

Chapter 11

Biocultural Heritage Through Museological Narrative as a Way of Return on Research in Historical Ethnobotany



Maria Franco Trindade Medeiros

Abstract This chapter develops a reflexive narrative of conceptual, experiential, and propositional structure. It will consider as a guiding axis, in a first take, the biocultural heritage and the space of the museum. Next, three distinct experiences of return in the field of ethnobotany will be reported, which is believed to be a living and driving force as a creative process of museums as well as within museums themselves. These experiences will lead us to the exhibition spaces created in the Benedictine Monasteries of the cities of Olinda (state of Pernambuco, Brazil) and Rio de Janeiro (state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), as well as video-lecture communication as part of the activities that integrated the participation of the National Museum/ Federal University of Rio de Janeiro during the 19th National Museum Week. In this way, it is intended that this placement of experience can be useful as a reference model for the establishment of the museological narrative as a means of return and thus sharing of scientific research with the public, in this case, the users of the museum. The exhibition will converge to a transnaturalism that will associate archivist contents with elements of areas transversal to the sciences and arts.

Keywords Collective benefit · Data governance · Ethics · Museums · Responsibility

M. F. T. Medeiros (✉)

Departamento de Botânica, Laboratório Interativo em Etnobotânica (LinE), Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (MN/UFRJ), Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
e-mail: mariaftm@mn.ufrj.br

11.1 Initial Reflections on Principles of Ethics in Ethnobotany Related to Museology

In the context of the retrospective view of the interaction that was established between the human person and plants, the historical ethnobotany works from the memory traces that refer to this interaction (Medeiros 2021a) which, like Prance et al. (2007) refer to, is an interaction of survival. From this perspective, ethnobotany makes use of different material sources for the development of a research such as textual, iconographic, and photographic documents (Medeiros 2009, 2010). This historical focus allows, therefore, the inclusion of multiple evidences, which makes research broadly interdisciplinary. Therefore, knowledge from areas such as botany, history, archival science, and museology is combined with each other.

One of the structural aspects of ethnobotany research focuses on the issue of return of the results achieved with the society in which the study was developed. Its existence integrates the thought around the principles that seek to point to what would be a good direction of researchers who praise the development of research with ethical and legal bases aimed at the commitment to the participating societies. This issue integrates a social and politic commitment in which will be discussed among researchers and different social and ethnical groups what would be the possible ways of return.

When we address this matter that involves a legal basis about governance of traditional knowledge and the requirement of formal agreements that associate this knowledge to the genetic resources, we face to its fundament in the legal and global institutional construction of the so-called Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). This document was elaborated from the discussions that occurred in the occasion of Rio Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), and it was opened for signatures in 1992. The main objective of CBD was to regularize the access to genetic heritage and benefit-sharing provisions, in addition to expose “sustainable development” as a guiding. This legal milestone has as fundaments assumptions of the nature, development, and circulation of knowledge, both those considered traditional and those scientific. The most prominence consequence of this legal milestone was to redefine the relations among people and knowledge and, for that, apply the terms *holders* of traditional knowledge and *sovereignty* of traditional stages over genetic resources (Cunha 2009).

Integrating the principles of the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) with those of the Code of Ethics of the International Society of Ethnobiology (2006), the premises of the participation of interlocutors in the process of composing results, access and analysis of the data dissemination material and its sharing, in an equitable manner, ensuring a circulation of ideas through dissemination adjusted to the desire of participants and the real possibilities of the researchers, and the sharing of benefits arising from the research, these appear as basic elements in the question of the return of research.

Going toward these premises, it is also important to mention the Declaration of *Belém*, created in 1988 on the occasion of the 1st International Congress of Ethnobiology, in the city of Belém (state of Pará, Brazil). This document brought in its lines the recognition of the importance of indigenous and non-indigenous traditional peoples, their hall of knowledge, and management practices in favor of conservation of biodiversity and natural resources, and, in addition to this central contribution of the Declaration, there was also the circumscription of the exercise of the ethnobiologist researchers (and ethnobotanists) in the dissemination process, return of the results of their research in the native language.

Dialoguing directly with these documents that highlight respect for different social and ethnic groups are also the *Tkarihwaié:ri* Code of Ethical Conduct (2011) and the Code of Ethics of the Latin American Society of Ethnobiology (2015). These actions are the result of a concern with respect for the cultural and intellectual heritage of these groups, in the same way that they also turn to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. They bring in their scope the need to have an effective, consented, and approved participation by indigenous and local communities in investigations about their knowledge, resources, and territories.

