

Visiting the ancestors: report of a workshop with Tupinambá leaders at the Florence Museum of Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

We report on a pivotal collaborative experience of study and reconnection when Glicéria Tupinambá (Indigenous artist, activist, anthropologist, and community leader) and Jéssica Tupinambá (Indigenous lawyer and activist) encountered the Tupinambá artefacts conserved at the Florentine Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology. We contextualize the event with information on the Tupinambá feather capes and clubs preserved in Florence. We comment on the potential impact and importance of this event, both for the Museum and for the Tupinambá community. We stress the importance of collaboration among people with different expertise and tasks fully realizing that scientific and spiritual approaches are not incompatible. Combining different approaches both interdisciplinary and inter-culturally opens up a brighter future dialogue about cultural heritage preserved in museums. Additionally, we disseminate, for the first time, information on a feather Tupinambá cape that arrived in Florence during Medici times, but was lost in Germany during WWII.

Key words:

collaborative research, Brazil, Indigenous knowledge, museology, history of collections.

RIASSUNTO

Visitando gli antenati: report su un workshop con leader Tupinambá al Museo di Antropologia di Firenze

Questo contributo è dedicato a una importante esperienza collaborativa di studio e riconnessione che si è realizzata quando Glicéria Tupinambá (artista indigena, attivista, antropologa e leader della comunità) e Jéssica Tupinambá (avvocato e attivista indigena) hanno visitato i manufatti Tupinambá conservati nel Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia a Firenze. La descrizione dell'evento è qui contestualizzata con informazioni sui mantelli di piume e gli oggetti lignei Tupinambá conservati a Firenze. Il contributo riflette sul potenziale impatto e l'importanza di questo evento, sia per il Museo che per la comunità di Tupinambá, sottolineando l'importanza della collaborazione tra persone con competenze e compiti diversi, e la necessità di combinare approcci scientifici e spirituali. La combinazione di prospettive interdisciplinari e interculturali apre nuovi luminosi scenari per un futuro dialogo sul patrimonio culturale conservato nei musei. Inoltre, qui diffondiamo, per la prima volta, notizie su un mantello Tupinambá in piume, arrivato a Firenze al tempo dei Medici, ma andato perduto in Germania durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale.

Parole chiave:

ricerca collaborativa, Brasile, conoscenza indigena, museologia, storia delle collezioni.

INTRODUCTION

All authors of this article participated in a profound and moving experience at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of the University of Florence on April 8, 2024. On this day, Glicéria Tupinambá, an Indigenous artist, activist, anthropologist, and community leader at Serra do Padeiro village, located in the Tupinambá de Olivença Indigenous Territory in southern Bahia, Brazil, came to visit her ancestors. Glicéria was accompanied by another member of her culture, Jéssica Tupinambá. Jéssica is an Indigenous lawyer and activist from her community. As Glicéria embarked on an emotional day-long journey among the ancient objects belonging to her traditional culture and housed in the Museum, she shared her experiences with all the participants and authors of this report.

These individuals included Francesca Bigoni, an anthropologist and a curator of the Florentine Museum, who hosted the encounter. Francesca has focused her activities on researching the history of artifacts and on projects of collaborative anthropology and decolonization (Bigoni, 2018). Mariana Françaço, Associate Professor of Museum Studies at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, was also present. As part of her research, Mariana has become familiar with a number of European ethnographic museums and their South American collections (Françaço, 2016; Françaço & Vander Velden, 2020). This experience has led her to develop projects with Indigenous researchers and communities who are interested in learning about and re-accessing their collections abroad. Mariana's presence at the event was important both for her cultural and linguistic mediation. Guia Rossignoli likewise took part of this one-day workshop. Guia is a restorer of the Ministry of Culture and deals with conservation, restoration and teaching at the laboratory of textile materials at the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, in Florence. OPD is a special autonomous institute of the Italian Ministry of Culture, which operates as a national reference in the sector of conservation of works of art, carrying out restoration, research and advanced training activities. Guia was invited to the event as expert who worked on the Tupinambá cape conserved in Milan, achieving a masterful work of restoration (Gnaccolini & Rossignoli, 2018). She is now collaborating with the Florentine Museum to help develop strategies of conservation for the precious and delicate Tupinambá capes.

In this paper, the authors contextualize and describe this visit, and comment on its potential impact and importance both for the Museum and for the Tupinambá community. The relevance of this event is better appreciated with some background information that describes the history and the context of the Tupinambá cultural materials preserved at the

Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence University.

