



Signification and resignification of *kaingang* indigenous art in contemporaneity: cultural resistance and survival

Significação e ressignificação da arte indígena *kaingang* na contemporaneidade: resistência cultural e sobrevivência

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INTRODUCTION

The present research has as its theme the *Kaingang* indigenous handicrafts in contemporary times, evidencing how the meaning and resignification of cultural elements occurs in processes involving trade for income generation and survival. The work presents a brief history of the *Kaingang* indigenous cultural universe with a focus on handicrafts, in order to understand its original context of production, including the materials commonly used, as well as the representation of symbolic elements. It records the perception of an *indigenous Kaingang* in the process of signification and resignification of the symbolic elements that make up the handicrafts sold in the streets of Chapecó and region, in the state of Santa Catarina, and, in this sense, exposes the apprehensions of a non-indigenous visual artist about the relations between art and indigenous crafts in processes of cultural resignification.

The relevance of this theme lies in the fact that the *Kaingang* indigenous peoples were reduced in the west of Santa Catarina, a region colonized by European immigrants who imprinted their own ways of life and work on the territory, thus instituting their cultural superiority. In this perspective, it is propagandized that the history of Chapecó concerns a group of migrants of European origin who, arriving in the region from the 1920s began a civilizing process that would have evolved from a small village to the city known nationally today, mainly through agro-industrial production (SILVA; HASS, 2017, p. 34). In this process, according to Pinto (2020, p. 19), the *Kaingang* Indians were unable to continue aspects related to their beliefs, habits and customs, as well as to cultivate their traditions: language, dances, foods, houses and social structure without class divisions and live in harmony with nature. When forced to adapt to a new and diverse conjuncture, the commercialization of handicrafts was gradually becoming a form of subsistence of populations residing in various regions of the country, predominantly in the western region of Santa Catarina, creating a script of mobility and cultural interaction between indigenous and non-indigenous.

For Emille Lappe (2012, p. 111), handicraft is also a means of keeping the *Kaingang culture* alive, given that, originally, it is characterized by its collective and dynamic dimension, which has undergone changes. It can be said, therefore, that the *Kaingang* "adapted" their culture to a world with principles, rules and customs that are beyond their control, limiting themselves to a process of acculturation.



With the ethnocentrist territorial reduction and indigenous settlement, families migrate to urban centers to sell objects and utensils that, traditionally, were made manually, for religious, hierarchical and cultural purposes, and now become merchandise, named "handicrafts" by non-indigenous people. Originally, the raw material used in the production of artisanal pieces was extracted from the forests and forests still preserved and, with the passage of time, a significant restriction occurred, forcing *the Kaingang* to seek new alternatives to continue the artisanal production.

Considering what has been explained so far, it is legitimate to say that this work contributes to the breaking of the social stereotype of "wild Indian" or even of "culturally backward people", and shows how indigenous people re-signify their art even with all the difficulties of being included in the contemporary world, in which they are deliberately invisible, marginalized and gentrified.

Based on the issues presented, it is expected that this work will collaborate with the integration and visibility of indigenous culture for non-indigenous people. In another perspective, the present research enables the debate about Art and Crafts in their relations. From this discussion, it is questioned: Is it possible to list its characteristics, aesthetic and conceptual elements, in order to suggest what characterizes Art, such as the place where the *Kaingang* Indigenous handicraft is located, is it Art?

GOAL

To investigate the processes of significations and resignifications of indigenous handicrafts. Understand and identify and subsistence of indigenous groups and, alongside these issues, record the perceptions of an *indigenous Kaingang* and a non-indigenous visual artist about the processes of production and commercialization of handicrafts.

METHODOLOGY

This research included a literature review and data collection through the application of questionnaires with an indigenous *Kaingang*, and a visual artist who uses indigenous aesthetic references for her productions, both living in the west of the state of Santa Catarina. The data collection instrument used followed a *Google Forms model* and was developed in two versions, related to the expectations of the participants' contributions.

DEVELOPMENT

Handicraft is characterized as a manual language, relative to the ability of people or groups of people. When looking at the history of art, one realizes that the first artisanal objects, with a utilitarian sense, appear in prehistory. At that time, the distinction between artist and craftsman was not set, and it is pertinent to question whether prehistoric man knew that he made art, or even understood what it was. Among the existing



hypotheses, it stands out that art arose suddenly, because the men of that time would have been interested in it and would have, therefore, expressed aesthetic needs ignored until then. (LIMA, 2020, p. 22). Also, according to Lima (2020, p. 21), "we could question, here, too, about the production of tools and utensils that man, called prehistoric, created with his hands. Was this production also considered art? Haven't we been artisans since prehistory?" In this follow-up, "[...]. Prehistoric man did not bother to separate anything. I didn't even know if I was an artist or a craftsman. Whether what I did was art or crafts." (p. 22).

