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Itaipu Archaeology Museum: A paradigm shift in museology

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze a paradigm shift in museology through the case study of the Itaipu Archaeology Museum (MAI), located in the city of Niterói, Brazil. For over 40 years, the MAI has disseminated narratives about the Itaipu prehistoric heritage. Concurrently, members of the Fishermen Village of Itaipu have struggled politically to legitimate their hundred-year-old fishing culture. This resistance movement will demand the MAI to acknowledge their identity discourses and practices, so that both the museum and the community can align their heritage perspectives.

Keywords: Itaipu Archaeology Museum, artisanal fishing, community, narrative, cultural heritage, museology.

Resumen

Museo de Arqueología de Itaipu: un cambio de paradigma en Museología

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar un cambio de paradigma en Museología a través del estudio de caso del Museo Arqueológico de
Itaipu (MAI), ubicado en la ciudad de Niterói, Brasil. Durante más de 40 años, el MAI ha difundido narrativas sobre el patrimonio prehistórico de Itaipu. Al mismo tiempo, los miembros de la Villa de Pescadores de Itaipu han luchado políticamente para legitimar su cultura pesquera centenaria. Este movimiento de resistencia exigirá al MAI que corrobore sus discursos y prácticas de identidad, para que tanto el museo como la comunidad puedan alinear sus perspectivas patrimoniales.

Palabras clave: Museo de Arqueología de Itaipu, pesca artesanal, comunidad, narrativa, patrimonio cultural, Museología.

Introduction

Decolonizing Museology demands revisiting museological concepts and their transformations over time to not only rearrange the discipline, but also to consolidate it. This paper aims to analyze how cultural and natural heritage narratives, produced directly and indirectly by the Museu de Arqueologia de Itaipu (MAI) (Itaipu Archaeology Museum), came to be a part of the resistance discourse of the traditional fishing colony of Itaipu, in the city of Niterói, Brazil. This discourse modified the role the MAI played in the community as well as the museum’s own readjustment towards decolonization.

How can an archaeology museum have contributed to the struggle of a minority group seeking to remain in and make use of the territory of Itaipu? The unstable context of the social order in Itaipu at the time of the creation of the MAI in 1977 should be explained. In the 1970s, the local population was facing a series of threats regarding their occupation of that space, despite their hundred years of fishing culture in the area.

The concepts of museology examined here are those closely related to the Round Table of Santiago of Chile (1972) and how they helped define the MAI at its creation. In particular, it was influenced by an integral museum perspective associated with the archaeological nature of the museum’s collections and also with the geography of its mandate. This original project will gain new definitions throughout the evolution of the MAI. The last decade seems to have concluded with a more meaningful agreement between the institution’s aspirations and those of the local community.

The museum and the community

“The beauty of [Itaipu’s] beaches and the panoramic view over the city of Rio de Janeiro, and the aforementioned monument [the Great Dune Site] constitute
one of the mandatory visits” (Arquivo Central do Iphan/RJ, n.d.). In these words, Renato Soeiro, president of the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (Iphan) (National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute of Brazil), along with the architect Edgard Jacintho, defined the basic purpose of the MAI. The main goal of the new museum was to stimulate Itaipu participation in the tourist economy, but integrated with its other mandates, which included prehistoric archaeological sites, dating back 8000 years, identified with the *sambaqui* culture (Kneip, 1979). The MAI was also to physically occupy the Iphan protected ruins of the 18th-century Retreat of Saint Teresa (Arquivo Central do Iphan/RJ, 1946), which had been the home of a few fishermen families up to 1969, when they were evicted by the Iphan. This was in accordance with the Brazilian legislation that in 1955 recognized the colonial building as a protected monument (Arquivo Central do Iphan/RJ, 1969).

