Mugunzá: Politics, Art/Development: Savour but don't Swallow: Cook your Own Means to Express yourself

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Abstract: In 2003 the group of artists constituting the "Action and Research Collective" of Identidades* started an intercultural, experiential project with a population based in Brazil's remote interior (Conceição das Crioulas**, a Quilombola community mobilized in the struggle for possession of land, for the rights to education and health, and to dignify their life and identity). This collaborative relationship allowed the formulation of the theoretical knowledge that was presented as action/research in five presentations in the colloquium "Mugunzá: Politics, Art/Development" *** in the Sixth International Conference on the Arts in Society****. The current article focuses on how communities can establish their own laboratories while preserving their autonomy and identity, and on how the Western World can "savour", and learn from, these experiences. The particular nature of this action/research shows the importance of articulating the intrusion of politics in the developed areas, leading to an assumed position about the concept of art/development. Taking place in a community where the issue of identities presents a huge multicultural complexity, the intercultural relationship follows through practices of complicity built in a mutual and continuous process and an extended knowledge of the subjects involved. The technological innovation's defense and the spread of the community's communicational spaces integrated technologies with strange grammar and syntax. This conflict opened the research about the interfaces' nature and the applications' friendliness in production/use within the ICT4D context. We question the implementation of technologies that were developed from Western models, ignoring and excluding other societies and cultures such as the community under discussion. The recipes used in attempts to implement these technologies under the acronym Information and Communication Technologies For Development (ICT4D) are based on a Western perspective that often ignores the socio-cultural aspects of these communities and become a top-down project. (*http://identidades.eu, **http://conceicaodascrioulas.org, ***This colloquium addresses the processes developed from intercultural relations between the community and the members of Identidades (mainly arts students), to create different perspectives on various issues. There are four more approaches in the project. First José Paiva makes a general framing of the project of inter-relating artist members of the intercultural movement Identidades in the social and political context of Conceição das Crioulas. Rita Rainho reflects on the role and implications of arts in the field of differentiated development and of the political space engaged with the social. Joana Mateus suggests a critical vision on connections of knowledge, trust, and complicity that tend to allow environments of interculturality. Lastly, Mónica Faria develops her reflection about the programs of artistic education in the community's schools, highlighting the relations with the "Political-Pedagogical Project" of the community, and strategic fronts in the field of the education of leaders of the community. ****http://artsinsociety.com/Conference-2011/)

Keywords: Identity, Quilombola, Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D), Power, Culture, Language, Interface, Conflict, Media, Community

COMMON GROUND

Enjoying the Meal

IDENTIDADES (IDENTITIES) IS an intercultural movement that arose from the desire of lecturers and students of the University of Porto's Fine Arts Faculty to develop various activities related to art, education, and development in Mozambique, Cape Verde, Brazil and Portugal. The activities include practical workshops in various technologies, such as ceramics, printing, video, and web publication.

In 2003, the Quilombola community of Conceição das Crioulas, in the remote interior of Pernambuco in Brasil, became interested in some of these activities and started cooperating with Identidades to develop on various fronts.

The Quilombolas constitute a predominantly rural black ethnic group, descended from slaves, that defines itself through its relationships with its land, kinship, territory, ancestry, traditions, and cultural practices.

This paper gives an account of the project related to video involving this community and Identidades that started in 2005, the subsequent involvement with ICT, and the various issues that this type of technology and projects raise.

The idea was born from the fact that the community was used to being the subject of documentaries, but never identified with these videos. They then proposed a video workshop to Identidades to allow them to use this technology autonomously.

From a workshop of only five days for young people of the community who were having their first contact with these technologies, the Crioulas Vídeo[1] (Creole Video) group arose. We (Identidades) had no idea of what would result but we decided to leave the equipment (Apple Imac G4, Sony 'Digital 8' video camera, tripod and microphone) to allow these young people to continue the project, to put into practice the knowledge they had acquired.[2]

When we returned to Conceição das Crioulas a year later, we were surprised that more than 20 videos had been produced, autonomously and professionally. Among them, "Serra das Princesas", or "The Princesses' Mountain Range", had been on Recife University Television and would go on to be shown at various festivals.

The purpose of our trip was to continue with the workshops, but this time we were accompanied by António Tavares (Toni), to do a dance workshop, another of the community's interests. We had noticed that the afro-descendent Quilombola identity was very remote with regard to dance, as opposed, for example, to the gastronomic roots.

Toni is Cape-Verdian and this was the first time that he had been in Conceição. One day, when we were having *munguzá* for lunch, a slow cooked stew of maize, beans, and fish or meat. Toni, recognizing the similarities with his country's *cachupa*, remarked:

> "People think that people are distinguished by the colour of their skin, by race, or whatever... But people are distinguished by their food, and these people are Cape-Verdian and don't know it."

