico y Artístico (IPHAN). El artículo describe y analiza la práctica de esta manifestación cultural en un Centro Municipal de Educación Infantil (CMEI) en Maceió (Alagoas), dirigido por un maestro tradicional con niños de 3 a 5 años. El objetivo es comprender el coco como una manifestación de la cultura popular y comprender la metodología construida por el maestro durante su producción, así como los significados que los niños atribuyen a estas experiencias. Metodológicamente, la investigación se desarrolla mediante observación participante, entrevistas, registros de cuadernos de campo y filmaciones. Se centra en el contexto histórico de esta manifestación cultural, abarcando los valores y funciones sociales atribuidos en el pasado y el presente; los elementos históricos, artísticos y estéticos del coco practicado en el contexto del CMEI mencionado; y las respuestas y significados atribuidos por los niños que participan en el juego del coco.*

**Palabras clave:** Educación infantil. Cultura popular. Coco. Actividad lúdica popular.

## 1. Introduction

The scenic manifestations of cultural tradition generally encompass the playful dimension of the experience in the connection between past and future, between the memories of parents and grandparents and what they bring to the present, and preserve various dimensions of knowledge: musicality, corporeality, rhythm, harmony, and playfulness.

Brazilian popular cultural manifestations such as *Coco*, *Samba de coco*, *Reisado*, *Pastoril*, *Cavalo Marinho*, *Bumba Meu Boi*, among many others, intensely practiced in the states of the Northeast, preserve this dimension of playfulness, are referred to as playful activity by those who practice them, and the leaders of these call themselves as players.

In an interview with Canal Futura, when asked where this matrix comes from, Antônio Nóbrega explains:

[...] it is the archaism of language, [...] for example, in English, to play is to act, in French, *jouer* means the same, and in the official Portuguese, this has been lost, but in popular culture, when they are acting, they are playing, that is, first because they are living in a playful world, the world of make-believe, and this wall between what they are seeing and what they are playing is very thin, they pass through it physically and continuously. Then also because playing is more heterogeneous, it allows for more communion between languages, so the popular player is a person who sings, a person who dances, a person who acts, who plays, so playing has this perspective of quite multidisciplinary acting (Manifestações..., 2016).

Almeida (2011, p. 11) refers to these playful activities as a “[...] manifestation of adults, where artistic elements such as music, songs, lyrics, singing, and dancing are used for their own existence, which converts them into art.” In addition, their insertion into a community of belonging and their reproduction through oral tradition is also part of these elements.

The state of Alagoas, according to the mapping of the Cultural Heritage of Alagoas by the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN), even though it is the second smallest state in Brazil, has a broad and rich cultural heritage derived from its ethnic groups: whites, indigenous peoples, and blacks. *Bumba meu boi*, *Guerreiro*, *Coco de Roda*, *Pastoril*, *Fandango*, *Cavallhada*, *Chegança*, *Maracatu*, and *Reisado* are some examples among the nearly 30 manifestations that make up the cultural references (Amaral et al., 2021).

In our research, the practice of two cultural manifestations from Alagoas, *Coco* and *Guerreiro*, conducted by a Master of tradition with children aged 3 to 5 years in an early childhood education context, was chosen as the object of study. Although our interest in bringing traditional knowledge and practices into school contexts is not new, the choice of these two cultural manifestations as the object of study was circumstantial.

In the second half of 2023, the master's research of one of the members of our research group (Silva, 2023) introduced Alagoas' *Coco* to the Professor Albene Clarindo Duarte Municipal Early Childhood Education Center, located in the municipality of Maceió (AL), having 3-year-old children as target. It sought to investigate the children's musical processes and ideas with Alagoan *Coco*, based on Edwin Gordon's theory of musical learning. To give legitimacy to this cultural manifestation, Nildo Verdelinho<sup>2</sup> and Íris Verdelinho<sup>3</sup> were invited to conduct the *Coco* through music, dance, games, stories, and traditional clothing. The CMEI Professora Albene Clarindo Duarte was chosen for its great interest in popular traditional culture, as expressed in the school's Pedagogical Political Project and in initiatives already undertaken, such as the introduction of the musical collection of *Coco* masters. The empirical research was brief, covering five musical educational workshops over the course of a month, the last of which was followed by a cultural gathering with a presentation by the children for all the other morning groups. However, the presence of the players, with their costumes and musical instruments rocking those children's bodies, was so impactful that the school

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<sup>2</sup> Nildo Verdelinho is the artistic name of Josenildo Santos de Assis, son of the renowned Mestre Verdelinho das Alagoas (1945-2010) and heir to the cultural traditions of his father and other masters of the Alagoan cultural tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Íris Verdelinho is the artistic name of Iris Maria Santos da Silva, wife of Nildo Verdelinho, player, singer and *Coco* and *Guerreiro* dancer.

administration found a way for the Master not only to remain, but to expand his work in that preschool context. The agreement involved expanding to two manifestations of popular culture, Coco and Guerreiro, so that all children from the morning classes could participate any of these activities.

In order to monitor and document this work and, above all, deepen our understanding of the practice of this manifestation of popular culture in the context of early childhood education, we submitted a project to the CNPq. It was a unique opportunity to document the experience of bringing children closer to the knowledge and practices of a cultural tradition in direct contact with a master of the tradition. A Master of tradition is the person who preserves the fundamentals of this popular playful activity and is responsible for passing it on. And Master Nildo Verdelinho is a legitimate heir to these traditions. Documenting this experience was also relevant because it was his first experience of conducting popular manifestations with young children on a continuous basis, and in this process, a method was being developed. The project was approved, and our monitoring and documentation work began in September 2024 and continued throughout 2025.

