

For an anthropology of documental objects: between the "souls in things"¹ and objectifying objects

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to reflect on the symbolism of the object and its links to day-to-day experience of social groups, immersed in the scenery to which they belong. Therefore, the article tries to take it beyond a reductionism viewpoint of a museum piece disconnected from the living. The immateriality of cultural goods appears, just as an instance in the relationship of subjects in the social world and a symbolism of things which circulate, spreading meaning in the world. In this way, an Anthropology of Documented Objects could demonstrate its social dynamic to the object, considering the circularity and "spirit of things" with the social forms which generated and dynamized them. In this way, the role of mediation can be construed as a more perfect way in order to avoid the congealing of the object and the isolation of the culture of action.

Keywords: cultural heritage, landscape, museums, object.

If objects remain only as signs despite the power of symbolic figuration of lifestyles, or tales, spoken or written, one may sketch out the possible in scenographies of memory.

Henri-Pierre Jeudy

The object, or the real thing, which circulates as something practiced or ritualized in the social body, through the acts that make it run the courses of the complex trails/stray trails of social life, is full of meanings and nexuses shared by those who attribute values and symbolisms to them, emerging in the actual inter-subjective experience of people interacting among themselves, and with the world. The object always closes over an ethical-aesthetical dimension, remitting to the human gesture of creating, confecting and operating with the most varied objects in specific places.²

There is symbolism in the object whose dynamism is related to a specific ecology, involving a mental universe implied in certain mappings out, attributions of meaning more or less subjective and fluxes of images, which "situate" the thing in itself by the meaning it has for subjects, from its being-in-the-world in relation to the actual aura-like presence of the object as an icon, or even as an expression and desire of establishing ways of communicating related to determined cultural experiences.

Well, this is the flux of meanings and images that the object disperses in the world which is capable of being a vehicle to singular aspects of reminiscences of the day-dreaming subject, through the act of remembering past living and experimenting the tension between forgetfulness and memories, starting from contact with the materiality of the thing and the possible meanings/feelings that it closes within itself. A Bachelardian perspective, as that which remits to a "poetics" of things existing in a place's space as well as a dialectics of duration (Bachelard, 1988a), points to the fact that memory, and its elastic and fabulous character, impregnates things and is pregnant in symbolism, when articulated to a phenomenology of the object immersed in the living.

This is why in a small text by Brother Leonardo Boff (2004), in which he discourses on the meaning of ritual objects in his life, it is possible to perceive the importance of "little things", crossed by a complex aura of tenacity and disinterest which the object holds. Since the author was far from his home, he brought his father's cigarette lighter with him. This object, so apparently without material value, took on a profound human dimension, before a certain tragic-ness of living, when Brother Beto received notice of his father's death. At this moment, a kind of metonymical resource seems to emerge, since the part (the object) was transformed into the whole (family, city, Brazil), unchaining a series of feelings of a subject being exiled.

An object or thing always remits to someone or some place, remaining as an element of a landscape (a XVIII Century manor house; an old fig tree; a pestle; a Ford 1929 model car), or even a corporal landscape (a New World emerald necklace; a gold bracelet from Ancient Rome; a Louis XIV shoe; a Yanomami back scratch; a Marilyn Monroe dress).

It's possible in this sense to speak of memories that impregnate and reconstitute "something's soul", referring to an (inter)subjective landscape in which the object (re)situates the subject in the living/lived world thanks to the work of memory, or still, it's the force and dynamics of collective memory that enables the object, as an expression of the materiality of a social group's culture, remitting to the elasticity of memory as a way of strengthening ties to a place, considering the proper tensions of forgetfulness.

Thus images of the object may also "circulate" within the meanderings of subjects' memories, carrying memories of situations lived in other times, permeated by certain subtleties and emotions proper to the act of fighting against forgetfulness and the finitude of being, as well as its ties with the place where it belongs.

