

Manioc: Root of Brazil

abstract

According to a common dictionary definition, “artisan is someone who practices a non-agricultural activity, oriented to the processing of goods, through his own work and of his family”, and yet, “... according to rules determined by his experience and study”. Let us consider the expression “his own” – it refers to the propriety of the tools and to the time of work, but also to the technical and cultural heritage that derives from the work of transforming and the research inherent to it.

Manioc is at ‘the root’ of Brazilian food culture from the earliest times, and whose legacy of ancestral practices, created for its processing and consumption, is still practiced in some communities in different regions of Brazil. This is what we will observe in the configuration of artifacts and processes developed, and remain preserved by rare craftsmen, singularly, in the region of Bragança, northeastern Pará, to benefit manioc [*mandioca* in Portuguese], by which name it is known edible species and more widespread genus of *manihot*, composed of several varieties of edible roots.

This paper intends to document, especially, an important *acquis* of Brazilian material culture, consisting of what we approach here as ‘popular project’: that one whose authorship must be attributed to humanity itself, and that is still maintained, shared and transmitted, by tradition, through generations, by means of observing and of the acquaintanceship in community environments.

“Manioc: Root of Brazil” aims to be a record of a set of knowledge comprising, essentially, the relationship between man and the nature of its surroundings, his *terroir*.

keywords

artifacts, arumã, Brazil, manioc, vernaculars techniques

Introduction

*“Mande a tarrafa
Com toda a linha
Que pega peixe
Como farinha.”*

*“Send the hook
With the whole line
That catches fish
As flour.”*

Floury: Knower, learned, acquainted with the subject matter. “Floury” in History. Flour is synonymous with abundance, wealth, crowd.

CÂMARA CASCUDO (2004, p. 241)

According to a common dictionary definition, “artisan is someone who practices a non-agricultural activity, oriented to the processing of goods, through his own work and of his family”, and yet, “... according to rules determined by his experience and study”.

Let us consider the expression “his own” – it refers to the propriety of the tools and to the time of work, but also to the technical and cultural heritage that derives from the work of transforming and the research inherent to it.

Manioc is at ‘the root’ of Brazilian food culture from the earliest times, and whose legacy of ancestral practices, created for its processing and consumption, is still practiced in some communities in different regions in Brazil. This is what we will observe in the configuration of artifacts and processes developed, and remain preserved by rare craftsmen, singularly, in the region of Bragança, northeastern Pará, to benefit manioc [*mandioca* in Portuguese], by which name it is known edible species and more widespread genus of *manihot*, composed of several varieties of edible roots.

Manioc is a bush that would have had its earliest origins in western Brazil (southwestern Amazon) and that, before the arrival of Europeans in America, was already widespread as a food crop, as far as Mesoamerica (Guatemala, Mexico). Spread to various parts of the world, today it has Nigeria as its largest producer.

In Brazil, it has many names used in different regions, such as: *mandioca-brava* [wilding manioc], which contains poisonous hydrocyanic acid; *aipim*; *castelinha*; *macaxeira*; *mandioca-doce* [sweet manioc]; *mandioca-mansa* [meek manioc]; *maniva*; *maniveira*; *pão-de-pobre* [poor’s bread] and varieties as *aiapuã* and *caibana*, or names that designate only the root, as *caarina*.

The complex sequence of processes that transforms this native and mythical plant in flour, a staple and essential food – ballast of the oldest traditions –, which are part of the repertoire of knowledge of Brazilian popular culture, is discussed from the point of view of the production of each of the functional objects that make up the core set to the practices involved in the course of this ‘productive chain’, as well as the specificities of their respective forms of employment.

This paper intends to document, especially, an important *acquis* of Brazilian material culture, consisting of what we approach here as ‘popular project’: that one whose authorship must be attributed to humanity itself, and that is still maintained, shared and transmitted, by tradition, through generations, by means of observing and of the acquaintanceship in community environments.

The processes to be emphasized in “Manioc: Root of Brazil” are: pressing; sifting and packaging of relatively small quantities of *farinha d’água* [flour of water] (flour made of fermented manioc) modality – in *paneiros* [hampers] – for being the ones where manually made artifacts are involved, crafted from the same plant, sturdy and common in the region – the *arumã* [aririte] (or *guarimã*).

Casa de Farinha [Flourmill]

However, for the proper understanding of the function and use of these artifacts, it will be presented, in summary, the *farinha d’água* ‘production line’ in a *casa de farinha* [flourmill]: from harvesting of the manioc root, going by its peeling off; grating; pressing, sifting, roasting and packaging.