It was also an opportunity to revisit the premises launched in a previous project, “Children, the City, and Heritage”, carried out in partnership with the University of Évora, which had been interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the world. This project, which involved several successful actions, aimed to improve early childhood education both inside and outside school walls, in constant dialogue with the city's cultural and natural heritage, pointing to other ways of practicing early childhood education based on the idea of strengthening cultural identity and belonging. One of the basic premises that permeated this project is that the cultural references of the communities to which children belong—namely those that include playful and festive experience of popular performances of various origins—should be recognized and valued as essential resources for children's education, for the training of professionals and the curriculum, as well as for interactions and dialogues with families and communities in general. Furthermore, the performative occupation of public space, seen as a right, presents itself as a phenomenon of cultural resistance to which childhood education cannot remain immune. (Haddad et al., 2024).

These premises are based on educational regulations, starting with the Guidelines and Bases for National Education Law, which states in Article 1 that education also encompasses the formative processes that develop in cultural manifestations (Brazil, 1996). In the context of early childhood education, these premisses resonate with the “aesthetic principles of **sensitivity**, creativity, playfulness, and **diversity of artistic and cultural manifestations**” (Brazil, 2019, emphasis added), one of the basic principles of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (DCNEI). Also, in Article 3 of the draft Resolution, which conceives the Early Childhood Education curriculum as:

[...] a set of practices that seek to articulate children's experiences and knowledge with the knowledge that is part of cultural, artistic, environmental, scientific, and technological heritage, in order to promote the integral development of children aged 0 to 5 years (Brazil, 2009).

It should also be noted that interactions and play activity are two guiding principles that make up the pedagogical proposal for early childhood education. Thus, popular culture played in Alagoas can and should play an important role in the curriculum. More than that, a deeper understanding of their characteristics can broaden the concept of play present in academic literature.

The approach to these manifestations based on the monitoring of practices conducted by those who hold the knowledge and skills of a tradition that is reproduced orally brings us to the scope of cultural heritage as set forth in articles 215 and 216 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution. However, this is not in the preservationist sense, which presupposes the conservation of a formally constituted heritage collection, or which conceives tradition as an immutable model of cultural practices. The aim is, in agreement with Almeida (2011, p. 15), to “recognize the intellectual production of people who promote the circulation of knowledge, based on knowledge generated within communities that interact with other knowledge and practices.”

Thus, this research can make several contributions to narrowing the gap between children, education professionals, and cultural heritage, opening paths and establishing dialogues with various actors and areas of knowledge in search of meaning.

In a survey of research on cultural performances or popular playful activities investigated in Brazil over the last five years in the area of early childhood education, only three studies were identified: one investigating the *Bumba meu boi* of Maranhão in São Paulo (Robson, 2020) and two conducted in Alagoas, the aforementioned research by Elaine M. da Silva (2023) on Alagoan Coco, and that of Bruno R. D. da Silva (2021), who investigated three popular playful activity: *Cambindas*, *Negas da Costa*, and *Alagoan Guerreiro*.

Given the lack of emphasis on playful activities in academic research on early childhood education, this study is exploratory in nature and constitutes a first approach to the field of cultural heritage, focusing on two cultural manifestations from Alagoas, namely Coco and Guerreiro, conducted by a Master of tradition with children aged 3 to 5 years in an early childhood education context.

For the purposes of this article, we made a temporal and thematic selection of this research. We chose Coco as a cultural manifestation and the practice of this popular playful activity with a group of children aged 3 to 5 years old during the second semester of 2024.

The main objective of this article is to understand the context of the cultural manifestation of Alagoan Coco, the methodology that was developed by the Master in conducting this cultural manifestation, and the meanings attributed by children to these experiences. The article is structured in three parts, including the introduction. In the second section, we present the concept of popular culture and playfulness adopted in this article. In the third, we present the context of the research and the methodological approach, focusing on the introduction of Coco into educational practice. In the fourth, we present Coco, its historical roots, and the values attributed to it in the past and present, based on a review of the literature and an interview with Master Nildo. In the fifth section, we present Coco as practiced at the CMEI Professora Albene Clarindo Duarte, seeking to identify the artistic, aesthetic, and historical elements introduced and the responses and meanings attributed by the children involved in the activity. Finally, we offer our concluding remarks.

## **2. Popular culture and playfulness**

Popular culture, traditional culture, oral tradition popular culture, ancestors' culture, popular traditions, traditional knowledge, and even folklore are the various terms used to refer to cultural expressions of oral tradition (Ikeda, 2013), guardians of the knowledge of popular and traditional cultures. Popular culture (or popular cultures) has been the term preferred by academia, the artistic community, and organizations linked to preservation, replacing the term folklore, which has been avoided due to its semantic use.

To Antônio Nóbrega (2024), the meaning imbued in this word holds a preservationist and museological view of the culture that developed among the Brazilian popular classes, especially in poor rural areas, and does nothing to contribute to the understanding of this cultural universe and the role it should play in a country like ours. On the contrary, this vision contributed to the class segmentation of Brazilian culture, between a culture of the people considered illiterate, called folkloric, and the culture of the ruling classes, called literate or erudite, inferiorizing the former. The complete lack of information about the artistic languages developed among the Brazilian lower classes in books dedicated to the history of Brazilian literature, theater, and dance attests to the hegemony and institutionalization of so-called erudite culture.

In several of his lectures, he defends the thesis that, in cultural and symbolic terms, only these two worlds or currents of culture collectively frequent the country, with a great imbalance in the visibility we have of them.

On the one hand, the Western or European cultural current, of Greco-Latin, Jewish, Arab, and Christian barbarian ancestry, is recognized as erudite, high, or superior culture, literate, globalized. On the other hand, the

popular culture resulting from the fusion of symbolic assets contained in the cultural stocks of African blacks, indigenous peoples, and the poor of the Portuguese social strata is almost always understood as regional, folkloric, traditional, primitive, and archaic.