The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence was founded in 1869, as a National Museum, by Paolo Mantegazza (Monza, 1831 - Lerici, 1910). Today it is part of the Museal System of the University of Florence. The Museum houses a vast heritage of cultural artefacts from all over the world, collected during a period of almost five centuries. Indeed, the oldest core of the Museum's collection came from the Medici Family. These and many other objects then referred to as "Utensils of the barbarian nations" were transferred in 1870 to the Anthropology Museum, from the Imperial and Royal Museum of Physics and Natural History (today called La Specola). Among these materials were three Tupinambá feather capes, which originated from the Medici collection and from 1539 onwards were documented in several inventories. In 1870 the capes were moved from La Specola to Mantegazza's Anthropology Museum, shortly after its foundation (Laurencich Minelli & Ciruzzi, 1981).

By 1892, one of the Florentine capes had ended up in Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde (Métraux, 1932) and was subsequently lost during Second World War. The arrival of the cape in Berlin was not a one-step transaction, but rather a series of exchanges between institutions and a private collector. The Florentine inventories of the Ethnographic collections (vol. I), report that "the cape n. 284a was given on 26 April 1892 to Prof. Giglioli in exchange for one Jarawa human skull (Southern Andaman till then unique in Europe)" (handwritten note, here translated from Italian). Enrico H. Giglioli held no position in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence. Instead, he was professor of zoology and the director of the zoological collection at the Museum La Specola. However, Giglioli was very active in the Italian society for Anthropology and Ethnology, an institution very close to Mantegazza's Museum. He had a considerable impact on the Anthropology Museum, both due to his studies of its collections and the use of his many international connections to increase the number of artifacts coming to the museum from different continents. Giglioli himself had a large private museum dedicated to artifacts from the "stone age" including, according to the misleading perspective of his time, objects from living traditional cultures. Giglioli was an active participant of a wide international network, created among institutions and museums and involved in exchanges of artifacts. Disturbing to modern sensibilities, these exchanges included a great deal of human remains for alleged "scientific" studies. Thanks to colleagues at the Museum in Berlin, we were able to consult two letters dated 24 May and 3 July 1892 (I/MV/0640 and E 652/1892), that shed some light on the transactions of the cape between Giglioli and the Museum in Berlin, and one glass plate

(V B 4101). The documents indicate that a “feather cape from the Guyanas, a wollen tassel from Peru and a plaster cast copy of a South American stone axe”, were exchanged for “a club from Vancouver Island, a lip ornament from the Araguaya river region (Amazon), a stone axe from the Armur region [between Russia/China], and a club from Hawaii”. Only future research can determine if any of the other objects sent in exchange by Giglioli came from the Florentine Museum. Although, as we stated above, the cape was lost during WWII, the glass plate with the image of the cape survived (fig. 1).

A second cape was also considered “lost”, but was re-discovered in 1980, when it was found hidden under the third cape, in the old frame that was used in the exhibit (Fabiano, 1994). The artefacts presently in the Museum and labeled as “Tupinambá” also include two clubs and three bows (Ciruzzi, 1983).

One club (cat. n. 31) did not come from the Medicean collection. Indeed, information about this club is somewhat scanty. However, we know that the club was not included in the inventories of the Medici and arrived much later in the Museum. Archival information indicates that the collector was Gregorio Corelli who had deposited at La Specola Museum a large number of artifacts coming from different geographical areas and cultures. When Corelli died in 1869 the acquisition of these objects by La Specola Museum was still not formalized and his heirs took legal action suing the Museum. Finally, a financial agreement was made: the artifacts, including the club, were formally sold to the Museum by Giuseppe Bellenghi in March 1871. Corelli’s collection became part of the heritage of the newly founded Anthro-

pology Museum when all ethnological artifacts were transferred from La Specola.

GLICÉRIA AND JÉSSICA TUPINAMBÁ VISIT THE MUSEUM

For a number of years, Glicéria Tupinambá has been researching the historic objects made by her ancestors. Many objects are presently kept at museums in Europe (Tupinambá, 2022). She has focused particularly on the historic feather capes made by Tupinambá in the sixteenth century and taken to Europe. Such capes were meticulously produced by the Tupinambá and used in ritual contexts by selected people of the community.

