

Case study:
WHEN MINORITY SPEAKS
A multimedia production with Ava Guarani indian communities
on the border of Paraguay and Brazil.
MUSEO DE LA TIERRA GUARANI, ITAIPU, PARAGUAY.

Alejandra Peña and Osvaldo Codas.
Memoria Activa. Paraguay
www.memoriaactiva.org.py

Abstract (EN)

In 2003 we were hired by ITAIPU -the largest Hydroelectric Dam in the world, owned by Brazil and Paraguay- to renovate their old museum. We designed a new museum with a multimedia-based story-line. We wanted to meet the interest of international visitors, while serving at the same time the local Guarani Indian culture. We invited the Guarani community of "Acaray-mi" to be part of the team.

Working with that native community of Paraguay changed our view of multimedia in a cross-cultural perspective.

Keywords:

Paraguay, multimedia, culture, indigenous, oral history, oral tradition.

Is it worthy to produce multimedia projects about indigenous culture, from a western perspective? Is it possible to overcome the cultural gap? To these personal questions, I would like to add those of the Mexican Bonfil Batalla¹: -Can indigenous people control the technologies of representation?, and -Can indigenous people control the interpretation of their discourse by dominant classes?

These questions were our main concern when we visited the Ava Guarani community "Acaray'mi" for the first time on the border of Paraguay and Brazil. We knew that these people had a very late contact experience with "white" society - in the middle of the 20th century and we felt sorry for what our ancestors did to them. We did not wish to repeat the conquest "of the sword and the cross." We wanted to make sure that our work was not going to force anyone to change their culture in any way. And because we knew the long history of exclusion suffered

by the natives, we were not sure we would be welcome in that community.

Our main goal was to break the long silence between the old museum that we were reforming, and the Indian tribes that lived in the region. We believed that the recognition of the indigenous people by the museum was a necessary condition for involving them in the new museological proposal. Until that moment, the museum exhibited archaeological pieces of the Guaraní ancestors, and some ethnographic collections of the 1980s. Those objects were exposed as relics of the remote past. They were displayed in such poor way, that they seemed to deny the existence of the living tribes of today.

But there was a very different reality beyond the museum's borders. The region is part of the triple frontier of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina, which share the mighty Parana River. It is the same river that ends in the Atlantic Ocean with the name of Rio de la Plata. This river and its affluents have been journeyed during the last 9,000 years by the settlers of the Rio de la Plata basin. Medicinal and nutritional plants were domesticated by the Guaranis in its subtropical forest. According to the myth of the Guaraní Creation, the Parana River means also the symbolic place where the cultural hero "Kuarahy" tended a bridge of arrows to cross the river, saving the life of his twin brother from the malignant devils. Since the 16th Century, this same place was the mandatory gate for Spaniards to colonize South America. The first Jesuit Missions settled here before moving towards the south, after the constant rebellion of natives. Finally, this is the same forest that hid, for five centuries, those Guaraní Indians who fled from the Spanish-Paraguayan villages.

After this contextual parenthesis, we can refine our questions: Is it possible to consider indigenous communities like a great repository of data-resources? How could we make sure that the research methodology is not a trap? When working in the trans-cultural field, is it possible to keep the necessary distance with the subject, according to Bourdieu's reflexive research methods⁽ⁱⁱ⁾? We need to assume that a question provides the model for the answer that we can receive. A question is a labyrinth into which the interviewer "leads" the interviewed victim. This is why the collected data reflects the theory of the researcher. The same happens when applying the method of participant observation. We observe according to our interest. This is part of the risk we take when approaching social reality in a similar cultural context. But, what happens when the person being interviewed has different codes of communication, and when he or she comes from a different symbolic representation system?

We were immersed in these thoughts when we started the first contacts with the Ava Guaraní community. The idea of meeting indigenous people, who had their first contact with the western world only 40 years ago, was a challenge for us. We were on the way to meet the descendants of those who hid in the forest from the 17th Century, avoiding contact with the

Europeans. The old people of the community still remember what it was like to meet “white men” that entered the forest to exploit the woods and the Yerba Mate plant, in the mid 1950’s. We had several introductory meetings with the indigenous community, where they asked insistent questions about the goals of the project. After some time they accepted their role to be our teachers on Guaraní culture.

Who leads the interview?

Once we had presented the concept of the project, the Guaraní priest, known as "oporaíva", arranged the next appointments to start the interviews.

I remember sitting with them during the first session with a list of questions in mind. For some reason, I was not able to ask what I wanted: the people there were so active in participating, that it was a rich and stimulating experience. Suddenly, I tried to remember my questions, but they made no sense to me anymore. Everything was already said.

Every time we met, I had the same feeling of being conducted by the community. At the beginning of every session, some of the men started proposing a subject, and animated the discussion. They included a wide variation of subjects like Guaraní religion, traditional rituals, the meaning of death, etc. Some of the old women participated also, and if they were a shaman, young women could speak as well.

Levels of communication

The Ava Guaraní Indian community established what to communicate in the museum, and what to keep in silence. Sometimes we were asked to turn our video-camera off, especially during some parts of mythic stories that they told. The shaman/oporaíva Ramón Iturbe asked us to make pauses in the recording, when he told us the myth of Creation. He whispered to us that recording “could be dangerous for all of us”, suggesting that there were some spirits listening to us, and that they could get mad. This is why the multimedia presented in the museum includes the pauses, and shows the segments of the story that they wanted to share.