Nóbrega (2020) also argues that Brazilian popular culture is visibly invisible, a fact that occurs because of the difficulty we face in seeing, perceiving, frequenting, knowing, and studying it.

In an interview with the Roda Viva program, Nóbrega states that Western culture is undergoing a progressive process of aging and exhaustion, moving away from playfulness, “diminishing this sensory contingency and becoming excessively cerebral” (Antonio..., 2014). Popular culture, on the other hand, brings about precisely the opposite: through a certain trajectory, it has been able to store a more sensory universe, in playful ways. And the multi-artist asks himself: if we bring playfulness back into schools, won't that have a civilizing educational function for children? At the same time, he states: for this popular culture to be incorporated into education, it is necessary to know its values and content, understand its symbolic material, and see its possibilities, the richness it offers in every sense, even therapeutic.

The film *Tarja Branca: a revolução que faltava* (White Label: The Missing Revolution), directed by Cacau Rhoden (2014), contrasts in its title with the increasing spread of “black label” drugs, affirming the importance of play and a playful spirit in all spheres of life, as opposed to the productivity and subjection of bodies increasingly demanded in a market society. Brazilian popular culture takes up a large part of the documentary, indicating that play also extends to manifestations of popular culture such as the *Cantadoras da quebra do coco*, *Maracatu*, *Boi do Maranhão*, *Fevó*, *Congado*, and the Carnival and São João festivals in the Northeast, among others. In these scenes, the bodies of the dancers and singers, the movements carried and rocked by the music, the colorful scenery, and the festive atmosphere symbolize a collective clamor. As Marcelino Freire, one of the interviewees, comments, “if you look at these festivals, you will see that it is an entire country that supports its imagination, its history, its narrative in festivals. If you ask these people what they think of the world, I don't know what they will say, but they will say it singing, dancing, with colorful feathers, with colors.” This statement indicates that this set of symbolic elements expresses a way of being, feeling, and behaving in a world that has no correspondence with the hegemonic culture. At the same time, it implies a collection that has the same playful substrate as play.

We understand that this current of Brazilian popular culture is the guardian of a playful way of life, and that this playful way of life has certain characteristics that need to be understood.

This understanding is based on John Huizinga's (2019) classic work, *Homo Ludens*, which argues that play, even in its purest and simplest form, is one of the main foundations of civilization. The great archetypal activities of human society have, from the beginning, been entirely marked by play.

In this work, he seeks to integrate the concept of play into that of culture and regrets that anthropology and the sciences have paid very little attention to the concept of play and the fundamental importance of the playful factor for civilization.

From the beginning of the work, Huizinga (2019, p. 6) strives to defend the significant function of play, that is, “that which has a certain meaning,” which transcends the immediate needs of life and gives meaning to action, implying the presence of a non-rational element in its very essence. His interest is to understand what play is in itself and what it means to players, and in this sense, he invites us to understand and evaluate play as a whole and to look closely at its aesthetic character, which he considers the essence and primary characteristic of play, expressed in its intensity, its power of fascination, and its ability to excite.

Although play is a social function of life, it is impossible to define it in logical, biological, and aesthetic terms, so the author is left to describe its main characteristics. The first is that “play is free, it is freedom itself” (Huizinga, 2019, p. 10). This means that play is a voluntary activity; if it is subject to orders, it ceases to be play. This characteristic evokes the freedom associated with enjoying play; one plays because one enjoys it. “It only becomes an urgent need to the

extent that the pleasure it causes transforms it into a necessity” (p. 9). It is never a task; it is always practiced “in one’s free time” (p. 10).

The second characteristic closely linked to the first is that “play is an escape from ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of self-directed activity” (p. 10). Every playful activity is capable of absorbing the player entirely at some point. In terms of formal characteristics, it is “disinterested” (p. 10). Because it does not belong to everyday life, it lies outside the mechanism of immediate satisfaction of needs and desires and interrupts this mechanism. “It insinuates itself as a temporary activity, which has an autonomous purpose and is carried out with a view to satisfaction that consists in its very realization” (Huizinga, 2019, p. 10-11). In the first instance, it presents itself to us “as an *intermezzo*, an interlude in our daily lives” (p. 11). At the same time, it is an integral part of life in general, embellishing it, expanding it, and, in this sense, becoming a vital function for both the individual and society, “due to the meaning it encompasses, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a cultural function”. By satisfying all kinds of community ideals, it is situated in a sphere superior to purely biological and physiological processes.

The third characteristic is isolation and limitation. “The playful activity is distinguished from ‘ordinary’ life both by the place it occupies and by its duration” (Huizinga, 2019, p. 11). It is a spatial separation from everyday life. The activity has its own path and meaning, it begins, and at a certain point it ends. “Even after the activity has come to an end, it remains a new creation of the spirit, a treasure to be preserved by memory. It is passed on, it becomes tradition. It can be repeated at any time [...]” (p. 12). Huizinga attributes repetition as one of its fundamental qualities, a quality that applies not only to the game, but also to its internal structure. “In almost all elevated forms of play, the elements of repetition and alternation, as in the refrain, constitute the thread and texture of the object” (p. 12).

In addition to the limitation in time, there is also a limitation in space. Every game takes place and exists within a previously defined field, whether material or imaginary, deliberate or spontaneous. All places where games take place are temporary worlds within the usual world, dedicated to the practice of a special activity.

The playful activity “creates order and is order” (p. 12). The fourth characteristic of the game, relating to the rules that are established. Order creates a temporary and limited perfection in the confusion of life and the imperfection of the world, and the slightest disobedience to it ruins the game. It is in this profound affinity between order and play that the latter is so strongly linked to the realm of aesthetics. “Play binds and detaches. It fascinates. It conjures, that is, it captivates. It is invested with the two noblest qualities we are capable of seeing in things: rhythm and harmony” (Huizinga, 2019, pp. 12-13).

