

Men change, and museums change

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“The object is the continuation of the
subject by other means”
(Boaventura Souza Santos)

This text was written for the 3rd Meeting of the Seminar on Social Museology, which took place at the Museu do Homem do Nordeste [Museum of the North-eastern Man], in Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil, in May 2010. It is important to explain that the Seminar on Social Museology is a monthly cycle of theoretical debates organized with the aim of gathering the necessary contributions to put together a new museological model which can indeed be compatible with the practice and its end activity – to institutionally represent the culture of the north-eastern region – and also with the practice of the role of social agent henceforth given Museums by New Museology in Brazil. To these objectives one can add that of legitimizing the museum before its peers and the museological community understood here as partners of its end activity, which is that of representing the North-eastern Man, a task that can only be feasible if socialized.¹

¹ In this setting, it worth noting the fact that today MUHNE is, strictly speaking, the natural unfolding of its conceptual restructuring, which denotes its affinities with social museology visible in the model already concluded of the new long term exhibition. In it, contrarily to previous displays, there is the concern to include in the circuit – realistically – the conflict and exclusion

Men change, and museums change. The title chosen for the 3rd Meeting of the Seminar, based on a poem by Luis de Camões, reflects museology today: social museology, action museology, which favours man, his doings, since without them there would be no object inside museums, and not even museums themselves. Still, this hasn't always been like this, since for a long time museums were conceived as distant, aristocratic institutions, obsessed with gathering and taking objects without due interpretation of their collection, mechanically bringing together histories of heroes, of military achievements, and exalting nations, as if they were homogenous, as if they had no conflicts, struggles and changes. Today, on the contrary, we think of museums as processes, in an organic relation with their social context. But this change in approach was not achieved from one day to the next. Strictly speaking, throughout the 20th century, mainly in the second half of the century, various documents were drawn from conferences, seminars and meetings organized to think, or rethink, Museums' function. In 1972, the Santiago Declaration considered museums as places that may contribute to make communities act, placing museums' activities in a historic framework which would enable an understanding of current problems. The Meeting of Santiago do Chile also addressed the political role of the museologist and the acknowledgement of citizens in the whole process of preserving, understanding and disseminating their heritage. In 1984, the Quebec Declaration recognizes New Museology and subsequently, in 1985, the International Movement for a New Museology, MINOM, was created. Also in 1984, the Oaxtepec Declaration based the museological notion on the heritage –

previously dissimulated or even absent from the region's museological space, still for the greater part taken up by a museology of consensus. Indeed, maybe the greatest virtue of the new exhibition is the quality of its exhibition narrative punctuated by images like that of children's physiognomy viciously aged by infant labour.

territory – population triad. In 1992, the Caracas Declaration updated the principles of the Santiago Declaration, by revising its precepts and thinking of museums as useful tools to achieve balanced development, greater collective well-being and strengthening peoples' cultural identity.

In 2010 it was therefore in the wake of this process that in North-eastern Brazil we seriously undertook the task of reflecting on transformations and changes. With the aim of adapting Museums to the emerging realities derived from growing urbanization, from the inevitable globalization and all the changes caused by the acceleration of social movements. In this setting, how could conflict be depicted museologically, how could exclusion be depicted museologically?

It goes without saying that there is no ready model or comfortable instructions manual or notes on counter indications, side effects, etc.; therefore, we felt the constant need to debate, exchange, socialize, know, do. To desacralize museums – solemn, intimidating, legislators – and transform them into democratic spaces. To think and practice a social museology. Indeed, a museology required by the law in force in the Museums Statute, approved in January 2009, which speaks of museums as tools for inclusion and social cohesion. The Museums Statute was only possible due to the creation in 2003 of a National Museums Policy, since it was from this policy that museums gained a central role in the political and cultural scene of the contemporary world. They stopped being regarded as places where relics of an abstract, remote past are kept, where motionless objects are amassed, or simply as depositories of old things. Museums today must be perceived as complex social practices, which are developed in the present, with the present and for the future, as centres involved with creation, communication, production of knowledge and preservation of cultural goods and manifestations.