Another interesting aspect is the selection of the film location, and the selection of some clothing to wear during the shooting. The Ava Guaraní decided that the meetings for interviews were going to take place at the Cooperative, surrounded by their trucks and machinery for agriculture. Also we noticed a certain deliberate use of western icons like jeans and sunglasses. These accessories were not used in such a compulsive way in other moments of their daily life. We dare to think that these are strategies of communication, looking forward to generate empathy with the “white” public. In this way, they could establish a balance with their speech, that is strongly dissonant compared to western rationality.

As time passed, I realized that our Ava Guarani hosts had the effective control over the interview process, the subjects of their culture, and the information that they shared with us. Once I saw their empowerment of the project, I experimented with a spiritual disarmament, and I could let things flow. My feelings of guilt as a member of the dominant culture shifted into the certainty of total success.

Community shooting:

The shooting of interviews took place in open areas, determined by the Indian chief and the shaman/oporaíva. The whole community participated, sitting in a big circle of men in the first row, and women, children and animals in a second circle surrounding us. This kind of collective interview, with the presence of all the community members, was very different from any other type of interview that I had participated in before. It was a proof to my individualistic culture, and an opportunity to experiment with the meaning of integral participation. Step by step, I discovered that participation had an endless dimension for them. The ties of social relationship included not only just people, but also all the beings of nature. Joining as a group to solve a problem means to assume the presence of other elements like wind, water (rain or rivers) or the animals. All the existing beings can manifest. Changes of plans can occur due to “messages” received from the cosmos: the passage of a bird of bad luck like the "Suinda" or big owl, or the leaves of the trees moved by the wind.

Sacred words need no film editing.

As the shooting process advanced, we got to see that writing the preliminary script had been a waste of time.

Once at home and checking the videos, it was hard to decide how to edit the interviews made by the natives. The message of every Ava Guarani participant was expressed with order, and integrity. We did not find weak segments, or bad parts. Erasing any part would bring the risk of losing all the material. Every word had its own place. It was a big difference. While editing interviews with “white” people was a hard work, the video of the Ava Guarani natives seemed to be already edited. Then we learned that every single phrase they said, and every ritual showed was already “edited”, pre-processed by the community. A permanent collective feedback exercise had been completed across centuries, in long night-talks around the fire. Indigenous people worship the meaning of every word in their daily life. Every word is sacred, and they say just what it must be said. This made us change our multimedia design: while respecting a full text, we gave titles to several parts and presented them in the menu, following the order of the text. Then we included several entries to navigate.

From the guns of the conquerors to the pen of the social scientist:

Guarani cultural memory is alive thanks to the combination of oral tradition and the communitarian way of life. In different moments of the interviews, the Ava Guaraní manifested that printed text can betray the words, which are sacred.

A paper and a pen in the hands of the researcher can be as aggressive to them as the colonial guns in hands of the 16th century conquerors. The first time that we met with the Ava Guaraní community, we mentioned that our project included shooting and recording interviews. The answer to this comment was extremely favorable, and the shamán/oporaiva said to us : "If our images and voices are going to be projected in the screens of the museum, we agree to collaborate. Then, I have the certainty that my face will look at the face of the visitors, and my words will go directly to their ears". He also added that "white people" like taking notes of everything using a sheet of paper and a pen, but later, they change the true words of others, and they don't explain the indigenous reality well.

Thus the multimedia way of thinking is part of the indigenous life. The concept that they have of communication includes using all the senses. While multimedia production was for us one of the possible ways to register their culture, our indigenous hosts thought that multimedia was "the way" to present what they are and what they think.

Final words

Our direct and virtual experience with the Ava Guaraní tribes changed our conception of multimedia production. We found out that our indigenous friends have the optimal cultural conditions to participate in digital culture. A reason for this can be their holistic conception of life and universe. We felt like we were in the presence of people of solid speech, standing firmly on their identity and their history. This explains their clear ideas about what parts of their symbolic universe they can communicate, and how to communicate in a western context where they are considered the lowest social step.

This paper began asking some questions that disturbed our peace at the beginning of the museum project. We hope that the readers have examined their own answers. Perhaps, the most disquieting of all our questions were those of Mr. Bonfil Batalla: -Can indigenous people control the interpretation of their discourse by dominant classes?, and -Is it possible for

indigenous people to control the technologies of representation?

Trying to answer the first question, we think that the dominant society interpretation of the indigenous speech is not an indigenous responsibility, but a deliberate blindness of the western world, that is functional to its position of dominant culture.

About the second question we can say that the experience that we had with the natives helped us to observe that the "white people" (as they call us), still have the colonialist idea of Indians as objects of protection. We try to teach them how they can make "good use" of the new technologies. The fact is, that they have much to contribute, and we have much to learn about their multimedia conception of life.

ⁱ Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo, "La teoría del control cultural en el estudio de procesos étnicos", Revista Papeles de la Casa Chata, año 2, núm. 3, 1987.

ⁱⁱ Bourdieu, Pierre y otros El oficio de sociólogo. Ed. Siglo XXI, México, 1976;

ⁱⁱ Bonfil Batalla, Op.Cit.

Bibliography

- Leuthold, Steven, Indigenous Aesthetics. Native Art, Media and Identity. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1998.
- Said, Edward W., Orientalism, New York, Vintage Books, 1979.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", en Cary Nelson y Lawrence Grossberg, eds., Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Sartori. "Homo videns" (1997)