Memories in dispute, and reconfigurations of cultural heritage: for an Ethnography of museums

Abstract
This paper proposes possibilities for ethnographic practices in the context of cultural heritage studies, focusing on the museological collection, taking as a case study an ethnography of the practices involved in the musealization of objects in the museum called “Museu Casa de Lembranças e Memórias Chico Xavier”, located in the city of Uberaba – Minas Gerais, Brazil. In order to do so, we seek to promote an interdisciplinary discussion between the fields of anthropology, ethnography, history, museology and museography, which is based on the dialogue between the materiality and immateriality of collections and practices of organization and museum inventory, in order to identify the forms of interaction, reflection, communication and social representations of cultural heritage. The balance of the institution’s founding process, of the composition of the collection and of its inventory process, interacts with different levels of temporality and allows dialogue between the construction process of certain memories that are in open dispute with various agents and agencies of society. The purpose of this approach is to discuss the association of cultural inventory and diagnosis with the implementation of security, protection, safeguarding and broad access to information and the collection of both material and immaterial assets, based on the convergence of some specific methodologies in the field of human sciences, especially associated with cultural heritage, that integrate in a dialogic way the large volume of information related to the cultural heritage of intangible and tangible nature. It was considered that in order to obtain effective knowledge, identification, preservation and management of the collection, and taking its huge size into account, the volume and scope of cultural heritage as a conjunction of objects, the ethnographic basis should thus be the point of connection between the applicable methodologies used by the regulatory organs at the municipal, state and federal levels.

Ethnography makes us question not only the themes, approaches and description methods, but the way of constructing the narrative itself, the agencies that are not only human, the supposed separation of theory and practice, as well as the field and ethnographic writing. To this end, questions are raised about the sociological unit in its research reality, in a way that the displacement of the category group / collective, private / public; material / immaterial occurs. Experimental and ethnographic writing, when problematized, call into question the very mechanism of research and the model of scientific production – including that of anthropologists – based on a discourse of authority. It is not just about style, semantic choices, or textual formats, but ethnography promotes an invitation to think about the researcher's performance.

1. Memories, cultural heritage and social representations: contributions to Ethnography of museums

1.1. Heritage, memories and social representations
Cultural heritage has attracted the interest of a significant number of researchers, principally among them museologists, anthropologists, architects, archaeologists, geographers and historians, who, through different approaches and themes, contribute to the formation of a broad set of varied studies, many of which focus on the research and analysis of cultural phenomena.

In Brazil, the discussion of heritage gained momentum with the first preservationist
movements led by members of the Modernist Movement who also acted in the newly created body for preservation of national historical and artistic patrimony: The National Historic and Artistic Patrimony Service (Serviço do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional – SPHAN) in 1937. In the search for Brazilian traditions, a national identity was constructed, represented by the majestic baroque churches and works of masters such as Aleijadinho. Moreover, the manifestations of popular and indigenous culture, such as music, tales, legends, medicine, cuisine, among others, were mentioned in the preliminary draft for the Protection of the National Artistic Patrimony produced by Mário de Andrade in the 1930s.

It is also important to underline the great social transformations generated by industrialization, especially between the mid-19th and 20th centuries. The term heritage assumed a social and even symbolic relevance in this context, being affiliated with preservationist movements as it attests to the process of modification, loss and/or destruction of cultural collections. This assertion is still relevant today in the context of the great impacts generated by the economic expansionist model.

The differences and heterogeneities of culture as a strategy for the construction of nationality have been eliminated. There is in this process a latent dichotomy between two conceptions of seeing and living in the world that are inherent to the context of modernity: the past is often regarded as something that needs to be overcome in search of a new civilization, while at other times, it needs to be remembered, given the accelerating process towards amnesia.

One of the issues raised in this project is that, in recent decades, the use and social functions of heritage have expanded the concept as well as broadening the need to interpret its dynamics in contemporary society. With wide-ranging interest in the expected benefits, and in a context of accelerated speculation regarding cultural assets, we consider it important to highlight the social relevance of cultural heritage. Social values inform analysis of how equity is interpreted over time, as well as how to organize classification and promote safeguard policies.

