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Art, agency and power effects in East Timor: provocations

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The connection between art, agency and power effects in East Timor is an epistemological equation that entails interdisciplinary approaches. Departing from an anthropological perspective, this introduction seeks to map potential methodological and theoretical questions for discussing such equation. One also outlines registers and historical and contemporary genealogies of artistic practices in order to suggest clues and challenges to be pursued by further studies in the area. The analysis of the articles which this dossier is made up of allows to discuss the development of political appropriation of art by various actors, revealing the emergence of new orientalisms and mediation processes, both local and international, in the making of art worlds in East Timor.

Keywords: art, agency, power, East Timor

This dossier aims at opening a space for multidisciplinary analysis and consideration of art production in and about East Timor. Nevertheless, the fact of being conceived by two anthropologists leaves its trace. In this essay, as an introductory provocation to readers interested in this topic, we raise a few theoretical and methodological questions for a critical outlook of art in and about East Timor, from the anthropological point of view. We discuss possible perspectives to approach the art worlds in and about East Timor, by connecting them, as far as possible, to the articles that comprise this dossier.[3]

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Anchored in the precept that the emergence of artistic fields (Bourdieu 1983, 1996) is a complex historical process of *longue durée*, we present some classificatory and institutional mediations in the way they were conceived in Eastern Timor and in other socio-political frontiers. We point out how the invention of art worlds relates to processes of invention, transposition, and subversion of modernity. In turn, these processes are intimately linked to the construction of colonial and post-colonial states. Therefore, we stress the dependence of the field of art production on other fields of social action. We bring up some episodes that mark the colonial genealogy of the production of indigenous and popular art in the then Portuguese Timor. We also invite the readers to undertake ethnographies on classificatory and institutional mediations involved in the construction of artistic fields in contemporary East Timor, by referring to actors who have been protagonists in these processes.

In addition, we explore the analytic potential of an agentive perspective, as conceived by Alfred Gell (1988), for the examination of what we may see as East-Timorese artistic manifestations from the interethnic point of view[4]. We shall take as an exemplary case the issue of semantic parallelism (Fox 1988), a feature of ritual poetry in East Indonesia. We shall also briefly refer to the centrality of the idea of reproduction – as opposed to invention – as a structuring value in some artistic production among local populations. Inspired by the issue of agency, we will show some ways in which the construction of East Timorese art was and still is related to the emergence of a tourist market, in both colonial and post-colonial periods, and to the creation of a national narrative to deploy significant items of tradition, custom or *kultura*. The use of what Viegas (this volume) calls fragments of tradition also serves to produce new Orientalisms, as well as a project for national identification.

Readjusting the outlook

To begin with, we need to focus on the way art has been conceived in what we rather crudely call the Western world. We cannot generalize the notion that art is the exclusive object of esthetic contemplation, produced by specialists – the so-called artists – and constitutes an autonomous domain of social action regarding other domains (politics, economy, religion, etc.). Rather, it is the result of specific historical processes, among which we underline romanticism, which appeared in Europe (Morphy 2005) between the late 18th and the 19th centuries, and the projects of purification, which set off the construction of Western modernity[5] (Latour 1994). However, we should not conclude from this that other social collectivities necessarily lack institutions or spaces for esthetic contemplation. What we notice very often is that the ap-

Ramos, for translating it into English and to Hugo Vale, who help us with the editing of images. Due to space limitations, we do not tackle the issue of literary production, which deserves a study in its own right.

4 The lack of a frontier between craft and art, insulation and recognition of certain phenomena characterized as art, among some social collectivities for specific esthetic and semiotic qualities, seems to suggest that their classification as art, from the anthropologist's point of view, is an eminently interethnic phenomenon. We understand interethnic phenomenon as resulting from the intersection of the classification systems of the anthropologist's own society and of the social collectivities with whom he/she works, who may be relatively marginal to the capitalist world.

5 Based on Latour (1994), we understand purification as the processes of and the search for separation through which modern episteme sets ontological frontiers and limits between what is taken as diverse realms, beings and experiences which make up social life, such as the opposition between nature and culture, politics and knowledge, justice and power, humans and non-humans, etc.

preciation and cultivation of esthetics go together with social actions generally coupled with the making of the person, communication with the ancestors, and reproduction of life (see Layton 2001, Gell 1998, Morphy 2005, Lagrou 2009, among others).

