

Northeastern Popular Puppet Theater - Mamulengo, Babau, João Redondo and Cassimiro Coco: an intangible Brazilian heritage¹

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Abstract: This article discusses the basic principles, guidelines and processes for the registration of Northeastern Popular Puppet Theater - Mamulengo, Babau, João Redondo and Cassimiro Coco - as part of Brazil's cultural heritage. The article is based on a dossier, which is one of the requirements of IPHAN (National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage) to obtain the above-mentioned title.

Keywords: Northeastern popular puppet theater. Intangible heritage. Brazilian culture.

1. Introduction

In 2004, the Brazilian Puppet Theater Association (ABTB)² - UN-

¹ Article translated from Portuguese by Vincent Bastik, graduated from Sydney University in English and History, with 20 year experience on teaching English as a second language; and Izabela Brochado Ph.D. in Drama Studies by Trinity College - University of Dublin – 2006.

² The board of ABTB (Management 2004-2006) consisted of: Humberto Braga (Chairman); Magda Modesto (Vice President and International Relations); Manoel Kobachuk (Secretary General); Ana Maria Amaral (Deputy President); Olga Romero (Alternate Vice - President and International Relations) and Neiva Figueiredo (Deputy General Secretary).

IMA Center Brazil, asked IPHAN, the Historical and Artistic National Institute, to open a registration process of popular puppet theater as part of Brazil's cultural heritage. The request was titled "Mamulengo - Brazilian Popular Puppet Theatre as Intangible Heritage".

In response to an alert by researchers, professors and puppeteers who had underlined the urgency of the registration process, the taking of an inventory and the safeguarding of this expression of Brazilian culture, the request was accepted by IPHAN, considering the fact that from the 1980s, this part of Brazilian culture had suffered considerable decline in its original ways of production and circulation.

However, it was only in 2008 that the registration process was effectively established. It was taken by the Board of ABTB (Management 2006 - 2008)³, coordinated by Izabela Brochado, Professor at the University of Brasilia, and Claudia Marina Varquez from the Department of Intangible Heritage, IPHAN.

The inventory was conducted in four states of the Northeast region where the highest occurrence of the popular puppet theater could be found. Those states were Pernambuco, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba. Also, Brasília, the capital of the Federal District, was included as a case study, given the significant number of puppeteers living in the capital who have the Northeastern puppet theatre as the highest point of reference. In each of these states, a research team was assembled, consisting of a coordinator and researchers.

The technical process of registration corresponded to the production of a systematized and updated knowledge on the occurrence of this unique form of expression of Brazilian puppetry, which included surveys, systematization, the evaluation and complementing of previously existing data on these forms of expression, as well as field-work research in the aforementioned states.

In September 2015 the general coordinators delivered to IPHAN an analytical dossier which consisted of a 250-page book and an audiovisual dossier of two DVDs – a short-version video 26' and a long-version video 1.015' to be analyzed.

³ The board of ABTB (Management 2006- 2008) was composed of: Renato Perre (Chairman); Graziela Saraiva (Vice-President); Aline Busatto (Secretary) and Gilmar Carlos (Treasurer).

On 5 March 2015, the Consultative Council of Cultural Heritage of Brazil endorsed the process of registration of the Northeastern Popular Puppet Theatre (NPPT): Mamulengo, Cassimiro Coco, Babau and João Redondo, as part of the cultural heritage of Brazil. This recognition was officially confirmed during a ceremony held in Brasilia on 6-7 May 2015, organized by IPHAN, to discuss proposals and develop policies to safeguard the NPPT.

2. Research definitions and boundaries

What is Brazilian Popular Puppet Theatre? We need to consider its diversity, such as aesthetic differences, multiple references and so on. Therefore, discussions were held to establish boundaries for the inventory. After extensive debate, the research team came to the conclusion that the focus of the registration process should be the popular puppetry practiced in the Northeast, considering its richness and originality, as well as the vulnerability of this puppet theatre which has existed for more than two centuries in Brazil.

In this context, the focus was on: a) puppeteers who learn through a family tradition or lineage, that is, those who are from the same community and / or social group as their master (the person from whom they have learned) and who have become puppeteers through constant contact with a traditional repertoire, including scenarios, puppet figures and characters.

This distinction was given since two other categories of puppeteers were identified: b) those who learn from one or more master puppeteers and use the elements of traditional popular puppetry, incorporating them into their shows (however, unlike the focus group, they come from outside the community of the master, learning by temporary contact and later, creating their own group and plays); and c) those puppeteers who appropriate certain elements of traditional puppetry, using them in some of their shows. In this case, there is no permanent link with the traditional folk forms, only using them occasionally.⁴

⁴ It is understood, however, that these framework categories are relative, considering their boundaries. However, the categories recognize that there are certain characteristics that should be considered, especially when it comes to establishing necessary omissions.

