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ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION OF EXPRESSIONS OF FOLKLORE: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE AMERICAS

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When we think of the universe of folklore and its relationship with other stances of the Brazilian social reality, no matter how hard we may try, it is impossible to avoid the common place of saying that Brazil is a country of continental dimensions.

Brazil covers an area of over 8.5 million square kilometers. Originally, upon this immense territorial base, lived Indian groups of various ethnic origins. Discovered by the Portuguese in 1500, the land started to be colonized on an agricultural basis, which explains the arrival of African slaves, brought from various parts of that continent.

Since then, the country has attracted other peoples - the "last-to-arrive Brazilians": Germans, Italians, Spanish, Arabs, the Japanese, Koreans and various other groups made up especially of Europeans and Asians. Bearing particular cultural values, these groups ended up by integrating themselves to the country, thereby adding new habits to the Brazilian culture.

The coexistence of different ethnic sources has brought forth, with the passing of generations, the sharing of varied cultural elements, although, in a general way, the cultural dominance of the first group of settlers, the Portuguese, prevails. At the same time, it is possible to witness the assertion of specific local features, when we refer to cultural expressions, among which folklore is found.

Thus, the Brazilian folklore universe is inexhaustible. Each group, each social segment, each community is capable of creating its own symbols, of identifying itself with them and, through these symbols, communicating with the whole of the society. The songs and dances, the music and the theater plays, the rites and the feasts, the objects of material culture, the foods and drinks present themselves in a different fashion throughout the country, thus making any attempt at generalization a rash attitude.

How can we talk about a national folklore? By excluding the specific features of each genre and keeping only to what is generally found from North to South of the country? By listing and adding up everything we find under different conditions for observation?

Questions such as the above, albeit extremely relevant, seem to be outside the aims of this Forum. Within the scope of the so-called Brazilian folklore genres, we have opted for handicrafts to reflect upon the slated issue.

THE DIFFERENT HANDICRAFTS AND THEIR RELATIONS WITH THE MARKET

In spite of providing a significant contribution to the country's economy, as the main financial support and complement for the family income of a sizable portion of the population, the handicraft activity in Brazil is part of the "informal sector" of the economy, there being no precise statistics on it.

According to the data contained in the Pluriannual Plan, 1996-1999, of the Brazilian Handicraft Program (PAB), by the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism, "it is estimated that one million producers are directly involved, generating five indirect jobs, comprising a total of five million people in the various stages of production and marketing". That would

correspond to approximately 5% of the Brazilian population. The same source estimates at US\$5 billion per year the value of the Brazilian handicraft production.

In spite of the lack of quantitative data, what happens throughout the country, both in the rural area and in the urban environment, is the profusion of handicrafts made of a wide variety of materials: from raw material, such as clay, vegetable fibers, wood, stone, leather, seashells, to industrial waste products such as plastic, rubber, cans, cloth and glass. Directly acquired from manufacturers, or through the middlemen who market them, mainly at fairs and village markets in small towns, and at stores in large urban centers, these objects are present in the daily routine of the Brazilians, as utility items, especially within the lower income groups and as decorative objects within the middle and upper levels of the society.

Added to the diversity of materials with which handicrafts are made and their intended use, we place the different contexts in which they are produced.

Lélia Gontijo Soares already pointed to the broad range of Brazilian handicrafts, in a document drawn up in 1983, for a meeting of handicrafts specialists, sponsored by the then National Folklore Institute (INF), currently the Folklore and Popular Culture Coordination/FUNARTE,

Referring to the various social and economic contexts of the country, Ms. Soares, a researcher and then director of INF, mentions the vast series of artifacts which, in an initial stance, are produced and absorbed by the same regional, neighboring population. We may cite, as examples, the votive figures of the northeastern hinterland or miracles, as they are also called, modeled in clay or carved in wood, deposited in shrines or churches as fulfillment of vows. They comprise depictions of the human figure, of parts of the body, of animal figurines. These kinds of religious handicrafts tend to disappear in the country, being replaced by photographs and by votive figures molded in wax.

Another example of these series of artifacts is the noteworthy figurehead - a fantastic figure used in the bows of the São Francisco river boats, common until mid-century, whose purpose was to scare away the bad water spirits, thereby protecting the vessels.

This figure, whose originals are currently found in museums as well as in private collections, have lately been made popular by handicraftsmen dedicated to catering to the tourist demand. Made especially into key rings and ashtrays, the figureheads are currently found in countless, varied shapes and dimensions at souvenir shops throughout the country, particularly at airports.

