

Museums, ethnographic collections and social identity: reflections on the curatorship shared with the sateré mawé in a university museum in the city of Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil

Summary

This work presents an experience carried out with the Sateré Mawé people in the identification and qualification of indigenous artifacts seized by the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Resources, and which are under the custody of the Amazon Museum belonging to the Federal University of Amazonas. The dialogue between indigenous people and the museum is based on the idea of collaborative museology, centered on the symmetrical relationship in which the relationship between indigenous people and objects identified as belonging to their culture is described. As a methodological resource, six “memory workshops” were held, when the artifacts were presented to indigenous people who described the objects, their uses and names in their own language. We chose to initially outline some aspects and concepts that are mobilized in the research, such as ethnic identity, collaborative museology and the context of museums in Brazil with ethnographic collections. Secondly, we present details of the process for reflection on how identity manifests itself in the experience of collaborative museology with the Sateré-Mawé people in the aforementioned museum. The observation was carried out during the workshops, held within the scope of the Amazon Museum with sateré mawé coming from four communities located in the metropolitan region of Manaus.

Keywords: identity, ethnographic collection, memory, indian people, cultural heritage

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Introduction

Indigenous objects, like the indigenous peoples highlighted in Brazil, are diverse and lead us to think about ethnic plurality. The gaze of non-indigenous people on these objects takes them into the interior of a people, into its ethnic nature, such as the porantim¹ from Sateré Mawé. For a long time, this foreign perspective on indigenous artifacts structured the classification, conservation and expographic narratives about these peoples. However, in the experience reported here, we privileged the indigenous perspective over its objects, allowing other perspectives from the prism of social identity. It is from this perspective that we reflect on the process of identifying objects seized by the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and renewable natural resources - IBAMA, under guard at the Amazon Museum - MA.

The Sateré Mawé people are located in the Andirá-Marau Indigenous Land, located in the lower Amazon region, between Pará and Amazonas. Many Sateré Mawé families reside in rural communities and urban areas of Manaus and the municipalities located around the demarcated land. The Sateré Mawé is known in historiographical and anthropological literature¹⁻³ as domesticators of the Waraná fruit (*Paullinia cupana*) and calls themselves “children of guaraná”. The Sateré Mawé performs the male rite of passage known as “tucandeira ritual”.⁴ In this ritual, several objects make up the party’s plot: paintings, musical instruments, feathers, baskets, gourds, gourd holders and a vegetable fiber glove. Objects are recognized and identified as belonging to that ethnicity.

Around this context, in which objects and ethnic references are intertwined, and focusing on the self-identification of collections

¹The porantim is a significant element for the sateré as it has a mythical value linked to the functions of the tucandeira and guaraná ritual. (ALVAREZ, 2009, p.153).

from this ethnicity, we describe the dialogical experience and observe the identification of objects by the sateré mawé who were part of an exhibition at the Amazon Museum. We remember that many objects, in this case, seized by IBAMA, as well as those collected by naturalists and travelers, who traveled the Amazon, are mostly devoid of ethnic identification. Based on this principle, this article aims to reflect on issues of social identity and the construction of relationships that mobilize indigenous people who are in an urban context, in particular, the sateré mawé, and museum collections, through the sharing of different knowledge during object recognition. Our starting point is an experience that took place at the Amazon Museum of the Federal University of Amazonas. To this end, the article initially outlines some aspects and concepts that are mobilized in the research, such as ethnic identity, collaborative museology and the context of museums in Brazil with ethnographic collections. Secondly, we present some details that made us reflect on how identity manifests itself in an experience in collaborative museology with the Sateré-Mawé people in the aforementioned museum.

Conceptual references

According to Barth,⁵ ethnic identities is expressed by the fact that a group can count on members who identify themselves and are identified by others. In this way, the construction of ethnic identity has its great founding basis in self-affirmation. Even though cultural analyses, for the most part, are still essentialist, ethnicity cannot be generalized from this perspective; There are several indigenous peoples who were subjected to intense contact and had their values and references vilified, as well as their objects, their art, their religion and their way of being.

Barth⁵ emphasizes that the fact of sharing a common culture can be seen as a consequence of interethnic relations, identity is relational.

From this perspective, ethnic identity and culture point different paths; they are dynamic, contextual and relational, which make them an ethnic group different from others. The intense contact with national society did not eliminate their knowledge and way of being indigenous.⁶

The knowledge coming from indigenous people who live in urban areas, even if the non-indigenous perspective is contrasting, from a more attentive observation and devoid of the integrative culturalists perspective, reveals their identity and history to us. In this dilemma, faced by countless other institutions with ethnographic collections, the challenge was to develop an exhibition that presented indigenous peoples, respecting their memories, contact with national society and, at the same time, taking care not to make generalizations or reproduce prejudices and stigmatization in the curatorial process and museum communication actions.