Talking about the flourmill in the singular, certainly does not account for the diversity of these buildings in various regions of Brazil that, despite differences in constructions and

equipment adaptations, keep similarities with regard to the sequence of the stages in the ways of making flour, remnants of the indigenous tradition, the collective nature of this activity and intense sociability among participants. These collective spaces of work and sociability can be very simple, divested, fully open, with handcrafted devices on a space of beaten ground, sheltered by a roof woven from plant fibers, as most flourmills found in the North and Northeast of the country, where the presence of indigenous traditions is still observed.



Called flourmills, mill ranches or simply ranches, the *casas de farinha* found in the South of the country are closed, rectangular buildings, strongly marked by European influences brought by Azorean immigrants who made an adaptation of the techniques of mills and windmills of their land of origin and ways of making flour they learned from the indigenous. In this region, the presence of industrial production in modern factories equipped with advanced technology is gradually eliminating the traditional mills, which has worked to convert the handmade flour in valued product and old mills in places of memory.

The *arumã*

From the family of *matantáceas*, it is a kind of reed of smooth and straight stem with a flat surface, flexible, that bears out the cutting of millimetric splints. The stem of the plant is peeled, scraped and polished. It can be dyed or left in its natural color, but also used with its bark, which gives it greater strength and a clear lacquered brown color.

The herbaceous plant, medium and large sized, grows in swampy places, such as *florestas de igapó* [flooded forests]. The tussocks are composed of stems at different stages: the “bud” is a new stalk that reaches the height of one meter; the “eye” is a young stem, reaching over one meter and has up to four leaves on its end; and the “mature” is leaf branched and taller than one meter.

The crop occurs during the dry season, when the *igarapés* [streams] are no longer flooded, usually from August to April. When the drought is very intense, as in the months of November and December, the picking is difficult because the watercourse gets too dry, making impossible the access at the harvest site.

A period of three years is recommended as a management plan for the correct replacement of *arumã* – therefore, other streams must be searched for as some may be left as a ‘rest’ area.

To perform a proper management, men must first clear the *igarapé* [stream] by removing fallen branches and trunks from the canal and release the crossing for the canoe. They

should then mark the area and measure the density and extent of the *arumanzah*¹, tracing measurement points in the clumps, which are used for annual monitoring of the species. *Arumã* mature stalks should be cut in half.

Pruned unripe and thinned out with the aid of a machete, a clump of *arumã* results in a set of stalks of smooth and straight stems, which are tied in a bundle for easy transport to the village.

During harvesting, the artisan should recognize the strong and healthy stalks that will confer durability to the *arumã* articles. In addition, the machete defter handling avoids damage to the tussocks' young shoots and stems. This good management practice is one of the guarantees of new crops.

Weaving

Separating the smooth bark from the core of the stems of *arumã* – the noble part used for the weaving – and producing splints, uniform in width and thickness, is an operation that requires precise movements. The core is further divided into two parts, separating the hull to make packaging and other panniers, from the very central part, wet, which is discarded.

To rip off, than the hands, a knife and a crosshead of *arumã* stubs, artisans use their feet and even their mouth.

Weaving is a solitary act that requires attention, patience and dedication and it is made with care, to last.

The start of the weaving is made with two or three splints. When beginning with four, it yields more, but is considered an exaggerated option, used in emergency situations.

Among the Baniwas² there are different names that define the act of weaving, related to the number of splints used at the beginning point. The number of splints to start weaving is determined based on the width of splints or the kind of design, except for the sifter, when only the two splints mode can be used, ensuring an adequate woof to sift the manioc dough, either to make flour or tapioca, or to retain the fruits grain.

The pressing / *tipiti*

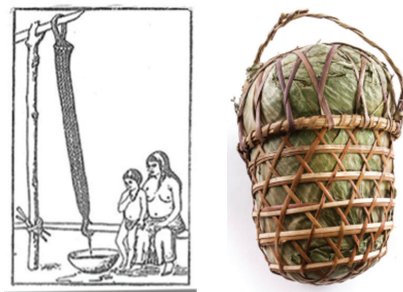
The *tipiti* is a sort of press or squeezer of plaited straw, used to drain and dry the grated manioc. The *mandioca-brava* [wilding manioc] has a deadly poison that was converted into food by the indigenous when they created the *tipiti*. It not only aids in the process of extracting the poison but the collected poisonous liquid itself is boiled and transformed into *tucupi*³.

¹ Area of *arumã*s.

