



# A search for Brazilian craft identity

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## Abstract

The basis of this article is a question posed to Aloisio Magalhães, Secretary of Culture in 1975. It was about a possible recognition of a Brazilian product. The proposal was to find the cultural references that form the national handicraft. The aim was also to understand how the objects presented this country material and immaterial wealth. It was important to understand the process for producing symbols, information, and culture. We presented some local objects with native and mimetic characteristics. They illustrate that the 'Brazilianness' of our craft is not pure, but multicultural. Because of that, it was necessary to define today's culture concepts to understand the identity construction. The research took a theoretical and an existential-phenomenological approach. It defined territorial identity, cultural changes, trans-culturalism, globalization, and hybridity. The challenge was that Brazil has an extensive cultural diversity. That is due its colonization process and intense migrations.

## Keywords

Brazilian handicraft, cultural identity, trans-culturalism, multicultural

## Introduction

In 1975, Severo Gomes, Minister of Industry and Trade, asked Aloísio Magalhães, Secretary of Culture, the reason why it was not possible to recognize a Brazilian product. After forty years, this is the question that this article seeks to answer. At that time, Aloísio also said that to understand a culture, it was necessary to know its reality in its various moments (Magalhães, 1997:115). He suggested mapping and documentation to comprehend Brazilian material and immaterial wealth. This paper's initial purpose was to follow the Secretary's proposal. The idea was to find the cultural references of a Brazilian craft. It was important to understand the process of symbols, information, and culture production. We illustrate that the 'Brazilianness' craft is not pure, but multicultural by presenting some local objects with native and mimetic characteristics.

The research took a theoretical and an existential-phenomenological approach. We defined territorial identity, cultural changes, trans-culturalism, globalization, and hybridity. The challenge was that Brazil has an extensive cultural diversity. Because of this approach, it was necessary to define today's culture concepts to understand the identity construction. We discussed cultural identities and their strengthening and weakening. We evaluated the Brazilian product by its socio-cultural bias and we also confronted its relationship with its extensive territorial dimension. Before the theoretical foundation is laid out, it is important to thank the CNPq – National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, a well respected scientific institution in the Brazilian academic milieu, for their financial support to our participation in the ICDHS Congress. It is also relevant to say that this research is part of Ms. Paoliello's postdoctoral studies in Faculty of Fine Arts at Lisbon University, Portugal and Ms. Machado's Master's Degree in Integrated Planning Management at Vale do Rio Doce University, Brazil.

## Theoretical foundation

Culture is a set of meanings and interconnections that shapes one's identity. Through symbols and representations, it introduces what is internal and singular. Claval (2013:95) established three conceptions of culture. The first places culture as a set of practices, knowledge, and individual values. The second sets the principles that determine an individual's choice. The third concept presents the attitudes and customs that give the social group its unity. Accord-

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ing to this author, culture comprises many variations. In this paper, the latter has an important role in the collective identity construction. That is the one that should be analysed to understand the Brazilian identity elements capable of producing a sense of nation.

National identity “provides a series of stories, images, and landscapes. It also builds sceneries, historical events, national symbols, and rituals. All those represent the shared experiences. They are the losses, triumphs, and the disasters that give meaning to a nation” (Hall, 2003:52). It collaborates towards building the feeling of belonging. To identify is to demarcate borders, to make distinctions on who belongs and who does not. It divides what is proper and what is foreign, same and different.

Local culture and social relations reflect that this feeling is linked to territoriality. Topophilia (Tuan, 2012) reflects this sense of place belonging. It's an engagement loop that connects people with a given part of a space. It's about affection. This word comes from the verb to affect that means to touch, to cause a certain sensation. It is also to appropriate and to choose what is important in each individual perception.

The being and space relationship is a mutual constitution, an inseparable web. Territorial identity is perceived, interpreted and imagined, especially when it anchors in landscape qualities. It is a reflection of a sense of place. According to Heidegger (2001), “we are not in space. We are being spatial.”

Marandola and Dal Gallo present the being-place term, whose relationship

presupposes a mutual and simultaneous construction. The subject constructs the place at the same time as he is being built by it (...) The places where the person lived or lives are responsible for their way of being. Through perception, sensation, cognition, representation, and imagination, the being-place is constituted. (Marandola and Dal Gallo, 2010:411)

To become a collective experience, the nation must represent each individual. People should recognize in space the symbolic elements related to their territory and history.

Territorialising is the process of territorial reconstruction. It is the place and community relationship rediscovery. Some authors have explained this process. They divide the process into three possibilities. The first is to denominate. It is the creation and the assurance for cultural practices. The second stage is the space control. Geo-symbols are used to understand and organise it socially and spatially. It is a reification phase. After that, the territorial system should be structured. This last stage reinforces the identity establishing spatial and identity links. It gives up ground to the identity and places value on the territory.

New territorial processes promote new meanings. Therefore, they provide the appearance of other identities. There could be a national identity, a regional and local one that could happen at the same time. Territorial simultaneity could also happen and it that causes the appearance of dual or multiple identities.