Those puppeteers in the first category were prioritized for the inventory. However, whenever possible, puppeteers belonging to the other two categories identified during the registration process were also documented. Thus, the intention was to 'cover' and refer to this broader universe of Northeastern Popular Puppet Theater - NPPT⁵, from the more 'traditional' to more 'contemporary' perspectives and forms.

Regarding the territorial limitations, the inventory prioritized Northeastern states with a higher incidence of active popular puppet theater, namely Pernambuco, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba. While NPPT can also be found in other regions, (mainly the mid-south of the country, due to the displacement of Northeastern populations to large urban centers) Brasília - DF was taken as a case study, which supported the perception of the strong assimilation and reinterpretation of the popular forms in different contexts, since most of the puppeteers living there fit category "b", appropriating elements of traditional forms and incorporating them into their shows.

Another important definition refers to the nomenclature. When the request for registration was made by the ABTB in 2004, the project was titled "Mamulengo - Brazilian Popular Puppet Theatre as Intangible Heritage". It was decided, however, to change the nomenclature to "Northeastern Popular Puppet Theater: Mamulengo, Babau, João Redondo and Cassimiro Coco". This decision was made because the term "Mamulengo" came to designate in a general way not only the puppet theatre of Pernambuco, where it originated, but also the various puppet theatre expressions of the Northeast region.

An important reason for this amendment concerns the old master-puppeteers who do not call their shows "Mamulengo" and do not recognize themselves as "Mamulengueiros" (puppeteers who perform Mamulengo). Among these are the majority of puppeteers from Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte and Ceará. In these states, popular puppet theatre has different names. So, the project title was changed to cover the diversity of NPPT more inclusively.

⁵ Throughout the article, the acronym NPPT is used to designate the Northeastern Popular Puppet Theater.

3. Research teams

As stated previously, the overall coordination of the registration process was done by Professor Izabela Brochado (PHD - University of Brasília), also responsible for the analytical dossier. Professor Adriana Alcure (PHD – Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) was responsible for the audiovisual dossier, consisting of two DVDs and also for the documentary research in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

Due to the scope of the registration process, five research teams were formed, dedicated to each of the four Northeastern states and Brasília-DF. The composition of the research teams was based on academic criteria: knowledge on popular puppetry and previous research experience. Another important criterion was to have multi-disciplinary teams, composed of puppet theater researchers, historians/anthropologists and puppeteers.⁶

The incorporation of one puppeteer articulator in the fieldwork research teams brought a significant contribution to this process, considering the important role played by them in liaising between the team and the puppeteers of the older generation.

4. Documentary research: survey of secondary sources

The documentary research was based on public and private collections - libraries and museums among others - in the aforementioned states as well as in Rio de Janeiro City. At this stage, historical information about NPPT was prioritized. This included: possible origins, sources, transformations and recreations in different cultural contexts; surveying and mapping of documentary references available, and identification of their producers and event venues.

The documentary research revealed that NPPT presents a significant but dispersed range of written documents (theses, dissertations, articles) and audiovisual material (photographs, videos, films, sound recordings). From the documentary research these were classified and cataloged. In

⁶ The state coordinators were: in Pernambuco - Isabel Concessa, theater professor at UFPE (Phase I) and Gustavo Vilar, ethnomusicologist (Phase II); in Paraíba - Amanda Andrade Viana, puppeteer; in Rio Grande do Norte - Ricardo Elias Ieker Canella, drama teacher UFRN; in Ceará: Angela Escudeiro, writer and puppeteer; and in the Federal District: Kaise Helena T. Ribeiro, drama teacher and puppeteer.

addition to these documents, scenic materials (puppets, booth and props) belonging to institutions, puppeteers and collectors were inventoried.

Despite the wide range of documents and scenic materials, collections which are accessible and in good condition are almost non-existent. Apart from the Mamulengo Museum in Olinda, Pernambuco, others collections are dispersed and there are very few spaces for the safe-keeping of these assets. Therefore, very important private collections (almost always following on from the death of master puppeteers) are in disrepair, often sold by families who do not understand their value. An exemplary case is that of Master Solon, from Carpina, Pernambuco, a great reference both as a puppet maker and as a Mamulengueiro (Mamulengo puppeteer). Many of his puppets and props were sold to collectors after his death in 1988.