Let us take as an example the Museum of the North-eastern Man. The Museum, created by Gilberto Freyre in 1979, is an anthropology museum with a culturalist bent, whose principles promote daily life as an ideal focus from which to observe social reality. Now, as we know, anthropology hesitates before broad generalizations because it knows, from experience, that exceptions deny the rules. This is reason for which so far the Museum of the North-eastern Man has prudently abstained from pointing out what its protagonist is, who the North-eastern Man is, since the diversity of its collection is enough already to demonstrate that there is no northeast but rather northeastS. From the gold sugar bowl to *viramundo*, a punishment and torture instrument for slaves. From the ox cart to the carriage. From the blazoned tableware to the clay *quartinha* [water jug]. From the Gobelin tapestry to the modest embroideries of the São Francisco river-side communities. From the chests of sugarcane plantation lords to the *matulão*. We are talking about 52 million *nordestinos* [north-eastern people], from Bahia to Maranhão, and it would naïve, to say the least, to believe that they are all susceptible of being assimilated to stereotypes of regional culture inherited from the rural, pristine setting of the *canavieiro* period. The north-eastern region populated by canes, and only secondarily by men. And in places where there were no canes, there was drought. And the very inevitable parade of misery: hunger, vagrancy, exclusion. The hordes of “poor cousins” of the nationality, herded together, like cattle, in the open trucks, so called “*pau-de-araras*”, on their way to the South. Correction: to the periphery of the South which receives them on condition that they accept to clean, docile and resigned, the toilets of the wealthy Brazilians. The north-eastern migrants are unfortunate enough to be exiled in their own land.

Still, the real Northeast is in fact very different from the narrated, fictional Northeast, people by pious people, migrants and smugglers, and folklorized in a biased manner, depicted by the media as a resistant region, even hostile to history’s

accelerations. The flesh and bone Northeast both cultivates its traditions and exports technology: dances *maracatu* and surfs the internet. Here in the northeast, as indeed everywhere, the effects of globalization are felt.

We can attest to that because in the Museum of the North-eastern Man, the criteria to analyze and interpret the region are driven by the direct observation of reality and not extracted from a rigid paradigm, the limits of which would force us to shrink and/or suppress facts in order to forcefully fit the Northeast into the theory. Because it is one thing preserve the memory of the Northeast, or rather the memories of the NortheastS, and quite another to artificially stimulate the tradition to the detriment of social changes that are visibly underway in the region.

To praise the Northeast of consensus is to contribute to enhance, as Jeudy would put it in his book *Memoires du Social*, the ideal of the “rosy” memory, where conflicts and oversights, errors and accidents end up being excluded. This logic of ideal preservation is fixed on the illusion of continuity and pureness, offering us a clean construction of the present through a neutral image of the past, omitting one of the characteristics of memory: that of being understood as action, and not as something given, static, crystallized and with a single meaning.

The Northeast of consensus prevents one from seeing the Northeast of conflict, the Northeast of social movements. It was for that purpose, to museologically depict conflict, exclusion, resistance, with a view to fostering social cohesion, that the Museum of North-eastern Man – a federal museum, connected, through the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation, to the Ministry of Education – took the initiative to transfer itself symbolically to a private area with the purpose of socializing with the community the practice of its end activity: - to

represent the cultural wealth and diversity of the North-eastern region.

The Multiple Museum project, as that itinerancy is called, has one purpose, maybe a very simple one, that of increasing its capital so as to make up for the demand of legitimacy from a museum created to be the institutional representation of the Man of the Brazilian Northeast. Just as in MUHNE, the task of museology is mainly to recover and reinstate in objects the memory of real men, from whom they derive. And, since it is not possible to enclose the real Northeast within the four walls of a building, the Museum travels. It moves. It identifies subterranean memories, even clandestine memories. It settles in exclusion areas. It tours the nine states of its region, looking out for variety. It talks. It listens. And it returns to Recife, its headquarters, multiplied. It carries in its luggage not the object that was plundered or negotiated for a vile price, but the LIVING experience of the Other, which will be reintegrated – reactivated – in the collection. Its objects, once returned to their story, may in fact enable the museum to emancipate from its stereotype and convert into a living, peopled, area. Stirred by the experience of the present.