The author highlights another element that plays an essential role in play, although at first it is not clear whether it is a fifth characteristic of play. This is tension, which means uncertainty, chance. It is the effort that the player makes to achieve a goal. It is an element that gives the player ethical value, as their qualities are put to the test.

The formal characteristics of play are summarized by Huizinga (2019, p. 16) as follows:

[...] a free activity, consciously considered “non-serious” and outside the norm, but at the same time capable of absorbing the player intensely and completely. It is an activity disconnected from any and all material interests, from which no profit can be obtained, practiced within its own spatial and temporal limits, according to a certain order and certain rules. It promotes the formation of social groups that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and emphasize their differences from the rest of the world through disguises or other similar means.

These characteristics cited by Huizinga (2019) help us to observe and understand the symbolic material provided to children by the Master during the Coco experiences and the playful dimension of this cultural manifestation.

### **3. The research context and focus on Coco**

This article presents the first stage of an ongoing research project conducted over ten weeks in the second half of 2024, which involved monitoring the experiences of Coco with children aged 3 to 5 who attend the CMEI Professora Albene Clarindo Duarte.



Our approach to the field was through a review of the literature on Coco and interviews with Master Nildo, aiming to gather elements of understanding of Coco, such as historical aspects, social uses, and cultural practices resulting from this cultural heritage.

Through participant observation, video recording, and field notes, we sought to record the historical, artistic, and aesthetic elements introduced by the Master to play Coco with the children. We also conducted interviews with teachers, assistants, and the manager to understand the meanings attributed to this practice for the children and for themselves.

Finally, in order to understand the unique aspects of knowledge and forms imbued in the Coco play, which also requires openness to other areas of knowledge (Gonçalves, 2014), we adopted a stance of non-interventionist participants. We placed ourselves in the position of constant learners of a cultural manifestation traversed by many historical and symbolic layers that we were able to access during our observations.

After the research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP), all participants and legal guardians of the children signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (RCLE). All participant observation sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, as were the interviews.

We emphasize that, as an ethical precaution, the researchers began to visit the site before the days scheduled to begin monitoring the experiences that would be part of the first stage of the research. They stayed, especially, during recess with the children, when all groups remained together until 9 a.m. During this time, spontaneous play and interactions were the focus, and the children had the opportunity to establish contact with the researchers, or not, at their own pace and in their own way. This approach corroborates Tebaldi and Carvalho (2022, p. 09), who state that “[...] winning the children's space, agreement, partnership, and complicity through the proposed affection” goes beyond merely introducing oneself as a researcher in the field.

The methodological approach of this research also ensured that the children had the autonomy to choose whether to participate in each of the workshops provided by the Master. At each experience, they were asked if they would like to go to the room where they would play Coco. Those who did not want to, which were few, were taken to their classrooms and stayed there with a responsible adult.

During the months of October and November 2024, the Master conducted seven experiences of the Coco play at the aforementioned CMEI, which were further enhanced by an experience of covering the mud house and a presentation with the respective costumes for the children's parents and the school community. The experiences provided with the Coco play involved children from three different classes, aged 3 to 5, totaling 40 children.

We will now present the partial results of the research in two stages. First, we will address issues related to the historical context of Coco and the Alagoas-style Coco practiced by Master Nildo. Next, we will present the artistic, aesthetic, and historical elements of the Coco practice brought to the children, illustrated with their playful activities and interactions during the Coco circle with Nildo and Íris.

## **4. An approach to Alagoan Coco as cultural heritage**

Coco deserved special attention from Mário de Andrade during his ethnographic trip in 1928-29 to the northeastern states, characterizing the first record about the Cocos made with scientific rigor, but also “preserving traces of the writer's passion, affection, and feelings, never hidden when it came to Brazilian popular culture” (Ayala, 1999, p. 274). He recorded 254 Cocos in direct contact with the singers, supplemented by his students and friends before and after the expedition. The records continued ten years later with the Folklore Research Mission carried out in 1938.

The Coco, or Cocos, as Mário de Andrade preferred, is a manifestation of traditional culture that is difficult to define due to its common characteristics found in other genres that present an intimate connection between music,



dance, and poetry, such as “*moda*,” “*samba*,” “*maxixe*,” “*tango*,” “*catira*” or “*cateretê*,” “*martelo*,” “*embolada*,” and others [...]” (Andrade, 1984, p. 347).

In the Mapping of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Alagoas (2008), the Alagoan Coco is highlighted as a dance of African origin with indigenous influence, since its birth in Quilombo dos Palmares, from where it probably spread, reaching the São Francisco River basin and the *Sertão*.

There are those who disagree with its Alagoas origin, such as Maria Ignez Novais Ayala (1999), who has dedicated herself to the study of Cocos in various locations in the state of Paraíba and neighboring states and thus gathered different versions about the possible origins of Coco from those who practice it. These records, compiled in the book *Os Cocos – Alegria e Devoção* (Ayala; Ayala, 2015), show how the “Coco play” is an indissoluble part of the sociability of the less privileged classes in various neighborhoods and locations surveyed.

In the state of Alagoas, Coco has been studied since the early 1990s by Telma César Cavalcanti, who collected Cocos in various regions of the city of Maceió (AL). The black origin and its relationship with the activity of breaking the fruit from palm trees is a version shared by some of her informants. The practice of dancing the Coco during the thatching of wattle and daub houses, common in rural communities, is also shared.

Building a house of this type required the presence of a large number of people. In the final stage of construction, when all that remained was to level the clay floor of the house, they would throw a party to celebrate the completion of the work. [...] The floor of the house was leveled by the party guests themselves through their dancing. They danced all night long, motivated by the Cocos or pagodes [...] until dawn, when the floor of the house, yielding to the efforts of the dancers, was left ‘smooth, smooth’! (Cavalcanti, 1997, p. 29-30).