Currently, there are a total of 10 such capes held in European museums: Florence (2), Milan (1), Basel (1), Paris (1), Brussels (1), and Copenhagen (4) (Buono, 2015). An eleventh cape, which had been kept in Copenhagen since the mid-seventeenth-century (Françoço, 2016), was recently (in the summer of 2024) repatriated to Brazil. This cape is now kept at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro (see website 1). In fact, the repatriation of this cape owes much to the work of Glicéria as a spokesperson of her people: after she visited the Copenhagen Tupinambá collection, her quest inspired the beginning of the repatriation negotiations (see website 2).

During these visits to the Tupinambá collections abroad, Glicéria has paid particular attention to the material elements used to make the objects, as well as the manufacturing techniques used, so as to later share this information with her community. Importantly, she has been recreating historic Tupinambá artefacts, and has so far produced 4 feather capes in collaboration with her community. In 2006, Glicéria made her first feather cape, which is now worn by the chief of her community, Cacique Babau (Tugny et al., 2023: 278). This was the first time in about four centuries that a feather cape was again produced by the Tupinambá.

In 2023, Glicéria was chosen to be one of the representatives of Brazil at the 2024 Venice Biennale (see website 3). For that event, she produced another feather cape, in collaboration with members of her community, and following tradition she used red feathers from the Guará bird (*Ibis rubra*) collected specially for her by a colleague at the northern state of Maranhão, Brazil. In keeping with her ecological ethics, the feathers used to make the cape were not plucked from the birds, but rather collected from the ground after having been shed by the birds. It was also in the framework of the Venice Biennale, and supported by the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil, that Glicéria and Jéssica Tupinambá travelled to Florence to meet the capes kept there. This activity was part of Glicéria’s individual artistic programme at the Biennale.

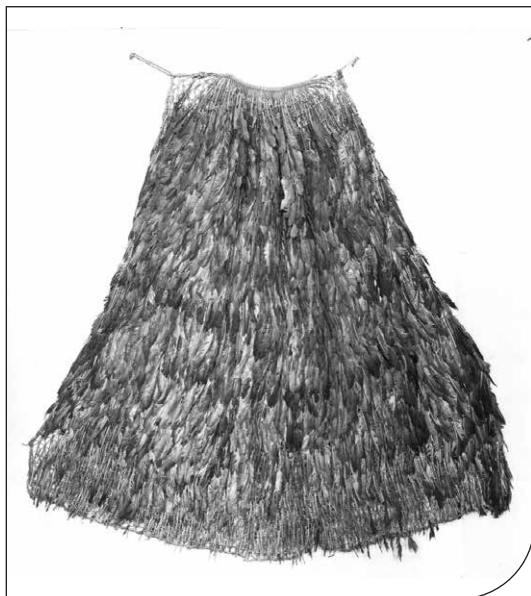


Fig. 1. Glass plate of the Berlin cape tragically lost during World War II (see text) (Credits: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / V B 4101).

MEETING AND STUDYING THE CAPES AND OTHER TUPINAMBÁ OBJECTS

The visit to the Museum in Florence took place on a Monday, when the Museum is normally closed to visitors, which facilitated the encounter with the objects. We were able to study the Tupinambá materials within their exhibition space, that is, the gallery dedicated to South America and its peoples where the two Tupinambá feather capes are kept. In addition to the capes, the other Tupinambá objects normally kept in storage were brought to this gallery and placed on top of a table, where they could be seen, studied, and touched (with gloves).

The two “Florence” capes were carefully observed and commented on during this visit. Cape cat. n. 281, which is visible to the public, has a square structure. When she saw it, Glicéria was reminded of a blanket, like the one used when one is in the hammock, to cover up during cold periods as the feathers can provide protection from the temperature.

This feather cape is supported by a cotton-fiber net similar to a fishing net. For those who work with fishing, this is a common fabric, noted Glicéria. The structural pattern of the fishing net is made with the use of a pallet. Pallets are flat rectangular wooden

tools of various sizes and forms used to keep a regular pattern of spacing between rows and knots. Older people at the Tupinambá village know how to use this technique to make a net with diamond-shaped knots. In each knot a feather is placed. The feathers used in this cape are wing feathers and include right and left-wing feathers, as well as black wing-tip feathers. These feathers are shed from the bird's body. Next to the cape in the Florentine Museum there is a display case showing the birds used in making the cape. This juxtaposition helps the visitor to better contextualize and understand how the cape was composed (fig. 2).