Embodied in real men, and revitalized by the – genuine – assimilation of their differences, the purpose of the Multiple Museum is to settle every two months in areas that for a long time have remained outside Museums' representations: prisons, public markets, ports, native communities, fishermen colonies, landless workers' settlements. Now in Bahia, then in Piauí, later in Sergipe. And, following its itinerancy, further multiplied in these areas, and legitimized by the exchange with those it represents, they return to Recife, and they settle, this time with full consent, in the headquarters of the institution, the vitality of which is after all to represent them.

In the fifty two million people of the Brazilian northeast, there is no "north-eastern man", but there are, rather, north-eastern men. Multiple, distinct and often, by virtue of cultural diversity,

dissident from one another. In the museum objects only matter to the extent that they are filled with their story, without which they become... empty shells. And by the regular practice of what we have been calling “rehabilitation of otherness”, in the sense that the represented Other will have the final word when the time comes to decide what will remain – as memory worth preserving – in its institutional representation in Recife. It is not that the past will be disfigured to focus on the urgencies of the present, but it will be up to the flesh and bone north-eastern men to choose if they prefer to be represented as they are today, or as they have been represented in their dominant fiction, in a narrative where the Northeast remains confined to an imaginary territory, where there seem to be only drought-stricken defenceless and nomads. When in truth we know that despite the remains of the Colonial Adventure that still linger in the region, the Northeast was never the setting of literary smugglers and pious men. In the Northeast there is rain. There is change.

Today the Multiple Museum is in Itabuna, south of Bahia – geographical boundary of the north-eastern region. The Museum of the North-eastern Man moves its discourse, its objects, its representations in photos and banners and panels and settles inside a “*terreiro*”: an African-Brazilian cult house. And this was only possible due to a symmetrical communication between the community and the museum. In April, part of the Museum’s staff travelled to meet the “*terreiro*” community in Itabuna, where meetings were held, work presented, parties for *orixás* [deities], shared lunches, conversations and a great deal of experience-sharing. There was such an effective integration between “the people from the museum” and the “people from *terreiro*” to the point that discourses and tasks blended and we could no longer locate one and the other. The Museum inauguration ceremony inside the “*terreiro*” gathered the local community, the “*terreiro*” community, authorities, unveiling of a plaque, national anthem, speech, party, *orixa* food and a lot of spontaneity. It was, in its

own way, an exemplary civic festival. Brazil spontaneously celebrated by Brazilians.

In Itabuna, the official authorities were, strictly speaking, simple guests of the true authorities: anonymous Brazilians, spontaneous artisans of nationality. Gathered there we found the kind of Brazilians that make Brazil... Brazil, and by extension, the Northeast... Northeast. In Itabuna we could clearly see that Brazil was never orthodoxically the West. We are perhaps a deviation, a dissent of the West. Cartesian only when it suits us, since, by virtue of the loyalty to Enlightenment, we do not deprive ourselves of other rationalities, like those we inherited from the African people.

To someone who has never entered a “*terreiro*”, it is difficult to imagine an area where, despite the number of academics and cybernauts – starting with the priest himself, Master in Vernacular Letters, taught by the greatest 20th century Brazilian grammarian, Celso Cunha – the world remains indifferent to the rustic and persistent dichotomies of the West: nature versus culture, body versus spirit, sacred versus profane. Inside a *cambonblé* [African-Brazilian religion], the world in continuous, compact, whole. The metaphysics passes, naturally, through the lives of people who transform themselves, with regularity, precision and method, into deities, which – it should be noted – does not imply that they do not pay their taxes and are not stricken by a cold or a belly ache.