Postcolonial studies, by their nature, promote the situation in which communities manifest themselves as decision-makers in defining what is considered as heritage. New collectivities become visible in the social fabric, seeking to assert their identities whereas longstanding privileged identities which were up to then hegemonic become questionable. The nation is seen not only through the prism of homogeneity, but through the various differences and multiplicities present across its territory. These dynamics are the basis for appreciating local cultural references, of a material and immaterial nature, in order to seek knowledge of a history open to diversity and paths open to the constitution of cultural citizenship.¹

¹ What is called cultural citizenship depends to a great extent on interpreting the fundamental cultural and
From this historical perspective, understanding the notion of cultural heritage depends on several interlocking factors. However, such premises are not enough to fully apprehend the problems raised by this doctoral research, since the assumption is that cultural heritage has very strategic uses in contemporary times, with very specific political and economic functions. What are the attributes and reference values for cultural assets to be considered heritage? What cultural references should be included or excluded from inventories? Of whose interest is it to preserve or to forget? ²

The memory that celebrates cultural heritage is closely linked to certain interests and desires to build a certain representation and a collective memory of social cohesion³. All that is real, understood as knowledge and interpretation that men attribute to reality ⁴, is a representation of what actually existed, and history, as well as memory, also construct representations of that past, so that the “representation of an object then corresponds to a set of information, opinions, and beliefs concerning this object”⁵. Thus, the identity of a group – its peculiarities, similarities and differences from other groups – is constructed through a set of representations, images and symbologies embraced with meanings, by memory. Memory, therefore, works actively in the reconstruction of the past through its previous experiences, and interferes in the means of interpreting realities.

The lack of understanding of specific strategies of memory repertoire is also one of the results of modernity that tends to detrimentally undo the old for the new, generating waves of nostalgia represented by a desire to safeguard the lost time. The sensation is one of loss, of an emptiness that can only be filled by the mythical admiration of the old thing, by the irresistible attraction to historic centers and past constructions, and by the increased tourism provoked by museums. However, “what is more important, in this case, is the reflection of the implantation of the museum on the life and growth of
the city. The content of its collection is intrinsically linked to the memory of the community”.

Museums reveal the tensions and contradictions between the need to forget and the desire to remember, but museological procedures are marked by very specific selection criteria determining what is cut out. Preservation is the reaction to the extremely destructive speed of modernity and postmodernity based on the generalized amnesia of fragmented subjects that try to establish bonds of identity with places. The wave of musealization that Huyssen (1994) highlights is in line with this tendency, since “it is a direct effect of modernization and not an event on its margins or outside it. It is not the sure sense of the traditions that mark the origin of museums, but their loss combined with a deep desire for (re-) construction”. In this respect, notions of cultural heritage and museums stem from an analogous perspective.

1.2. The Contributions of the ethnographic perspective

The ethnographic perspective is based on the discourse of groups and holders of cultural assets. Its contribution to the field of cultural heritage studies involves, through ethnography, seeking to produce narratives that capture interlocutors' perceptions about the social and cultural environment, the climate, the description of the landscape, its history, among other aspects related to the cultural asset studied. At the same time, ethnographies concern specific dimensions of fieldwork and written production.

A fieldwork encounter establishes a particular relation with the interlocutors, a meeting of two worlds - one that is taken to the field by the researcher and another encountered therein. It is the essence of the anthropological / ethnographic experience, whose record privileges not only the researcher's view of the respondents, since the narrative must demonstrate the affectation caused by the relationships established at the time of the fieldwork. The moment of writing, which constitutes the time of reunion, opens space for the idiosyncrasies of the collectivity, for the particularities of the subjects, in order to expose not only the norm, but its deviation. From this trained look that dialogues between the general and the specific, a specific conceptual and methodological framework of anthropological analysis is designed, in a specific time of reflection on the experienced events.

The choices influenced by the research conducted around its ethnographic writing

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are, therefore, very particular results of the engagement with the group studied and the museum. In this respect, the specificities of each ethnography reside in both the very specific engagements and interactions with the natives in the field, and in the re-elaboration of the experiences through writing. The empathy of the researcher with the researched collectivity must be central to the point of taking the cultural universe of its interlocutors as crucial, giving the measure of its importance and in order to emphasize the need for specific linguistic understanding.