Votive figures and figureheads used in boats are part of a world in which the handicraft is basically absorbed by the group which produces it. This universe also includes objects linked to production techniques, such as agriculture, animal breeding, fishing, in addition to pots, pans, and various kitchen utensils.

In a second range - which actually interests us most in this Forum - we find objects made by individuals and communities, which are not geared to the group's domestic consumption but to the supplying of the outside demand. The buyer is not the neighboring user anymore, but rather, the tourism industry. Lélia Gontijo Soares sets the formal individualization of the

production as the landmark of this second phase, contrasting it to the greater uniformity of the pieces, as found in the previous case.

The author also refers to a third traditional handicraft production range characterized by the extreme individualization of works which, already under the label of popular art, are sold to high income people in art galleries in large centers like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

THE UNIVERSE OF HANDICRAFTS: DIFFERENT VIEWS

Just as there are different types of handicrafts which are defined as to specific production and consumption contexts, there are also in Brazil different ways to approach this universe.

One of them, which we shall call romantic, sees handicrafts as the survival of cultural forms which, that used to be operational. According to the romantics, the current handicrafts should be understood as a residual originated in the past, thriving, most usually in the rural, poorest areas of the country which regarded as conservative and thus less liable to changes.

As a result, this angle brings forth the mystifying of the notion of handicrafts. The object is idealized as being 'authentic', 'pure', 'unique', a witness of a past, more noble reality. Hence, there would bring a need to preserve and protect it from extraneous influences, as the melancholy role of survival doomed to extinction or the redeeming role of representing the 'roots' of the Brazilian people is assigned to it.

Such view contains a criticism to the modern world, ruled by machines and automation. Typical of this world are the mass-made, manufactured objects to which we contrast the hand-made ones.

The sacred condition that the romantic view often assigns to the handicrafts turns them into icons. This view imposes the risks of undervaluing its creator, the human being, by highlighting the material object. In the struggle for keeping the crafts "pure" and "authentic", the observation and a possible change on the often subhuman living conditions of their makers are frequently left behind.

A second approach, very common in Brazil, especially used by governmental and non-governmental institutions dedicated to the assistance of low-income communities is the one which we call economistic.

This approach aims at developing and strengthening the potential of the Brazilian handicraft sector, by implementing projects, actions and activities which may increase the quality level and enhance the production process, the marketing system, and the improvement of living conditions of the human resources involved. According to those who advocate it, the handicraft segment is one of the productive sectors with the greatest capacity of mustering and absorbing labor. It comprises a potential work market, especially in regions of the country in which jobs are not yet available in sufficient number to absorb the available labor force.

Those who favor interference in the handicraft sector argue that this segment:

- generates jobs using less capital than the formal sector;
- uses manpower who would not otherwise be used by modern industries and who would be doomed to unemployment;
- use Brazilian raw materials;
- requires little investment in facilities, machines and equipment;
- encourages population settling;
- favors the domestic market;
- comprises an important support element to tourism;
- allows for the export of large part of production;
- determines cultural identity value.

This view, although excessively emphasized nowadays, could already be noticed in previous decades, as mentioned by Heye and Mello & Souza (1987), when referring to the growing interest in handicrafts which arose in Brazil in the 1970's. The writers attributed their appraisal to the increase in tourism and, consequently, in the consumption of "typical" products, in addition to the crisis in the national economy, which prompted the search for new forms of labor usage and resource generation. The same researchers related this product to the formulation of institutional programs geared to the increase in handicraft production and training of specialized labor:

"The increase in production was reached with the introduction of new forms of work, generally the parts being produced in series, in specially equipped sites. The professional training was frequently given by experts outside the general community, who did not know the latter's handicraft traditions and all knowledge bestowed on them through previous generations".

What has been seen in Brazil throughout the years is that a great number of incentive programs for handicraft production has failed, as they were based on exclusively economic factors, "even leaving in their wake a path of destruction of previously prevailing cultural systems and greater impoverishment in all senses" (Frota, 1996).

