The Voice of the Ancestors Echoing in the Sertão: The Legacy of Rio Grande do Norte’s first indigenous museum, the Luiza Cantofa Indigenous Museum.

Apodi, Brazil
SENAC RN
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
In Apodi, Brazil, the history of the Tapuias Paiacus indigenous people who once lived on the shores of the Apodi Lagoon had been erased from the municipality's official narrative, leaving most residents unaware their town's own name had indigenous origins. In 2006, indigenous leader Lúcia Maria Tavares Tabajara Paiacu, noticing the total absence of her people's history at a national cultural event, mobilised roughly 120 descendant families to found the Centro Histórico-Cultural Tapuias Paiacus da Lagoa do Apodi in 2013, which eventually led to the July 2023 opening of the Luíza Cantofa Indigenous Museum — the first indigenous museum in Rio Grande do Norte state. The museum now draws an estimated 800-1,000 visitors monthly plus three to four school buses weekly, reinforced by the municipality's 2022 Pedagogical Tourism Week law bringing students directly into contact with this reclaimed history. The core lesson: preserving a people's memory requires more than collecting artefacts — it demands rebuilding identity and giving voice to communities long made invisible, and heritage education in schools is the most powerful tool against historical erasure.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

Apodi, the second largest municipality in Rio Grande do Norte, is a territory defined by the encounter between nature and ancestry. Long before colonization, the shores of its lagoon were inhabited by the indigenous Tapuias Paiacus people, whose cultural heritage and history of resistance are preserved and honored today at the Luíza Cantofa Indigenous Museum. The city connects past and present through its landmarks, such as the century-old Church of Saint John the Baptist, and its natural wealth, represented by the impressive 90-million-year-old limestone formations of the Lajedo de Soledade, which shelter fossils and rock paintings. More than just a geographical destination, Apodi is a space of living memory that invites future generations to celebrate and preserve its deep historical roots.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

For a long time, the history of the Tapuias Paiacus, the indigenous people from the shores of the Apodi Lagoon, suffered a historical erasure in the municipality's official narrative. This invisibility led to a general lack of knowledge among the local population regarding the region's own identity—including the fact that the name "Apodi" has indigenous origins and that the territory was the stage for major episodes of resistance. The scenario began to change in 2006, when indigenous leader Lúcia Maria Tavares Tabajara Paiacu, while participating in a cultural event in São Paulo, noticed the total absence of records about her people in national exhibitions. Driven by the risk of seeing her history disappear, she initiated a collective mobilization in Apodi. This movement for identity reclamation and appreciation resulted in the creation of the Centro Histórico-Cultural Tapuias Paiacus da Lagoa do Apodi (Tapuias Paiacus Historical-Cultural Center of the Apodi Lagoon) in 2013, bringing together descendant families, researchers, and schools. More than just cataloging objects, the initiative sought to promote historical justice and strengthen community pride in the sertão potiguar, culminating years later in the fulfillment of a dream: the founding of the Luíza Cantofa Indigenous Museum, the first indigenous museum in Rio Grande do Norte.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The first step was taken by Lúcia, but the dream quickly ceased to be individual. Little by little, families descended from the Tapuias Paiacus began to unite around a common purpose: to protect what no generation should ever lose—their identity. This movement of belonging and resistance culminated in the creation of the Centro Histórico-Cultural Tapuias Paiacus da Lagoa do Apodi in 2013, bringing together men, women, youth, and elders who decided to commit to preserving the memory of their ancestors. More than just telling a story, the community wanted to ensure it remained alive. They wanted to create a space where ancestry could be celebrated, where traditional knowledge was valued, where students could learn about the true origins of their territory, and where visitors could find a narrative built by those who actually lived it. The vision was to build a legacy. A place where every object, every photograph, every account, and every memory helped tell a story of resistance, dignity, and survival. A space capable of inspiring respect, promoting intercultural dialogue, and strengthening the community's sense of

belonging. Years later, this collective dream took concrete shape with the creation of the Luíza Cantofa Indigenous Museum.