In view of this, the distinction between art and crafts becomes better delineated in the Middle Ages (476 AD to 1453), a period in which the arts are separated into "Liberal" and "Mechanical". "In the first category, they identify themselves [...] grammar, rhetoric, logic and (...) arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music. In the second category are the so-called servile arts (weaving, manufacture of weapons, trade, navigation, hunting, etc.)." (GREFEE, 2013, p. 37 apud LIMA, 2020, p. 22). This division, similar to the classifications dating from Classical Antiquity (around the eighth century BC), which distinguished certain intellectual activities from the so-called vulgar or servile, which depend on the use of physical energy, helped in perpetuating the differentiation between doing and thinking, characterizing craftsmanship as a 'raw' manual service, the mastery of a technique, differing it from artistic making. The "artisan would be the one who makes and the artist who thinks, as if it were easy to sculpt without planning and without making decisions, without knowing the characteristics of the materials and creating without 'getting his hands dirty'." (LIMA, 2020, p. 23).

Once craftsmanship starts from the culture of a group or society, its technique gains expression in repetition, a characteristic that art would not have. In this sense, the notion of artist departs from that of artisan, because the artist is inferred from creation, and does not resort to copying. The idea of what art is has changed several times, according to social and cultural changes. Currently, in the face of the cultural multiplicity that results in several aesthetic aspects, "to evaluate art according to criteria in activity for only two decades is to not understand anything else that is happening" (CAUQUELIN, 2005, p. 15). In this direction, Anne Cauquelin (2005, p. 18) states that it is necessary to "see how the art of the past prevents us from capturing the art of our time."

In recent decades, there has been a growing involvement of indigenous people with art as a poetic of creation and expression. Recently, the indigenous anthropologist Sandra Benites assumed the post of curator at the Museum of Art of São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) representing a great achievement of all Brazilian indigenous peoples. Another example of indigenous participation in the art circuit is Yacunã Tuxá, an indigenous activist and visual artist of the Tuxá ethnic group from Rodelas, Bahia. Graduating in Letters at the Federal University of Bahia, she acts as one of the leaders in defense of the LGBTQIA+ indigenous cause. According to Henrique (2019, p. 49), "to respect differences and diversities, in general, it is also necessary this position of confronting their own ways of life, combating gender violence in their own



community." By evoking the strength of the women of her people, the artist's works allow a new look at the indigenous people who move between the villages and the big cities, building daily new strategies of resistance. The *Tuxá people*, like all indigenous peoples, since the process of colonization, go through all kinds of violence and discrimination, and the artist seeks, in her poetics, to represent the sense of resistance and struggle.

Through all this, it is understood that art has a historical meaning and responds to the human desire for representation. It follows academic norms and is related to time in the search for innovations or in the use of materials. It is updated with society and does not depend only on the manual skill of the artist, since it can be developed by multidisciplinary teams. Art is an essentially mental and creative activity, generating new artistic languages in their connections with materials, poetics and themes. Therefore, it is possible to assert that art approaches craftsmanship when both enter the field of creation, production and marketing, even with differences in value, quantity, market and consumer public.

Obviously, we can note that it is still worth discussing the separation between art and crafts, because this separation, through the post-colonialist way of analysis, only reinforces European prejudices in relation to the making of the "others". The privileges of today's world elites, of which Europeans are the forerunners, only make the art-handicraft divide more social than actually of aesthetic value. A typical example of this is the production of art books. Why do art books always refer to European art and "forget" the art produced in the rest of the world? (RODRIGUES, 2012, p. 93).

Consequently, what non-indigenous people regard as art, or crafts, is not necessarily classified in the same way in the context of the indigenous group in which they are produced.