In an interview conducted for this research, Nildo Verdelinho explains this association between Coco and *pagode* and reaffirms the version of the covering of mud houses:

[...] everything is Coco, the Coco from here, Coco from Paraíba, Coco from Pernambuco, it's all Coco. But depending on your region, how it was sung, why it was sung, there was and still is a difference. Coco from Alagoas is more commonly referred to as *pagode* because of the party, the house coverings. [...] Because pagode is not a musical genre. *Pagode* is a party where you could have any musical genre [...]. But when it came to house parties, where a *pagode* was held to cover the house, it was usually with Coco, because of the stomping of the feet, the purpose of the *trupés*, which is different from Coco in Alagoas, where a *trupé* is done to spread the clay with the foot, to apply more force, to smooth the clay, right? (Interview with Nildo Verdelinho, 11/27/2024).

Over the years, brick houses became more common, and the Coco dance became detached from the festive context of mud houses.

Regarding the approach of Masters from formal educational contexts, Cavalcanti (2021) points out the importance of Professor Pedro Teixeira. According to her, he developed a project between the 1960s and 1990s, bringing popular masters to schools and creating groups of revelers, especially for those living in Chã Preta and Maceió at the time. Over the years, Professor Pedro's former students were invited by schools to put on Coco performances for the June festivities and folklore month. These invitations ended up encouraging the formation of new Coco groups.

The story of Mestre Nildo is intertwined with that of Professor Pedro, who was very close to his father and family:

[...] Professor Pedro Teixeira was amazed by my father's work, and my father arrived at his Guerreiro as Mateu [...] From that time on, my father became Mestre de Guerreiro, no longer Mateu. [...] My father began to rehearse other plays (pastoral, caboclinhos, nega da costa...) for him too, for a long, long time [...] (Interview with Nildo Verdelinho, January 13, 2025).

From a very young age, Mestre Nildo accompanied various popular events with traditional Masters. At the invitation of Master Jurandir Bozo, a disciple of Master Verdelinho, they decided to hold Coco workshops in schools, after realizing that the stylized Coco was the only one worked on in the school environment.

Watching the performances, I saw that it was very different from Coco, it was very stylized, it was mainly without the *trupé*, without the dance. Then in 2010, based on Bozo's idea, we opened a workshop focused on these Cocos in the foundation's building. I taught the Coco workshop, Bozo taught the singing part, and Fagner taught the tambourine (Interview with Nildo, January 13, 2025).

With regard to early childhood center, Master Nildo reports that this is not the first time he has worked with this age group, but these were one-off projects that had no continuity, taking place at certain times of the school calendar, mainly during the São João festival and Folklore Day. Once the requested projects were completed, the relationship ended. His current work at the CMEI is his first experience of developing ongoing work with the same group of children in the early childhood education age group. He attributes this opportunity to the management's understanding and appreciation of popular culture.

[...] we have time to explain the whole history of Coco, right? That's very important. And when you're working on a project that has a deadline, you don't have time [...] to explain how Coco came about or why it became *Coco de Roda*, Coco play, and why you put your hands behind your back, right? [...] It depends a lot on who is managing the school, who embraces it, who understands it, who really likes the activity and values popular culture (Nildo, 11/27/2025).

The Master also informs us that although the stylized Coco play, which developed strongly in the 1980s and 1990s, is the most practiced in Maceió, it was the *Coco de raiz*, also known as *pagode alagoano*, that he introduced at CMEI. This choice is due to the care he takes with the school that his father created in 2004 for the family. The *Verdelinhos* was the name the children gave to the school after their father's death in 2010. He argues that many things have been lost, especially the essence.

[...] few people here in the capital follow this line of Alagoan *pagode*. To my knowledge, only the Verdelinhos, Mestra Zeza, Comunidade Azul, which is already one of our cells too [...]. But there's a lot more in the countryside, right? [...] There are many Cocos plays, but it's very current, right? Very stylized. And so I am concerned with maintaining this style of *pagode*, especially with the instruments that were played in Alagoan *pagode*, which are the tambourine, the *ganzá*, and the *bizunga*. Today, few people know what it is, right? The *bizunga* was one of the first instruments of Coco. So we take care to maintain these instruments, to maintain the meter in the compositions and maintain the rhythm and dances, even to serve as a reference for those who are interested in learning about it (Interview with Nildo, 11/27/2025).

The Master's statements reveal his appreciation for maintaining the tradition of Coco play, which is expressed in his knowledge of its history, the use of percussion instruments (*pandeiro*, *ganzá*, and *bizunga*), meter, and dances, elements that the stylized Coco play does not always preserve. In terms of education, he values continuity and, although he meets the demands of schools, he takes a critical view when Coco is only requested occasionally to perform at festivities scheduled in the school calendar.

## 5. Coco in action

In this section, we bring together the artistic, aesthetic, and historical elements introduced by the Master to play Coco with children, as well as the methodology created throughout the experiences.

Nildo and Íris invited us to look at the history of Coco and how it is played. As we get closer, we begin to understand what the Master learned from his ancestors and what he has been incorporating into his experiences with

the children, bringing the experience of a traditional cultural manifestation that is revealed in repetition, but also in innovation, subject to constant change.

When we began our field research in October 2024, the experiences that had begun in March 2024 were already well established. Over the course of ten weeks, we followed the experiences that Nildo and Íris provided to the children and built an understanding of the strategies that were created to organize and develop Coco play with the children.

The meetings took place once a week, on Wednesdays, always in the mornings, starting around 9 a.m. The number of children varied throughout the meetings, as it depended on their attendance and desire to participate. On the days observed, most of them gave themselves over to the activity.

The children respond with their eyes, words, smiles, and other body language to the presence of the players. In the reception area, they stay until it is time for the Coco to begin. The children approach, talk, sing a few songs, borrow the tambourine, dance a few steps, and thus warm up the Coco circle that will soon be played.