The Journey: How change happened

The lack of appreciation and recognition of the historical and cultural identity of the Tapuias Paiacus peoples became one of the major challenges faced by the territory of Apodi. Over the years, the memory of the native peoples who inhabited the Oeste Potiguar (Western Rio Grande do Norte) was gradually forgotten, leaving a large part of the population unaware of their contribution to the social, cultural, and historical formation of the municipality. At the same time, the episodes that marked the colonial occupation of the region—frequently characterized by conflict and violence against the indigenous peoples living in the Sertão de Apodi—remained little known. Faced with this reality, the understanding grew among indigenous descendants that preserving memory also meant promoting historical justice and ensuring that future generations would have access to their own history. Driven by this purpose, descendants of the Tapuia Paiacu ethnicity initiated a process of mobilization in defense of the preservation of their culture. As a result of this collective effort, the Centro Histórico-Cultural Tapuias Paiacus da Lagoa do Apodi (CHCTPLA) was created on February 7, 2013. Composed of approximately 120 families and 150 members, the center was born as an organization structured by the indigenous people themselves, with Lúcia Maria Tavares Tabajara Paiacu as its founder and primary leader. Initially established at Lúcia's residence, located at 105 Antônio Lopes Filho Street, in Apodi/RN, the CHCTPLA became an important space for resistance, research, and cultural appreciation, and was later recognized as an institution of public utility at both the municipal and state levels. The mobilization continued to grow. In the second half of 2018, the movement led by the Tapuias Paiacus reclaimed an important memory site situated between the district of Soledade and the EMPARN base, on the Apodi Plateau (Chapada do Apodi). This action strengthened the debate regarding territory, identity, and the recognition of indigenous rights, demonstrating the movement's relevance to the preservation of local history. In parallel, the municipality began to invest in initiatives aimed at promoting culture and heritage education. The approval of Municipal Law No. 229/2022, which established the Pedagogical Tourism Week, created new opportunities to bring students and the community closer to the territory's history, strengthening educational actions focused on preserving the memory, cultural heritage, and natural resources of Apodi.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The inauguration of the Luiza Cantofa Indigenous Museum on July 26, 2023, marked a historic milestone not only for the Tapuia Paiacu people but for the entire state of Rio Grande do Norte. For the first time, the memory, culture, and journey of the state's indigenous peoples came to occupy a permanent space of appreciation, recognition, and belonging. The results can be observed both in tangible terms and in the emotional transformations experienced by the community. Since its opening, the museum has welcomed a growing influx of visitors. Although consolidated official statistics are not yet available, it is estimated that between 800 and 1,000

people visit the space monthly. Furthermore, the museum receives between three and four buses of students weekly from different municipalities in the region, consolidating itself as an important tool for heritage education and pedagogical tourism. However, the most significant impacts go far beyond numbers. What was once a little-known history has now become part of school conversations, educational activities, academic research, and the local population's own identity. Children and youth have come to learn about the presence of indigenous peoples in the formation of the territory where they live, developing greater respect for cultural diversity and a deeper sense of belonging to the place. For the descendants of the Tapuias Paiacus, the museum represents something even more valuable: the recognition of a history that for a long time remained invisible. Many visitors report feeling deeply moved upon discovering that the indigenous presence remains alive in the territory and that their ancestors played a fundamental role in building Apodi's identity.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

Here is the complete translation of the summary into English, maintaining the reflective, professional, and inspiring tone of the text: The journey toward creating the Luiza Cantofa Indigenous Museum demonstrated that preserving a people's memory goes far beyond gathering collections; it is about rebuilding identities and giving protagonism to historically invisibilized communities. One of the main surprises along the way was realizing the local population's deep lack of knowledge regarding the indigenous heritage in Apodi, which contrasted with the immediate reaction of curiosity, respect, and pride from students, residents, and visitors once they gained access to this information. This path also evidenced that cultural recognition requires time, patience, and persistence to overcome years of invisibility. Furthermore, it became clear that no transformation consolidates itself in isolation: the strengthening of the indigenous movement was only possible through strategic partnerships with schools, universities, public agencies, and researchers, proving that safeguarding heritage is a shared responsibility in which the community must lead. Reflecting on the process, the founders note that, if they could change anything, they would have initiated heritage education actions in schools even earlier, as education proved to be the most powerful tool against historical erasure.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The Luiza Cantofa Indigenous Museum has established itself as a collective movement that transformed the invisibility of the Tapuias Paiacus into community recognition and pride. Beyond reclaiming family memories and integrating them into academic research and public policies, the initiative strengthened partnerships with universities, schools, and government agencies. This joint effort turned the museum into a living laboratory for heritage education and boosted initiatives such as the Pedagogical Tourism Week (Municipal Law No. 229/2022). As the first indigenous museum in Rio Grande do Norte, the project has become a model for sustainable development, demonstrating that preserving cultural identity can generate social inclusion and conscious tourism without losing its authenticity. More than safeguarding the past, the museum

illuminates the path to the future, inspiring new generations to assume the role of guardians of this memory and ensuring that the legacy of native peoples remains alive and integrated into the territory's sustainability.

Awards or Certifications

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Other Relevant Links

Quotes or Testimonials

"The Luíza Cantofa Museum is not just a building with objects; it is the proof that we exist and that we resist. For a long time, our history was silenced in the sertão, and our children grew up not knowing where they came from. Today, seeing students walk in here and discover the pride of carrying Paiacu blood is the fulfillment of a dream that began in 2006. We ceased to be invisible to become the narrators of our own history."
— Member of the Tapuia Paiacu Community "Being here is a celebration of the role of women who never give up the fight, an example masterfully led by Lúcia Paiacu. The Luíza Cantofa Indigenous Museum holds immeasurable importance for local culture and native peoples. At Uern, we strengthen this commitment through ethnic-racial quotas, and seeing this space consolidated reaffirms that the university and society must walk together in preserving memory and guaranteeing rights."
— Cicília Maia, Rector of the State University of Rio Grande do Norte (Uern)