In the city, ethnic identity and culture are themes that have become classics in the anthropological field.⁶⁻⁹ Manaus, as anthropologist Raimundo Nonato Pereira da Silva asserts, is an eminently indigenous city. Therefore, the dialogue between the Amazon Museum and the sateré mawé made it possible, through collaborative museology,¹⁰ to have a different look at the ethnic identity of people with intense contact. With an estimated population of more than 2 million inhabitants,¹¹ Manaus has around 27,466 people who identify as indigenous, divided into around 34 ethnicities,¹² and whose ethnic identities are put to the test by every time.

Reflecting on the subject considering the museum as a “contact zone”¹³ was important as this type of institution is a privileged place for establishing social relations and cultural manifestations, serving objects and collections as a motto for the reconstruction of memories and exhibitions from new and multiple perspectives.

Museums, ethnographic collections and their relationships with indigenous peoples

In Brazil, some museums with ethnographic collections have, for some decades now, made efforts to create situations in which indigenous people visit their technical reserves and get to know their collections. At the same time, we observed that different indigenous peoples in the country have incorporated heritage discourse to strengthen their struggles to guarantee their constitutional rights.

Relations between museums, collections and indigenous peoples, based on more symmetrical principles, give rise to meetings and dialogues in which questions of identity come to the surface. Experiences like the one we report in this article have the power to build and reconfigure discursive regimes and orders and outline processes contemporaneously called by terms such as collaborative museology or shared museology. In these cases, the value of ethnographic collections goes beyond the limits of research as they provoke different forms of sharing.

Different from each other, these processes face the difficult challenge of decolonizing historically formed collections and creating new narratives of representation and/or self-representation. Many Brazilian researchers have experienced and reported on practices of this nature.¹⁴⁻¹⁹

Regarding collaborative museology, Russi and Abreu¹⁰ explain that they refer to different processes that point to a collaborative and symmetrical exercise between those who study and represent different cultures and those who experience them on a daily basis. If we bring the notion of collaborative museology here in a much summarized way, it is so that the reader can learn from the case report how it can

happen in practice. We say this because it is evident in the literature on these experiences that there is no model to be followed and that it is quite difficult to classify them (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Sateré objects separated for the memory workshop.

However, we believe it is necessary to contextualize the reader about ethnographic collections in Brazil. These are, for the most part, preserved in “History” museums, focused especially on regional histories. A pioneering initiative by the Brazilian Anthropology Association has been dedicated to identifying them through the Mapping of Ethnographic Collections in Brazil project. Among the institutions identified in the northern region of Brazil is the Amazon Museum linked to the Federal University of Amazonas. Opened in 1991, it is located in the historic center of Manaus.

The Amazon Museum’s collection has 16 museum collections, containing around four thousand items. Among them, we highlight the IBAMA Collection, composed mainly of indigenous material culture. This collection is the result of an inspection seizure at Manaus airport and was in the possession of a foreigner who would resell the pieces abroad, illegally. The collection has 2,381 items with different types: ritual objects, braids, feather ornaments, wooden artifacts and utensils, clothing, ceramics, cords and fabrics, products of animal (leather and skin) and vegetable (plants) origin, souvenirs and weapons, produced by different indigenous groups in Brazil: Baniwa, Bororo, Ka’apor, Kaiabi, Kaiapó, Kamayurá, Karajá, Matis and Sateré Mawé.

To prepare our reflection, we chose the Sateré Mawé objects from the IBAMA Collection as the focus of understanding. The idea was to present the objects so that the indigenous people could identify and contextualize them in relation to their culture. To this end, we delimited 680 artifacts for observation purposes (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Museu Amazônico, Universidade Federal do Amazonas, Amazonas, Brasil.

As a methodological strategy for building the exhibition, we held “memory workshops”, based on the reading and recognition that the Sateré Mawé made of different types of artifacts. Each of the six indigenous participants was motivated to speak freely about their life, their history, their relationship with objects and their social relationships. This experience was useful for us to reflect on how questions of indigenous identity submerge in the discourses and conversations developed during the workshops, when indigenous people contextualized their political relationships in the city of Manaus.

