


Safeguarding the ‘path of the souls’: the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures

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ABSTRACT

The Don Bosco Museum of Cultures (Brazil) is the custodian of the largest Bororo collection in the world. The Bororo are one of the most studied indigenous groups in Latin America. Adorned human remains and ritual utensils recount the various stages of the highly complex Bororo burial process. In 2004 the museum underwent a large scale redevelopment. It aimed to establish more participative modes of cooperation with stakeholder indigenous communities. This paper presents the unique journey of this cooperation characterised by new approaches in dealing with the sacred and the indigenous voices in the museum.

Keywords

Indigenous, custodians, sacred, burials, human remains, first voice, preventive conservation

Introduction

The aim of this article is to draw the attention of ethnological museums to their responsibilities in safeguarding objects that are representative of the sacred life of their diverse stakeholder communities. We will not be going into details about the history of the Bororo people or their relationship with the Salesians of Don Bosco, but we will focus on one example of their

relationship with the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures which is located in the Brazilian countryside.

We chose to explore two dimensions in the text. One that situates the meaning of death in the Bororo context and another that seeks to contextualise the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures in relation to the Bororo collections in its care. We hope, by so doing, to contribute to

reflections about current museological practices and to stimulate the development of new methodologies for approaching the sacred.

The Don Bosco Museum of Cultures

The first idea of creating the museum emerged in 1948 through Felix Zavattaro, a member of the Salesian Catholic religious order of Don Bosco. His project consisted of creating a space dedicated to the preservation of cultural manifestations of the indigenous peoples with whom the Salesian mission had maintained contact since 1892. In the first half of the 20th century, Antonio Colbachini laid the foundations of valuable research which was followed up by the Salesian, Cesar Albisetti. The research was later organised by Angelo Venturelli, also a Salesian of Don Bosco, and published under the title *Encyclopaedia Bororo*, authored by Albisetti and Venturelli.

The first volume of the encyclopaedia consisted of the catalogue of the first Bororo exhibition at the Don Bosco Museum (later the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures). The museum officially opened in 1951 in the city of Campo Grande in Mato Grosso do Sul State. It brought together objects collected by the Salesian missions working in the mid-west region of Brazil and in the Amazon. The initial

themes were the reproduction - within certain limitations - of the relationship between man and his environment, man's relationship with man, and man and ideas. From 1952 to 1977 the museum operated under the direction of Angelo Venturelli and from 1977 until his death in 1996, under that of John Falco who was responsible for the permanent exhibition which was in place until 2003.

The museum's ethnology section is noteworthy since it conserves the first collection of the Bororo people, namely the Eastern Bororo (*Orarimogodoge*) who live in the riverine region of the *pintado* fishes. They were not farmers; they made their livelihood from the forest. Their objects, especially their feather headdresses, became famous for their colourful geometry. The museum's Bororo collection is the most complete and the largest in the world with almost 2000 items. It excites the interest of scholars, specialists and non-specialists mainly because of the objects that recount step by step the various stages of the burial ritual, the complexity of which has made the Bororo people one of the most studied indigenous groups in South America. Brazilian researchers such as Novaes (1983, 2006), Vietler (1991) and Carvalho (2006) have dedicated years of their lives to investigating the meanings of Bororo funerals, understood as *moments of defacement and effacement of the world*. (Novaes, 2006)



Figure 1
The moment before the human remains were placed in the 'path of the souls' showcase.
Photo. Sergio Sato

The rich diversity of knowledge systems embedded in the tangible and intangible heritage required the museum to reorganise its material to make it more accessible to the Bororo, the public, to facilitate research and above all to serve schools as a didactic-pedagogic laboratory. With this in mind, the museum researched ways to reconcile art and science, logic and poetry, diachrony and synchrony, thesis and antithesis so as to praise the achievements and the uniqueness of the Bororo creative spirit.

A crucial new direction taken by the museum was the adoption of a system of participatory management of the ethnographic collections to promote a democratic commitment to cultural diversity, and to facilitate the deconstruction of naturalised discourses. The museum sought to understand and experience other ways of articulating meaning through the 'first voice'¹ of peoples whose collections are in its custody.