This is why the professor, who lives in the city of Alcântara (MA), while visiting a spring in Mirititua, constructed in the XVIII Century, can record and recall washing women who worked there in the second half the Twentieth Century, and how, during her childhood, she carried hampers and bundles of clothes on her head in order to help her mother. Or regarding the sale of an old house, by her already aged father, in order to attend their anxieties and personal and subjective obligations, she can sensitize her son, full of good memories from his childhood in the old Popular neighborhood, today a protected center in the city of Goiânia, where he played

"salve-latinha". In this sense, Walter Benjamin's memories and reflections (1984) on toys, or even on visiting the city zoo, can unchain in an adult the healthy experience of remembering the child he was and that still, perchance, exists in him by pointing towards the symbolic act of playing, remitting to Johan Huizinga's studies (1996), up to the dreaming imagination (Bachelard, 1988b), which speculates on the universe of an animal confined in his place.

The object, therefore, always speaks of a place, wherever it may be, because it is connected to a subject's experience with and in the world, being that it represents a significant portion of the lived landscape. Such were the ruins of the *pueblos* and their baroque cathedrals for Senhor Pedro Tufão, when he reflected on the "terra miguelina"³ as a "sacred place", or even the presence of a large fig tree on Senhor Honorival's property, also in the Rio Grande mission lands, which he cultivated right after moving to that place, appearing as a response to his "daydreams of will" (Bachelard, 1991), as ever since his childhood he had dreamed of owning property with a large tree on it. On the other hand, the coconut trees mark the time and the happenings in the village of Santa Isabel do Morro, on the island of Bananal, as Maluaré has affirmed, a Karajá Shaman, since he was a boy.

As such, this is one of the aspects of historicity which reveals the dynamics of time for human groups that are documented, "printed" in the landscapes while the coconut trees grow or the old man followed the growth of his fig tree, under which his children played during their childhood. As Michel de Certeau has taught us (2004, p. 199, 200), "narrative structures have spatial syntax value", referenced by a "spatial practice" or a "geography of actions". Therefore, places, being transfigured into social spaces, are combined to the time they sew and re-sew the mental images according to native categories.

These symbolic-subjective mappings reveal the importance of a mental ecology that strikes people's ties with the places where they live, being a singular experience made particular by the cultural expression where the objects circulate – or that their images persist as possible *axis mundi* (Eliade, 1992) in the place where they are found -, mobilizing a subtle convergence and dispersion of meanings/feelings in the body of the social.

In this way, the complex mental map, with which the Gavião do Sul Indians in the state of Pará or the Bororo Indians of Mato Grosso, in their hermeneutics, operate their interpretations of place and their symbolic nexuses, becomes clearer. Their circular villages, divided into two ceremonial halves, don't make it impossible to know exactly in which house, in which half of the village, their potential spouses might be, even if the houses don't exist anymore. The house and its exact location in the village are important references to this indigenous group.

This phenomenon shows the importance of Gregory Bateson's proposition (1990), when he affirms that "the map is not the thing", i.e., the cartographic map doesn't reveal the true dynamics of the place and the complex technical-cultural and symbolic arrangements on which it rests, in such a way as to transform it through the action of human groups onto their environments. The map remains static, while the place itself follows another dynamics, being able to be mapped out mentally relative to the actual flux lived among subjects interacting in the world. In these terms, the place is transformed into a social space or, better yet, into a practiced place (Certeau, 2004, p. 202).

Such reflections point to that which we are calling Anthropology of the documental object, parting from the principal that the *object*, and the group of images that come with it, has a very special place in the epistemological context of the discipline. In the first place, because it

materializes the most diverse kinds of cultural conceptions, starting from its own, making possible the understanding of other dominions that engender culture, such as, for example: in the economy (the pearl bracelets for Melanesians in the South Pacific; the Karajá canoe, in Araguaia; the Xingu snails, in the National Xingu Park; just like a pen, a coin, a mobile phone, a mouse), or in politics (the paper/parchment in which the Áurea Law was printed, signed by Princess Isabel, deposited in the National Archive in Rio de Janeiro; the bullet that killed Getúlio Vargas, represented in museum form in the Palácio do Catete; Pedro Ludovico's study, in the Palácio dos Condes, in the city of Goiás; or Mário Juruna's tape recorder in the National Congress). In the same way, in art, kinship or the religion to which the objects are references, and, at the same time, the consequences of cultural construction.

