Negotiating Tradition and Modenity in Amazonian Pottery

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Negotiating Tradition and Modernity in Amazonian Pottery

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This paper explores pottery production in Icoaraci, a village located at the mouth of the Amazon River, the State of Pará, Brazil, not only as economic activities but also as signifying practices. In other words, I propose that pottery production in Icoaraci should be interpreted as a site in which the relationship between Amazonian prehistoric past and Amazonian modernity is being continuously negotiated. Those who are involved in that multifaceted process are potters, local community, merchants, tourist industry, tourists, local governments, business sectors, academics, collectors, etc. All of them have, somehow or other, interest in the local pottery production, but their respective positions and visions are highly diverse.

In the first place, I should briefly mention on the prehistoric ceramics in the lower Amazon. Compared with the much admired and appreciated pre-Hispanic pottery of the Andean civilizations, the prehistoric pottery in the Amazonia is usually rather modest in its technique as well as in its design. There are, however, two notable

exceptions: *Tapajonic* ceramics from the region surrounding Santarém at the mouth of the Tapajós River and *Marajoara* ceramics from Marajó Island.

Tapajonic pottery is famous for its very distinct forms and designs, which include highly characteristic decorative appendages of zoomorphic motifs. About the societies which produced *Tapajonic* pottery, sporadic information is available in the descriptions by the 16th century Portuguese and Spanish explorers of the region, but systematic archaeological research is largely yet to be done.

On the other hand, as for the remnants of the original inhabitants of Marajó Island reliable scientific excavations started only in the middle of the 20th century (by Betty Meggers and Clifford Evans). Recent archaeological research (by Anna Roosevelt, Denise Schaan, and others) has demonstrated that societies with hierarchical social institutions and highly developed material culture flourished on the island for centuries. Among the four archaeological phases, the most elaborate and impressive polychrome ceramics were fabricated during the

Marajoara Period, which lasted approximately from 400 AD to 1300 AD.

Today the indigenous societies which produced *Tapajonic* and *Marajoara* ceramics no longer exist in the locale. The present inhabitants have no direct cultural connection to and no memory whatsoever of the pre-colonial traditions of the region. It is not uncommon that uncovered archaeological objects are used in local households for utilitarian purposes such as for the storage of water. Ironically, among the local residents, those who know best the value of those precious objects are the looters, who illegally sell uncovered pieces to outsiders.

In sum, for centuries, *Marajoara* and *Tapajonic* ceramics were practically unknown to the regional population, majority of which are not indigenous people. Lack of interest and information characterized people's attitude toward the prehistoric ceramics up until the middle of the 20th century. A kind of 'social amnesia' separated those splendid prehistoric ceramics from contemporary Amazonian potters.

Since the colonial period, Icoaraci has been one of the

principal pottery producing regions in the lower Amazon. Today more than one hundred kilns are in business in a small town, mostly run as family-owned small factories. Among the potters there are more men than women, but there is no strict division of labor along the gender line. The vast majority of the ceramics produced for sale was basically utilitarian: domestic utensils (pots, vases, bowls, plates, etc.) and industrial materials (earthen pipes, containers, etc.). The city of Belém, the 'capital' of the Amazonia, has been the main market for the products manufactured by Icoaraci potters, before and after the the advent of tourism.

The ceramic industry in Icoaraci has experienced the ebb and flow. One of the most serious crises came after the Second World War, when, as in other regions of the world, the cheap plastic and metal wares increasingly replaced the traditional clayware for daily use. Facing a drastic decline in sale, not a few potters migrated to other regions and the remaining potters were forced to develop a new line of products in order to survive.

In the middle of 1960s, Mestre Raimundo Cardoso, a now renowned potter began to make replicas of *Marajoara* and *Tapajonic* ceramics. The replicas made by him are carbon-copy reproductions of the original archaeological pieces preserved in the Emilio Goeldi Museum in Belém. A series of interviews I conducted with him during my research in 2000 shows that Mestre Cardoso, who was born in 1930, learned to make rustic pottery with his mother in his childhood, but it was only after engaging various occupations that he started to make serious efforts to pursue the vocation. The reason why he made that choice was that he visited by chance an exhibition held at the Emilio Goeldi Museum featuring regional archaeological pottery. According to him, in those days, ordinary people did not have much chance to see those splendid ceramics fabricated by the original inhabitants of the region. He was immediately fascinated by the beauty and technique of those objects and decided to dedicate himself to make authentic replicas of those rare pieces. After careful examination

of the traditional techniques and designs and repeated experiments, he and his wife Dona Inês succeeded in making plausible replicas for sale. Their success in selling their works at high price to museums and collectors both at home and abroad gave strong incentives to other potters to follow their example.