From the conversations with the sateré participants, it became clear that there are several segments organized from associations in the Amazon region, more specifically, in the Andirá-Marau Indigenous Land, a place traditionally inhabited by them since time immemorial, reflecting the existence of several sateré communities around Manaus, as well as in other municipalities in the region, created as a result of political divisions. The dynamics of the workshops were carried out, initially, with the selection of different types of objects (gloves used in the *tucandeira* ritual, maracas, rattles, etc.), followed by the exhibition on a table in the main hall of the museum, where the events took place workshops. The second moment was dedicated to dialogue with the sateré mawé. Thus, every day, a Sateré indigenous person was invited to speak with museum professionals about these and other significant objects that were brought by them.

The intention was to bring together the indigenous people to hold the workshops together, however, meeting them on the same day proved to be unfeasible. Despite having family ties, some family and political conflicts were still very latent and it was decided to avoid worsening these conflicts. Another issue that the museum team had to deal with was questioning the social identity of the participants. Some of our interlocutors questioned the participation of one or another indigenous person in the workshop because they considered it “more or less indigenous”, taking as a reference the kinship relationships established with non-indigenous people in the city. Another dilemma revolved around knowing which of the associations located in Manaus would have the legitimacy to speak “on behalf of all sateré”, including those who were in the Andirá-Marau Indigenous Land. Although all representatives had a common ancestry, each represented an association or community and had different levels of proximity. Listening to the different segments allowed us to observe that there were no dissonances between them. Everyone was unanimous in recognizing certain objects in line with their ethnicity (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Workshop at the Amazon Museum with sateré mawé.

Considering Barth’s statement⁵ which emphasizes that the sharing of a common culture is not a cause but a consequence of ethnic groups and their identities, we realize the existence of different borders within the same culture: the geographical border, that of ideologies, that of generations, that of gender, etc. We know that the discussion about identity and culture is much broader and more complex. On the other hand, the dilemma presented itself at that moment, requiring an

immediate response, aiming to build an ethical relationship between the museum and the indigenous people in which everyone had their interests met.

The presentation of the reports, through textual and audiovisual resources, with the identification of the indigenous representative with the name (real or fictitious), age and community, was a thoughtful solution, placing excerpts of these speeches in time and space in the museum circuit, except in situations where participants chose confidentiality.

From these workshops we intend to establish a lasting partnership with these communities, reducing the distance created by the historical colonialism of museum institutions, bringing the sateré mawé closer to their objects. Considering the museum as an institution with a social function, there is an intention that the Amazon Museum will gradually connect more with these communities, encouraging self-representation.

The visit to the communities and the holding of workshops, with the presence of indigenous people in the museum spaces for the joint construction of the exhibition, allowed reflection on important themes that permeate the reality of all participants, which deal mainly with prejudice and lack of opportunities in the city.

Despite this, sateré has been gaining more and more space through the commercialization of handicrafts in cities, partnerships with local tourism agencies and gastronomic spaces that offer different food, enabling new developments and challenges, such as building a narrative that points to the dynamics and transformation of the sateré people, reconfiguring discursive orders historically established by museum institutions.

Conclusion

We seek to describe the experience with Sateré Mawé indigenous people in the process of identifying and qualifying objects seized by IBAMA and which were made into museums and are under the custody of MA. We outline some aspects and concepts that are mobilized in research such as ethnic identity, collaborative museology and ethnographic collections.

We consider the museum as a “contact zone”¹³ as it is a privileged place to establish social relationships and encourage cultural manifestations. We reflect on the social function of museums, the complex social mobilization and criticisms of anthropology museums, which nowadays they seek to establish relationships based on symmetrical principles, promoting different forms of sharing.

The relationship based on the principle of symmetry promotes the construction of new knowledge, considering dimensions that correspond to other perspectives and worldviews. Based on symmetrical Anthropology²⁰ we seek to understand and value these differences, avoiding preconceived and prejudiced ideas. It is important that museums are places that promote these processes, fulfilling their social role.

This experience was useful for us to reflect on how the issue of indigenous identity, representation and legitimacy submerged in the speeches and conversations developed during the workshop, when they explained their political relationships in Manaus. We detail how the dynamics of the workshop occurred, who the participants were; indigenous people and museum professionals, which associations and communities were represented. We address dilemmas about identity, representation and legitimacy throughout the process. The case reported here illustrates the intricate and complex relationship that

is established when the museum, through its professionals, decides to dialogue with an indigenous society to collaboratively build a new exhibition with a narrative that includes indigenous people as actors in the process.

The process is still ongoing and there are many doubts about the path forward. Based on mediation and consensus, between indigenous participants and museum professionals, there is this enormous challenge imposed by the collaborative process - that of presenting aspects of a people, always dynamic and contextual, through an exhibition, static and delimited, and that will produce unique experiences for your audience.

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Conflicts of interests

None.

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