

ST. Bartholomew of the sea: a Holy Bath

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Video:



https://youtu.be/jS-IEq_1NPs

The richness and variety of the rituals present in the Pilgrimage of Saint Bartholomew of the Sea introduce us to a complex intangible cultural heritage. In the process of undertaking its manifestations, emerges the sense of sacrifice to the community and the pilgrims, who seek, through the rituals of the black rooster and the holy bath, to exorcize evil and search for a prior purity. Between the forces of evil and the force of the water, the body is submitted to goodness and healing, in search of resolution for the problems which afflict the pilgrims.

Keywords: Holy Bath; Intangible Heritage; Body; Healing; Belief.

During the years of 2015 and 2016 we carried out research in the parish of Mar, municipality of Esposende, North of Portugal, to accomplish the inventory of the Pilgrimage of Saint Bartholomew of the Sea (*Romaria de São Bartolomeu do Mar*) and Holy Bath (*Banho Santo*). The pilgrimage has its main day on the 24th of August, every year. The central cultural expressions of this pilgrimage are:

- a) At the church and its square, the pilgrims perform the following rituals: the offering of the black rooster by the children (not always black and not always a rooster),¹ circumventing the church in three turns; they enter in the temple, kiss the saint's image located in the table of the parties' committee (some pilgrims put the image on the head); pass underneath the saint's *Andor* (a portable platform that carries the holy's image);
- b) Then, the pilgrims head to the beach and take the Holy Bath: the children are usually delivered to a *banheiro* (term used to address the adult responsible for bathing the child in the ritual) who takes them to sea, to be dipped in three waves (it can be seven),² and returns them to the parents who pay a stipulated value;
- c) The adults, even the elderly, plunge or wash parts of their body in the "holy waters";
- d) Following, is a family meal in the dunes of the beach, in tents next to the beach or in the homes of the families;

- e) In the afternoon, takes place the solemn procession, taking the patron saint, St. Bartholomew, to the sea, where is addressed the festive sermon, and afterwards returns to the Parish Church, along the Praia Avenue;
- f) After the procession, occurs the auction of the chickens, ritual that ends the relationship of the pilgrim with the envisaged rituals. The people stay on site and indulge in entertainment and conviviality activities, given that this is, for many pilgrims, the only day of the year they go to the beach.

One of the aims to study the Pilgrimage of *São Bartolomeu do Mar* and the Holy Bath was to integrate this cultural manifestation in the National Inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, as a measure of safeguard. The methodology focused on four areas: 1. Gather the entire bibliography and material relating to the Pilgrimage of *São Bartolomeu do Mar*, about which many ethnographers and historians have written; 2. Trigger an approximation to the community of Mar and pilgrims who sought the celebrations, in order to integrate them in the research process and the construction of the inventory, pursuing both the most relevant theoretical underpinnings to this field and the UNESCO convention's recommendations; 3. Plan and develop the field research, taking into account the methodologies of ethnographic research and the anthropological analysis for content conception; 4. To

¹ Traditionally, the rooster should be black (in the sense that the narrative of the offering of the 'rooster' always refers it as a 'black rooster', very common in the region in past times, now reappearing because of competitions and awards, such as the one held in Barcelos, in the 'Feast of the Rooster'). Scholars point out this feature, by being able to associate the colour black in many of the figurations of the devil, almost always painted black. Also our informants associate the black colour to evil, to the mysterious. Doing the pilgrimage and offering the black rooster, aim, they say, to leave with the holy saint the 'problems' and 'disease' that might afflict children. Questioned of the reason for offering rooster of other colors and even other animals (ducks, for example), they respond: "what matters is to give the alms, the bird, to the saint! He is not fussy!" (Mary Augusta, 73 years old, of the village of Barroselas). That is, given the difficulties in the availability of black roosters, the pilgrims do not get stuck to tradition, they think that the important thing is the offering and the ritual of the pilgrimage. This fact demonstrates, once more, the flexibility of the practice of the ritual, and the ability to interpret and change what tradition proposes (this was verified in an extreme way in 2017, in the case of the Holy Bath, because there were no waves and the bath had to be carried out in a lagoon, between the rocks, given the erosion of the coast). The believer pilgrims, negotiate and express their will, circumventing the limits of both scholars and established formalities, without fear of the non-effectiveness of the ritual, contrary to many theoretical assumptions.