It wasn't cachupa, but what was missing to make it cachupa was neither here nor there. It was immaterial what the differences were, because, indelibly, it would be difficult to make

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[1] http://crioulasvideo.org
[2] See T Assis, 'Ciroulas Media: Technology, Language and Identity in a Quilombola Community in Brazil', "Multiculturalism: Critical and Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives", Kerry Gallagher, Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford, 2011.

them disappear in a 'terroir' of any product so genuine that it can only exist in its place of origin.

It was African *cachupa* rebaptized *munguzá*, altered by the people, ground and climate of northeast Pernambuco.

In Conceição das Crioulas, the people recognized a long time ago the importance of reorienting to their benefit everything that came from the outside. It is like this in education, with their distinctive curricula; it is like this in the architecture to collectively construct a village; it is like this in the agriculture that has been adapted to the dry land. But, despite the huge amount of imports from the outside world, the decision to alter the environment, like diverting the flow of the São Francisco river to satisfy a need as basic as drinkable water, is such a delicate matter that it requires extensive discussion within the community, demonstrating the enormous sense of responsibility and respect that they have for what they consider their most precious possession: their territory. The political consciousness of the manipulation by the large companies of the needs of the poorest is latent.

This awareness is maintained by the media. Long accustomed to being the target of reports and documentaries where they did not recognize themselves, they wanted to discover and use the media to their advantage. It was to realise this desire that Identidades participated with the video and web publication workshops that left Conceição das Crioulas with the ability and the necessary means to produce its own audiovisual objects.

Cultural Maieutics and a Shared Wish

This project is very different from many others executed around the world, generally under the acronym ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies For Development).

We don't want to distinguish it in terms of value for the development of communities; we're not sure which is more or less valid, and also not whether we're speaking about the same type of 'development'. We know that we run the risk of entering terrain susceptible to large discussions, but wish in the first place to distinguish the genesis of the project and the entities that comprise it:

1. The project was born from a need explicitly articulated by the community. It was the community that decided that it wanted to use ICT and reorient the practices to their socio-political needs, in contrast to the projects based on an external view premised on the necessity to 'informatize' the communities to let them develop.
2. The model was not of top down implementation – applying 'recipes' developed in Silicon Valley for companies that know what the people need… in a computer.
    If there is a model, it is in constant conflict with itself: we know that we are different and that we have to reorient the technology to our specificities. What the community and we learned is that we carry seeds from other places and that, to grow in our ground, they have to be planted in another manner. The interfaces of technologies have cultural loads that need to be redefined in each culture.
3. The parties are not groups organized to raise funds and execute projects with predefined models, making their profession of this practice. We don't wish to replicate 'successful' models that guarantee 'development' similar to 'developed countries'. On the contrary, we reiterate that we wish to discover our needs and how to reorient ICT to serve them.

4. The parties became independent immediately following each intervention. There is an ever present dispensability, in which no-one needs or depends on the other to continue… At the same time, one of the threads of continuity lies in the dynamics provoked, in which the art and technology (in this case), transform the parties. Without knowing the reasons for, and consequences of, this transformation and these dynamics, we became addicted to them. We can say that we don't depend on one another, but in a certain way, we depend on this addiction for the unknown that we wish to know and there mark the meeting point.

This wish is shared by the community and the Identidades members, all the parties seeking a space to act jointly and individually. We called this an egoistic project, which does not prevent us from having solidarity with the various problems, as we all know that cultural and individual conflicts are the engine that allows growth of the collective and at the same time of each individual.

There is an individual and also a cultural maieutic in this process, in the sense that each one asks him-or herself: Who am I, and collectively, who are we? This identity conflict of the search for knowledge about ourselves is a desire that results in permanent intellectual disobedience to external recipes and models.

We wish to know the recipes to be able to reject them or, at least, reorient them.

We are interested in differences and conflicts to the extent that they provide new areas to identify ourselves.

Could this disobedience be resistance to social development? No. Not if done with the sincerity of those seeking to know themselves. Moreover, we believe that this can even be a foundation for social development of these types of communities.

In this conception we meld Art and Society, as what could be common to the artists and to the people of Conceição is that both wish to know themselves and develop themselves in the unknown. The power of an author's self-determination is close to that of cultural self-determination, both seeking to overcome the borders of what is established in the search for their identity.

ICT Conflict

When computers and internet reach these communities, they bring with them the entire history of the construction of these technologies, which has long been distant from these people. Not only the devices arrive, one of the characteristics of ICT is that the interfaces are labelled with words such as: friendly, intuitive, usable, etc. In fact, what happens is that under metaphors such as 'desktops' and 'windows' we find recipes to use these means, for example figurative icons with messages about how to use those means. The cultural cargo implicit in the graphic interfaces of these devices is a vehicle for the globalization and uniformization of its users.