While the performers wait and interact with the children in the reception area, teachers and assistants prepare a CMEI reference room for the play, moving furniture, organizing objects, and taking care of other details so that the space is as free as possible to welcome the children, the Master, and Iris.

The average duration of the Coco experience in the classroom was 20 minutes, but for the Master, the feeling of time was longer. In an initial conversation before we entered the field, when asked about the duration of each experience, he mentioned that each session of Coco and Guerreiro lasted from 50 minutes to 1 hour. In a later interview, he commented: "If you ask me: how long does it last? I don't know. It's not something you can measure with a clock, it's in your head, right? The repertoire is already designed for that" (Interview with Nildo Verdelinho, 11/28/2024).

This comment reveals one of the characteristics of the playful culture proposed by Huizinga (2019), which is the temporary suppression of the usual world. The player is intensely and totally absorbed by the activity that they themselves organize and conduct it. For this, the repertoire is of vital importance.

Composed of six to seven songs sung in a well-planned sequence, the rich and varied repertoire brought to the activity challenges, enchants, and mobilizes children in different ways. The children's involvement and excitement mark the time of each song.

The songs chosen are representative of popular music, some by unknown authors, others by his father, such as Dona Mariquinha, which is reconstructed for playing Coco with children. Nildo kept the main verse [Dona Mariquinha da feição miudinha, Seu Manoel da fulô do limão] and created others to play with, especially in this school context. As can be seen below, there are four verses that invite children to play in different ways.

Table 1 – Dona Mariquinha with new verses and proposed challenges

Solo: Dona Mariquinha da feição miudinha Chorus: Seu Manoel da fulô do limão Solo: Dona Mariquinha da feição miudinha Chorus: Seu Manoel da fulô do limão	The children make a circle and go round.
Oi, pisa miudinho Miudinho, miudinho Miudinho, miudinho Miudinho Uma pisada, duas pisadas, três pisadas, limão	The circle stops, and the children speed up their steps to the rhythm of the tambourine. When singing " <i>uma pisada</i> ", the children must stamp one foot on the ground; when singing " <i>duas pisadas</i> ", they must stamp both feet, one at a time; and when singing " <i>três pisadas</i> ", they must stamp their feet three times, alternating between them. This chorus is repeated after each verse.
Pula pula pipoquinha Quero ver você pular Tudo mundo tá pulando Eu também quero pular	The children stop spinning and jump where they are.
Bate o pé e bate a mão Bate a mão e bate o pé Se abaixa e levanta	The children are challenged to stamp their feet and clap their hands, and at the command of the Master's tambourine, they bend down and stand up. When they do the opposite of what the Master said, they end up laughing and having fun with the Master watching the activity.

Quero ver como é que é	
Dá a mão ao coleguinha Gira a roda sem parar Quero ver você correr Sem sair do seu lugar	The children start spinning the wheel again, then stop it and run in place without moving. The Master increases the tempo of the tambourine, and the children run faster and faster.
Preste muita atenção No que agora eu vou dizer Todo mundo fica estátua (pausa) Agora pode se mexer	The children play of being immobile at the Master's command. When he asks them to be <i>estátua</i> (statues), the Master comments on their “frozen” poses.

Source: Authors (2025).

In addition to these songs, there are others that make up the repertoire, each with its own specific characteristics.

Nildo used to start the circle with *Quebra Coco*, *Coco Catolé*, initially with the children sitting down, alluding to break the coconut with their hands, followed by the circle spinning with everyone standing up, to break the coconut with their feet. In the song “*Três Coco*”, there are two verses that invite the children to dance and sing very fast, followed by a very slow part. The song “*Candeeiro*” also has this oscillation in speed. In the song “*Araúna*,” there is a part where they must drag their feet backward [*Arrasta o pé pra trás xotinho*] and then run to the center of the circle, jumping [*Essa Araúna não faz como eu!*]. When singing “*Feira do Passarinho*”, the children are asked to jump with both feet toward the center of the circle and then backward. It can be observed that all the songs feature a solo and chorus duet, and the children easily take on this dialogue with harmony and vigor.

When asked how he came up with the repertoire, he emphasizes the rhythm, the animation with different movements, and the chorus (response) that was easy for the children to sing:

[...] I was thinking of something that had rhythm, that would get them excited, that they could jump around to, like *Dona Mariquinha* in the playful activity where you bend down, stand up, and clap your hands, running without leaving your spot. And that's what they're waiting for, right? I purposely leave *Dona Mariquinha* for the last moment. For two reasons, right? First, because they're waiting for it, it's what they like best. And second, because when it ends, it ends with the energy up there, right? It ends on a high note.

[...]

So that's it, along the way, until we get to *Dona Mariquinha*, there are other things too, like “*Arrasta o pé pra trás xotinho*” [solo by Araúna], then they shout [chorus] “*Essa araúna não faz como eu*”. I'm also thinking about the issue of responses that are easy for them to understand when singing, and often, as it's an ongoing project, we have time to sit down, as we did at the beginning, and work only on the lyrics of the song (Nildo, 11/27/2024).

The repertoire was taught throughout the relationship between the Master and Iris with the children, but within a structure that contained a sequence of songs, each with its own playful activities. And, within this structure, rules were established and gradually assimilated by the children.

On the days we observed, we could see that the children had already assimilated this sequence, knew the songs, their lyrics, those that had already been sung, and those that were still to come. Here we can make a connection with what Huizinga (2019) states about the presence of rules within activities: if the rules are not followed, the activity ends. We noticed that the children understand that Coco is played in a circle, led by the Master with his tambourine in the center, and that each song has its own steps and responses to be given.

For those who watch the activity, especially in the context of the CMEI, it is possible to understand that the encounter takes place as a ritual, consisting of a sequence of acts, in this case led by a Master, in which each person knows their role and performs it properly. This is only possible through repetition, corroborating Huizinga (2019), who attributes it as a quality that applies to the internal structure of the activity.