Going forward in history, 30 years after the first congress held in 1988, which has already been commented above, in 2018, *Belém+30* brought together the XVI Congress of the International Society of Ethnobiology; the XII Brazilian Symposium on Ethnobiology and Ethnoecology; the IX State Fair of Science, Technology and Innovation; and the 1st World Fair of the Sociobiodiversity, also in the city of Belém (state of Pará, Brazil). At this congress in 2018, the *Belém+30* Declaration was presented, which brought an assessment of the challenges and achievements of the Declaration of *Belém* elaborated in 1988 and considered the perspective of different traditional peoples and communities, defending respect for their territories, freedom of management, and self-determination of their ways of life.

In addition to these documents mentioned, since the twentieth century other covenants, codes, declarations, laws, and agendas have also recognized the rights of social and ethnic groups, the importance of traditional knowledge for the conservation of natural resources, and biocultural heritage and were in defense of the equitable sharing of benefits. Among these actions we can also mention as an example the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (United Nations 1948), the Convention No.169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ILO 1989), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003), the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO 2015), the United Nations Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (2005–2014), the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2001), the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UNESCO 2005a, b), the *Bonn* Guidelines on Access to Genetic Resources and Fair and Equitable Sharing of the Benefits Arising out of their Utilization (CBD 2002), the *Akwé: Kon* Guidelines (2004), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), and the *Nagoya* Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization (2010).

What is called into question when we think about the issue of commitment between researchers and their interlocutors, whether originating peoples or other different social and ethnic representations, what we propose to think about is the definition of the viable possibilities of return together with these people. Social and ethnic groups must integrate this process in an active and informed way, either by the information shared or by the possible profits generated from them, as Moreira (2005) adds.

In the case of historical ethnobotany, this commitment to think about the results and their dissemination among the communities participating in the research can be developed through actions of return that prioritize social actors, their epistemologies found in memory traces, and respecting their particular cultural contexts.

Given the multifaceted characteristic of ethnobotany, essentially historical, combined with the imperative need to establish the return activity in these surveys, the following question was posed: How then to integrate museology into the process of returning research into historical ethnobotany?

From this inquiry, this reflection will consider in the foreground the biocultural heritage and the museum space. Next, we will report return experiences in the field of the historical ethnobotany, aiming that they can serve as a reference model for the establishment of the museological narrative as a means of return, as well as for the sharing of scientific research with the visiting public that effectively constitutes the user of the museum.

11.2 Some Considerations About Cultural Heritage and Museums

Understanding people-nature interactions in the progressive discovery of Brazilian biodiversity is not easy. It walks between writings, Nankin ink illustrations, traditions, oils on canvas, watercolors, landscapes, sculptures, stories, objects of all sorts of varied ethnicities, memories of plants, and objects.

In the ambit of the symbolic and the imaginary, the memory can be accessed in the materiality of the registers and the visibility of the images. Thus, several images and registers become documents of social memory when recalled in the collective plan.

In the set of information that reveals the meanings of memory, biocultural heritage, material, or virtual objects constitute the elements that will mediate social relations and actions.

In this search for past know-how that transcends the times, we are in the face of the situation that trying to identify memory through biocultural heritage is not guarantee that we will access it completely. What we find are the vestiges, the traces of memory printed on the biocultural heritage that may be sheltered, for example, in the places of physical or virtual memory.

In these places we find objects, vestiges, and testimonies, which can be, for example, books, documents, or a variety of objects that can represent an individual, places, phenomena, a class, a family of objects, or objects that are not perceptible to the human person or that do not allow their displacement. These objects are supports that will potentially lead us to some remembrance, some feeling, a fact, a particular person, an ethnic group, and so on.

Among the places of memory that safeguard these traces, the museum, which could be understood as a space of “concentrated reality” (Wagensberg 2005), can shelter in its collections a multiplicity of objects of varied natures and typologies. These objects can evoke reflections and questions through narrative strategies and also have the potential to confer materiality and visibility to realities that sometimes are configured as inaccessible to human perception.