The preliminary survey also confirmed the location of puppeteers and people with key information, which allowed the state teams to conduct indepth research in the field.

5. Fieldwork research: meeting the puppeteers

This step entailed the researchers going to meet the puppeteers in their local area. This process led to several surprises and unforeseen events. Some have been positive, for example, the inclusion of new puppeteers in the registry, since they had not been identified during the first phase. Others were negative, such as the absolute lack of recognition of the puppeteers coming from their municipalities and the various states' cultural departments, due to the almost complete absence of records.

The fieldwork research included interviews, primarily with the puppeteers, and the audiovisual recording of their collections of puppet and props, of their workplaces and also their cities. In each city there were also presentations of their puppet shows, which were filmed by the research teams.

Besides the technical aspects included in the registration process, the fieldwork research also aimed to involve local government bodies in the activities developed in each of the municipalities as a strategy to promote the local puppeteers. The presentation of the puppet shows, which happened in public spaces, served to give visibility and appreciation to the master puppeteers and their art.

Knowing the context of the communities – the puppeteers and their public - allowed researchers to achieve the following: to understand fully

what characterizes NPPT as a part of Brazil's heritage; to verify its importance in order to preserve it; to identify and understand the elements that constitute it as a theatrical expression; to understand its historicity and the dynamics of its transformations; and finally, the meanings built together by its artists and public.

6. The meetings: playing and telling their stories

The registration process also involved meetings in each of the states included in the research in order to bring together puppeteers, teachers and researchers of puppetry, representatives of the state and municipal cultural organizations, representatives of IPHAN and the community in general.

The meetings were composed of lectures, round-table talks, discussion wheels, interviews and puppetry performances, all of which were open to the communities. The discussion wheels focused on the narratives of the puppeteers, who discussed aspects of their learning processes, their shows (characters, plots and transformations) and their expectations regarding the registration process. Within these 'wheels', the puppeteers were free to conduct their narratives, followed by them opening their bags of puppets to the audience. These meetings were of significant importance to the registration process, as well as to the puppeteers themselves, for they had the opportunity to meet each other, thus widening the networks and ties to a socio-cultural group of great relevance.

The meetings also served to mobilize puppeteers and alert municipal officials and cultural entities to the current situation of NPPT and its producers. A very good example was the creation of Potiguar Puppet Theater Association (APOTT) which was inspired and driven by the João Redondo meeting in Natal. At the assembly, the puppeteers discussed strategies, voted and elected the director of this association which is very active nowadays.

This fact, among others, showed that the explanation of the registration process itself could drive efforts to preserve and safeguard the heritage. Contact with the communities also indicated the urgent need for safeguard actions.

7. Number of registered puppeteers

In Pernambuco, eighteen Mamulengueiros were located in sixteen municipalities, most of whom live in the coastal region.

In Paraíba, the fieldwork was carried out on the coast and inland areas, where thirteen puppeteers were located, two of whom died during the registration process.

In Rio Grande do Norte, 46 puppeteers were recorded, located in 28 municipalities and the state capital, Natal, which has the largest number of living, active puppeteers, totaling seven.

In Ceará, thirteen puppeteers were recorded, three of whom died during the registration process.

In Brasília – DF, eight puppeteers were recorded.

What is evident, however, is that the number living, active puppeteers is much higher than previously thought, since after the closing of the inventory, new puppeteers are continuously being found, indicating that research is an ongoing and often inconclusive process.

8. Conclusion

In terms of patrimony, NPPT is part of the social life of a community, linked to other aspects that characterize it as such. At the same time, it is in dialogue with puppet theater forms that are located in the field of “the Arts”, and are recognized as predominantly artistic events within the context of other urban arts. So, some questions arise: how do these two “forms” (and their variations) coexist and/or conflict? How does this popular puppet theater, whether in its traditional or more contemporary form, relate to the theater segment included in the field of performing arts? The answers to these questions are complex, since the dynamics of the present time dislocate categories which were once solid and fixed, by bringing new spaces and configurations which make categorization more difficult.

Entering into the context of the puppeteer’s communities allowed researchers to know the true extent of this knowledge, to understand what characterizes it as a cultural heritage, to verify its importance in order to preserve it, to identify the elements that constitute it as a form of expression in the field of theatrics, to understand its historicity and the dynamics of change, and finally to understand the meanings and significance contained within and for the communities which produce and receive NPPT.