In second place, because by becoming a metonymy of a cultural system, the object becomes a document, and therefore, possible to subject to a hermeneutics or, still, to an interpretive process capable of remitting it to specific cultural landscapes, following particular historicities. It's not by chance that, since the end of the XIX Century, anthropologist Franz Boas was so concerned with the exact position of the objects and collections, including those on the shelves of the National Museum of Natural History in New York.

In the dominion of collections and museum artifacts, the objects remit us to a complex communicative process, followed by singular paths that express distinct, but not excluding ways: one is internal and of a subjective character, which points towards "memory's work" (Bosi, 1994), keeping, still, a certain pedagogical-didactic importance and illustrative of its capacity to stimulate reflection, in which times and spaces are realigned, mixed, and deconstructed by the observer.

However, the subjective dimension – appreciating the culture of "exotic groups", the heuristic validity of the collections and their "fixation" in collecting and classifying material forms of determined cultures, in order to "construct" an urban/tourist's view of the *other* – carries within itself certain perversities that emerge in the tension between local and globalisms and their correlates, places and spaces.

The epistemological error of cultural suppression through the exacerbated fetishism of the object, fearing the "phantasm of oblivion", can unchain coercive patrimonial policies that hit an *other's* landscape, establishing museum environments, landscapes of power (Zukim, 2000). There is, in this case, a kind of presence of vibrating lacking as a sign of de-contextualizing the thing, objectified in the figure of a museum artifact stripped of the culture that animates it, hence destitute of its *mana*, for lacking an integrated system that would give it meaning, regarding its relations with environments that carry a peculiar geography and historicity. All that remains is for these objects to be re-signified by a foreign gaze.⁴

On the other hand, the external way tends to provoke certain reactions tied to subjectifying the object through the look to which it attributes meaning, in its encounter within museum space. What is processed is a kind of externalization of internalized impressions when the contact with the "artifact", i.e., the image of the object and its possible meanings that it carries within itself, are interpreted, being revealed through the corporal actions of the subjects that observe it (looks, gestures, corporal positions), words, and even re-reading it through art, which always reveals an attentive observer of the object.

In other words, the documental object prints certain marks on subjects, invigorating both internally and externally the intercultural communicative process. The experience of contact with

a museum actions Simmel's figure of the foreigner (Simmel, 1983), pointing towards its positive and revealing character of aesthetic interest in difference, but crossed at times by asymmetry and power struggles. This is a movement inwards and outwards from oneself. Inwards, as a centrifugal movement, leading us to reflexivity, to a dialogue with our visions of the world and ethical-aesthetical appreciations on "the things" that constitute the world, through the prism of subjectivity and personal character.

On the other hand, when the movement is directed outwards, its centripetal dimension is revealed, which permits reading the *other's* culture, by recognizing difference, which, in this case, rebels as lived alterity in the radicalness of the relational and the interactive, pointing towards social, political and ethical complexity. As such, this communication process is always an anthropological experience, since objects, by materializing what and how men think and by indexing a communication process, reveal a parcel of cultural expression on which form of anthropological knowledge to lean on, lining it, still, with documental value.

It's necessary to relate this documental value, coming from the objectifying process of thinking and representative categories of cultures, with the polysemical notion of "patrimony" and its diverse implications within the theme of conserving determined "cultural goods". Polysemia is inherent to the category of thought "patrimony" which is currently tied to the relevance of articulating culture and nature, making evident a tendency to consider patrimony from a bio-cultural perspective pointing towards the theme of conserving biodiversity (and its relevance in genic and biotic terms), allied to the rich archeological collection of American man and its unfolding to the Brazilian social world, whether by the necessity of understanding the transformations gestation in the South American context, in which tensions and cultural amalgams engender traditional singular societies and their ties to landscapes of belonging, or even by historical complexities inherent to the "civilizing process" in the *Mundus Novus*, defining relevant socio-cultural aspects for generating urban space in national territory.

As such, one may perceive that in the last few years the idea of "patrimony" has been present in different ways in the academic milieu, revealing its complexity and the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to reflecting on it, proposing, in the case that interests us, a direct relationship with themes dear to Anthropology such as: identity, citizenship, cultural diversity, memory and human rights.

