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# Saving the present in Brazil: Perspectives from collaborations with indigenous museums

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores some of the challenges and benefits involved in the collaboration between the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo, the Índia Vanuere Historical and Pedagogical Museum, and the Kaingang people of Vanuere, as well as some of the outcomes of these partnerships, such as the creation of the Kaingang Wowkriwig Museum. These experiences showed that working in collaboration with indigenous groups can be mutually beneficial and rewarding. The benefits include opportunities to empower the Kaingang to create and manage their own museums, and to exchange more effective preservation strategies, information about manufacturing technologies, as well as the original use and significance of objects. Moreover, the significance of objects whose value had diminished was revived by the new perspectives brought about by these inclusive approaches. The paper concludes that many other museums can act as agents of these processes but a prerequisite is a reconsideration of their relationships with indigenous groups and how the past can be redressed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first ethnographic museums in Brazil date back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Indigenous inclusion in decision-making processes in these museums, however, has only become more common in the last decade. Although these processes have been gradual, in the last few years several Brazilian indigenous groups have started using ethnographic museums to see, review, know, and learn techniques from objects in collections or photographic records of their ancestors (Lopes 2005, Carvalho 2006). These engagements have created a renewed recognition of the value of these institutions for these groups, as well as more governmental incentive and funding for the preservation of indigenous culture.

This paper explores some of the challenges and benefits involved in collaborations with originators or descendants of originators of indigenous collections in Brazil. The discussion is focused on different aspects of a partnership between the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo (*Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia*, MAE-USP) in the city of São Paulo; the Índia Vanuere Historical and Pedagogical Museum (*Museu Histórico e Pedagógico Índia Vanuere*, MHPIV), which is located in Tupã, in the west of the state of São Paulo; and the Kaingang people, a Brazilian indigenous group whose members live in cities and indigenous lands in the four southern states of Brazil. Plans for the creation of the Kaingang Wowkriwig Museum of Vanuere (Museum of the Rising Sun), to be located in Tupã, are also discussed. By introducing the Brazilian context to an international readership our aim is to provoke greater debate about the issues involved.

## **CONTEXT**

The Kaingang are an indigenous Brazilian group that has been in contact with non-indigenous people since the 18th century but which has suffered severely from the effects of pillage and forced acculturation. Like many other indigenous groups in the Americas, they have been confined to the margins of Brazilian national society, despite having played important roles in the formation of the country. The Kaingang people have been constantly displaced and regrouped as a result of governmental policies since their first contact with non-indigenous groups. During these processes, they have suffered continuous physical, cultural, and psychological violence.



**Figure 1.** The *V Encontro Paulista Questões Indígenas e Museus* (5th Paulista Meeting of Indigenous and Museum Issues), held in 2016, celebrated the collaboration between the MHPIV, MAE-USP and the Kaingang. Photo: Marília Xavier Cury

For example, during periods of their recent history, they were prohibited from performing their rituals or speaking their language. As a result, many elders have avoided transferring their knowledge and traditions to younger generations, in an attempt to prevent persecution by the non-indigenous population. Thus, part of the traditions and cultural memory of the Kaingang has been suppressed for many years. Today, the Kaingang are attempting to recover this fragmented history, to rebuild their traditions, and to learn about their own past. The group is still a strong presence, with a population of around 40,000 that is distributed in 46 Indigenous Lands and cities in the states of São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul, including the Vanuire Indigenous Land in the city of Tupã (Tommasino et al. 2004, Povos Indígenas no Brasil 2016).

Since its creation in 1989, the MAE-USP, as a university museum of archaeology and ethnology, has prioritized the generation of academic knowledge to foster understanding of past and present societies and cultures through collecting, preserving, interpreting, and exhibiting diverse material culture to its students and the general public. Beginning in the last decade, it has included the originators of some of its collections in these processes.