Image 1 – Coco's Circle



Photo: Roberta Brito.

The children understand the formation of the circle and the challenges that the songs present. They bring with them an experience that has been built up over the course of the year, based on observation, imitation, and repetition. As the Master tells us, this is how learning happens:

It's not just about playing the tambourine. You see that there are children watching me, trying to repeat what I do, and that's how I learned. I learned by watching. My father never came to me with a tambourine and said, 'play like this, play like that, play two, play three'. [...] The tambourine was always within reach at home, right? And we would look at it, do what it did, do it and watch (Nildo, 11/28/2024).

Nildo's relationship with the tambourine signals to the children what will be done at that moment. For example, when he put the tambourine under his arm, the children knew it was a break, that the Master was going to give a message, teach a song, or show a dance step. If the tambourine was being played, it was time to dance and sing. At the end of each experience, the Master would lower the tambourine and the children would run towards him to play it. The relationship is so close and constant that the children identify and position themselves differently, depending on how the tambourine and the Master are positioned.

Image 2 – End of Coco's Circle



Photos: Roberta Brito.



Contact with the Master and the tambourine occurs before, during, and after the Coco's Circle. It was common to find Nildo challenging some child in the reception area before the experience. We highlight an episode in which the Master is challenged and challenges others, with the tambourine playing a leading role:

On this day, Nildo sat on the low wall in the corridor and engaged in dialogue with Levi, using two tambourines. The boy has the small tambourine and Nildo has the larger one. Nildo plays the tambourine and sings while Levi watches attentively, holding the smaller tambourine. Nildo interrupts the sequence and asks in a joking tone:

– *Where is it now? Play! Didn't you say you would play better than me? Didn't you?*

– *I already played!* Levi replies, pointing to the larger tambourine that Nildo is holding.

– *Go on, then play that one*, says Nildo, referring to the smaller tambourine he was holding.

– *You want this one?* Referring to the larger tambourine.

Levi says yes, and they swap instruments. Nildo now holds the smaller tambourine, while Levi has the larger one.

Nildo runs his thumb along the edge of the smaller tambourine, making the instrument vibrate. Levi watches him and says:

– *Sir, I can do that with the tambourine.*

Nildo asks Levi while demonstrating the movement:

– *How can I do that?*

– *Just do it* (Levi replies) (Transcription of video recording 10/16/2024, emphasis added).

Image 3 – Dialogue with Levi



Photo: Roberta Brito.

Another remarkable event involving the tambourine took place on November 6, 2024. Nildo and a child named Elias entered the room where they would form the Coco's Circle. Elias is a child with Down syndrome and showed great fascination with the tambourine from the start. In his experiences with Coco, Nildo always carried two tambourines, a larger one, which he used to lead the circle, and a smaller one, which he offered to a child for a challenge. Noticing Elias' interest, Nildo brought him to the center of the circle to play the instrument with him in all the Coco circles he attended. Here is the episode:

Nildo takes the bag where he keeps the smaller tambourine, shows it to Elias, gesturing with his body (mainly with his head, hands, and arms) and asking if he wants the tambourine. At that moment, Elias nods his head in agreement.

The Master bends down and unzips the tambourine bag at Elias's eye level. Elias puts his hand inside the bag and takes out the tambourine. Elias holds the tambourine and explores it with hand movements. Nildo approaches Elias and says: - *Play, play the tambourine* (he shows the movement of playing with his hand and points to the tambourine).

Elias stares at the Master.

Nildo approaches, takes the tambourine from Elias's hand, and shows him what he wants him to try it [which is the gesture of moving the tambourine while playing]. Elias points to Nildo the place where the Master leaves his tambourine, signaling the invitation for the Master to play with him. Nildo takes the tambourine and begins to play, Elias plays along following the Master's instructions.

These two scenes (among others that were repeated) show the trust that the Master has in children who show an interest in learning more. This is reflected in his attitude of bringing an extra tambourine, allowing the children to handle it, and setting increasingly complex challenges. This reverberates in the behavior of the children, who accept the challenges and evolve in their explorations. Elias is a great example. It is very interesting to note that he knows the performance of each song and the lyrics, even if he does not verbalize them. His body accurately follows the rhythm set by the Master, beating the tambourine, moving his feet, bending down, standing up, jumping, among many other demands placed on him as they play.

His gaze is somewhat peculiar; the Master is followed in his smallest gestures by Elias' eyes, who is sure of watching closely, facing the Master. Sometimes he approaches, touches the Master's tambourine, kisses his cheek, pokes the Master's belly, showing some body gesture corresponding to some music he wants to be played, places himself in the center of the circle in constant dialogue with the Master and the children, helps organize the other children in the circle, and when he notices that someone needs to take a step back, he approaches them and, with his free hand, touches their body, showing them that they need to move back.

Image 4 – Nildo and Elias with the respective tambourines



Photos: Roberta Brito.

The historical dimension of Coco is also an element that has received special attention from the Master. Nildo was sure to show the children the history he learned and experienced in Alagoas' Coco with his parents and close friends. On October 2, upon entering the room, Nildo places *quengas*, *ganzás*, and tambourines in the center of the circle. The children are sitting in a circle and Nildo is standing in the center explaining why those coconuts are there:



What does it mean to break a coconut with your hands? We break coconuts with our hands. In the old days, when people went to break coconuts, they did it like this...

They took two halves of the coconut and started hitting them together, making the rhythm of the coconut.

They hit it hard, but we're not going to hit it too hard; we have to hit it slowly, right? (Transcription of video recording, 10/02/2024).

Nildo and Íris invite the children to beat quengas against the other, following the rhythm of the song, and those who do not have a *quenga* in their hands, because there were not enough for everyone, clap their hands to the rhythm and then break the coconut with their feet. Stomping their feet to the rhythm of the music.