In order to better comprehend why we've chosen the title "Anthropology of the documental object" it's necessary to open first, even if quickly, a window so that we may visualize the academic context as regards the theme of cultural patrimony, in which notions of materiality and non-materiality are articulated, revealing disputes in a field of knowledge, whose specificities and interests are tied to an *other's* cultural experience, not always sought after, or even placed on the margins of the conservation process of conserving their "cultural goods" through policies of turning them into national patrimony.

In the Brazilian State, two periods stand out in official policies of cultural patrimony. The first is the creation of the Secretary of National Artistic Patrimony (Sphan) in 1937, being characterized by structurally organizing the implementation of State policies, marked by restoring and conserving edified patrimony such as churches, museums, historical cities, government headquarters and archives. During this period attention should be given to the interventions in the field of patrimony in the Rio Grande mission lands, or in Ouro Preto, in the state of Minas Gerais.

The second period is linked to Aloísio Magalhães, who amplified public policies regarding cultural patrimony, salvaging the notion of "cultural references", which had already been indexed by worldwide policies, in organizations like UNESCO.⁵ In this way, not only "edified patrimony" stood out, but also other representations equally legitimate to the country, such as customs, trades, and celebrations. In this political-ideological process experienced within the framework of legitimizing conservation practices, petitioned by agents in the area of patrimony, the notion of cultural goods representative of the country's cultural diversity was valorized, considering the diversity of existing "patrimonies". Since the early Twentieth Century to this day, various concepts have been developed in order to interpret the process of creating a national identity, such as: legal protection, material culture, popular culture, folklore, trades, non-material culture, edified patrimony, celebrations, and registries, among others. This process subsidized the so-called National Inventory of Cultural Goods, which, as a whole, seeks to compose a documental base on the cultural history of Brazil, by way of an analytical and conceptual instrumental of studies on patrimony.

Besides, in order to perfect and complement laws protecting Brazilian cultural patrimony, attention may be called to decree n. 3.551, from August of 2000, which instituted the Registry of Cultural Goods of a Non-Material Nature. The goods in question are considered as untouchable, or, still, belonging to the sphere of "non-material patrimony".

From this perspective, three important and articulated themes should be emphasized, which have qualified studies on cultural patrimony:

- 1) materiality of objects;
- 2) patrimony as a category, not only good for symbolizing, representing, or communicating, but also performing, as reflected upon by José Reginaldo Gonçalves (2003a, 2003b);
- 3) reflections on the non-material nature of patrimony.

Even though many reflections have been published on the meanings of the registration law and the notion of non-material or untouchable patrimony, the question is still controversial. It's as if the necessity of historical preservation of edified goods, frequently related to the idea of "freezing" time, was also immediately correlated to the proposal of registering non-material goods. The result is a conflict with the dynamics of social life, intrinsic to the concept of culture. In other words, one may not "freeze" that which, in principle, is volatile, flexible, mutable, since it has lived through social practices inserted in a vast group of cultural actions invigorated by the imaginary, intimately tied to communities' collective memory.

On the other hand, Maria Cecília Fonseca (2003) suggests that it is necessary to see the question of patrimony being untouchable as something related to social practices. She advocates that the instrument of legal protection in itself isn't able to reveal such practices, because of the notion of "exceptionality" that has historically guided State protection practices in Brazil. Hence the necessity of adopting, not only here, a wider concept of cultural patrimony not centered any more on objects, but in the relationship between society and culture, dislocating, as such, the notion of exceptionality (Fonseca, 2003, p. 67). Indeed, Marshall Sahlins has already argued that "the material aspects aren't separated from social ones in a satisfactory way; as if the former make reference to satisfying necessities by exploring nature and the latter to problems of human relationships (Sahlins, 2003, p. 204).

In this way, "exceptionality" and "freezing", in the context of culture studies, are concepts of friction, "attritioning" and lapidating patrimony's conceptual material when counterpoised to the cultural experience of groups who have lived in action, as they are affected by the process of turning their everyday goods/artifacts into national patrimony. Therefore, one may perceive that, as such, the trajectory of protection policies which, at first, gave value to the materiality of the patrimony edified (the objects), and later on to the non-materiality of patrimony (skills).