Soeiro and Jacintho sought to capitalize on the economic and touristic potential of the Fishermen Village of Itaipu, which was “in a process of rapid dismantling caused by the modernization of the fishing industry” (Arquivo Central do Iphan/RJ, 1977, p. 1). The intended collection for the MAI “constituted of archaeological objects from the region plus elements from the *caiçaras* that in their current *primitivism* . . . were reminiscent of the *sambaqui* builders” (Arquivo Central do Iphan/RJ, 1977, p. 1). The first objects to join the MAI collections came from Itaipu: a collection of reminiscences and artifacts from the Sambauki of Camboinhas and the Small Dune Site, both excavated by Professor Lina Kneip and her team in 1979 (Kneip, 1979); the acquisition of a centenary canoe from the fishermen, previously used for dyeing fishing nets (Arquivo MAI, 1979b); and, finally, a collection composed of 966 prehistoric artifacts, randomly collected since the 1950s from the Itaipu archaeological sites – the Great Dune Site, in particular – by the local fishing inspector Hildo de Mello Ribeiro (Arquivo MAI, 1979a).

Edgard Jacintho defined the Great Dune Site as a “necessary didactic contemplation for the dissemination of the foreseen scientific and cultural activities planned for the institution [the MAI]” (Jacintho, 1988, as cited in Najjar, 1997, p. 21) regarding the “common interest in disseminating popular culture,
through the knowledge and the exhibition of the entire chain of facts related to the national prehistory” (Jacintho, 1988, as cited in Najjar, 1997, p. 21).

Soeiro and Jacintho seem to have incorporated into the MAI the concept of an integral museum, as envisioned at the Roundtable of Santiago (Ferreira, 2017). The integration of the well-preserved Great Dune Site as an extension of the museum, as well as the ancestral fishing community as a living component of the local heritage, can both be perceived as an outcome of the discussions held in Santiago, which searched for possible solutions to the real economic and social issues of its region (Mesa Redonda de Santiago do Chile, 1972).

The MAI was settled in the middle of the Fishermen Village of Itaipu, which was socially and economically organized around its tradition of trawling (Kant de Lima, 1997). The 200 Itaipu fishermen were the foundation for the interpretation and transmission of traditional fishing to the next generation. The social reproduction of a communal identity among these fishermen was manifested every year, during the period of the mullet fishing when the natives recognized themselves as belonging to one of the seven fishing companies of Itaipu (Pessanha, 2003). From April to August, group values related to the mastering of the fishery art transmitted by the elders, the appropriation of natural resources, and the respect for the local social rules were cyclically updated (Kant de Lima, 1997; Pessanha, 2003).

In the late 1970s, the customary social order in Itaipu began to unravel with the advent of “so called” progress. The threat to the historical condition of the fishing colony caused the community to organize a resistance movement to preserve their traditional fishing lives. In 1979, the Veplan construction company permanently opened an artificial canal between the Itaipu lagoon and the beach, dividing the beach in two pieces, destroying thousand-year-old archaeological sites (Kneip, 1979), and promoting the gentrification of Itaipu. The growing urbanization of the area, the expansion of industrial fishing, and the pollution of water systems led to the scarcity of natural resources, all of which inevitably affected the annual migration route and spawning grounds of the mullet (Kant de Lima, 1997). The fishermen faced the loss of both their territory and their identity.

Conflicting temporalities

The MAI was also perceived as a key element in local problems since it deprived the community of their homes, their religious, and their working spaces inside the ancient Retreat of Saint Teresa. Seu Chico, a fishermen leader, regarded the eviction from the historical building as cowardly: “This type of violence was enforced by the museum, so we’ve always been sure that the museum had

7. Author’s translation.
arrived to disrupt our lives, to create nothing” 8 (J. N. Souza, personal communication, July 11, 2016).

On the other hand, the fishing master Cambuci was more equivocal: “The museum was left to its own fortune... The Iphan gave [the families] a stability to leave, so they could transform that into a museum, a historic preservation. Otherwise, it would have been destroyed too” 9 (A. M. Souza, personal communication, July 12, 2016).

Hildo de Mello Ribeiro, an agent of the Brazilian State, authorized to inspect not only the fishing colony, but also the protected ruins and the Itaipu archaeological sites, was considered a controversial character in the area. In addition to assisting Iphan with the eviction of the families from the ruins, Mello Ribeiro is also frequently accused of being authoritarian due to his collecting methods of the archaeological artifacts (Ribeiro, 2007). The locals reported that the inspector would require them to hand over the objects found by chance at the archaeological sites: “No one, no fisherman should be colonized” 10 proclaims Érika (as cited in Ribeiro, 2006, p. 206), the daughter of Seu Chico. The restricted use of the Great Dune Site imposed by the law was also a reason for discontent, since it used to be both a play space for the children and a fishing spot for the fishermen (Ferreira, 2017).

