

4.1. Caldeirão da Santa Cruz do Deserto: From Intentional Community to Cultural Artefact

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Abstract

Caldeirão da Santa Cruz do Deserto was an intentional community with messianic, ecological, and socialist characteristics. It was organized in the city of Crato, in Ceará State, northeastern Brazil, by a pilgrim devoted to Father Cícero, and existed from 1926 and 1936.¹ In light of memory and utopian studies, this paper aims to understand the role of art in the making of the history of this community, transforming it into a cultural identity artefact of the region during and following decades of media and government attempts to silence and defame its memory.

Key words: Caldeirão, intentional community, Father Cícero, Armorial Movement, Araripe Geopark

Northeast Brazil was where the Portuguese started their occupation, with the cultivation of sugar cane and coffee. With the deterioration of the soil and the arrival of immigrants from the abolition of slavery, people were attracted to other regions of Brazil in search of economic opportunities and modernity. In the media, an idea and image of the Northeast was created as the poorest and most backward part of the country (Albuquerque Júnior, 2011: 56–7). Despite the exodus, some rich landowner families stayed and managed the land feudally with semi-slave labour for more than half of the twentieth century.

In 1889, the Republican regime was proclaimed in Brazil, bringing the end of the monarchy. It was a moment of religious uncertainty as a rupture of ties between the State and the Catholic Church was threatened by three antagonistic forces of positivism, Freemasonry, and Protestantism (Menezes, 1959: 194–209).

Between 1877 and 1915, four major droughts ravaged the Northeast. Along with depopulation for the “progress” of the South (Facó, 1976: 29–37), orthodox

Catholicism in Brazil was in a state of decomposition. The lower classes lost contact with the official Church in sacramental liturgies, due to fees or being neglected by priests who preferred to welcome the rich (Della Cava, 2013: 49). A void was left which made room for a “thought of the end of the world” fuelled by prophetic priests during droughts (Della Cava, 2013: 63).

In this context, the newly ordained Father Cícero Romão Batista was sent in 1871 to the then Vila de Tabuleiro Grande, a small village with only two streets, a chapel, and a school. It had about two thousand inhabitants, and belonged to Crato, then the largest city in the interior of Ceará (Della Cava, 2013: 43, 64). The cleric assumed the roles of “doctor, counselor, provider and confessor” (Della Cava, 2013: 136).

Due to an alleged miracle, in March 1889, the communion wafer given by Father Cícero turned into blood in the mouth of Beata Maria de Araújo.² This miracle happened more than sixty times, attracting many pilgrims and making the village grow rapidly in population within a short space of time (Della Cava, 2013: 55). Since 1911, the town has been called Juazeiro do Norte. It is now the second largest city in Ceará. Father Cícero is considered the “saint of the Northeast”, and a twenty-seven metre high statue stands in his honour in the city.

During his education, Father Cícero had a lot of contact with the Jesuit formation. During a cholera epidemic, his mother and sister were assisted by one of the charity hospitals founded by Father Ibiapina, who travelled the region as a Jesuit teacher (Della Cava, 2013: 34). Father Cícero was charismatic and popular, and found occupation for the many people who were arriving every day. Juazeiro had become a “promised land” because of the supposed miracle. One of these pilgrims was Beato José Lourenço (Della Cava, 2013: 53), to whom Father Cícero leased land in Sítio Caldeirão, in Crato, and instructed him to take some followers there to live from agriculture (Ramos, 2011: 59).

About two thousand people lived there and, under the slogans of “fé, trabalho e oração” (“faith, work, and prayer”) and “tudo é de todos e nada é de ninguém” (“everything belongs to everyone and nothing belongs to anyone”), more than three hundred houses, dams, a sugar cane mill, warehouses and a church were built. At first, the community was agricultural only, but it received other workers and eventually manufactured clothes, tools, bricks, and kitchen utensils, among other products. The inhabitants ranged from pilgrims to drought migrants and farmers, who fled from semi-enslaved labour (Ramos, 2011: 61–5).