Considering that the objects in a museum are parted from their primary context, and therefore consequently from their original reality, when transferred to the museum space, these objects are inserted into another reality. In this new ambience, the intention is that from the objects it is possible to document their original reality from which they were displaced (Mensch 1992).

Thus, it is emphasized in this way that the master line of the musealization of objects is the process that transforms it into a document. This musealization would introduce elements of the original context of objects, such as references related to spatiality, temporality, and significance, in a contemporary reality to the user public, the exhibition, and the museum (Meneses, 1992).

Through museological narratives an order and classifications of the objects are proposed. These objects represent the fragments of the universe of material culture, and this organization sends us to a broader reality full of complexifications. What is being placed is that museums, when turning to objects, lead us to the proposition of a system of ordering and narrative that is endowed with an internal coherence that gathers the fragments of reality and recontextualizes them. From this process, it will be in museums that we will have the possibility to visualize the realities of these objects and immerse ourselves in a greater context of their integrity from their recontextualization in this new space, that of exhibitions, collections, or technical reserves.

Within the scope of ethnobotany, these vestiges of biocultural heritage, when put under analysis, can lead us to reflection and bring us information about the meaning and historical and contextualized application of plant species in different societies, as we will discuss below.

11.3 Taking as a Model of Return the Practices of Exhibition in the Museum: Physical and Virtual Environments

Objects that comprised the daily life of past societies can also serve as starting point for the establishment of studies and reveal important questions about the meaning and use of Brazilian vegetation in past centuries through the analysis of these objects, that is, through the detailed analysis of our biocultural heritage.

We can find this type of register dealing with the plants used as raw material during the nineteenth century in the hospital of Saint Benedict located in the Monastery of Saint Benedict of Olinda (state of Pernambuco, Brazil) and in the *botica* (pharmacy) and infirmary of the Monastery of Saint Benedict of Rio de Janeiro (state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

The actuation of this hospital, *botica*, and infirmary of Saint Benedict, which operated on the premises of the Benedictine Monasteries of Olinda and Rio de Janeiro, along the nineteenth century, was related to health and disease issues, taking care of the religious community itself, slaves, and the lay people who resorted to this place, through the medicinal use of plant species and animals (Alencar et al. 2010; Medeiros 2007; Medeiros et al. 2011; Medeiros and Albuquerque 2012; Medeiros and Alves 2020).

Saint Benedict, Italian, founder of the Benedictine Order in the fifth century, in his rule of life left to the religious who entered the monasteries as well as to those who also currently enter the monasteries the so-called Rule of Saint Benedict, where he says in Chapter 36 on the care that monks must have for the sick (The Rule of Saint Benedict 2003). Carrying out this activity, the Benedictine monks of Olinda and Rio de Janeiro put into practice in the *botica* and infirmary the guidance of their founding father, Saint Benedict.

Considering the informational set formed by the collection of recipes of these *boticas* and infirmaries, medicinal plants, as well as the Benedictine actuation in Brazil and therapeutic practices of the nineteenth century, our motivation for the organization of exhibitions pointed to some questions: Is it possible an ethnobotany that situates people in time and space? If we agree that yes, that is possible, does memory articulate itself with this perspective? Being that, would not the museological narrative be the great vehicle that approximates memory, biocultural heritage, and ethnobotany?

All these reflections lead us to a discussion about the meaning of memory. In the exercise of thinking about memory, what guide our thoughts is to perceive how the relations between memory, biocultural heritage, and ethnobotany can be carried out by the museological narrative.

We think about museological narratives in which the “axis of the musealization” is the process of transformation of the objects, such as prescriptions, information, plants, and therapeutic practices, in short, how these objects become documents that introduce us to references of other times and meanings in a contemporaneity that is that of the exhibition itself and its user.

We gathered, reorganized, and recontextualized the objects, attributing visibility to these past realities, thinking about today’s visiting public. The organization of exhibitions of a social and educational nature aimed at the general public contemplated the information generated from research conducted within the scope of ethnobotany. Thus, in Codex 81 (according to the organization of the Benedictine Archive of Olinda), which was transcribed and printed in 1966, under the title *Receituário of Joaquim Jerônimo Serpa* (Prescription Book of Joaquim Jerônimo Serpa) (Schmalz 1966) and Codices 138 and 139 (according to the organization of

the Archive of the Monastery of Saint Benedict of Rio de Janeiro) were taken as central documents.