Proceeding to the analysis of the data collection performed, the indigenous participant belongs to the *Kaingang group*, resides in the Toldo Chimbangue Village, is a teacher, graduated in Social Sciences and Master in Education. The non-indigenous participant lives in the city of Itá, Santa Catarina, is a visual artist, and has among her pictorial creations, works that make reference to indigenous culture. The first question addressed to the participants concerned the "function" of indigenous handicrafts. For the indigenous participant, *"the Kaingang handicrafts, in addition to having the utilitarian function, are fundamental for strengthening the indigenous identity"* and *"the process of strengthening identity, goes from the collection of the material (identification and location of the useful material, spiritual preparation to enter nature to remove the material, ask for a license, etc.)"*. In the visual artist's view, indigenous handicrafts, at first, have the function of sustenance and, later, utilitarian *"mainly in baskets. Another important function is to adorn (accessories) because they are easy to produce, transport and display at points of sale."* The visual artist adds:

[...] the cultural function is intrinsic in indigenous handicrafts. The sustenance, in its majority, is from the sale of this handicraft that presents Kaingang symbols in all its production: in the ancestral wisdom of the plantations and harvests, in the products used for confection, the knowledge about the



graphics and colors, the respect for the kamé and kanhru clans and, even, the culture of taking the whole family to sell this handicraft. This question opens up for other discussions. (SURVEY DATA, 2022).

When discussing the meaning and function of Kaingang indigenous art in *its original process of elaboration*, Santos (2018, p. 24) states that "in addition to being an instrument for subsistence, it also allows the resistance of Kaingang cultural identity in urban territories." He adds: "[...] The artistic creation in the manufacture of the objects is directly related to the construction of a memory that redefines the identities represented through the translation of the symbolic contents in the making of the braids." That said, the way to produce *Kaingang basketry*, inclusive, would start from the assumption that "artistic work is a factor of humanization and liberation, generating critical awareness and interaction between distinct social groups." (SANTOS, 2018, p. 24).

The second question addressed to the indigenous was how the *Kaingang* indigenous culture is represented in the handicrafts produced and, for him, the handicraft brings together several dimensions: spiritual; of preservation, when children are taught its importance; of strengthening culture and income generation, because "commercialization is also linked to the process of teaching and learning in the orality of indigenous children, Because in the whole process they are together, learning what is cultural and what is necessary for physical survival."

When questioning the visual artist if she considered that, aesthetically, the indigenous Kaingang culture is represented in the crafts produced, her answer was affirmative, because, although not in "its totality and originality, but present strong characteristics of the Kaingang culture, such as colors and plots." She said that in her artistic work, she attributes "to indigenous culture respect for the symbols of each ethnicity, the manifestations of faith and mysticism, respect for the narratives and oralities of each group," representing them "through graphics and colors."

Any element of appropriation is only accepted and assimilated by the dominant culture after being subjected to "a process of purification, emptying of meanings and erasure of the traces of its culture of origin," William points out (2019, p. 29). In line with Savoro, Silva and Notzold (2014, p. 40), "when it becomes a product of trade, indigenous handicrafts lose their quality and there is interference in the sacred sense of the objects," however, "it is one of the only sources of income for indigenous people."

On the other hand, Ribeiro (2013, p. 12) alludes that handicrafts recreate themselves aesthetically in the same way that the culture and identity of any people does, and "updates its products, being able to use new resources, new materials, new forms and current uses [...]. In a process that characterizes the changes resulting from intercultural contacts." However, the "traditional handicrafts, although recreated (product of an intercultural dialogue) from the contact with the external society, do not cease to represent the expression of the *Kaingang* culture affirming its ethnic-cultural identity."



Participants were asked about the appreciation of indigenous culture by non-indigenous people. According to the visual artist, in general, non-indigenous people do not value as they should and the lack of knowledge about indigenous culture may be the reason. "*We have genuine villages and other mixed villages, a cultural treasure very close and so far in its recognition.*" The indigenous man mentioned:

I believe that non-indigenous people do not even take the time to know what are the feelings that the original peoples develop for collecting, preparing and making handicrafts, after all, the vast majority of non-indigenous people have long ceased to be sentimental. Therefore, we believe that when they buy, it is only to meet their daily needs for utilities. (SURVEY DATA, 2022).

Ribeiro (1983) *apud* Savoto, Silva and Notzold (2014, p. 34) points out that indigenous craftsmanship has its "absolute value: to witness life, to give weight, importance, happiness to everyday life, either by the magical effectiveness attributed to ritual objects and adornment, or by the very intrinsic usefulness of the pieces destined to the facilitation of existence."

Regarding the commercialization of indigenous handicrafts in the streets of Chapecó and the region, the indigenous participant indicated that handicrafts are the main source of income for the communities. There is also work in agro-industries in the region, however, the production of handicrafts for trade in summer places (coast) and fairs is expressive. And as for the sale value of the handicrafts, the craft should have "*a fair price, but most of the time, this is not what happens, because those interested in the purchase insist on exploiting a price that is not enough to cover such time dedicated to the work of confection.*" According to the visual artist, utility and price are the factors that encourage non-indigenous people to buy and, according to the vision of the indigenous, buyers are sensitized because there are children in the trade of the pieces.

