

Heritage Narratives at the Itaipu Archaeology Museum: Territory and Resistance through Artisanal Fishing

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Introduction

This paper analyzes the cultural and natural heritage narratives produced directly and indirectly by the *Museu de Arqueologia de Itaipu* (MAI) (Itaipu Archaeology Museum). We argue that these narratives have inaugurated an unprecedented temporality in Itaipu, city of Niterói, Brazil, based on prehistoric archaeology, forging, thus, for the museum staff and the local fishing community new approaches to proclaim their memories and write their history. Therefore, we acknowledge the resistance movement of traditional fishing in Itaipu as one of the native processes of appropriation of the cultural heritage grammar as a means to solidify their belonging to that territory.

Should museum and community be opponents?

The MAI was established in 1977 in the national protected ruins of the colonial Retreat of Saint Teresa. In the late 1970s, Itaipu was undergoing severe urbanization and real state speculation, which led to the destruction of prehistoric sites identified with the *sambaqui* (shell moundbuilders) culture (Kneip, 1979), and the threat of gentrification of the fishing community (Kant de Lima, 1997); the MAI was then created in a context of derangement of the social order in Itaipu.

The MAI was conceived by the president of the *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional* (National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute of Brazil) Renato Soeiro, and the architect Edgard Jacintho, who both incorporated in their project the new integral museum conception from the Roundtable of Santiago of Chile (1972) (Ferreira, 2017). The archaeological sites – the *Duna Grande* (Great Dune) site, in particular – and the artifacts collected in its vicinities by the local fishing inspector Hildo de Mello Ribeiro would be the backbone of the upcoming museum alongside an expected touristic and economic development of the Fisherman's Village of Itaipu (Arquivo Central do Iphan/RJ, n.d.). This artisanal fishing community dating back to the 18th century, whose know-how of the fishing techniques and the natural territory was acquired from previous generations of fishermen (Pessanha, 2003), was also regarded as a living component

of the local heritage, since they were “in the process of rapid dismantling caused by the modernization of the fishing industry, [the *caiçara*¹ elements] remember the *sambaquis* builders” (Arquivo Central do Iphan/RJ, 1977, Soeiro’s speech).²

The social reproduction of the communal identity among the fishermen of Itaipu was manifested during the cycle of the mullet fishing, in which the natives recognized themselves as belonging to a fishing company from Itaipu where all the mastering of the fishery art was transmitted by the elders (Kant de Lima, 1997; Pessanha, 2003). Nonetheless, in the 1970s the natural resources started to become scarce due to the opening of a canal between the Itaipu lagoon and the beach by a construction company, the growing urbanization of the area, and the expansion of industrial fishing. All of which have affected the annual migration route and spawning area of the mullet, increased sea pollution, and imposed on the fishermen the loss of their territory (Souza, 2016).

The fishing community of Itaipu also perceived the MAI as a key element in those times of instability. Social problems were soon attributed to the museum, either because local families had been expelled from the protected ruins, or because of the authoritarian collecting methods of Mello Ribeiro, or yet because of the restricted use of the *Duna Grande* site, a then ludic and fishing spot for the community. The museum had turned into a target of resistance for the residents of Itaipu who, above all, never felt recognized in the archaeological exhibition of the MAI at the time. Seu Chico, a leadership of fishermen, demanded the museum to expose the “true history of Itaipu” since “we don’t have the history of Itaipu [there], (...) the museum doesn’t know the truth”³ (Souza, 2012, personal communication), as his daughter Érika summarizes the idea: “the museum should tell our history”⁴ (Ribeiro, 2006, p. 206).

Although the MAI seem to have failed the local community regarding the institution’s communication power in those troubled years, we would like to enhance that in the realm of “subterranean memories” (Pollak, 1989, p. 4), the museum has stimulated the production of marginal narratives as an inverse pillar of identity to that represented in the museum’s prehistoric collection and exhibition. The museum language was thereby re-appropriated by the fishermen of Itaipu to create a sense of cohesion guided by the reframing of their everyday objects, which would eventually gain a testimonial and monumental character. A new temporality had to be formulated with the fishing decay of Itaipu. The construction of a discourse of authenticity by the fishermen then stood on the antiquity of their identity, rooted in a territory filled with the presence of a millennial prehistoric tradition, this one equally characterized by the practice of fishing (Ferreira, 2017).