These exhibitions, through the study of manuscripts gathered and preserved in the Archives of the Monasteries of Saint Benedict of Olinda and Rio de Janeiro, referred us to the history of the Benedictine actuation action, as well as expressed one of the characteristics of Brazilian culture – the importation of ideas, values, and practices from other origins related to the use of plants from the cultural network that forged the formation of healing practices in Brazil, associated with native plants of the country itself.

The exhibition projects were then elaborated aiming at the plant resource and sought to redesign a post-biographical itinerary of the Benedictine hospital, *botica*, and infirmary during the nineteenth century, from the sources consulted. The proposed itineraries are related to an integrative narrative of their own temporality, that is, the period between 1823 and 1829, having as reference Olinda, and the years 1837–1880, in this case, Rio de Janeiro.

These exhibitions converged to a transnaturalness that integrates archivist content with elements in areas transversal to the sciences and arts. A selected cast of medicinal plants native to Brazil constituted the essential element of these scientific exhibitions, which revealed to the general public the research with historical sources safeguarded by the monasteries of Olinda and Rio de Janeiro. Visitors to the exhibitions could see that the plants on display reflected a usual medical practice during the nineteenth century in the monasteries, which were now hosting the exhibitions. As such, the plants presented had become an object of research that went through the processes of collection (selection), classification, conservation, and documentation so that they could become an element of exposure.

In a museum of natural history, dried plants can be taken as a representative object of their species, being therefore part of the set of objects that can be exhibited in the space of a museum, as a dead and representative object, as systematized by Alberti (2005). Thus, the strategy adopted in the two exhibitions for presentation of the plants was in the form of exsiccates (Fig. 11.1). The exsiccates consist of parts of plants taken from a plant (species) containing plant vegetative structures (root, stem, and/or leaf) and/or reproductive structures (flowers and/or fruits), which have undergone a herborization processing, which includes pressing, drying, and assembling the botanical material (Fidalgo and Bononi 1984).

Together with the parts of plants were provided data such as popular name in the nineteenth century, botanical identification (species and family), geographical distribution of the plant, part of the plant used, and therapeutic indication. This way, visitors were able to contemplate the biological structure of medicinal plants and know their application in the past.

Working the exhibitors at height that allowed a good visualization of these for all visitors, also considering children from 5 years, this information was written in a simplified calligraphy, but that was close to that of the original document. The cubes that served as exhibitors of the information and presentation of the parts of the plants were coated with botanical illustrations printed on paper and had a transparent antireflective glass protection placed on top of each of the cubes as a means of

Fig. 11.1 Visualization of exsiccate as an exhibiting form of medicinal species used in the Monastery of Saint Benedict of Olinda during the nineteenth century



protection of the botanical material exposed (Fig. 11.1). Also integrated the museological narrative, a set of black and white photographs as well as colorful photos organized and displayed in several large frames, which evoked a large picture frame. In these compositions presented, arrows were also drawn along the photos, which indicated and made available to the visitor the images of the façade of the building where the hospital operated, images of the floor plan of the building and reproduction of historical illustrations, as well as current photographs that clearly situated the location of the old *botica* and infirmary. In addition to this hall of imagery information, there was also the display of current photographs of medicinal plants, as well as the reproduction of details of the historical sources consulted (Fig. 11.2).

As elements that were exclusive of the exhibition held on the premises of the Benedictine Monastery of Rio de Janeiro, we mentioned the organization of a bilingual panel to open the exhibition, the creation of a space for the visitor to sit down and watch the display of a video, whose narrative included other information that provided an immersion in the history about the use of plants in medicine exercised by this monastery in times past (Fig. 11.3). There was also the incorporation of an exhibiting table on which parts of medicinal plants used in the *botica* and infirmary were exposed (Fig. 11.4). These parts were fruits, seeds, barks, leaves, and flowers of medicinal plants that were arranged in faience on the table, referring to the usual packaging in the *boticas* of the nineteenth century. The botanical identification and



Fig. 11.2 Visualization of the imagery arrangement of medicinal species used in the Monastery of Saint Benedict of Olinda in the nineteenth century

medicinal application at the time of operation of the *botica* were informed by means of written identification labels, positioned near each part of the exposed plant.