The changes in the museum started with the careful design of a project that would allow extremely delicate objects that had been kept intact in showcases for years to be transferred and treated to minimise damage. The

project comprised the removal, treatment, proper storage and relocation of objects to the new exhibition space. Especially sensitive was the treatment of human bones collected in caves and lagoons of the region of the 'River of Death' and the Das Garcas River, which were the final destinations of Bororo funeral rituals and were where souls were laid to rest.

Death, the Bororo people and the museum

The Bororo people, in the beauty and depth of their rituals, show that death is life with another dimension. The body dissolves in water and releases the soul (*Aroe*) that lives eternally. But for that to happen certain conditions must be met. For the Bororo people death has two faces: one represents punishment and the other vengeance. The Bororo believe that the supernatural entity, *Bope*, is responsible for every bad thing that happens in a village, including death. When somebody breaks the rules established by their ancestors, *Bope* punishes the village with death. When a Bororo dies, he transforms into any sort of animal which can be devoured by the jaguar (*onça*). The bereaved family must be



Figure 2
The chief chanter, Helinho Kuruguga, performing the *Roia Kurireu* (the great chant).
Photo. Sergio Sato



Figure 3
Liberio Uiagomeareu, Kleber Meri Tororeu and Orlando Kuira preparing the human remains for the chanting ritual in the entrance hall of the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures.
Photo. Sergio Sato

rewarded, or rather vindicated against *Bope*, so that the soul of the departed loved one can live in peace and the harmony of the village, shattered by death, can be restored. This reward is called '*mori*'. The Bororo elected to be the proxy of the deceased at the ritual must kill a jaguar in order to free the soul of the dead. The skin, claws and teeth of the jaguar are transformed into rich utensils and body ornaments, and are delivered to the bereaved family in order for the revenge to be completed.

One of the stages of this complex rite of passage consists of preparing the body for the big trip. The first step is to free the bones of the rotting flesh. Bones, especially the skulls, are spotlessly cleaned, adorned with macaw (*arara*) feathers and painted with *urucum*. In this way, the Bororo people believe, the soul is ready to fly to eternity. The funeral rite may extend for about three months, depending on the importance of the deceased or the wishes of the ceremonial elders, forming a cycle that starts with the agony of death and moves along the entire path between inhumation and exhumation of the corpse, preparation of the bones and final burial. It involves almost all the inhabitants of the village.

This unique way of experiencing death causes the funeral rite to be seen by some authors as one of the most refined in the world, which is the reason why this

culture has become the object of various research projects and a multitude of bibliographic titles (e.g. Crocker 1985; Carvalho 2006; Novaes 1983, 2006; Viertler 1991).

Part of the Bororo collection in the custody of the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures are the bones and skulls collected by Salesian missionaries at the time when, we believe, the Bororo people still buried their dead in the caves. These objects were on display for about twenty years. In 2004, on the decision of the Salesians, we started revamping the museum and removing the collections from the exhibition spaces. The museum organised conservation workshops for the staff, under the consultancy of ethnologist Dr. Esther Console from the Vatican Museum. The project team included staff and especially Bororo representatives of the Meruri Community Museum, an initiative located in the Meruri Indigenous Reserve and supported since 1999 by the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures. The goal was to exchange techniques and materials, and to empower community members with the resources for preventive conservation that could later be applied in their own museum.

The workshops started with an analysis of the showcases in which the objects were stored. Together, we stood in front of the showcases and observed three

human skulls and a number of large and small bones adorned with macaw (*arara*) feathers, as mandated by the traditions about the treatment of the body for final burial. The Bororo members in the group stopped and looked at each other. Their eyes sought ours in silence – an unusual silence – a silence full of meaning. We felt that for them it was not easy to understand why those sacred objects were 'exposed' in that way. Perhaps, we thought at that moment, they would accept that instead of being in the caves the objects could be in the museum, but intact – resting as they should have been. It was difficult to imagine removing these bones from there as if they were no different from any other ethnographic objects.