1. *Caiçara*: descendants of the indigenous people and the Portuguese colonizers who live in coastal areas and practice small-scale fishing in Brazil.

2. Author translation.

3. Author translation.

4. Author translation.

Cultural and natural heritage as a common territory

In the following decades, the MAI did not succeed in the endeavor of becoming a territory museum as originally conceived, despite the museum's tendency in the 1980s to break through barriers and try to act in the surrounding space: a protection process of the *Duna Grande* site was initiated at IPHAN in 1986 and the landscape of Itaipu, the Fisherman's Village included, was inscribed on the State of Rio de Janeiro heritage list in 1987. At the same time, the fishermen community was struggling for the right to an identity space within the narratives of the national history, they would be legally recognized as a traditional population by the Brazilian Constitution of 1988. Besides, the community had begun to gradually consolidate an argument in favor of the work and life style of the artisanal fishery as being responsible for the preservation of the landscape and other cultural heritage of Itaipu (Pereira, 1997).

According to the inherited ancestor knowledge and to the centennial presence of their families in that territory, the Itaipu fishermen devised some identity strategies that were afterwards conceded by the Brazilian State. In the late 1990s, the fishermen of the *Morro das Andorinhas* (Swallow Hill) in Itaipu litigated on municipal and state levels for the right to remain in that natural protected area, the residents were incorporated in 2007 into a State Park and legally validated as a traditional rural and fishing population. In 2011, the artisanal fishing of Itaipu was inscribed on the intangible heritage list of the city of Niterói. And, in 2013, the Marine Extractive Reserve of Itaipu was created by the State Environment Institute of Rio de Janeiro, highlighting the identity of this fishermen community as an active agent in the sustainable management of the marine environment. The Itaipu fishermen vindicated, by their own means, the geographical space and the archaeological heritage as an amalgam for their new reshaped identity, based on a resistance regime: from the MAI they required the disclosure of their discourse of identity.

In the 2000s, the MAI engaged in overcoming the distance between the museum and the community. An effort that found in the National Museum Policy (2003) and the Statute of Museums (2009) the correspondence once imagined for the MAI in terms of an active, participant, and democratic museology, in service of the development of society. We cite as an example the institution's exhibition "*Faces de Itaipu*" ("Faces of Itaipu") (2015), for it can be comprised as a metonymy for the yearnings of the community in sharing the technical curatorship with the museum, thus deciding which pictures of members of the community taken in the 1960s and 70s by the photographer Ruy Lopes should be exhibited (Araújo, 2016).

The MAI decided to place itself in the "contact zone" (Clifford, 1997, p. 192) the moment the authority over the objects was shared with the natives, who, in their turn, demanded that their personal pictures should also be included in the exhibit. The communal identity extrapolated its boundaries so as to give way to the nominal exhibition of each individual through their own photo images. The

purpose of “Faces of Itaipu” was to emphasize the exhibit process, we acknowledge though that the narrative capacity of the museum and its malleability have been apprehended by the local community in the last four decades in a way that they can formulate what they consider to be their collective memory, even if it is in a process of “auto-archeologization” of the “self” (Sarlo, 2007, p. 38). Cultural heritage thus becomes the mirror of the image of the fishermen’s representation of themselves.

Conclusion

Although the MAI may not have contemplated the fishermen of Itaipu back when it was founded in 1977, the cultural heritage reference established by the institution has allowed a requalification of the historic condition of the native group. The risks of fishing extinction in Itaipu alongside the not so well received novelty of a museum in that territory have enabled, however, the local social group to make use of the heritage vocabulary. In other words, this centennial fishing community soon realized that the political use of the remains of the past was a central authenticity argument for them as a subjugated culture to be able to enunciate their understanding of the memory of Itaipu.

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