The MHPIV was created in 1966 and originally projected a discourse that supported the ideologies of dominant groups, that is, the non-indigenous population that formed in that region of Brazil during the 20th century. The museum's collections and displays were used to depict recent local history, including the relationships between these settlers and the local Kaingang and Krenak tribes. This resulted in ambiguous messages that included both admiration and rejection of indigenous cultures. For decades, the MHPIV's relationships with the Kaingang and Krenak were limited to invitations to key events such as the Day of the Indian (19 April), a day dedicated to the celebration of Brazilian indigenous peoples.

In 2008, the MHPIV's overall mission started to change, and indigenous voices were brought to the forefront of the museum agenda. This was facilitated by a collaboration with the Cultural Association for the Support of the Casa de Portinari Museum (*Associação Cultural de Apoio ao Museu Casa de Portinari*, ACAM Portinari), a governmental organization focused on empowering cultural projects and museums through technical and financial assistance. MAE-USP joined them in 2011 through an academic agreement that also included the Kaingang as active partners (Figure 1).

## **THE PARTNERSHIP**

The partnership started in 2010 with the planning and design of the MHPIV's new permanent exhibition, which was conceptualized by the Kaingang of the Vanuire village and narrated in the first person (see Cury 2012 and 2014 for details). The process generated many opportunities for negotiations and mutual learning. On the one hand, the indigenous representatives sought opportunities to discuss the details of their roles in this new phase of the museum. On the other, museum professionals still needed more experience to understand the impact of bringing indigenous voices to the forefront of decision making, and what it meant in terms of discourse and museum routines.



**Figure 2.** Kaingang curator Josué Carvalho completes the donation of a basketry collection to the MHPIV, 2012. Photo: Marília Xavier Cury

At least two events played essential roles in introducing the Kaingang to museological practices. The first was the donation of a contemporary basketry collection in 2012, which was catalogued by the researcher and indigenous curator Josué Carvalho in collaboration with the MHPIV staff. This cooperation included the recording of techniques and materials related to the preparation of donated objects, and the documentation and conservation methods involved in the care of this new collection (Figure 2). The second event relates to the development of a temporary exhibition titled *Fortalecimento da Memória Tradicional Kaingang – de Geração em Geração* (Strengthening Traditional Kaingang Memory – From Generation to Generation) curated by José Campos Silva, a Kaingang from the Vanuire village, which promoted indigenous memory and traditional knowledge of the Kaingang ceramic culture. These experiences allowed Kaingang representatives to become more familiar with museum-work routines and motivated the group to further the issue of memory and to valorize their past.

The collaborations had a knock-on effect that triggered a wide range of first-person narratives and projects. These include projects led by indigenous teachers, traveling exhibitions with indigenous schools, indigenous dance and food festivals, and other cultural activities. These processes also inspired local Kaingang leadership to propose the creation of the Wowkriwig Museum (The Rising Sun Museum, in Kaingang), as a space conceived and managed by and for the Kaingang.

### **CONSERVATION PERSPECTIVES**

The conservation literature is rich in examples of conservation projects that prioritized indigenous voices and values (Clavir 2002, Johnson et al. 2005, Peters 2008, Peters et al. 2008). Among the topics discussed are the dilemmas that may confront conservators trying to adapt conservation concerns to new paradigms. However, the literature also highlights the importance of working with the values revealed by participatory approaches and collaborations. Indeed, bridging the conventional ideals of the conservation discipline and our daily activities as a university museum with an indigenous museum posed challenges to the staff of both the MHPIV and the MAE-USP. A wide range of adaptations had to be made, from the language and materials used to the objectives to be achieved. However, our experience has shown that conservators benefit greatly from these collaborations, mainly because their decision making becomes better informed based on the different ethical perspectives, which strengthen theoretical discourse and inform practical work. Moreover, they have a significant impact on the other parties. For example, the words of Kaingang leader Dirce Pereira in relation to objects stored in ethnographic museums caught our attention during one of the organized events. They expressed an awareness and a sense of ownership towards the Kaingang material heritage found in many Brazilian museums, as well as a need for redress of past injustices:

What he [the anthropologist] collected, he took elsewhere. It is not in the Museum India Vanuire [MHPIV]. So, this is our struggle. . . . as we managed to start our own museum [Wowkriwig Museum], and god willing, we will be able to build it the way we planned, we



**Figure 3.** Ana Carolina Delgado Vieira (left) discusses conservation with Kaingang representatives Lucilene Melo, Itauany Melo and Dirce Pereira at the MAE-USP's storage area in 2016

want our objects back. They belong to our people. So, he [the anthropologist] has to return them. Because they do not belong to him. That is ours. It is gold. Of our people. (Pereira 2016, 55)

The detailed plans for the Wowkriwig Museum are being discussed among the Kaingang, following their strong traditions of oral discourse and debate. Although they are likely to apply some of the methods and techniques used at MAE-USP (discussed below), the Kaingang managers have already signaled that their objectives will probably differ from those of the western museum model, especially in relation to bureaucratic procedures. While the creation of another museum would seem to pose a conflict between the Kaingang and MHPIV, this interpretation is inherently flawed as it suggests that the MHPIV or the MAE-USP can fully meet Kaingang aspirations. The Wowkriwig Museum will be the Kaingang “place of memory,” created *by* and *for* the Kaingang. No other outside initiative can have such deep significance. Besides providing opportunities for the Kaingang to reassess, reconstruct, and valorize their history on their own terms, the Wowkriwig Museum will be a space for Kaingang spirituality that should not be revealed to non-indigenous people.

To empower the Kaingang to fulfill the mission of safeguarding the objects produced by their ancestors, the MHPIV and the MAE-USP invested in a collaboration to facilitate the exchange of methods of collections care, such as access policies, handling methods, and loan procedures (Figure 3). These exchanges helped define the kind of material the Wowkriwig Museum could hold, and the potential roles of the MAE-USP and MHPIV in this new scenario. Furthermore, although the Kaingang have strong views regarding the return of some of the material originated by their ancestors and housed at the MAE-USP and MHPIV, the exchange ensured them that these objects are safe where they are, at least for the time being. The community's desire to bring ceremonial and older objects to their museum was expressed, for example, by Kaingang representatives Dirce Pereira and Lucilene Melo, who recognized the importance of following the high standards of collections care with respect to storage, display, and access policies.

## **CONSULTATIONS**

A series of activities was developed in collaboration with the Kaingang community. Its dual goals were to form a working group in the Wowkriwig Museum and to introduce the Kaingang members to the international standards of museology and collection care. Events at the MHPIV and MAE-USP were used to facilitate the exchanges. During the 2016 MHPIV exhibition *O Olhar de Hercule Florence sobre os Índios Brasileiros* (The Gaze of Hercule Florence on Brazilian Indians), the MAE-USP's objects that had been loaned to the exhibition were discussed with a group of Kaingang representatives. This helped to better understand and “resignify” the collection. For example, when looking at some Kaingang ceramic pots, Lídia Campos Iaiati, a Kaingang from the Vanuire village, revealed that their cracks suggested that they had been made by people with health problems. Many emotions surfaced when she confided that although she was always very careful in all stages of manufacture, her own pots always



**Figure 4.** Kaingang representatives Itauany Melo, Lucilene Melo, and Dirce Pereira visiting the MAE-USP's storage area in 2016. Photo: Marília Xavier Cury



**Figure 5.** Ceramic pot RG 2552 was used as an example of a fragile object to facilitate the communication of conservation concepts and methods during a meeting in 2016. Photo: Ader Gotardo

turned out to have cracks. This had happened since an early age. She then added that when she was a child, one of her uncles warned her that she would have fragile health, an omen that was confirmed later in life.

Consultations were also conducted with Dirce Pereira, Lucilene Melo, and Itauany Melo, representatives from three different Kaingang generations. These sessions focused on specific objects from the MAE-USP collection in order to obtain information on manufacturing techniques, raw materials, original context, use, and specifications for displays of baskets, necklaces and ceramic pots. The main goal was to understand how and under what conditions the Kaingang wished the material to be cared for. The interviews were documented through photography and voice recording and will be available in the museum's database (Figure 4).