With the death of Father Cícero in 1934, the community lost its protector and began to suffer persecution from the Church, which claimed the lands left by him and was uncomfortable with the so-called “popular Catholicism”. The ruling elite, which was losing workers, also cracked down, with support from the government which was opposed to a community that did not use money to live (Ramos, 2011: 121–33).

On 11 September 1936, the community was attacked and expelled by the police, accused of being “communists”. Everything was destroyed. Only one house remained besides the Church (Cordeiro, 2008: 10–11). The residents fled to a place higher up the hill. A few days later, the expelled residents were surprised by an air raid. The exact number of dead is unknown, nor are there records of their names. The police report enumerates about two hundred dead, but non-official reports estimate more than seven hundred victims, including men, women and children (Cariry & Holanda, 2007: 277). After the massacre, survivors returned to their homeland and many settled, mainly in the cities of Juazeiro and Crato. The press and public opinion sided with the government and the Church, and treated the inhabitants of the community as criminals. The newspapers of the time labelled them as “subversives” and “religious fanatics” (Menezes & Pinho, 2017: 75).

In the decades of silence since, six of the seven types of forgetting proposed by Paul Connerton (2008) can be identified: (1) “repressive erasure”, the survivors are considered “enemies of the State” without the right to remember the names of the dead; (2) “prescriptive forgetting”, the community is seen as a “communist” threat to the recent republican regime; (3) “forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity”, new experiences inhabit the silence that covers the loss of past experiences; (4) “structural amnesia”, only socially accepted memories are taken into account; (5) “forgetting as annulment”, all information is organized in the form of archiving, making its permanence in everyday life unfeasible; and (6) “forgetting as humiliated silence”, for all of the above, survivors often do not feel comfortable telling their descendants about the past.

The remnant population felt prohibited from talking about Caldeirão, but the subject “Caldeirão” became more than prohibition — a demanding policy that would require an appeal to rationality — it became a taboo, conceptualized anthropologically as a practice of avoidance (Olick, 2007: 40). Taboo is not merely or morally neutral, it requires being designated as dangerous, dirty, disgusting, contagious, and/or degenerate. It operates through a mythical order, which involves moral principles and definitional claims that are beyond debate and rational arguments.

We can observe in the survivors of genocidal events such as wars, the Holocaust, and the massacre of Caldeirão, the formation of a trauma that damages the self through a non-heroic memory, where any physical and intellectual control over the environment is subtracted. Language loses active connotation of choice, will, power of reflection, and assurance of expectations (Langer, 1991: 177). Trauma transforms the body into a recording area, unable to narrate. Therefore, the silence of the remnant population remained for about four decades, fed by a mixture of fear, shame and loneliness (Assmann, 2011: 283).

Despite decades of silence in the media, and the difficulty of obtaining testimonies from survivors, the history of Caldeirão gained space to be told and mythologized in the arts, especially in cordel (chap-book) literature and in xylographs (woodcuts). As Aleida Assmann observes, “it is as if memory, no longer having a cultural form or social function, had taken refuge in art” (2011: 385). Della Cava writes that around 1900, “Northeastern bards and singers appropriated the prophetic figure of Father Cícero and introduced him into their popular repertoire” (2013: 35), mythologizing the priest as a miraculous entity and one of the legendary heroes of regional popular belief. As a consequence, Caldeirão became “a symbol of progressive thinking about the Brazilian agrarian structure” (Della Cava, 2013: 35).

Cordel literature and xylographs became the main arts in Northeastern Brazil, but were considered “poor” in the rest of the country. This meant that, even without much notoriety and appreciation (since the Northeast was considered a separate Brazil), they forged a mythical image of the history of Caldeirão and Father Cícero. Today both are symbols of regional identity, represented in customs, fashion, and art in general.