We understood that in order to handle these sacred objects we had to ask the Bororo representatives what procedures were most appropriate. They decided to act according to their traditions. They prepared for the manipulation of bones by smearing their bodies with the juice from leaves known as *cerrado* that grow in the savannah grasslands. They sang in front of the open showcase, removed and gradually transported the bones in various *baku* (woven trays made of buriti leaves), depositing them on the restoration tables. There, working with the curator, they started cleaning and identifying the bones of their respective clans.

Agostinho Eibajiwu, curator of the Meruri Community Museum, who had already taken a course in preventive conservation and restoration, gently cleaned the dust particles from the skulls protected with a piece of gauze. The silence and looks of compassion for those bones/souls created the sort of atmosphere of emotion and respect that can be seen at funerals. The bones were relocated in small individual boxes and placed in a large wooden box, where they would remain until the day they would be transported to the new premises in the museum. Back in the village, Agostinho and the others asked the ceremonial chiefs for guidance about the second stage of the process – the transfer of the funeral boxes and the relocation of the bones in the new showcases. They came to the conclusion that one of the skulls, which could still be identified by the clan insignia because of the colours of the macaw feathers, belonged to the *Paiwoe* sub-clan of the *Tugarege* moiety. As a rule, the rituals would have to be carried out by members of the opposite moiety, the *Ecerae*.

The 'path of the souls'

The complex Bororo culture is deeply influenced by a profound religiosity and it is to a great extent expressed in their material culture. This required us to mount an exhibition that could contextualise the collection effectively in the new museum space. The challenge was to make this space communicate to the visitor the very close relationship between the Bororo and the sacred. For this purpose we turned to the singularity of the original Bororo village as a model, trying to mirror the same choices the Bororo people had made in the Meruri Community Museum and to re-establish the cosmic order that, according to Levi-Strauss (1986:224), speaks to *the relations between man and universe, between society and the supernatural world, between the living and the dead*.

So, in the heart of the exhibition hall a large circle was built that was divided into north and south by a row of showcases which runs from east to west. In each of the two halves, representing the *Tugarege* and the *Ecerae*, four showcases for the four sub-clans of each half, house the objects which are carefully placed according to their relative importance. A large domed ceiling represents the central house called *bai mana gejewu*, which also resembles the full moon, so significant in the ritual life of the Bororo.

Fixing this 'central point' evoked the consecration of an original Bororo space and established a division of levels, at the same time introducing the idea of a dual opening 'from above' (the divine world) and 'from below' (the world of the lower regions). In this way it introduced the three cosmic levels or three heavens of the Bororo, and ensured the communication between them. The construction of the circle and its division into two halves (*Ecerae* and *Tugarege*), according to the cardinal points (north and south), fixes the limits, established the cosmic order and drew the *aije rea* into the museum. The latter is represented by the showcases that divide the floor from east to west and is known as the 'path of souls.'

In a Bororo village, an imaginary line drawn from north to south determines the space for the funerary rites. Apart from the 'Eastern Bororo' area in the east, which is used for the acts preceding initiation rites, the performing ceremony of the *ipáre* (Crocker 1985), all the other areas west from the centre (where the central house should be located), are intended for funerary

rituals. The courtyard to the west, called 'Western Bororo', is where the ceremonies are held around the grave. A shallow slit in the ground, where the deceased is placed during the first funeral, marks the *aije rea* (the 'path of souls'). The boundary zone between the two halves that extends outside the circle of the village is called *aije-muga* and it is the place where the participants prepare for the more solemn representations. In the exhibition, a spherical showcase represents the *aije-muga*. The *bai mana gejewu* (central house), the Western Bororo, the *aije rea* and the *aije-muga* form the supporting complex for the funeral rituals performed before the second (or permanent) burial. This complex, mirroring the construction of Bororo villages, maintains an intimate relationship with the sacred.

Mediated spaces in the Museum

The cosmology of the Bororo makes us realise that they commune with a sense of cosmic sacredness which is manifest in everything that surrounds them. It is expressed in the structure of their villages, consisting, as we have seen, of strong, meaningful and powerful spaces – in other words, sacred spaces. These spaces become even more significant during funeral rites, when actors and dancers fill them and revitalise them through

gestures which symbolise many of the myths of this culture.