² The bath in 7 (seven) waves is founded on the sacred significance of the number 7, which is considered the perfect number, the wholeness, manifesting at the same time the awareness of the fullness and the mystery. It is a symbolic number widely present in christianity and other mythologies. Therefore, frames the creation of the world made by God in 6 (six) days, resting on the seventh. Thus, it is the beginning and the end. The number 3 (the perfect number for the chinese) is connected to the geometry of the triangle and to the christian Trinity, which gives it another strong symbolism. At *S. Bartolomeu do Mar* is almost always the dip into 3 waves. In 12 years of field work, we never witnessed submerging the children in seven waves. What stands is that erudite narrative. In occasions they can be dipped more than three times (without coming to seven), in the case the «*banheiro/a*» thinks that the diving was not well performed. The goal is to dive into three waves, an odd number, loaded with spiritual symbolism.

share critically the contents of the inventory with the local community.

The Pilgrimage of *São Bartolomeu do Mar* and Holy Bath has awakened a particular interest in researchers, for several decades now. In a first moment, it was merely described in monographs (Cepa, 1944; Oliveira, 1971) and appeared on miscellaneous news in the newspapers; but in recent decades, following the ethnographies of Jorge Dias (1960) and Callier-Boisvert (1969), it arose a more in-depth attention, reinforced with texts by ethnographers (Oliveira, 1971, 1984; Pereira, 1986; Santo, 1988; Barros & Costa, 2003), historians (Soares, 1985, 1987, 1988), psychiatrists (Malpique, 1987), and new monographic syntheses (Vieira s/d, 1994; AAVV, 2000; Capitão, 2004).

As to the majority of traditional pilgrimages (Sanchis, 1992), this pilgrimage summarizes many of the senses expressed in festive celebration of people's faith: praise for the deity and patron saints; requests or thanks for healing and protection; manifestation of social cohesion and of belonging to a community; an alliance between the sacred and the most important expressions of people's everyday life revealed in the moment of exception of the celebration, a place and time to carry family life and economic production; the celebration of the artistic expressions, the cycle of life and of the body in a constant dynamic.

The Pilgrimage of *São Bartolomeu do Mar* is a religious celebration and a specific expression of folk culture. Crowds of pilgrims, together with the local community, follow a well-established geography of the sacred, between the square of the Parish Church and the beach, passing by the Old Church and its tank of water, previously experienced as sacred. The celebration focuses on the expression of the painful body – illness or as pledge on the children's bodies – and in the ritualization of the bath, where prevails the protective and curative water (Vigarello, 1988; Le Breton, 1993; Sennett, 1994; Duerr, 2002; Porter & Achama, 2004). Close to the patron saint, St. Bartholomew, the pilgrim either invokes the divine

grace or offers his body as covenant of gratitude to the gift received - in healing and health - against any impurity or deviation (Terry & Urla, 1955; Douglas, 1991; Eliade, 1994; Hidioglou, 1994; Bastos, 2003). Parents, accompanying the children, approach the image of the saint, come into contact with it, placing it on the head, passing underneath the *andor* and following it in the procession to the beach. They walk alongside with the patron saint, perceiving in the martyrdom of St. Bartholomew, who was skinned alive, and in his story associated with the struggle with the forces of evil (figured in the character of the devil), an opportunity to connect the holy saint's sacred powers with the evils that afflict them: skin diseases, fear, stuttering and epilepsy (the *gout*). The manifestations of these diseases define the limits of normality of the body and its problematic expressions (Canguilhem, 1992; Gil, 1997; Butler, 1993; Corbin, 2003).

Children are the promise of the world, yet they are fragile, bodies of wounded innocence, subjected to the forces of evil. Their parents, first protectors of the risks of the world, are also the first to feel the obligation to protect them from the invisible forces. When they take the children on a pilgrimage in fulfillment of a promise, they seek the spiritual force, magical, that will give the child a healthy life, a rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1909). They pray to God, to the saint; they call upon unknown forces, but feared and expected in the course of life. At *S. Bartolomeu do Mar* they make a pilgrimage to "dive" into spaces where the patron saint is; to immerse them, literally, in the water of the sea, receiving the telluric force of living waters.

The richness and variety of the rituals present in the pilgrimage of Saint Bartholomew of the Sea introduce us to a complex intangible cultural heritage. To participate and live this pilgrimage gives us the chance to feel inside the deeper meanings that our communities have built over centuries and, albeit coming over as ancient and belonging to "other world", where the sacred, magical reigns, once understood it continues to uncover the fears and

anxieties that still today govern our daily lives. It is certain that we do and express ourselves with other means, supposedly more contemporary and sanitized, which seem to us alien to atavisms of beliefs that are dated and magical.

In this pilgrimage we find ancestral rituals and narratives in context. They invoke concepts and words peculiar to the vocabulary we use nowadays; rituals and strange behaviours to our daily lives. But as we enter in the contents and in the words, in the rituals and behaviours expressed therein, more aware we are of belonging to the same humanity and the same fears, regardless how "modern" we are supposed to be. This fact grounds the investigation into a community's intangible heritage and the joint responsibility to do its inventory, to defend and to promote it as a cultural heritage, worthy of being passed on to the next generations. Moreover, that is not done with the sense of mere "spectacle" for display, but as a body of knowledge to reinterpret, challenging and provocative in the world that we are now creating.