Since the memory of the patrimonialization process is quite recent in the country and a living memory within the communities is still affected by it, a question remains: how should registering non-material goods be proposed to the human groups that have lived through the coercive process of patrimony agents while their symbolic goods were going through the process of being legally protected, since the 1940s?

The Rio Grande missionary case is illustrative. The baroque images of the hollow wood saints, sculpted in the period of the Jesuit-Guarani reductions, after this experience with civilization in the *Mundus Novus*, suffered a Diaspora throughout the vast missionary region in the XVIII-XX Centuries, resisting the looting by Uruguayan *caudillos* and numerous rural guerrilla fighters, because they were protected by farmers and holy people from the region.

A *criollo* Catholicism re-signified the baroque images in the divine social body. The images then started occupying an important role in native religious experience and forms of sociability, surging from the religious services and processions directed towards the "patron saint", occupying a sacred place in the so-called "lands of the saint". Starting from the 1940's, coercing legal protection of material goods tore the saints away from these communities, with the objective of "freezing them" in the Missions Museum. The trauma that the community suffered because of the symbolic violence inflicted on them by the patrimonial agents still remains in local inhabitants' collective memory: the end of the services and celebrations on saints' days; the saintly woman's death from sorrow and prostration; the lack of understanding of the motives for which a series of saints' images were taken from the community; the museum's distance given its image of power and violence against religious practices, revealing its profane character by "arresting" the saint. The aura-like dimension of the object, its sacred character as a representative artifact of the nation reveals itself to the eyes of some missionaries as an image of profanation.

What do the missionaries say about the importance of registering elements of their non-material patrimony, for example, after suffering violence, when the materiality of the Jesuit-Guarani baroque imaginary was immersed in a group of syncretic images, proper to the baroque gaucho-missionary – unfolding from the Jesuit-Guarani experience with civilization and the erring of vague Indians, as well as the miscegenation between blacks, whites, and Indians – was torn from their daily lives? Is the register in process still not regulated by the notion of exceptionality?

Well, it has become necessary to reflect upon what we may call re-contextualizing the object's place in patrimonial studies. This remits to the North American anthropologist Richard Handler (1985), who, in studying the significance of the construction of Williamsburg (EUA) as a living museum of the country's history, calls attention to the fact that the West is barefoot when it doesn't think of things by way of objects. And, as Reginaldo Gonçalves thinks, the objects bring a cultural circularity that is directly related to the process of cultural belonging and, henceforth, identity (Gonçalves, 1996, 2003 a, 2003b).

As such, this doesn't mean valorizing non-material culture as a form of revenge against an historical process, in which legal protection and architecture (the objects) are the maximum

representatives of national patrimony. However, the question to be asked in this critical view of the role played by the object in the process of legally protecting "patrimonial goods" refers to the ties between patrimony and power, or still: how do they reflect on the impasse between societies that operate and deal with goods in their daily lives and the process of creating patrimony that creates a significant dilemma; why and for whom does the patrimony serve in this perspective of a documental anthropology?

What use is it to reconstruct and preserve homes and palaces if men, or their remnants, which construct them or live near them don't have minimal citizenship rights? Or still, if determined patrimony remains under the control of local oligarchies, where the notion of "common good", in the end, poorly hides a group's dominating that which should be everyone's good?

On the other hand, if ethnic groups, emigrants and urban groups' cultural material references aren't guaranteed, what use is it to merely register ways and trades, if the material background (clay, earth, straw, birds, flowers, wood, water) isn't preserved?

It seems to us that the means, the mediation, must be property's place par excellence leading to the construction of an Anthropology of documental objects.

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1 Fragment of the song lyrics *A Paixão de V Segundo Ele Próprio*, by Vitor Ramil.

2 See Barros' contextualization (2004, p. 32) on the epistemological trajectory of the History of Material Culture, salvaging Bachelard's thought on an imagination of movement demanding to imagine material and still, Leroi-Gourhan's perspective (2002) which conceives objects and

artifacts as complexes of trends or "gesture networks".

3 As the city of São Miguel das Missões, in the Northwest part of Rio Grande do Sul is denominated.

4 The discussion in question is part of the reflections appearing in Silveira (2004).

5 See the book *As Cidades Brasileiras e o Patrimônio Cultural da Humanidade*, by Fernando Fernandes da Silva (2003).

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