Brazilian sociologist and anthropologist Gilberto Freyre attributes Dutch influence in the seventeenth century as one of the factors in the cultural differentiation of the Northeast from the rest of the country, and regards historical events as stronger than natural issues, such as drought and miscegenation, in the formation of regional identity (Albuquerque Júnior, 2011: 89). Regional identity makes it possible to sew a memory, invent traditions, and reconnect to the past, giving direction and meaning to existence (Albuquerque Júnior, 2011: 91).

After the 1964 military coup, there were twenty-one years of dictatorship, with much censorship of the arts. Still considered poor arts, Cordel literature and xylographs enjoyed a certain freedom of dissemination, because they were restricted to the Northeast region, regarded by the rest of the country as a poor and miserable place, which survived through policies of government charity.

It was only after 1970 that cordel literature and xylography were accorded canonical *status*, followed later by music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, and other artforms. The Armorial Movement, headed by Ariano Suassuna, then Secretary of Culture for the State of Pernambuco, sought to catalogue, classify, and define artforms that could be considered genuinely Brazilian, making use of the symbology of heraldry and studies of the popular arts. Suassuna saw in Brazilian armorial art common traits and a connection with the magical spirit of the pamphlets of Northeastern popular romance, the music that accompanied these songs (played on viola, fife, and violin), and the xylographs that illustrate their cordel covers (Suassuna, 1975).

The end of the silence concerning Caldeirão would only happen, however, with the end of the military dictatorship in Brazil. This is how the film *O Caldeirão da Santa Cruz do Deserto*, by filmmaker Rosemberg Cariry, was released in documentary format in 1986. With appealing imagery from the Armorial Movement, the film tells the history of the community through the testimonies of members of its remnant population, as well as from police officers and politicians of the time. Launched in a historical “new” period, the so-called “redemocratization of Brazil”, it was received as a symbol of a movement of transformation. There was a sense of optimism that overcame the “moment of crisis” so common in post-revolutionary moments (Ricoeur, 1997: 359).

This film is considered a watershed, as it promotes an appreciation and new focus on the history of the community. From “religious fanatics” and “enemies of the government” to “surviving heroes”, Caldeirão began to become part of the structure of regional identity, through the characteristics of faith, work, resilience, Christian love, and utopia. Aby Warburg sees art as a form of cultural memory, for its power to survive for long years and its ability to traverse large spaces. With a valorization of the arts, academic research, books, and other historical approaches to the history of Caldeirão also began to appear (Erlil, 2011: 21).

A survivor of attempts at disqualification and historical erasure, the community of Caldeirão da Santa Cruz do Deserto is more alive than ever in the memory that forms the identity of the inhabitants of Northeast Brazil today. There are countless products derived from Caldeirão, a true cultural artifact, portrayed not only in chap books and xylographs, but in many forms of literature, painting, sculpture, theatre, cinema, music, fashion, and graffiti, in forms that vary from simple portraits to questions about its symbology, the absence of mourning, sociological analysis, and retractation. In the form of pilgrimages and masses, rites created to keep the memory of the community alive now attract thousands of people every year.

The place has been legally occupied since 1991 by about 50 families from a Brazilian Landless Movement (MST), a community called Assentamento 10 de Abril, practitioners of sustainable agriculture. There are ongoing projects to become a Geosite of Araripe UNESCO Global Geopark (as the touristic visitation sites are called, as they are considered of unique wealth from the geological, historical and cultural point of view) and to be part of the Organic Museums Project of the Ceará State, which already has more than 10 museums in operation.

Notes

1. Born in Crato, Father Cícero Romão Batista is considered the founder of Juazeiro do Norte and a unifying character in the history of the region (Marques, 2019: 3).
2. “Beata(o)” was a title given to people who took vows of a life of chastity, work, charity and faith. It was instituted in the region by Father Ibiapina, without the canonical approval of the Church (Della Cava, 2013: 55).

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