We also deem necessary to suspend the variables that have underscored the recognition of certain cultural expressions as art in the Western world because they have no *a priori* cross-cultural application. Morphy (2005: 651) identifies three large criteria for acknowledging certain phenomena as art in the West: 1) institutional; 2) self-classification; and 3) the object's attributes.

The institutional variable has to do with the recognition of a given cultural expression as art, which will place it in a specific universe of circulation and consumption. In most cases, recognizing something as art in the West has to do with its potential for commodification and incorporation in the art market (Bourdieu 1996), via circulation in museums, galleries, etc. Recognition of certain manifestations as art is a social process made up of mediations of various orders. Among these, we emphasize heritage policies carried out by national states and contemporary transnational government agencies. We shall return to this issue.

Self-classification, in turn, refers to the meaning attributed to a given cultural expression by whoever creates or performs it. Thus, one of the conditions to recognize something as art (among us) is that individuals or collectivities responsible for its existence conceive of it as art. However, most often, this comes with the construction of the artist's name, achieved through multiple mediations in which the anthropologist can also play a role. Hence, certain phenomena may not come into existence as art, but they acquire their status along their biography, its social life. An emblematic example are the Western appropriations of so-called primitive art in which art dealers, art historians, and even anthropologists often take part.

With regard to the attributes of an object, this is usually considered an art piece if its features are outstanding before certain esthetic standards as well as its semantic potential (Lyton 2001: 14). Formerly, the highly specialized technical skills applied to the making of objects recognized as art were also an important variable for that recognition. At that time, the distinction between craft (whose utility was beyond esthetic contemplation) and art was not yet important (Morphy 2005: 649).

Our efforts to objectify (within the limits of this essay) the variables that, from the Western viewpoint, operate as mediators in the construction of the artistic phenomena have a function here. We invite the reader to reflect on the extent to which these phenomena have, or not, been enforced in East Timor in the long run. We argue that the various people who live in the socio-political frontiers that are now part of East Timor have been exposed, both in colonial and post-colonial times, to processes of invention and transposition of modernity. They have also lived through events that have led to the conception and imagination of art as a relatively autonomous field of production and representation, with a number of different effects. The articles in this dossier discuss some episodes related to these processes. In this context, the promotion of development – whatever we may understand it to be – and national construction appear as elements that trigger off art production and invention. These facts seem to indicate, among other things, the dependence of art production on other fields of social action. This trend is far from being unique to East Timor. It corroborates what has happened at other socio-political frontiers.

From a semiotic to an agentive approach. New overtures for translation and perception of art in East Timor

The semiotic approach to art has received important criticism (Gell 1998) in anthropology. Among other things, it questions the idea that the artistic phenomenon represents or communicates something that is external to it, and the very notion of representation, for they are not cross-culturally valid. They express but a specific semiotic ideology[6] (Keane 2007). Based on his research among Papua New Guinea peoples, Gell (1998: 6) suggested that we approach art as an agentive entity that carries intentions and causations and produces results and transformations.

The shift of analytic attention from meaning to efficacy, in Lagrou's (2009:32) terms, can be cognitively valuable in the analysis of occurrences we recognize as artistic (the effect of an interethnic outlook) among East Timorese peoples. We highlight ritual narratives and their typical semantic parallelism (Fox 1988). This phenomenon is characterized as a narrative genre that deploys synonymous words or metaphors, framed as either prose or poetry, in oral, formal, and canonic performances.[7] In this case, its expressive form and esthetic quality are the main elements of its function and efficacy, as is the control of its knowledge and reproduction. Dance can also reinforce this agentive component (Sousa 2010). In the colonial period, the record of these narratives seemed mostly to favor the esthetic dimension as a constitutive feature of a memory for a future that is now being recovered. The works of Artur de Sá (1961), José Rodrigues (1962), and Ezequiel Pascoal (1967) are, among others, very good examples. In addition, some authors with ethnographic inclination risked ethnological approaches to these narratives, as did Francisco de Azevedo Gomes (1972) in *Os Fataluku* (The Fataluku) and Jorge Barros Duarte (1984) in *Timor Ritos e Mitos Ataúros* (Timor Atauro Rites and Myths).