Thus, it is not an extreme separation between the field of ethnography in which fieldwork is carried out and the specific work of the anthropological métier, since the notion of experience and theoretical-methodological basis, this creative tension between research and theory, seem rather to be inseparable faces of the same coin. Essentials are dissolved over the natives, thus promoting the historical dynamism of the research group, without freezing and creating suspensions in the time of the natives' actions. Ethnographic writing, however, is a distancing from lived reality. Nevertheless, so as not to create an abyss between the researcher and the natives when trying to maintain the “co-age” between the time of life and the time of writing. Following the words of Vincent Capranzano (1977), ethnography would be a symptom of the confrontation with otherness, the dialectical attempt to put an end to the encounter, thus removing oneself from the lives of the ethnographers.

Possibly, the first point of cleavage in the produced ethnographies that take into account not only the specific context of our interlocutors, but how they think, feel and produce their own knowledge about their culture, is the moment by which the encounter, the relationship, and the interaction of the researcher with the universe of the other becomes the fulcrum of the narrative.

From the encounter of two compared worlds, which produce idiosyncrasies, ethnography produces a relationship between its interlocutors, which includes the researcher himself and his subjectivity. Nevertheless, it is possible to affirm that every ethnography is an autobiographical record par excellence, since it carries in itself, still, an ethnographic moment of analysis of the contexts that cannot be undersized. Ethnography is a form of dialogue not only about the other, but with the other. The multiple vowels, the cosmovisions, appear in ethnographic experiences as a priority issue: it is not only talking about the other, giving voice to the other, or translating the native universe. It is rather an interlocution between the world of the other and my world, ethnography being a bridge between native theory and anthropological theory. In the rupture of the production of a generic voice on the studied collectivities, it is

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intended to build symmetrical relations in the ethnographic experience, propitiating the interlocution between the world of the other and the world of the researcher 11.

The native categories begin to dialogue, therefore, in the binomial objectivity / subjectivity, since in addition to simple ethnographic data, they deal with concepts and theories understood in the terms of others. The bone of contention in this field of speaking with another, not only of the other, is the bridge between anthropological theory with its related fields, ethnography and museology being profitable fields. The displacement of the axis promotes the search for another balance between what is relevant and structuring for the ethnographed group. Polyphony goes beyond an experience; it is the genesis, the narrative model, the paradigm of knowledge construction. The force of speech is therefore in the encounter; the power of knowledge lies in the interlocution 12.

2. Main results and conclusions

The research and management of the collection evidences both the process of knowledge construction, which is achieved not only through its material collection, formed by a diverse set of mobile and immovable cultural assets, but also, and perhaps most importantly, by the set of experiences that conform a certain history and memory together with a community. In this process, the notion of social cohesion is relevant in the process of selection, categorization of cultural assets in conjunction with certain value regimes, in order to converge artifacts into consecrated assets by means of collectivist logic; cultural expressions, ways and methods of heritage assets craft; rituals in public performances; people in community representatives and spokespersons. It is also important to establish an interface with the interdisciplinary reflections between museums, heritage and collections, in an attempt to collaborate with the dialogical reflections between the material and the immaterial of culture.

The results of the research demonstrate that ethnography can promote a relevant counterpoint on the universalization of concepts, reinforcing the necessary reference of decolonization of methodologies. How do we create the fictions about the worlds of others, whereas the natives cannot express themselves through their own categories, concepts, and methods? As collaborative projects, they are very close to the natives' point of view, without, however, giving them, after all, the seal on knowledge, given that the researcher ends up appearing as a mediator and translator and, therefore, who interprets, cuts, edits the content formalized in the text as final product? Writing can approximate or distance / exoticize the other, since mechanisms of discursive potential, of play between contexts, are triggered.

Within different models of ethnography possible in museums, how do the native categories begin to dialogue, therefore, in the binomial objectivity / subjectivity, given that in addition to simple ethnographic data, they deal with concepts and theories understood in the terms of others? Therefore, in this field of speaking with another, not only on the other, the bridge between anthropological theory with its related fields, ethnography and museology having profitable fields. The displacement of the axis promotes the search for another balance between what is relevant and structuring for the studied group. The polyphony becomes beyond an experience, it is the genesis, the narrative model, the paradigm of knowledge construction.

This research bases its investigation beyond the analysis (identification, selection, clipping, description) of objects, but in relations with people from different social circles and their different sectors, agents and agencies, as a way of understanding this world and its relations between subject / object, the material / immaterial, the public / private. In such a way, the ethnography of a contemporary museum promotes the debate of its specific social practices related to the modality of museum associated with it.

References