The first exhibition was installed in the Benedictine Monastery of Olinda itself, during the period from July 10 to 24, 2011, on the occasion of a wider exhibition – *São Bento no Tempo: Fatos e Fotos do Mosteiro de Olinda* (Saint Benedict in Time: Facts and Photos of the Monastery of Olinda – which brought together the entire monastery to discuss its memory in commemoration of its 425 years of foundation. This exhibition – *Plantas Medicinais no Hospital Beneditino Oitocentista, Olinda – Pernambuco – Brasil* (Medicinal Plants at the nineteenth-century Benedictine Hospital, Olinda – Pernambuco – Brazil) – was visited by 3000 people. The second

Fig. 11.3 Visualization of the space dedicated to the video display about the history of the use of plants in medicine exercised by the Monastery of Saint Benedict of Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century



scientific exhibition was installed in the space of the Benedictine Monastery of Rio de Janeiro, during the period from July 20 to 26, 2013, integrating the cultural corridor that took place in Rio de Janeiro during the World Youth Day with Pope Francis. *Farmácia Botânica dos Monges, Mosteiro de São Bento do Rio de Janeiro – Brasil* (Botanical Pharmacy of Monks, Monastery of Saint Benedict of Rio de Janeiro – Brazil) had the registered visitation of 3284 people.

After these two exhibition experiences, we organized a return action by digital means, in 2021. This action was implemented through a video-lecture that integrated the participation activities of the National Museum of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in the *19ª Semana Nacional de Museus* (19th National Week of Museums), whose central theme was *O Futuro dos Museus: Recuperar e Reimaginar* (The Future of Museums: Recover and Reimagine) in the same year.

Due to the pandemic by SARS-CoV-2, in 2021, the *Semana* (Week) was entirely in digital format. Thus, our video-lecture was made available on the National Museum's YouTube channel on May 17, 2021, and has been available for viewing even since (Medeiros 2021b). It is worth mentioning that this event has been coordinated by *Instituto Brasileiro de Museus – Ibram* (Brazilian Institute of Museums), and it takes place every year, since 2003, as a cultural season in celebration of International Museum Day (May 18) (Ibram 2021).



Fig. 11.4 Visualization of the exhibiting table on which parts of medicinal plants used in the Monastery of Saint Benedict of Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century were presented

The thematic perspective of this chapter was based on the dynamics we have developed for this reflective experience with the general public and brought up this discussion of the possibility of working ethnobotany, memory, and museology, taking as a guiding thread the curatorial experiences in the Benedictine Monasteries of Olinda and Rio de Janeiro.

11.4 Final Appreciations

Strengthening and deepening the interactions between ethnobotany, memory, and museological narrative with the creation of a field of convergence between museums and society, what was promoted through the actions of return of shows and video-lecture were environments for the exercise of human experience, whether social, environmental, or historical.

The circulation of ideas among individuals from different instances of the society, from different countries of origin, created a field of possibility so that they could access a portion of Brazilian memory and be instigated to recognize the historical importance of plants in their life in society.

The shows, therefore, pointing out some of the plants observed in the medical practice of Saint Benedict Hospital and Saint Benedict *Botica* and Infirmary sought to stimulate the imagination and the senses and, above all, to rescue and preserve an important portion of the memory associated with the biocultural heritage of Brazil.

Thus, we intend that this placement of the experience can serve as a reference model for the establishment of a museological narrative as a means of return and, therefore, of sharing scientific research with the general public, in this case, the users of the museum. The exhibition converged to a transnaturalty, bringing memory as a point of inflection, a dialogical arc between the constitutive elements of the narrative around the biocultural heritage, establishing that objects – plants and information about their use – serve as a means for the construction of a narrative, an act of thought, and for the reconstitution of aspects that involved the *modus vivendi* of a given society, its know-how, its rituals, its therapeutic practices, and other aspects that involve human life.

In this way, this continuous historical process, within the perspective of our time, with the help and facility of virtual means, can be increasingly rescued, recovered, and presented to society as a whole, promoting the interaction of this same society with its own history and, above all, the belief in its freedom so that, when analyzing this history, it can benefit from this history in the projection of its future.

The return of research in historical ethnobotany through scientific exhibitions evokes the repositories of experiences consistently, awakening the public to get in touch with the memory of a place or with the network of information, which constitute the knowledge, wisdom, and practices that have been bequeathed to us and that we live today.

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