It should be remembered that there is a discomfort in most non-indigenous people to see children in this environment, because they believe that these children are being exploited by their parents, delegitimizing this as being fundamental for the physical and cultural survival of this people. (SURVEY DATA, 2022).

Emeli Lappe (2015) points out that the main source of sustenance of these groups is handicrafts "and this is guaranteed in the Indian Statute. Law No. 6,001, of December 19, 1973, states that – handicrafts and rural industries will be stimulated, in order to raise the standard of living of the Indian with the convenient adaptation to modern technical conditions." (LAPPE, 2015, p. 163). In addition to the role played as a vital source of income for the *Kaingang* people, handicrafts act as an identity element of culture, resistance and cultural survival.

The research also investigated issues of preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge. The indigenous was asked how the knowledge related to indigenous handicrafts is being preserved within the villages. To which he declared:



The knowledge is related from the collection, preparation and commercialization of handicrafts; therefore, these communities need to be understood by non-indigenous society, I see every day some opinion maker say that "the Indians need to get a service". Dismissing these practices as being useful for the physical and cultural survival of this people. We just want the respect and dignity of living as we see fit. That's it. Only in this way will we be able to safeguard knowledge and practices at all times of life in the community. (SURVEY DATA, 2022).

Next, the indigenous participant was asked how he would define indigenous peoples today. For this question, he referenced the strength of his people, in his view, indigenous peoples are "*resilient, (re)existent and stubborn peoples, because even in the face of so many influences of society, they continue to live, not isolated, but on the margins of the so-called "dominant society", developing their practices.*" Despite the many violence suffered by the *Kaingang* peoples, in harmony with Rocha (2016, p. 29-30):

The expropriations of the fields and forests of their traditional territory did not prevent the Indians from maintaining a cosmological system. The *Kaingang* groups beyond a common mythological record share 30 beliefs and practices about their ritual experiences, respect for the dead and affection for the lands in which their navels are buried.

The non-indigenous participant was asked about her opinion about Brazilian indigenous peoples today. She expressed that these populations are in constant battles for their culture:

Society exerts great pressure on them to remain isolated, without knowledge, keeping the group archaic and segregated. This is castration of cultural evolution. Culture is alive and transforms through the years. We have evolved as humanity and indigenous people are part of this humanity. Why not modernize your culture and preserve it at the same time? (SURVEY DATA, 2022).

When investigating the question problematized in this research, it is considered that the answers of the participants were complementary. Their participation underscored the need for the non-indigenous population to know, value and respect Brazilian indigenous peoples in their habits, customs, rituals and worldviews. Both printed, in their speeches, the symbolic value of handicrafts, as a record and memory of a people. The indigenous teacher *Kaingang* experiences daily the struggle for their rights and emphasized, in his answers, aspects such as inequality and social injustice and, when referring to prejudice by non-indigenous people, reported challenges that his people face. When it comes to art and crafts, the *indigenous Kaingang* drew attention to two main issues, the spiritual – in which symbolism and religiosity are of extreme relevance; and the social importance. In this question, he addressed the utilitarian items, the production, the passing of knowledge to generations, and that the participation of the youngest in the collection and sale of the elements is of extreme importance for the culture of its people to prevail alive.



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The cultural globalization driven by the contemporary capitalist system resignifies cultural goods and transforms them into commodities with various purposes, from aesthetic to entertainment. Concomitant with the creation of the stereotype of the "vagabond" indigenous artisan is the relationship of cultural appropriation to the realities and history of the *Kaingang indigenous group* in the western region of Santa Catarina. In it, the marginalized group and the oppressor group are easily identified, the group that appropriates itself and the one that has its appropriate identity. Each element of the handicraft sold by the indigenous contains a centuries-old identity cultural baggage not recognized by the non-indigenous who acquires it.

Returning to the questions about the links between art and crafts, it can be said that both have their productions based on certain techniques, both are situated in a universe of representation and signification and, both art and craftsmanship are the fruits of an idea, of a thought that is configured in a form.

It's not about reinforcing stereotypes or drawing comparisons between art produced by big names and exhibited in galleries and museums and symbolic indigenous art/crafts. This work is committed, above all, to contribute to the valorization and enrichment of the aesthetics produced by marginalized peoples.

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