Bauman named this process of post-modern society as liquid. According to this author: “Fluids neither fix space nor bind time. They are constantly ready to change it. It is the flow of time that counts, more than the space in which they happen. After all, they occupy that space only for a moment” (Bauman, 2001:9). So, how to recognize a Brazilian product? That is this article's central question. We must consider that “things are symbolic ornaments of identities” (Bauman, 2001:100). In a world of instability and continuously transformed identities, objects also become unstable.

It is important to understand a little more the significance of the being-place. For that, we present three approaches on migration by Marandola and Dal Gallo (2010). They talk about transnationalism, multi-territoriality, and in-between territoriality. These concepts will help us in understanding the unfinished contemporary identity and the Brazilian craft symbols.

The transnationalism considers the space as a fluid. The person is no longer limited to the origin nor to the arrival place of settlement. The multi-territoriality is about the loosening of the national borders that become gradually more permeable. It is about a transit in the various spaces. The in-between territoriality is when people live between regions and between cultures. They are between being and not being a citizen. They are divided between the demands from the origin place and the ones from the destination place.

Another type of structural change is also transforming the present society. It is the globalisation process. Tarouco and Reyes state that “Globalization is the end of Geography or the annulment of space. It can be expressed by the 'dispossession' of human activities. It is the 'depersonalization' of the place that is not uniqueness anymore” (Tarouco and Reyes, 2011:2).

The locality refers to a historical construct between society and the nearby territory. It is not only contrary to a global position. According to Hall (2003), globalisation would be responsible for some collective identities formation movements. One is the disintegration of national identities; another is the strengthening of these

national and local identities by a globalisation resistance. It is a local reaction.

Haesbaert and Limonad (2007:41) discuss the socio-cultural homogenising image resulted from the globalization. Their texts explain the dissolution of local identities that could culminate in a depersonalised global space. This fragmentation as another face of globalisation manifests itself in the form of exclusion.

Canclini introduced the term hybridisation in various ways.

At this point it must be said that the concept of hybridisation is useful in some research to cover conjointly forms of cross-cultural contact that usually carry different names: radical or ethnic fusions called *mestizaje*, syncretism of beliefs, and also other modern mixes between the artisanal and the industrial, the refined and the popular, written and visual forms in mass media messages. (Canclini, 1997:19)

It is about simultaneous actions, in which everything is interchangeable. It is a process of intersection and interculturalism. The result appears in cultural changes and in conflicts between tradition/modernity, local/global, old/new. With hybridisation, dispossession and repossession reappears, and also territorial relocations and new symbolic productions. In Brazil, that happened since the beginning of its colonization process and intense migrations. The decline of national identities gives away to new hybrid identities and globalisation encourages the appearance of various territorialities and hence to identities diversity. That argument alone could stop us from mapping the national cultural values embedded in Brazilian handicrafts. There is no longer a political nation-state able to make a homogeneous culture. "National identities are strongly generic" (Hall, 2003:61). Therefore we can state that the Brazilian national product does not exist in its uniqueness.



Fig. 1: A soap dish from Ouro Preto.  
<http://www.vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/arquitextos/12.141/4235>

### Object-place

The craft objects are narratives. They are the symbol of a situation and a defined place, so they show us an identity. They become a speech and then translate our culture. We can also name them as 'reflexive products' because they can emerge from and also interpret some human's experience.

In this way, we present five objects examples that have Brazilian cultural signs. They are impregnated with the place where they were produced. It is a specific time-space production. They are cultural narratives that represent a small part of this country handicraft.

We will begin by showing the first Brazilian handicraft revitalisation project result. It is the result from a meeting between designers (Heloisa Crocco, Marcelo Drummond, and Porfírio Valladares) and craftsmen from Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais.

The project discussed the cultural significance loss in products developed with soapstone. The local architecture, the Baroque monuments and Aleijadinho works formed the new objects basis, as in figure 1.

This object-place reflects the culture of this place. A functional contemporary demand, 'soap dish', symbolizes people's identity. It chronicles various references. First, the soapstone – a low-value material - exploration history is explicit. The baroque architectural reference is the second one. Their contra curves reveal a symbolic identification. The technique used is the last narrative because it is an interpretation from one from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is a time rereading of several constructed narratives that forms this object-place.



Fig. 2: Santarém gourd.  
[http://www.acasa.org.br/reg\\_mv/OB-00815/dc786f1d5a41de9ac4310467a0df51e8](http://www.acasa.org.br/reg_mv/OB-00815/dc786f1d5a41de9ac4310467a0df51e8)

The next object-place is made from *cuiêira's* fruit. It was dyed in black and decorated with ornamental incisions. It is important to say that the gourds are used as tools in Santarém region since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Local indigenous communities have developed this artisanal practice and IPHAN registered them as a cultural heritage. They are still used today throughout the Pará state to serve its typical dishes.

In this historical object, some images found in Belém's museum collections were inserted. Some archaeological images found in tapajônicas' ceramics were also used as cultural symbols. Figure 2 shows the object developed by the Santarém's Women Association.