The complete development of a nation depends on the respect for its cultural identity, as stated Amadou Mathar M'Dow, transcribed by Gontijo Soares on the previously mentioned document:

"It is recognized nowadays that the concept of cultural identity is the very basis of development, but this is something that has been fully accepted by the international community only recently. It is only in the past few years that our manner of viewing development and its pathways and goals has acquired scope and perspective. Equated initially with mere linear growth of the economy - essential as it undoubtedly is, since increased material production makes a decisive contribution to the improvement of living conditions of people, if output is equitably distributed - development has now come to be envisaged as an infinitely more complex, all-encompassing and multi-dimensional process, which can be effective only if based on the will of

each society to make its own way and properly express the identity that characterizes it”

Thus, projects which aim to be successful in dealing with the realm of handicrafts should not close their eyes to the cultural identity issue, even more so because they themselves comprise the certainty of the good marketing of handicrafts directed to higher income customers. Reality has shown that the first world market, a potential buyer of Brazilian handicrafts has an expectation for quality and authenticity when buying cultural products from other countries, which the organizing of production, on a supposedly rational basis, threatens to destroy.

“If local handicrafts do not keep the natural and spontaneous rhythm of their bloom, - which does not mean they should not change their technology, if desired - the same markets will lose interest in the short run . Consequently, craftsmen will be even more pressed: they will have to either quit or transform their traditional work, refusing to master any other cultural technology that could make their survival possible”.

Handicrafts are a permanent source of tourist attraction thanks to the identity which they keep with their original cultural roots. The cultural identity is the inherent value of traditional handicrafts. The sale of handicrafts to national and overseas tourists may generate a sizable revenue together with a national resource acquisition policy if, and only if, its status as cultural product is kept.

On account of its cultural roots, the Brazilian handicraft activity has its own, well defined features, and is an original, popular and artistic manifestation, being able to compete in the international market with products from other countries.

For this to happen, the official support action towards the production agent is paramount. This support may not have interferences which disorganize the concept and production of objects which, above all, stem from peculiar and specific world views.

This is what the Folklore and Popular Culture Coordination, an agency of the Ministry of Culture of Brazil, has proposed upon developing the Popular Artist Hall project.

THE POPULAR ARTIST HALL, AN EXPERIMENT

The Popular Artist Hall in Rio de Janeiro is dedicated to the diffusion of popular arts and crafts. It exhibits objects which, on account of either their symbolic significance, manufacturing technology, or the prime materials employed, are witnesses of the life and labor of individuals and specific groups. In this Hall, artists/craftsmen display their works and demonstrate, in small workshops, the manufacturing techniques. Moreover, they decide freely on the sale of what they produce and display as well as the price of the objects and take full benefit of the income accrued with the sales.

All exhibitions are preceded by a research aiming at giving an ethnographic treatment to the objects shown, placing their producers in the social and cultural environment in which they

act, as well as showing the relations which they keep with groups in which they are found. Although many objects, especially those which usually receive an "artistic" label, may be shown on account of their esthetic or technical qualities, the Hall's primary objective is to show the cultural identity aspect found in the objects and their creators. Next, it means to foster specially for artists and craftsmen with little experience in marketing, either directly or through middlemen, bringing them together with the spectator and the purchasing public.

The project was started in 1983, having carried out, until today, 69 exhibitions at the Folklore and Popular Culture Coordination, named, until 1990, The National Folklore Institute/Ministry of Culture. Most of the exhibitions are documented in catalogs.

Conceived and installed as from the ascertaining of the need to renew the supporting mechanisms to the diffusion and marketing of popular art and crafts in large urban centers, like Rio de Janeiro, the project has had a staff comprising coordinators, educators, museologists, photographers and visual programmers.

The experience shows that, in addition to the financial result of sales during the exhibition period, the interaction with visitors and the divulgation, on a larger scale, of the artist's work brings forth lasting benefits to the participants. These benefits may come as invitations to display his/her work in other places or to give technical demonstrations and lectures in schools and other institutions or as orders from stores. These activities contribute to a clearer perception, by the craftsman/popular artist, of the value of his work.

The project has also warned the artist/craftsmen about the realities of their potential market. A good example of that is the case of José Casemiro da Silva, considered the leather master in Juazeiro do Norte, a small town in the Northeast of Brazil. Having been invited to exhibit his work in the Hall, he brought with him a very beautiful saddle. On looking at the cars and buses going up and down the street, where the Hall is located, and seeing no horses, he shook his head and said: "Yeah, nobody is going to be buying this here, no way!" And he was right. Mr. Silva's experience was transmitted directly to his peers, by himself. That convinced them that their market for saddles and accouterments is regional and should not be directed to big cities (for a more in-depth discussion of local, regional and metropolitan markets, see Heye and Mello & Souza, 1987).