In those first years, the MAI had turned into a target of resistance for the residents of Itaipu. Hildo de Mello Ribeiro, the state officer, and Professor Lina Kneip, in charge of the excavations and the opening of the museum’s exhibition, were severely criticized. Kneip’s exhibition, Aspects of the Rio de Janeiro prehistory along the coastline between Niterói and Cabo Frio (1982), included only 10 objects out of 54 directly related to Itaipu. Furthermore, the majority of the objects had been borrowed from the National Museum, Kneip’s home institution (Arquivo MAI, 2010b). Eight objects were identified as a Didactic collection/No reference, and these objects happened to belong to the Hildo de Mello Ribeiro Collection. The credits at the exhibit did not do the MAI’s main collection justice (Ferreira, 2017).

This exhibition ended up disappointing the residents of Itaipu. Kneip had decided to display objects from her other archaeological research contradicting the museum’s original purpose as outlined by Soeiro and Jacintho. The exhibition contained few references to the archaeological heritage of Itaipu and no references to the Itaipu artisanal fishing at all (Araújo, 2015; Saladino, 2010). At the time, the native fishermen and their families did not feel represented in that long-term exhibition. They demanded that the “museum should tell our history”, 11 says Érika (as cited in Ribeiro, 2006, p. 206), or, as Seu Chico

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8. Author’s translation.
9. Author’s translation.
10. Author’s translation.
11. Author’s translation.
puts into words: “We don’t have the history of Itaipu [there], . . . the museum doesn’t know the truth”12 (J. N. Souza, personal communication, July 11, 2016).

However questionable the development of the exhibition, it must be acknowledged that the museum provided the declining community with arguments for the preservation of the ancient practices of fishing dating from the prehistoric *sambaquis* period (Ferreira, 2017). The fishing colony would appropriate, from then on, the museological language to mobilize their own material culture so as to represent their history and to prove their connections to that territory. Those Itaipu *subterranean memories* (Pollak, 1984), made partially possible thanks to the MAI, would later on, in 2010, become part of the official discourse of the museum from the moment that everyday fishing objects were musealized to compose the institution’s new long-term exhibition called *Paths of time: Revealing Itaipu*.

If I knew that things were going to get where they got, I would have saved a lot of things that belonged to my father, eighty-year-old stuff, . . . there’s only this pot now, which is pretty old, it’s probably a hundred years or so. First of all, it is important to hold on to documentation. . . . If the human being’s words were valid, you wouldn’t need a document13

(A. M. Souza, personal communication, July 12, 2016).

Master Cambuci, who donated some of his family objects to the MAI in 2010, expressed his understanding of these objects as corroborating the fishing tradition passed on to him by his father. This statement by one of the last fishing masters of Itaipu – there are only two fishing companies nowadays – is indicative of the new lives the native fishermen had to forge for themselves, in the four decades since fishing had largely disappeared in Itaipu. The MAI played an important supporting role in solidifying the authenticity of the community by means of exhibiting its related material culture. Had it not been for the thousands of years of archaeological materials of Itaipu, on which the MAI shed light, the ancient fishing culture would not have resonated as a local heritage worthy of preservation.

Furthermore, Seu Chico as the president of the Fishing Colony of Itaipu noted in a 1996 letter to the Ministry of Agriculture of Brazil that:

“The Southern Corner of Itaipu is not only important for its beautiful sunset or for its significant historical and architectural heri-

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12. Author’s translation.

13. Author’s translation.
Artisanal fishing helped to preserve this physical and cultural landscape, projecting at the same time its own way of life, which still enchants visitors today. A style of living that in a country that counts its hungry in millions has food production as its main axis. Reserving the vital space for fishing in Itaipu is to protect a food-producing region, it is our duty.” (Colônia de Pescadores de Itaipu, 1996, as cited in Pereira, 1997, p. 313).

It is clear from this that while the threat to the traditional fishing life of Itaipu was proportional to economic progress, the life of the fishing community was increasingly responsible for representing the local cultural and natural heritage. To preserve the fishing space meant the preservation of the whole surrounding area of Itaipu, regardless of the museum.