### Asking questions

One of the greatest difficulties throughout this process was to adapt the technical and specialized language of conservation so that non-conservators would not feel intimidated by it. For example, when trying to obtain information about ceramic pots, some of the objects in our storage facility were used to ask direct questions about objects such as: "Do you think this pot should be cleaned? How should we clean it, how much? Are these stains important? Do you think this pot should be fixed? How can we fix it? Do you think we should do it?" Real conversations were encouraged so as to avoid ending the dialogue with simple 'yes' or 'no' answers. Soon it was realized that the objects revived the Kaingang representatives' memory about the past and encouraged them to tell important details about the original contexts of the pieces.

Some technical terms were adapted so that they could be easily understood, for example, that a gap represented a vulnerable area of a ceramic (Figure 5). The Kaingang were also asked their opinion about actions aimed at stabilizing the fragile objects while avoiding the use of technical terms such as adhesives, consolidations, and gap-fillings: "Do these cracks bother you? What should we do with this pot that was glued so many years ago?"

### Learning

During our sessions it became apparent that the Kaingang representatives preferred that the objects be repaired as little as possible. In their opinion, reassembling and consolidating pieces is acceptable, but gap-filling should be kept to a minimum and only used to ensure the structural stability of an object. Conservators are familiar with the concept that impurities present in the clay can contribute to cracks in the finished pot. Yet, our collaborators quoted Lídia Campos Iaiati, a Kaingang elder who believes that even if the clay is prepared appropriately, the finished piece can crack for spiritual reasons. That is, a crack can indicate a message from a spiritual entity, which means that conservators should not attempt to treat it.

It was also asked whether some of the ceramics could be x-rayed so as to reveal further details about them. This question provoked intense curiosity once the Kaingang realized that through this kind of analysis it would be possible to identify whether a crack in the pot was caused by a failure during its manufacture or by a message from the supernatural world. Thus,

it was agreed that x-rays could be used to recognize messages from the “enchanted” (spiritual entities).

As a result of these discussions in our storage facilities, the Kaingang women felt compelled to produce ceramic pots similar to the ones we had studied together, in order to make them part of the Wowkriwig Museum collection.

## CONCLUSION

Although working in collaboration with indigenous groups can be demanding and may reveal conflicting expectations, our experience showed that the process can be mutually beneficial and rewarding. Through these collaborations, it was possible to come up with more effective preservation strategies. Relationships with the originators of some of our collections were strengthened and a great deal was learned about Kaingang manufacturing processes. More importantly, the significance of objects whose value had somehow been lost over time was revived through the new perspectives brought about by more inclusive approaches. Finally, these collaborations provided first-hand experience with the empowerment brought by more inclusive conservation approaches. It was seen that working together can help recover long-lost cultural practices and benefit cultural identity and social cohesion.

Institutions such as the MAE-USP, the MHPIV, and others that are ethnographic in origin may act as agents of these processes, but they must first reconsider their roles in their relationships with Brazilian indigenous groups and how the past can be redressed. Not only do these efforts have the potential to reframe traditional museums, they can also enrich and legitimize the roles of those museums as stewards of collections (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** At the opening of MHPIV exhibition *O Olhar de Hercule Florence sobre os Índios Brasileiros* (The Gaze of Hercule Florence on Brazilian Indians), in 2016, the Kaingang of Vanuire perform a ceremony in honor of the material produced by their ancestors. Photo: Francis Melvin Lee

Our next steps include in-depth training courses in the expertise needed for collections care, so as to build capacities within the Kaingang. This will provide them with enough autonomy to make their own decisions regarding the Wowkriwig Museum's collections, in addition to generating new opportunities for the Kaingang to create places of memory and recover some of what was lost during a long history of violence and acculturation.

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