The second cape, cat. n. 288, is normally not visible to visitors, but was exceptionally made available for Glicéria and Jessica's visit. It has a very different structure from the cape previously described, as it is made without the use of a pallet to keep the consistent spacing between the knots and the rows. This is the only cape Glicéria has seen out of the 10 capes kept in Europe that is completely made by hand, without the use of a pallet. This technique requires the use of very small feathers to be inserted into each knot.

After an extensive examination and discussion of the capes, the group went on to study the wooden objects placed at the table. Club cat. n. 31 has a format



Fig. 2. Glicéria and Jéssica Tupinambá observing the rectangular cape (cat. n. 281). On the glass protecting the artifact you can see the reflection of a taxidermized *Ibis rubra*. It is contained in a close by display case to help the visitor to understand how the cape was composed.

and decorations that are recognized as typical of the Tupinambá-style clubs made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These are wooden clubs with an oval-shaped blade at the top and, at the middle part of the handle, a dense adornment of cotton strings where feathers were once inserted (fig. 3). Clubs similar to cat. n. 31 are found at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (Richardin & Gandolfo, 2013) and at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. In all three clubs, the cotton strings are still present, but the feathers have fallen out. This particular club has some incisions and residual pigments along the handle and the blade. The latter are remnants of the texture applied to the club and the former, according to Glicéria, are the club's (female) signatures. Even though clubs have been historically depicted and written about as war instruments carried by men (warriors), they also went through female hands. Glicéria explains that women produced and applied textures to the clubs and signed them afterwards.

Club cat. n. 280, on the other hand, is a long, rectangular club and not typical of the Tupinambá style as described above. It seems to have been made of another type of wood (presumably, the dark wood Baraúna, according to Glicéria and Jéssica). It also has incisions and graphism along the handle, and presents traces of red-like pigmentation (presumably,

urucum). There is no cotton or feather decoration, or traces thereof, on this club. Still, Glicéria and Jéssica consider it as potentially of Tupinambá origin (fig. 4).

GLICÉRIA'S OWN WORDS ON THE VISIT

"When I arrived, I found the cape and the blanket on a piece of furniture by the window, and next to it a showcase with birds and a banner with a map reminding me of the Tupinambá territory. The history I knew made me believe there was just one cape, but at the museum I discovered there were two capes: [the place] where this magic happens, the multiplication of one becoming two. Continuing our visit, in that same room, on a table I could see various weapons such as clubs, bows and arrows. By describing this environment, I can fill up an imagined memory.

This act of listening to artifacts demands a very sensitive process. This [Tupinambá] memory has longevity, and it is very challenging to amplify this [our] voice. We came to the museum and got closer to learn about the work of care and to meet those who take care of the cape. The cape had told me it had been made by women's hands and had been worn by women. Now I say it is taken care of by women, too. I was curious to know from the restorer Guia Ros-



Fig. 3. Glicéria and Jéssica Tupinambá studying the club, cat. n. 31, with its dense adornment of cotton strings where feathers were once inserted.

signoli how this challenge of finding technology for a delicate process was like, as feathers are very sensitive, they are ephemeral. We heard about how techniques were developed so that the restoration work is more coherent with the material being manipulated. When hearing about this way of working, we saw how preservation studies are very important for the long life of all pieces.

We consider these objects as our ancestors, so the fact that museums preserve and take care of this memory, this history, is very important for us. We have a relationship with our objects and what they represent, so we appreciate it when we see that they are taken care of. We know that people say different things about museums, but there is an important aspect to them, which is how people manage to keep part of their memory alive, so when we need to access that memory, we come to the museum.

So, for me, it is important to know the people who take care of these pieces, the importance they dedicate to its life, to studying it, to understanding its place. For me, this is very important because it is about relationships between people, and [the object] being treated with the greatest affection and respect. So the museum's work is remarkable, it is of great importance and I hope it is further amplified so that the knowledge about the object grows. This is about [its/the object's] life, it is shining a new light at what's lying there dormant. People might think 'that thing there, it will no longer tell a story, no longer have a life'. But it has a lot to teach us! You learn one way, I learn the other way, and we gather this knowledge, we put together different shapes, different angles, different looks, so when we add them together, we will open the way to a much calmer much clearer path".