The void left by the MAI in its first decades, since it could not go through with its original concept of a kind of territory/community museum, can be justified. The difficulties faced by the museum were countless and included inadequate budgets and staffing (Ferreira, 2017). Although the power of the museum to act was limited by the Iphan, still some efforts were made towards its original mandate such as the opening of the protection process of the Great Dune Site by the Iphan (Arquivo Central do Iphan/RJ, 1987) and the inscription of the Itaipu Landscape, the Fishermen Village included, on the heritage list of the State Institute of Cultural Heritage of Rio de Janeiro (Inepac, 1987).

A common ground

It is undeniable that the debates concerning Itaipu heritage converged in one way or another on the MAI. The continuation of local traditions and the defense of the permanence of the fishing community on the Itaipu beach were sustained by the argument of an ancient identity rooted in the territory, to which both archaeology and the museum contributed. In the 1970s and 1980s some shifts in social and environmental values echoed in Brazilian laws should also be mentioned. The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 legally promoted the organization of minority groups to demand their right to a space within the narratives of the national history (Abreu & Chagas, 2009). A large number of different ethnic peoples – especially the indigenous and the African-descendants – were incorporated into the new legislation. Apart from the acknowledgement of their right to memory and to cultural identity, these social groups were encouraged to protect and to promote Brazilian cultural heritage.

The conservation of biodiversity through traditional knowledge of the indigenous and non-indigenous communities is included in the legislation concer-
ning the National System of Conservation Units (Brasil, 2000). It will regulate the creation of protected areas with sustainable use of renewable resources and with low impact agriculture. Moreover, the National Policy on Sustainable Development of Traditional Peoples and Communities (Brasil, 2007) will support culturally diversified groups to claim a differentiated identity built on their traditional knowledge and their self-recognition as a culture inside Brazilian society.

Currently still threatened by extinction, the fishing community of Itaipu has conceived of three main survival strategies based on their ancestral knowledge and on the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of Itaipu. In the mid-1990s, the first of these strategies was the legal struggle against municipal and state public authorities to ensure the preservation and retention of the Siqueira da Silva family residence on the Swallow Hill in Itaipu. This family of farmers and fishermen were accused of invading the Swallow Hill environmental protection area (Costa, 2011; Lobão, 2006). As a way to prevent their removal from the area, which the family had allegedly been occupying since the 19th century, the main argument used to prove their case was the framing of the family as native farmers and fishers (Lobão, 2006). Besides, in 2007 the residents of Swallow Hill were integrated into the State Park of Serra da Tiririca and, once again, they were validated as a traditional population whose rights to occupy that area rested on a hundred years of contributing to the fishing culture and on a limited use of the land for their subsistence (Rio de Janeiro, 2007).

The second strategy was the inscription of the artisanal fishing community of Itaipu in 2011 on the intangible cultural heritage list of the city of Niterói. The municipal law defines the Itaipu artisanal fishing as an intangible cultural heritage:

“Practiced as the main way of life, where the fisherman works autonomously in the capture and sale of aquatic species, individually, in a family economy regime, or with the occasional help of partners without employment relationship, exploring the environment located close to the sea coast, by the peculiarity of the vessels and techniques used.”15 (Niterói, 2011)

Despite the significant mobilization of civil society alongside the city councilor Gezivaldo de Freitas, aka Renatinho do Psol, and their support for this piece of legislation, community members like Seu Chico question the extent to which it actually will work (J. A. Silva, personal communication, July 12, 2016; J. N. Souza, personal communication, July 11, 2016). Even considering the

15. Author’s translation.
weak governmental act, Jairo da Silva, fisher, believes that the protection of Itaipu cultural heritage functions as a legal act of resistance: “The protection acts make things hard for contractors. . . . For them, this here is politics which is an obstacle”16 (J. A. Silva, personal communication, July 12, 2016). As far as the community is concerned, if the legislation does not contribute much to the local development, at least it slows down the erosion of Itaipu.

The last strategy was the establishment in 2013 of the Itaipu Marine Extractive Reserve by the State Environment Institute of Rio de Janeiro. This process had begun in 1999 and it only became a reality as a result of the participation of the local fishermen who, despite some episodes of dispute among the leaderships of the community, had struggled for over 20 years for recognition as a traditional population. This strategy stands out among the tools of fishing resistance and has reshaped the identity of the community more than the amount of fish it produces. The historical demand of the fishermen of Itaipu not only values artisanal fishing, but also “contributes to the permanence and the protection of the way of life of the claiming beneficiary population, as well as the traditionally managed natural resources and the region as a whole”17 (SEA, 2013).