Once the “official” ceremonies were over, the Museum remained there and the “*terreiro*” community uses it today as a tool to disseminate its culture, as instrument of knowledge, of the fight against prejudice. The “*terreiro*” performs the everyday tasks of any traditional museum: it opens its door to any visitor, schedules school visits, monitors, builds a discourse from the reality of its living, without any type of intervention from the headquarters; and goes far beyond that, they do not differentiate the “museum” from the “*terreiro*”. In

the words of Ruy Póvoas, *babarolixá*, supreme priest, chief authority of the “*terreiro*”:

Such space, given its nature, is a living museum, a kind of miniature Africa, challenging time and all its implications, material, conceptual and above all, to locate us in a time of the present, those connected to communication via the internet. (...) From what I know, no terreiro in Brazil has been created from previous planning. People's doing and living give rise to terreiros, while the terreiro itself guides people in their living and doing. In the terreiro, heritage is built from various assets that are at stake, but they are all part of a place: the land/territory, the plants, the animals, the people, the invisible ones. And it's the orixa who governs everything. It all becomes heritage when the property is consecrated as a whole.”²

If the “*terreiro*” is a Living Museum, consequently the Museum of the North-eastern Man is one too. No longer a piece of clipping, a representation, but life such as it is. What a difference between this setting and the conventionally museological facilities in general, still today, in anthropology museums, with their rows of lifeless objects exhibited as curiosities, remains of meritless and/or inferior cultures! Or euphemistically rehabilitated as “First Arts” by Western Art.

The old lady with her close-cropped white curls submerged in her petticoats is D'Oxum: the deity of freshwater, of fertility, of

² I am speaking of the 2nd Meeting of the Museology Seminar of the Museum of the North-eastern Man. Ruy do Carmo Póvoas is Babarolixá do Ilê Axê Ijexá Orixá Oflufon, Master of Vernacular Letters by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Professor of Portuguese Language at Santa Cruz State University – UESC. At present he coordinates Kâwé - Centre for Regional African-Bahia Studies of UESC.

beauty. Soon she will be dancing with the youthful grace of a young girl and, as she walks by, the faithful will bow, imploring the blessings that will be granted to them in the guise of a pirouette, light, oh so nimble, since among the African gods dancing is a superior form of praying.

It is in this environment that the Museum is immersed. Not the official one, solemn, circumspect, like the physiognomy of curators, but its double, embodied in flesh and bone people. They are the Museum. The Museum is the community of Ilê Axê Ijexá Orixá Olufon. And the community takes on its new role naturally and with haughtiness. It is not subservient; it is not, there, staging an ethnographic show to impress the anthropologists present. For the community, the notion of heritage does not exist, since it is literally superfluous. Culture is alive, it is preserved, it reproduces like a plant. To imagine a world in which life and the memory it engenders need special care to be preserved is... ridiculous. In Continental Africa and in the Africa ritually recreated in Brazil nobody goes out to walk, for instance – people simply walk.

The old priestess D'Oxum would feel insulted if anyone considered her 'living heritage'. She is alive. She is useful. She presses her petticoats, cooks what she eats, watches over her grandchildren, teaches the young what she learned from the elders. She is not tolerated: - she is cherished. She is not worthy for what she has, she is worthy for what she knows. Her culture does not reward the good with money, it rewards them with longevity. This is not the West.

On the other hand, it is not the Museum's function to legislate on the issue of relativism, and to issue an expert opinion – in favour or against – Man's universals. For the time being, anthropology does not authorize any man to assume that he holds more humanity than these fellowmen of his. A Brazilian animist is no less human than a protestant Swede. However, from the point of view of the Museum, when there is

commitment, it is possible to “reanimate” objects: all we have to do is give them back their story.

By undertaking its itinerancy, the MUHNE has taken on towards itself and towards those it represents the following commitments: incorporate in the collection the meaning of the origin of the objects, understood here broadly and honestly as a continuation of their artisans and users. Real men. And what is Social Museology if not that: - to embody the Museum in flesh and bone people?

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