Another element introduced is the position of the hands and feet. In most of the experiences, Nildo used to remind everyone of the rule:

- What is the correct position for dancing Coco? (Nildo)
- The girls with their hands on their waists and the boys with their hands behind their backs. (Children)
- Why with your hands behind your back? Does anyone remember? (Nildo)
- To carry! (Children)
- To carry the clay. (Nildo)

Image 5 – Position of the hands in the Coco's Circle



Photos: Roberta Brito.

The historical dimension was expanded with the opportunity to take the children to the mud house that was being built on land that Nildo had managed to acquire, thanks to the award he received from the Paulo Gustavo Law for the support and maintenance of cultural spaces. On this land, the playful family built a mud house. As mentioned, this type of house used to be built by many people working together, and so it was. The experience would take place on November 9, 2024. Until that day arrived, the Master and Iris began preparing the children. On October 23, 2024, the song “*Quebra coco, coco catolé*” gained a new verse, and the children were invited to learn it. The Master went to the center of the circle and said the following:

Now let's sing a new song, so we can sing it when we go on our outing. A song about clay. You're just going to say this:  
– I want to see tapá.

Are you all ready?  
– I want to see tapá. (Master Nildo)  
– I want to see tapá. (The children respond)  
Tapá is when we cover (open your hand and make a gesture of covering something) or beat the clay with your hand.  
If I say: – I take the clay and throw the clay.  
You say: – I want to see tapá.  
He ask two children who have already understood the new verse introduced to join him in the center of the circle.  
The children repeat and the Master mixes verses from the song “Quebra coco, coco catolé” with the new ones he has just taught.

Another strategy employed by the Master can be observed, which is to introduce something new into what is already known as a way for children to assimilate the new verses more quickly.

November 9 arrived, and the children participating in the experience were able to knead the clay, put the clay on their backs, carry the clay, and build the Verdinhos' mud house. While some trampled the clay, the microphone was open, and the children sang. Trampling the clay to the sound of Coco is fundamental, as the material reaches the necessary consistency for covering. At this point, it is also time to remove any stones or other materials that could hinder its uniformity. The music enhances the gathering, strengthening the quality of attentive and devoted presence. When the clay is ready, the carrying begins, as taught in the Coco's circles. It is time to put your hands behind your back and fill them with clay to cover the house.

**Image 6** – Experience in covering the mud house





Photos: Roberta Brito.

The photographs taken that day show children deeply engaged in the experience of building a mud house as the Master had described it. The walls of the house are filled in, and the children bring to life what they have heard.

## Final Considerations

We have been discussing for some time the need to bring traditional cultural knowledge and practices closer to the context of early childhood education. But what path should we follow to ensure that these unique aspects are known, respected, and contemplated without falling into the pedagogical bias that collects disconnected elements that are meaningless to children and their professionals? The testimony of one of the teachers interviewed shows the awareness necessary for a change in the way we think about and practice popular culture: "But something was missing. We knew that something was always missing, that it wasn't quite right." The teacher refers to the efforts made at the school since 2017 to introduce traditional culture into the school environment, mainly through a rich musical collection of traditional masters.

Perhaps the knowledge we had, the experience, was not enough for the children to take ownership and live in a more natural way. [...] It was after Nildo arrived that we recognized and were able to witness how he has an experience of his life, of his father's childhood, who was a Master. It's as if he had already incorporated those movements into tradition and everything. And in a very natural way, the children got involved and we began to see that they were really appropriating [...] the songs, the movements. And so, what I can say now, today, is that they really get involved and for them it's an activity. They sing in the classroom [...] we see children singing the songs that the master sings with them (Interview with the second period B teacher, 12/11/2024).

This testimony shows us that the children's involvement and appropriation of the songs, movements, and even the story, revealed in several other testimonies, are related to the presence of artistic, aesthetic, and historical elements that constitute the identity foundations of Coco. This does not mean that innovation cannot exist in order to maintain tradition. We agree with Gadamer (1985, p. 74) when he says that tradition does not mean "mere conservation, but transmission," which in German has the meaning of translation and "includes not leaving anything immutable and merely conserved, but learning to capture the old in a new way".

It is the essential elements of Coco, brought together and masterfully crafted by Nildo and Íris, that fill the void pointed out in this teacher's statement. They are what make Coco an art form, combining its playful, symbolic, and

festive aspects, as suggested by Gadamer (1985). From this perspective, it is possible to perceive the characteristics attributed to play as described in Huizinga's work (2019), as we see a group of children and adults singing, dancing, and playing Coco in a space and time circumscribed by a spirit of joy and freedom without material interest. Playing Coco is governed by rules agreed upon by everyone present, who maintains order so that the activity can develop and continue. There is “order, tension, movement, change, solemnity, rhythm, enthusiasm” (Huizinga, 2019, p. 21). But above all, there is the playful spirit of its leaders, who share and heighten the enthusiasm of this collective.

Thus, popular culture enters the school and becomes part of it, filling it, as shown in this teacher's statement.

“Miss, the Coco has arrived!” It's the Coco, not the master. They don't want to know that the Master has arrived. They want to know that the Coco is here. “Miss, the Coco has arrived”. When Nildo's wife arrives, [they say] “Miss, the Coco has arrived”; [they say] “The two Cocos have arrived”. They both have arrived, Nildo and his wife. So, during the week, they say, “Where's the Coco? Where is it?” Where's the other one? Most of them ask, “When is the Coco day?” So they always ask about the Cocos. [...] Nildo's way of doing things captivated everyone, and they like to participate. They participate without it being an imposition. They go of their own free will. It's because they like the music. They like everything.

Mestre and Íris are the Coco, so when the CMEI gate opens on Wednesday mornings, the children feel it, run to embrace it, and enthusiastically shout:

“The Coco has arrived, the Coco has arrived!”

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