If the threat of extinction prompted the fishermen to generate a new collective memory as a tool for survival, the same strategy will be required from the MAI: the distance between museum and community will have to be significantly narrowed. The 2000s will demand that Brazilian museums put into practice participative and socially engaged discourse. In Brazil, the National Museum Policy (2003) and the Statute of Museums (2009), the fruits of a collective work of museum professionals and civil society, are responsible for the establishment of guidelines for a more democratic management of museums. These two documents will encourage the ideals sown in the museology field in the early 1970s to finally grow strong in Brazil through national policies which see museums becoming inclusive spaces in service of the development of society (Brasil, 2009; PNM, 2003).

Aligned with these new political, economic and social directions for the Brazilian museums, the MAI will be able to reassess the museum’s original project and compensate for the long frayed relationship with the fishing colony. In spite of the museum, the community was already organized in its search of government supported public identity policies. Having said that, the MAI’s performance in the last decade has been dedicated to bringing the museum closer to the community through collaboration. The temporary exhibition *Faces of Itaipu: Expressions of the past through the lenses of Ruy Lopes* (2015) is a worthwhile example of the MAI’s community collaboration. This temporary exhibit is a radical landmark in the MAI’s history in terms of listening and respecting the will of the community that it has become the symbol for a new MAI-Fishermen relationship.

16. Author’s translation.
17. Author’s translation.
This exhibition was a shared curatorial process between the community and the MAI. The fishermen along with the museum staff decided which of the pictures taken in Itaipu by the photographer Ruy Lopes in the 1960s and 1970s should be exhibited (M. L. Araújo, personal communication, December 14, 2016). The MAI placed itself in the *contact zone* (Clifford, 1997, p. 192) once the interpretation and the authority over the photographs were shared with the native fishermen of Itaipu who in turn required, in addition to Lopes’ pictures, that their family pictures be included in the exhibit as well. The collective identity of the fishing colony, as it was supposed to be displayed through Lopes’ lenses, was overcome by a nominal exhibition of each individual who participated in the curatorial process with his/her deliberately chosen photo images.

The purpose of *Faces of Itaipu* was to emphasize the creation of a museum exhibition with the community as a decision-making agent. The museum’s narrative capacity seems to have been appreciated by the local community for the first time since the foundation of the MAI. The fishermen of Itaipu as a group are now conscious of their right to a part in the official history of Brazil. They are now also aware of the fact that they are the ones who should formulate what they consider to be their collective memory instead of delegating this task to the State. An interesting aspect observed in the curatorial process was the *auto-archeologization* of the self (Sarlo, 2007, p. 38) whose prominent place in the exhibit confirms a self-centered facet of the cultural heritage narratives in the 21st century. Cultural heritage becomes the mirror to the image the fishermen wish to represent of themselves.

**Conclusion**

A paradigm shift in museology towards decolonization can be seen in the case of the fishermen of Itaipu in relation to the MAI. In the 1970s the promotion of ethical awareness in a museum’s community was one of the principles of an *integral museum*, such as conceived then by museology professionals (Scheiner, 2012). Nowadays, it is the community members themselves that demand participation in the museum’s activities and even in its management, not the other way around. Although the MAI may not have contemplated the fishermen of Itaipu back when it was founded in 1977, the cultural heritage narratives established by the institution have allowed a requalification of the historical condition of the native fishermen group. The risks of fishing extinction in Itaipu alongside the not-so-well received novelty of a museum in that territory have enabled the local fisher community to make use of cultural heritage vocabulary.

In other words, this hundred-year-old fishing community soon realized that the political use of the remains of the past was a central argument for them as a subjugated culture to be able to enunciate their understanding of the memory of Itaipu. This is the paradigm shift in museology this paper has identified with the case of the Itaipu Archaeology Museum. It demonstrates the inverse process of constructing an identity discourse that occurred in parallel with the
This discourse was, in the end, based on the cultural heritage references the MAI brought to the local scene.

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