² Baniwa, also known with local variants as Baniwa, Baniua, Curipaco, Vaniva, Walimanai, Wakuenai are South American Indians, who speak the Baniwa language belonging to the Maipurean (Arawak) language family. They live in the Amazon Region, in the border area of Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela and along the Rio Negro and its tributaries. Baniwa Indians rely mainly on manioc cultivation and fishing for subsistence. They are also known for the fine basketry they skillfully produce.

³ Tucupi is a seasoning and sauce of yellow color. Once extracted, the broth "rests" for the starch (gum) to separate from the liquid (tucupi). Initially poisonous due to the presence of hydrocyanic acid, the liquid is cooked (a process that eliminates the poison) and fermented from three to five days, and can then be used as a sauce in cooking.

The *tipiti* is done with splints of *arumã* and is a kind of elastic cylindrical basket with an opening and a handle at the top to secure it to a fixed point, and below, to introduce a lever and make it stretch.



Seu [Mr.] Francisco Trovão, as he weaves the *tipiti*, reports to the object as an animal, on expressions that have absolute morphological relationships: head, nape, ear, mouth, body and tail.

The sifting / sifter

The sifters are platform baskets, used for the separation of the manioc and improvement of the dough, but may also serve to transport the flour in small amounts. They may be circular or square shaped and its woof can be more or less open which will determine the kind of flour to be obtained.

The edges of the sifter must be made of the stalks for its structuring, and the woof of the 'fabric', made of splints of *arumã*, presents various geometric compositions, ranging from those simply orthogonal to those more complex.

The packaging / *paneiro* [pannier]

The *farinha d'água* is put into a pannier for packing and transport. The pannier is a kind of basket with a wide-open woof, square based, opening up in a circle, made from the stalks of *arumã*.

Inside are arranged the leaves of the same plant, "about twenty six to thirty", according to *Seu Bené* [Mr. Bené], Benedito Batista da Silva, "the flour professor" as he is known.

These leaves will form a kind of lining that covers the entire basket inside, where it will be deposited the *farinha d'água*. The ends of the leaves are then folded over the flour so as to cover it completely, forming a sort of flower bud.

Seu Bené, flour producer and dealer from Bragança, State of Pará, besides producing his flour, made from the yellow manioc that is peeled and softened for about four days in the stream running water, manufactures the pannier for transporting and protecting the flour for up to a year, in addition to conferring it a special scent.

Conclusion

"Manioc: Root of Brazil" aims to be a record of a set of knowledge comprising, essentially, the relationship between man and the nature of its surroundings, his *terroir*.

Manioc is usually associated with the basic livelihood of the poorest people, whose ancestral tradition and knowledge, built up by generations, constitute the heritage of many rural communities that have on family farming and the production of manioc their livelihood.

The strength of these traditions consist of human ingenuity invested in species classification, the mastery of the doings, the secrets of a good flour, a savory *beiju*, a warm tapioca: alchemy that turns poison, cyanide present in manioc, in delicacy.

Also called retreats, *farinheiras*, manioc-mills, factories, the flourmills are an essential reference for rural communities, the meeting place par excellence, center of knowledge and learning, cooperation, expression of collective life.

Part of the rural landscape in all regions of the country, they are a symbolic space, link between the different dimensions of the same process. Situated within the confluence between nature and culture, articulate biodiversity, methods of cultivation, trade and social systems of meaning.

Finally, it is important to note that this work had the direct advice of Teresa Corção, from Instituto Maniva [Maniva Institute], which is developing a fundamental and constant work with the community of *farinheiros* [flour producers] of this region, in Brazil.

References

- CÂMARA CASCUDO, Luís da. (2011) *História da alimentação no Brasil*, 4th edition, São Paulo: Global.
- (2004) *Locuções tradicionais no Brasil*, São Paulo: Global.
- SÁ FREIRE FERREIRA, Tatiana de (Org.). (2010) *Trançados e entalhes de Novo Airão*, Rio de Janeiro: IPHAN, CNCFCP.
- NOGUEIRA, Maria Dina; WALDECK, Guacira. (2006). *Mandioca: saberes e sabores da terra, Rio de Janeiro*: IPHAN, CNFCP.
- VIDAL, Lux; SILVA, Aracy Lopes da. (1995) "O sistema de objetos nas sociedades indígenas: arte e cultura material", In: *A temática indígena na escola*, Brasília: MEC/MARI/UNESCO.

Films

- "Professor da farinha" (2004). Produced by Made for TV.
- "Seu Bené vai para a Itália" (2008). Produced by Made for TV.
- "Seu Bené e Dona Maria" (2010). Produced by Made for TV.
- "Tipiti - Bragança, Pará" (2011). Produced by Made for TV.