The designs and patterns used are similar to those used in the Indian body painting. That results in a material culture. When these patterns are reused, this people reconstruction history happens. This object-



Fig. 3: Anemone lamp from Pedras Altas | Rio Grande do Sul.  
[http://www.acasa.org.br/reg\\_mv/OB-01857/6ac6f6c806d193b13e7c78ef5ec076e2](http://www.acasa.org.br/reg_mv/OB-01857/6ac6f6c806d193b13e7c78ef5ec076e2)

place provides the narrative of two epochs, their habits, and their culture.

From the southeast toward the south of our country, we present the third object-place. It was developed by Tina Moura and Lui Lo Pumo in partnership with the Ladrilã artisans. They are from Pelotas, Jaguarão, and Pedras Altas, cities in Rio Grande do Sul. This region is famous for its carpets and pure wool blankets. However, the collection developed different objects from this traditional material. One example was the Anemone lamp (Figure 3). It awarded the 25<sup>th</sup> edition Design Award of Brazilian House Museum.

This object narrative began with a way of thinking beyond the traditional material application. Its seasonal application changed for new uses with new colours. The light that exceeds the existing material is a novelty. This temporal-spatial displacement provides new symbolizations. The narrating identity and historical references prints a new contemporary identity. It is a re-look to what is typical but it also reinforces the importance and the history of the existing material.

The next example presents the work from Handcraftsmanship Association from Monte Castelo. They are from Maranhão state. Their objects are made from the Buriti, a majestic palm tree, abundant in the region. Its fruit is a chestnut color and is covered with shiny scales. The basket (figure 4) was woven from its large leaves and also used its oval nut.

This artisanal practice is linked to cultural traditions, in which we could also notice indigenous influences. It brings strong values. It is a product that reflects the artisan itself and that also expresses a cultural identity. It uses local raw materials, traditional skills, and a cultural heritage that results in a unique craft product. The last object-place to be displayed is made of clay. The piece - almost an ex-voto - carries all the expressiveness of the artisan. It features the faces of the people that lives around its house and also from those imagined by the artisan. Figure 5 shows the craft object made by Irinéia Silva from Muquém, Alagoas. It is an object-place that embodies an individual identity. It goes beyond the historical culture narrative. It is an artist look on the local material, on the people nearby, using a particular technique.

We noticed that craftsmanship could be seen as an interpretation, as a personal symbolism. It can also be the result of a single person and her/his local territorial identity. We could exemplify it not only as identification of a collective narrative but as a personal and a symbolic narrative of a place.

It is worth mentioning that the objects-place presented here are just a small selection to show the diverse craft developed in Brazil. They are local identities that increase the sense of belonging to the responsible artisans. So, is there a genuine Brazilian handicraft product? We can answer no, as we stated earlier. But we can also say yes. "Communication between man and nature is mediated by objects. They are signs of happiness, satisfaction, power, wealth, science, technique, etc." (Henrique, 2008: 204). The identity generates products that represent someone or somewhere. They appear as a mirror of certain local place and time.

Our difficulty in finding Brazilian's product identity is the result of this country great cultural diversity, its colonization process and the intense migrations that occurred here. Hall (2003:59) stated "most nations consist of separated cultures. There was a suppression of the existing one. Culture was unified with a long process of violent conquest". Brazilians were composed of Indians, Portuguese, Italians, Japanese, Germans, Africans, etc. This ethnic diversity is the foundation of this country culture. As in many other nations, it reflects the "difference as unity" (Hall, 2003:62). Those are the reasons why the Brazilian nation doesn't exist and therefore the impossibility to visualise its cultural and craft characteristics.



Fig. 4: Basket from Monte Castelo.  
<http://artesanatosebrae.blogspot.com.br/2009/08/catalogo-de-artesanato-colecao-mao-das.html>



Fig. 5: Head from Muquém.  
[http://www.acasa.org.br/reg\\_mv/OB-02663/208cd362a9bcd974d50f538900c446cb](http://www.acasa.org.br/reg_mv/OB-02663/208cd362a9bcd974d50f538900c446cb)

## Final considerations

The objects-place craft deals with the production of objects, materials, techniques, symbols, people, and place. It is a local and personal narrative interpretation. The objects are a reflection. They represent identities and histories. A simple object reflects a cultural territoriality. The Brazilian handicrafts should not be read as 'frozen' products. They should not be seen as 'pastiche'. Otherwise, they should be the result of its culture accumulation. They should take possession of this country's history and be the result of all the cultural contamination process to this date. To recognize a Brazilian handmade product we should use a space-time reference. This will describe the country's identities, culture, materials, symbols, and techniques. We should also concern that Brazilian craft is multicultural in essence.

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## Biographical note

Carla Paoliello is an Architect, an Artisan, and a Researcher. Her master's and doctoral degrees were in Structural Engineering in 2001 and 2008. Nowadays, she is a post-doctoral student in the Faculty of Fine Arts Center, at Lisbon University. She is interested in discussing craft, culture, design, and the territory.

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