Lagrou (2009: 14, 23, 27) states that contemporary Amerindian peoples do not regard art or artistic production as self-contained entities with value in themselves, but rather as knowledge acquired from mystical beings with power to act upon and transform the world. In similar fashion, ritual oratory in Eastern Indonesia does not originate in itself, nor is it self-contained. Its efficacy derives from its association with the voice of the ancestors, from its connection with a sacredness regime responsible for the creation and reproduction of the world (see the photographic essay by Simião, Rocha and Almeida, this volume). This kind of ritual oral performance has even been included in the representation of the East Timorese nation since the ceremonies of independence restauration in Dili, May 20, 2002.[8]

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6 The notion of linguistic ideology as stated by Silverstein (2000) involves a set of beliefs about language expressed by users as rationalization or justification of the language they use. Based on this, the idea of semiotic ideology goes beyond. It affirms that one must first observe what counts or not as language in different cultural landscapes and the meaningful and agentive effects attributed to its various configurations. For Eastern Indonesia, based on his research in Sumba, Keane (2007) provides a series of analyses that show the agentive power of words and things in the negotiation of sociality.

7 As a hypothesis, we propose that at least part of the narratives on street art, as analyzed by Arthur (this volume) has components of semantic parallelism as discussed here. Good examples are the repeated times when the *"Paz no dame"* mobilizer (*Dame* being the Tetum term for peace) appears in visual narratives. We also risk proposing that some sort of semantic and complementary parallelism is present in sculpture production among East Timorese peoples.

8 Elsewhere in East Timor, that same night, other performances took place. We might ask whether the reasons of the event organizers and of the ritual speakers were the same.

The understanding of formal, ritual narratives, as expressed in semantic parallelism, is that they produce truth, thus defining the order and meaning of the world and, hence, reproducing it. The monopoly of certain narrative forms has several power effects. Different peoples conceive this monopoly as a product of collective enterprises in which the living, the dead, and the ancestors participate.[9] As opposed to the valorization of creativity and innovation that characterize some artistic products in our societies, a good performance of a ritual narrative resides in its similitude to what is seen as its original form. Reproduction and repetition, rather than innovation, are the elements that add value to artistic expression. On this point, what Lagrou (2009: 67) says about the pragmatics of conservation and continuity of Amerindian artistic production leads us to think about a similar trend in East Timor local art:

> (...) This valorization of a history of conservation and continuity, in contrast to our valuing of a history of rupture and discontinuity with the past, may relates to a corresponding valorization of non-cumulative art (…) at the service of a certain life style. Hence, the recurring answer to the question about the meaning of a given motif or form: 'this is our custom.'[10]

Those who are familiar with ethnographic research in Timor know that the statement 'this is our custom' is also very common among its peoples. In his seminal and forerunner work on Timorese art, Ruy Cinatti (1987: 65) affirms:

> Ask a Timorese artisan about certain motifs in the carvings of house rafters at Los Palos, about the most evident patterns in Ocussi cloth (sic) or, etc., at the various Timor places where ornaments are most developed. His invariable answer is that his grandparents already did it in this way, meaning that there is no individual creation, and that he, the artisan, limits himself to interpret the imaginative thinking of his fellow citizens, according to prescribed patterns. (...)
>
> The Timorese artisan is, above all, an intellectual: the creation model is like an intelligible word in his mind; he will give the final touches when leisure permits, for artisanship and the artistic function are not distinguishable from other collective tasks, such as gardening, or house construction. (...) Art without a purpose is a secondary concept, which was thrived by foreign influence (...).

In light of this passage, we hypothesize that the agency to produce what we, outsiders, recognize as art, in rural East Timor, in general, may have more to do with reproduction than with creation skills. Its value would be in replacing a form thought to be ancestral, rather than in the artist's inventive disposition.

