Digital strategies for widening the scope of dissemination of indigenous cultures: the Presença Karajá Project and the Tainacan Platform

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The Karajá people today live in 20 villages along the Araguaia River in the north-central part of Brazil, amounting to 3000 individuals. They call themselves *Iny* and speak the *inyribè* language. In their society, the social position of women ceramists is paramount, as they possess the know-how, transmitted from one generation to another, that embodies features of what it is to be Karajá (Leitão, 2015). Contrary to what one might imagine, the master ceramists are not the ones who model best, but those who dominate the burning of the pieces, a very complex process which ensures that they do not break. "Only a dry wood (*Hulalaò*) serves to burn the ceramic doll," says an indigenous man who holds a master's degree from the Federal University of Tocantins (Karajá, 2015). And so we discover the Karajá people not only through the studies of others but through their intellectual production.

The *Iny Karajá* villages are spread across four Brazilian states, but the ceramic centres are at Bananal Island, the largest river island in the world, and Aruanã city. The villages underwent a massive impact from the 1930s onwards when the region became the target of public policies of interiorization and occupation. Due to commercialization, the production of Karajá dolls, originally intended to be children's toys, little by little adapted to the taste of tourists. It is not a stylistic 'evolution' since the old type of dolls are still produced alongside the new one.

The Karajá dolls, called *ritxoko*, are shaped in either wax alone, or clay - raw or baked - plus wax. Playing with the dolls is a way of socializing children in the customs and practices of the Karajá people, its rich cosmology and the relationship of the indigenous people with the Araguaia river and its fauna. All over the world, museums have collected *ritxoko* since the 19th century. In 2012 it was listed as immaterial cultural heritage by the Brazilian Institute of National and Artistic Heritage, positively impacting its commercialization and the perception of its cultural value.

To understand the relations between intangible heritage and museum collections the project "'*Presença Karajá*': material culture, weft and colonial transits" started in 2017. It has been mapping *ritxoko* collections in museums in Brazil and worldwide, having already listed 77 institutions in 16 countries; the oldest collections found date back to the mid-nineteenth century. While we map collections, collaborating to improve their documentation, we research their formation, which involves processes of material and symbolic exchange between indigenous and non-indigenous people which mostly emerged from processes of colonial exploitation.

The history of ethnographic collections in museums follows different paths depending on the institution and the country. The formation of these collections became a field of study in anthropology, addressing topics ranging from the motivation of collectors to intercultural exchanges between anthropologists and studied groups, accessed through the study of material culture. One of the most pressing aspects of these studies concerns the selection of objects that make up the collections, as well as the curatorial perspectives employed by museums (Fienup-Riordan, 2010; Macdougall and Carlson, 2009; Engelstad, 2010). Who makes, how and why certain objects are selected over others to represent a specific culture, why some objects are displayed while others remain locked in storehouses are questions on which the studies of material culture have focused in recent decades.

Another important aspect of this debate concerns so-called decolonial studies, which brings the researchers' focus to different forms of engagement of indigenous groups in the process of formation and diffusion of ethnographic collections. Some of these studies reveal that processes inherent to the museological operative chain take the original owners away from the construction of meaning and narratives about ethnographic objects (Knowles, 2013).

Lately, the decision-making process of what will be collected, studied and, mainly, exhibited has experienced new developments. Successful examples of shared curatorship (Fienup-Riordan, 2010; Macdougall and Carlson, 2009; Engelstad, 2010), collaborative research (Silva, 2012) and the establishment of indigenous museums (Vidal, 2013), has empowered the voice of these communities within museums. The framework for these experiences is grounded on a new ethic within which museums have to be open to other narratives and practices, in a healthy exercise of coexistence and collaboration with the communities of origin of the museums' collections (Marstine, 2011).

However, in most museums, the ethnographic collections still reflect the view of experts, curators and researchers in defining what visitors will share. Society, and especially indigenous people, have little influence on the processes of selection, storage and sharing of information about these collections. It is worth adding to this scenario the cases of ethnographic objects that have never been exposed or even studied, remaining for decades locked in the storehouse (Knowles, 2013). Therefore, their potential for academic, cultural and touristic uses remains unexplored, undermining their social relevance. In Brazil, the national historical-social narrative obliterates indigenous people's material cultures and history (Cury et al., 2012).

Assuming that digital technologies can foster access to indigenous collections, we are building an online repository for digital collections, named Tainacan. Built on free software, Tainacan was developed by a team of researchers from the Federal University of Goiás, in partnership with the Ministry of Culture and the Brazilian Institute of Museums. They expect Tainacan to be a reference for the establishment of a national policy for digital collections. Currently, it is being used by several public and private cultural institutions, seeking future interoperability between different institutional collections. According to its developers, Tainacan:

> [...] aims to incorporate various functionalities that facilitate interoperability with social media and the engagement of users in their management and maintenance of the repository, and hence to become a reference in the perspective of digital repositories. Tainacan is to be easy to use, configure and implement; a free and efficient alternative for cultural institutions that seek to implement thematic and institutional repositories.

The use of digital repositories for cultural collections is already a reality in different parts of the world. However, for technical, political and/or institutional reasons, Brazil still does not have a policy for the preservation of cultural collections via digital repositories. Repositories are collections of digital objects (images, documents, music, etc., digitized), sorted and made available, via the Internet (Martins et al., 2017). The guarantee of preservation and the possibility of sharing metadata, through protocols, are also part of the definition of a digital repository. Additionally, digital repositories are important communication tools, widening public access to the museum's collections.

The framework of our project is aligned with the Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, Their Diversity and Their Role in Society, according to which:

> In instances where the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples is represented in museum collections, Member States should take appropriate measures to encourage and facilitate dialogue and the building of constructive relationships between those museums and indigenous peoples concerning the management of those collections, and, where

> appropriate, return or restitution following applicable laws and policies. (Unesco, 2015).

Working on processes of identification, systematization and dissemination of heritage references of the *Iny Karajá* culture, the project takes part in the complex thread of strategies to represent indigenous people in the museal world. And adhering to digital strategies of collections management and diffusion we intend to promote 'digital restitution' to indigenous people, allowing access to their collections, which are usually geographically scattered. Furthermore, it also feeds back the ceramists' inspiration and craftsmanship.

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