But very few of them could come up to their exceptional talent and skill. In addition, there was and still is a very limited demand for those expensive quality replicas. As a result, a great majority of potters were forced to manufacture in quantity less expensive objects such as tableware for daily use and souvenirs for tourists. Those mass-produced 'Icoaraci style' ceramics are characterized by simplified geometric designs, which, to some extent, transmit to consumers a sort of 'Amazonian indigenous flavor'. On the other hand, there are people who criticize those products by calling them *Tapajoara* : that is, tasteless mixture of *Marajoara* and *Tapajonic* designs.

Most of those 'Icoaraci style' ceramics, which hardly attract art dealers and collectors, are to be sold at

relatively low prices to local consumers and tourists from outside. Although there is always certain demand for those objects, the competition has been so harsh that the potters keep complaining: "The more you make and the more you sell, the less you earn".

In recent years there have taken place several significant changes which may influence the future of Amazonian pottery. Among those changes is a government-sponsored project of 'modernizing' ceramic industry in order to create a new source of income and employment for the region. At the same time, it intends to make effective use of folk culture to promote a distinct regional identity. The project called *Programa de Artesanato do Pará* (Program of Crafts of Pará) started in 1998 as a joint venture of the public and private sectors and is coordinated by SEBRAE (Serviço de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas do Pará). The Program includes a wide range of new strategies: marketing research, technical and financial assistance to potters, workshops for potters, sales promotion, and so forth.

Archaeologists from the Museum are also involved in the Program, giving lectures about the archaeological ceramics. They expect the potters, in turn, to transmit this information to a wide public.

One of the new strategies worthy of note is the development of a totally new line of products such as sophisticated tableware (plates, glasses, etc.). The targeted customers are local hotels and restaurants catering to tourists and affluent people. Those ceramics, which are called '*vanguarda*' (avant-garde) by a coordinator of the Program, are basically modernist in style. But some hint of regional flavor such as geometric lines inspired by *Marajoara* design, makes them distinct from the ceramics produced elsewhere. The combination of regional tradition and universal modernism is expected to give additional value to the products and open a new market for Amazonian 'quality' pottery.

As we have seen, in contemporary Amazonian pottery of Icoaraci, tradition is constantly being discovered and/or invented. Although the majority of the potters are not direct inheritors of the prehistoric tradition, the pottery is used by

them as a resource for 'inventing' their cultural past, or imagining the continuity from the past through the present to the future. In other words, more than other things, pottery serves as a vehicle that could convey various interpretations of the relationship between Amazonian tradition and Amazonian modernity.

Archaeologists are specialists of recovering the past, to be sure, and their task is to dialogue with the ancient objects in order to decode the original meanings. But, besides them, there are others who are engaged in dialogue with the past as is the case of Mestre Cardoso and Dona Inês. In the process of making replicas of the excavated objects, they have been continuously in conversation with the unknown indigenous potters who made them in the remote past.

On the other hand, other potters who are producing 'Icoaraci style' ceramics for mass-consumption are also interacting with the past. It is true that their products for sale are considered to be lacking authenticity. But, it could be said that, more than the authenticated replicas

made by the Cardoso Family, those '*Tapajoara*' style cookie-cut pots and vases are, in some sense, more creative appropriations of the regional traditions.

In conclusion, I would like to add only one more point. The concept of 'prehistoric ceramics' is highly compromised one, to say the least. Because they could be called 'prehistoric' only from the point of view of the modern Amazonian people whose history is totally discontinuous from the pre-colonial societies which produced such magnificent pottery. In other words, Amazonian modernity came to be built upon the ideological erasure of the Amazonian 'prehistoric' history. Thus, what is going on in Icoaraci is not just another case of revival or recovery of the past cultural traditions. It could be and should be a difficult task of listening to the voices which have not been listened to for such a long time.

Note: The present paper is based on the author's fieldwork in Icoaraci and other parts of Brazil (January- October, 2000).

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