Ruy Cinatti's (1987: 65) quote also confirms our initial point. In many socio-political frontiers, art as esthetic contemplation and autonomous field of social action seems to make little sense. The photographic essay by Simião, Rocha and Almeida (this volume) also gives us some clues about this. We can see in it how esthetic work is associated to specific sacredness regimes (*Lulik* and Catholic) which, nevertheless, are in mutual communication. Symbolic and esthetic expressions are, at the same time, form and medium for religious practice. Based on this essay and on our very research experience in different East Timor contexts, we risk proposing the following. To a certain extent, we can think of many religious experiences in East Timor

9 Fox (1988) defies us to think about the correlations between semantic parallelism and other aspects of local social dynamics, such as complementary classificatory dualism and social organization dynamics. Unlike complementary classificatory dualism, which includes a ranking in the position of its terms, in semantic parallelism this feature is absent (1988: 26). From this observation, Fox challenges us with a very interesting analytical question: "how do non-hierarchical pairs of words are transformed into hierarchical pairs of terms?"
10 All the Portuguese language citations have been translated into English.

From artifacts to indigenous and popular art: genealogical notes on the construction of the arts in Portuguese Timor

Some 19th century authors perceived beauty in artifacts made by East Timorese peoples as the minimalist production of a people with a "savage expression," but still with taste, ability, and patience. Afonso de Castro, in referring to "textile industry," meaning artisan production, states that it was "very backward," due, according to him, to the Timorese scarce and limited needs. Nevertheless, in female weaving,

> (…) the beauty of some of those artifacts, the way they combine colors, and their durability, show us that the 'Timors' are not devoid of ability; if well managed by European entrepreneurs, they could compete with Java inhabitants in making certain products. (Castro 1867: 335)

In 1891, Bento de França, in his booklet *Timor*, in mentioning the "textile industry" of the "Timors", affirms that:

> Those islanders are not clumsy; to the contrary, they have great manual ability, but due to their invincible indolence, they limit their artifacts to the strictly needed. These artifacts are limited to coarse cotton cloth woven by women in crude bamboo looms; silk and cotton fabrics, products in beautiful hues, clay pots and bowls; turtle combs and buffalo sticks, goges (a kind of bag) of all sorts and shapes; carved and arabesque-drawn bamboo straws; boxes, straw baskets and cigarette pouches, and relatively coarse ornamental drawings. In all these products, many of them crude, the 'Timors' reveal a great deal of taste, patience and ability in manual work, despite their savage condition. (França 1891: 40)

In the early 20th century, these local expressions of artisan production acquired a new social life. The Álvaro Fontoura Album, attributed to the Governor of that name, gives a photographic overview of Portuguese Timor in the late 1930s. Among the laudatory listing of peoples and colonizing actions, we find an item dedicated to indigenous art illustrated with images of artifact making and their exhibition at a fair to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the "National Revolution." Goldsmithery, weaving, turtle shell jewelry, and bamboo boxes with anthropomorphic lids representing indigenous and city dwellers, seem to substantiate what is taken as art in the re-creation of a local production basically catered to a metropolitan market; its outlet is a showcase of local products during the annual fair to celebrate Portugal Day on July 10th.[11]

One of the first ethnological approaches to art was done by António de Almeida (1994 [1959]) in 1959, although he did not distance himself from previous descriptions. In his *Notas sobre Artes e Ofícios de nativos de Timor Português* (Notes on the Arts and Crafts of the Natives of Portuguese Timor), the author attempts to systematize the field of arts and crafts in Portuguese Timor. He describes the making of salt, pottery, weaving, ropes and plated pieces, decorated brass objects, jewels, buffalo horn sculptures, and houses on the east side of the territory.

Encouragement to transform these goods from artifacts to esthetic objects came from a new demand, be it by city dwellers, or by the new foreigners who poured in Timor in the 1960s, namely, tourists. Francisco Xavier de Menezes (2006 [1968]) explains the influence of foreigners in Timorese artisanship, and the surge of an internal demand to the point that, says the author, it became the object of an institutional incentive by the *Centro de Informação e Turismo*

11 The Alvaro da Fontoura Album is available online at:http://www.ics.ul.pt/ahsocial/fontoura/album/pag_inteiras/0.htm. Assessed March 3, 2015.