Thus, the project plays a direct role in the field of popular art /Crafts, by articulating production groups or individuals, the visiting Hall public and, more specifically, buyers and collectors, through shows with an average duration of one month. The project aims at achieving a nationwide coverage, by hosting artists/craftsmen from several units of the Federation. Private and Governmental cultural agencies also have an important role in promoting greater integration by sharing among themselves, the necessary tasks to a successful performance at each show. It is important to point out the joint effort with local craftsmen bodies, such as cooperatives and guilds. In addition, the Hall seeks to multiply similar initiatives in other cities.

The ethnographic character of the exhibitions gives the public the chance to not only enjoy and acquire objects, but also, and mainly, come to know very unfamiliar or unknown realities. The publication and the direct contact between craftsmen/artists and the public allows for the former's effective participation in the process of appreciating and marketing their work as well as expanding their market.

Parallel to the research directed towards the organization of shows, the work requires systematic reflection on the theme and the knowledge of other projects directed to popular arts/crafts in Brazil and overseas.

This work proposal joins the fields of Anthropology and Museology in activities which have, as an immediate purpose, the divulgence and valorization of the work of artists/craftsmen in ethnographically-oriented shows. In this sense, they come close to Applied Anthropology, as the knowledge is promptly linked to the operation. This perspective gives the Hall its dynamic character, as it requires that specialized know-how and social intervention mechanisms and procedures be permanently renewed.

The joint work of anthropologists, museum specialists and photographers establishes opportunities for the discussion of the simultaneous use of several languages - verbal, museum - oriented, photographic. That enlarges the chances the visitors have of "reading" the objects exhibited. The choice of participants is done by the project team based on requests, forwarded by artists/craftsmen and local agencies to the institutions taking into account variety of themes, the raw materials, the techniques, and the benefits it brings at the social level.

As to the quality of the works, the selection is guided by an ethnographic criterion, according to which the choice between 'beautiful' and 'correct' stems from the evaluation of the production and user groups, this evaluation may deviate very much from the criteria applied to 'scholarly' art or our own subjective criteria. These principles give the Hall the possibility of drawing public attention to the diversity of technical and esthetic solutions elected by distinct social groups. Moreover, the popular artists/craftsmen approach a wide range of world views extending much farther than the 'past/rural/nostalgia' stereotypes frequently linked to the folklore and popular art concepts. The life stories and the social background of the participants also vary: we have, among the artists/craftsmen who have exhibited their work at the Hall, stories of migration from the country to the city, with or without a return to the rural environment, as well as the reverse way, leading from the cities to the hinterland; we may find, in this last group, representatives from the local elite as well as peasants who are currently part of the artistic universe of Rio de Janeiro.

The researching and the holding of the exhibitions raise a series of problems leading to reflection. Each show makes us revisit questions like, "who is the craftsman and/or the popular artist?" and "what is handicraft and/or popular art in Brazil today?". The relevance of these questions is not limited to the simple classification or to a mere abstract definition of terms, but has to do with the participation of Folklore and Popular Culture Coordination and its position in the midst of State cultural policies.

CONCLUSION

Seen as a potential income generator, able to alleviate the effects of unemployment or to supplement the low income of rural and urban worker families, handicrafts have been the target of performances whose emphasis are the rationalization of production and the widening of outflow channels.

Obviously, crafts/popular art may be seen under this prism and the approach of economic aspects may undoubtedly contribute to the solution of the question. However, we advocate a perspective which tries to understand crafts/popular art as a cultural phenomenon. Involved in this arena are not only the low income producers and the urban, middle-class public attracted by "rustic", "exotic", "handmade" objects, but also groups of different social and cultural backgrounds. The artists and craftsmen, in turn, produce by responding to diversified and complex motivation such as the expectation for a market and the improvement of living conditions, among others.

We are not overvaluing the cultural component of the production of handicrafts at the expense of its economic aspect or any other social factor. Actually, we should underestimate the absolutism of economic factors which downgrade the cultural core of crafts.

By giving the Popular Artist Hall as an example, we believe we have brought to this Forum elements which allow us to reflect and open up safe paths to the actual development of handicrafts and of the folklore universe of our countries.

Translated from Portuguese to English by Mrs. Patricia Carla de Almeida Mendonça.
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