It is very difficult and even controversial to define intangible cultural heritage, as well as its demarcation from the material heritage, which endorses and gives it visibility (Ahmad, 2006). The bases upon which we establish the inventory of the intangible heritage today are not exactly a consensus among researchers in the areas of anthropology and of cultural heritage, but are those enunciated in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It defines what is intangible cultural heritage (Article 2 (1), which are the domains by which it is expressed (Article 2 (2), as well as those responsible for the inventory (Article 11) and the need of the participation of the community (Article 15).

For communities, the celebration of their intangible cultural heritage presents itself as an opportunity to celebrate the belonging to a social group and to share their identity group, presenting the cultural expression as "knowledge", an appropriation of the world made with the intentions that are significant to their

everyday lives. The form as the communities established performances, rituals, narratives and artefacts gave them a sense of harmony in the customs, within a certain social context and space; a sense of group that perseveres in time; the power to set the social rules of behavior, both in the moments of everyday life and in the moments of exception; the ability to resolve, through the artefacts and knowledge, the challenges that nature poses and the basic needs they require; coherent visions of the world that are consistent with the interpretation that provides the best consensus about the forces that rules nature, the bodies and the future of their lives.

It is this complexity and depth that confronts those who investigate the intangible cultural heritage: to see the multiplicities and "layers" of meaning between the practices and expressions of intangible culture; to determine the points of conflict and the paradoxical elements that emerge out of the desired consensus; to interpret and bring to the present this heritage (if it is indeed heritage, it is a heritage with meaning for the present), without being fully a traitor (but a translator), manipulative of the senses by enforcing authority, be it academic or political (Smith, 2006).

It is no coincidence that there is some consensus on the requirements for ethnographic methodology and for anthropological work, to the extent that the contexts of observation of cultural expressions oblige to put into dialog, and under a critical gaze, different research methodologies. Therefore, the process of inventory, with the description/interpretation and dissemination of cultural expressions, is itself an opportunity for questioning the theoretical object of study and subject to inventory (Harvey, 2001; Smith, 2006). Looking at the intangible cultural heritage, we must bear the notion that it is always an "act of creation", constantly renewed and reinterpreted by the practitioners (Cominelli & Greffe, 2012). We can't yield to attempts on heritage process that stagnate the vitality of the cultural heritage, i.e. not to confuse the inventiveness of cultural expressions with their "invention", preserving a supposed "authentic" heritage, by which "authentic" is no more than a

petrified period, or else a vested construction of interested external powers, political or academic, to plunder from its bearers the dynamics intrinsic to the experience of living their culture (Smith, 2006). In the case of the intangible cultural heritage we always run the risk of "objectifying" culture since the knowledge, know-how or performances, and rituals that compose it are easily subject to fixation in order to carry out observation, in this way capturing the senses which should be manifested freely (Campelo, 2005). The intangible cultural heritage depends both on the temporality (Harvey, 2001) and on the social group, as lived by the community (Frost, 2016). Hence, the insertion of the communities in safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage assumes particular importance and meaning considering it is the community that, to express it, reflects the complexity of the experiences, and grants to the practice of cultural expressions a way to update the sense of belonging and identity (Watterton & Smith, 2010).

Conclusion

The content collected and subject of study in the Pilgrimage of *S. Bartolomeu do Mar*, with the Holy Bath, allow us to introduce ourselves into the experiences and ways sought by the pilgrims and

simultaneously provide the community of Mar and those who seek it, on the 24th of August, the consciousness of being holders of an intangible cultural heritage, worthy of being preserved and transmitted to future generations. The children, with the roosters on their lap and taken to the holy bath, see the family project of protection implemented. Their bodies are protected from the manifestation of evils and gain strength to meet the challenges to their expected physical development. The adults, already marked by stories of pain, of the monstrosity of a body touched by disease, by malformation, by forces and by desires that many associate with the devil, rely on the divine healing and the pilgrims' solidarity. The bodies display themselves on the beach in another dimension, the erotic, paradoxical in a sacrificial ritual, in search of propitiation.

On the 24th of August at *S. Bartolomeu do Mar*, in the church around the saint or at the beach in sacred bathing, what is present there is an understanding of the fragility of the body, of the complexity of desire, the establish of a relationship with the community, through the ritual meal, through the exuberance of the celebration, returning to the order of the world, to the original purity, being the dip in the water its supreme manifestation.

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