The time came to complete the second stage of the ritual planned by the Bororo elders. We scheduled a date for the opening of the new museum and invited the Bororo, as well as other indigenous groups, to make a presentation during the ceremony. The Bororo people decided to take that opportunity to carry out the relocation ritual of the bones. They arrived in the city of Campo Grande two days in advance. The chiefs examined every skull, every little bone, and decided to transport the box in a procession to the storage in the new museum. There, out of the sight of women, the ceremonial chiefs requested three *baku doge* (trays made of buriti leaves) and placed the skulls on them. They talked and decided to cover the skulls with three other *baku-doge*. Men formed a big circle around the covered skulls. Each one with their rattle, called a *bapo-doge*, they started singing the *Ciba Etawadu*, with the help of the women, and danced in the circle for over an hour. After that, again in a procession, they transported the bones to the exhibition hall entering their 'village' area. The skulls were placed next to the showcase built in the floor (the 'path of the souls') and the Bororo began another song, the *Roia Kurireu*.



Figure 4
Agostinho Eibajiwu and Ailton Meri Ekureu sing and dance around the human remains in the entrance hall of the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures.
Photo. Sergio Sato

The showcase was then opened by a staff member, and, after finishing the song, the Bororo chiefs placed the skulls in a ready-prepared space inside the showcase. One of the ceremonial chiefs knelt on the floor to reach the bottom of the showcase and, putting his hand under each of the skulls, he said his farewell in silence.

It is very important to note that the skulls are not visible in the exhibition. On top of them, on the 'path of the souls', are a series of displays of *pariko*, the colourful feather head-dresses. After the relocation ceremony, some Bororo men observed that by trying to represent the 'path of souls' the museum ended up portraying the Bororo sky. The colours of the *pariko* (feather headdresses), lined up from west to east, reminded them of the myth that tells about villages inhabited by the *aroe-doge*, places of extreme beauty where everything is built with macaw feathers.

Conclusion

Appeasing the *aroe* has been a worthwhile experience for the Bororo people, who at this moment seek to

revitalise their traditions and affirm their cultural identity. According to Agostinho Eibajuwu, curator of the Meruri Community Museum and present at all stages of the process,

...the possibility given by the museum in Campo Grande (Don Bosco Museum of Cultures) for us to remove from public sight our ancestors' bones and to offer their souls our songs, our tears and our silence, to offer their bones a respectful place within the space of our original village reconstructed inside the exhibition, was a valuable moment for us, who, in the middle of so much loss, try to recover the love for ourselves, for our culture; love that is able to return our human dignity.

It was also a worthwhile experience for highlighting many issues discussed by anthropologists today, as well as for museological anthropology, which has become much more human. Human in the way we are changing the old belief that ethnographic objects necessarily lose their roots when displaced and placed in an environment



Figure 5
The chanting procession, with the women, taking part, going to the exhibition hall of the Don Bosco Museum of Cultures.
Photo. Sergio Sato



Figure 6
The 'path of the souls',
the imaginary line that divides a village into north and south, represented by a showcase in the exhibition hall.
Photo. Sergio Sato

of care and display. In this 'third border' the object represents a historical loss: it is not in the circuit of life nor available to uses other than those specific to the museum (Pereira 2010). In the book *The museum in the village* (2006), Aivone Carvalho draws on the collaboration between the museum and the Bororo villages to explain how the participation of the Bororo in the making of the museum's ethnology, as well as the participation of the museum in the cultural lives of the Bororo, has become crucial for both sides.

Opening up museological spaces to indigenous people triggers an important self-reflective process, especially for the young Bororo. On the other hand, the treatment given to the human bones at the museum returns to them important dimensions of their meaning-elements of intangible heritage that are valued and safeguarded thanks to the knowledge and active engagement of the Bororo who are the primary stakeholders. Because of the Bororo's 'first voice', the integration of intangible and tangible heritage and respectful community engagement, these objects have come closer to their original context and meaning in order to present an inclusive museum discourse.²

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NOTES

1. Based on the notion of 'First voice', see Galla, Amareswar. 'The First Voice in Heritage Conservation', *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, Volume 3, June 2008.
2. See the knowledge platform on the 'Inclusive Museum' and various contributions in the *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*. (www.onmuseums.com)

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