GUIA'S WORDS: A RESTORER'S POINT OF VIEW

Meeting with Glicéria Tupinambá was extremely touching, and unexpectedly had a sort of indirect cathartic effect on the restoration carried out on the cape preserved in Milan: it resulted in a tacit approval of the work done on the artefact. Normally, the phases of a conservation include the study of the artwork before the treatment, the compilation of documents, a list of the products and techniques to be used, the sharing of information and choices among curators and inspectors. However, it is very rare that there is ever such a possibility for a "sentimental verification" as afforded by the encounter with Glicéria.

Indeed, in this case, years after the anything but simple restoration of the Tupinambá mantle of the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana (Gnaccolini & Rossignoli, 2018), something very special happened: I was involved at the Anthropological Museum of Florence in a sort



Fig. 4. Glicéria Tupinambá studying the club with incisions and graphism along the handle, traces of red-like pigmentation (cat. n. 280).

of reconciling rite between cultures. It was the immersion in an ancestral dimension outside of time, an experience that took us beside the apparently only speculative knowledge of the Florentine mantles.

The dialogue that took place with Glicéria Tupinambá about the conservation work was characterized by reciprocal interest and keen curiosity on her part for me, who had been able to touch one of the few surviving specimens woven with feathers. It seemed to result in a silent approval, visible, among the many questions, in the glare of her smiling eyes.

The meeting prompted an exchange of opinions on the working method adopted in the conservation phases, in a dialectical comparison between art and conservation, at the end of which the impression was of having dialogued with the creator and custodian of all the Tupinambá cloaks. The driving force behind the intervention on the Milanese cape was the respect for an artefact as vibrant as it was full of critical issues. The first objective was trying to recover the lost brightness of the feathers and to offer a new support for a very fragile textile structure. Nothing has been modified, re woven, altered. Every single detached feather has been retained (Ciofini et al., 2022).

Glicéria passes down today her tradition and proudly wears feathered cloaks patiently woven by her. She seems to have built one of the junction points between past and present, between South America and Europe, and I felt to be part of this process through my work, thanks to which I was able to touch and to come in contact with one of the masterpieces created

by her ancestors. For me, it was equally unique and special to have the possibility to get to know her interest for a working method that I had long wondered about. I felt the admiration for her carrying forward, peacefully and through her art, the request of enlightening the world with the knowledge of the Tupi culture through these extraordinary original artefacts, all of them for centuries were preserved outside of Brazil.

CONCLUSIONS

The Florence Museum holds a very complex heritage accumulated over more than four centuries and from many geographical areas. It represents a model case study of the challenges faced by many ethnology museums with respect to the decolonizing process, where collections from various continents were for a long time assembled and exhibited bearing the perspective of ethnocentrism and colonial aspirations. Regarding the problems related to representation (and misrepresentation) through material culture, Tupinambá objects were for a long time trapped under the stereotype of "curiosities" and the rhetoric of extinct people's art. Today the capes are part of the South American collections, a complex and diversified heritage. They draw our attention to dramatic current issues such as climate change and the protection of biodiversity that are linked to the fundamental rights of native peoples. They also remind us of the role of protagonists they play in the defense of their territories and in general for the safeguarding of the environment. Their activism invites us to establish a polyphonic dialogue in search for a "good life" for all.

This report helps convey these new values to the individuals who eventually have the opportunity to read it. Further, the experience reported here was also documented by professional photographers and filmographers. We hope that these visual material will help more widely to disseminate the event to a wider public. However, how to convey these new values through the exhibition is an important and difficult question which remains without a clear answer. The current exhibit certainly does not "speak" sufficiently to the visitor who autonomously "travels" through the rooms.

The history of objects is (re)created every time that we put them in relation with the context where they were conceived, made and used. The process of creative narratives must be continuously renewed and widened, or the objects will lose their voice. These artifacts tell many stories, some are lost in the past and they will probably remain a mystery. New stories can be created, by renewing their connection with the people from whom they originated.

In this article we wanted to share the memory of an important experience, stressing the importance of

collaboration among people with different expertise and tasks. It was not only an interdisciplinary, but more importantly a meeting point of intercultural collaboration. While writing this article, we became more aware that it was important to integrate the scientific aspects with more personal observation, therefore we gave space in particular to Glicéria's and Guia's intimate voices. Scientific and spiritual approaches, as Glicéria teaches us, are not incompatible, on the contrary they should be combined for a brighter future dialogue around cultural heritage so that it can be shared and understood by all.

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