We assume, thus, that we contribute to this perverse effect, in actively participating in the experience with these media. But the fact that do it while aware of that effect – and anticipating other attempts to expand these media-allow us to place this conflict at the level of others. That is, in a sense of reorientation of our needs.

There is a moment of dialogue with the communities, before we go on to any type of action. A moment for discussion in which we try to understand the needs of the various parties. In Identidades we call this 'zero moment'.

The spaces between this moment and the following moments are a temptation to use recipes. If we resist we may find other recipes in the processes and in the needs, on terrain that is not ours. We can savour the moments of speculation of those that define the rules and change something in accordance with our environment.

It is easy to follow a rule, difficult is to create a conceptual environment from ourselves.

In the case of Crioulas Vídeo's first works, it delighted us to see the North American Film Director D. W. Griffith's grammar diluted, before a collective, which learnt by its own means and established its own means of telling stories. The narratives belong to the Quilombola imagery and to the constant struggles that have taken place throughout its history.

But these idiosyncrasies are disappearing with the invasion of foreign references, by the appearance of more devices, for example: TVs, DVDs and the internet. Crioulas Vídeo itself goes in search of these, as is natural to all who give themselves to knowing the medium. We conclude that the first moments of contact with the medium are naturally the most daring, it was surprising to see the videos of the first year, particularly "Serra das Princesas". A documentary that, starting from a legend, made Crioulas Vídeo venture into the discovery of Quilombola territory. The videos progressively become institutionalized and instrumentalised by the politics of the community abandoning fiction. Video and ICT become political tools, in this sense serving the needs of the community because it needs this weapon to defend itself against the hostilities, but the question remains:

Can a community emancipate itself in the sense of developing its own grammar in the media it uses?

The first moments point to this, for an endogenous development. At 'zero moment' the disruptive elements that could impose a 'recipe' are us (Identidades) and the media themselves, in accordance with the discourse mentioned before. But, as we share an interest in knowing and adapting the means to the speculative needs of art researchers, we deliberately suspend the recipes. We try to understand what the media have to offer on the borders of their use.

The reality of Conceição das Crioulas is interrupted by us and by the technologies in these moments. But it never stops being interrupted when we are absent as the spaces between us, technology and Conceição remain, because of the absence of a recipe. The questions remain and are incessantly repeated during and after our meetings. This reality is as non-linear as ICT itself and, as in ICT, the interruption does not impede the movement.

Our Recipes

We learn new recipes such as the CCK (confidence, complicity and knowledge), recipes that emanate from the processes, while we maintain the conflicts. Recipes that cannot be doctrines because they only make sense in the actions in which we are involved. They have no use for anyone else and are as ephemeral as our movement.

Allow us to say that our experience obliges us to distrust the ICT4D recipes that ignore the cultural aspects of the communities they aim to transform.

A brief overview of the evolution of ICT serves to show that the recipe boils down to the first movers conquering all.[3] What they do in Silicon Valley is what they try to impose on the rest of the world. These strategies impede 'zero moments' as 'zero moment' already happened in Silicon Valley.

Incidentally, the acronym that carefully replaces "for" with a number, in an implacable marketing gesture, covers a word that would be more pertinent for a development sense: "FROM".

The recipes are in the communities. Learn with them a new perspective on technologies; learn new uses in the context of development, to so redefine ICT in the service of people. Open intercultural spaces and laboratories of 'ICT From Communities', and development may result from this process.

In the current model, we see NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) working half the year to get ICT4D projects, to pass the rest of the time implementing the projects that, far from being what the communities need, are the projects that the technological companies need to implement to ensure their business.

Crioulas Vídeo won autonomy. Their work is profitable within and outside the community. This allowed the acquisition of new equipment and the continuity of the project. It provided training in other Quilombola communities, replicating its recipes and inventing others. It is a bottom down, inside out project.

The need of an author to express him or herself and a community's need to express itself share common challenges. One of these is discovering its recipe and not conforming to those of others. Allow the ingredients to absorb the recipe, let the 'terroir' manifest itself, let the accidents happen… Speculate between the recipe and the actually cooked, between the me and the other, and the *munguzá* appears and the identities are transformed.

This is a territory of the arts that, when shared with society, maybe develops it, or at least transforms it.

We continue enjoying the Quilombola recipes, taking some ingredients to launch the conflict. As in that year 2006, when the Cape-Verdian Toni resolved to make cachupa to show its similarity with munguzá. Led by Toni, Quilombolas and Portuguese got cooking according to the traditional recipe. It was excellent, but Toni, forgive us, it was closer to *munguzá* than to Cape-Verdian *cachupa*.

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[3] http://gurstein.wordpress.com/2010/08/02/silicon-valleys-to-community-informatics-neighbourhoods/ Last updated: August 10, 2010. Viewed on June 10th 2011.

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