The human and cultural richness of the heritage contrasts with the precarious situation of the puppeteers. The majority of them, mainly

the older ones, live in the interior areas of the Northeast states, in both urban and rural areas. The economic situation of the majority is difficult, and only a few participate in the national festivals circuit and participate often in puppet theater unions and associations.

Parallel to this situation, there is a significant increase of new puppet theater groups, most of them formed by young puppeteers. Unlike the puppeteers of the older generation, many of these new groups support themselves almost exclusively through puppetry, either by performing in diverse contexts such as schools, children's birthday parties, shopping centers, cultural and tourist spaces and festivals. Also, the marketing and sale of craft products such as puppets and toys or even the development of educational projects are other forms of income.

There is a contrast between these two groups: the older puppeteers, isolated in their communities, and the newer puppeteers, working in new contexts and settings. The expansion of the puppeteer's fields of activity is an important fact, as it creates sustainable opportunities for them in new contexts and updates NPPT as a form of expression. However, it is evident that the vast majority of the older generation of puppeteers – the master puppeteers - is not involved in these new situations, and thus, their very important collections (whether visual, dramaturgical or musical) are being lost due to the lack of specific policies that prioritize the popular puppet theater as a cultural expression rooted in the social life of communities, and not just as salable merchandise or as a didactic teaching tool.

The registration process indicates a viable way to establish safeguard policies that will give strength and sustainability to NPPT. Further to this, research teams collected many suggestions throughout the registration process from puppeteers, artists, managers and so on (all of them are listed in the dossier) on ways to safeguard NPPT. These suggestions included: specific actions for the puppeteers; production and circulation of their shows; maintenance and recovery of the constituting artistic elements of this puppet theater; archiving and documentation; exchanges with other puppeteers: meetings and festivals; transmission of knowledge; and participation in tenders and procurement.

To maintain NPPT as a cultural expression that is part of our long-term memory, it is urgent to face the precariousness observed, especially among older puppeteers. Their adverse economic situation is reflected in the fragile condition of their assets, notably their collections

of puppets and musical instruments. Also, it can be seen in the drop in participant numbers of puppet groups, evidenced mainly in the decline of live music performed by musical groups, which being replaced by pre-recorded sound.

The economic difficulties of some of these old puppeteers have led them to despair and desperate attitudes to disrupt their practice. Mano Rosa, a puppeteer from Pernambuco, said that he was sometimes taken by a desire to burn all his puppets, "by the grief and sorrow that the situation gives me." Bibiu, also from Pernambuco, recounts that his father, Saúba, a very well-known puppeteer, "only just failed to burn his puppet bag because I arrived in time to stop him". Reports of the research teams during the fieldwork also revealed the dismay of many puppeteers in the face of the difficulties they have experienced. In some cases, teams have had to work hard with some puppeteers, fixing puppets and props to enable them to stage their shows again and thus, complete the registry steps.

Being obliged to suppress scenes and themes, replacing musicians with recorded music and dramatically reducing the duration of puppet shows, among other factors, cause a lack of continuity and possible losses of both material and non-material collections. The support of and fulfillment of contracts by local governments is crucial to the survival of NPPT and its puppeteers, in terms of both art and employment. It is in their communities that older puppeteers have found the deeper meanings of their performances and therefore, it is there where they can deeply reveal their art and expertise. The puppeteers being recognized not only by the public but also by their governments, the puppeteers being able to live with dignity from the practice and circulation of their puppet performances - these will surely give the new generation of puppeteers enough motivation to continue this cultural heritage, understanding it not only as a way to survive, but also as a form of expression and art, which gives meaning and structure to community life.

The safeguard proposals in the dossier point to specific actions relating to various aspects that are inherent in the practice of north-eastern popular puppetry, such as production and circulation of shows, maintenance and recovery of the elements which constitute the puppet theater, the creation and recovery of archives and documentation. Actions specifically related to the artists were also suggested, such as increasing

the frequency of meetings and festivals, the sharing of their knowledge, health insurance and participation in tenders and bids.

The process of registration of Northeastern Popular Puppet Theater - Mamulengo, Babau, João Redondo and Cassimiro Coco as a part of Brazilian cultural heritage is justified when one considers the originality and historicity of this theatrical expression, passed on from master to disciple, from father to son, from generation to generation. It is a tradition that reveals a facet of Brazilian culture, where puppeteers, through the art of puppets, act out stories borne out of tradition. It is a tradition that speaks of social relations during a certain period of Northeastern society and stories that continue to reveal their daily lives, through new plots, characters, music, verbal language, colors and joy that are inherent in their social context.

However, it is the effective application of safeguards that will ensure the maintenance of this cultural heritage of Brazil.

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