

ABSTRACT

TITLE:

COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES IN THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN MALE-DOMINATED CONTEXTS: THE COMMUNITY OF SHELLFISH HARVESTERS OF CAMBADOS, SPAIN

INTRODUCTION:

This thesis and photography project are the result of a three-month sojourn in 2012 and 2013, when the author lived with a community of women shellfish harvesters in and around the village of Cambados (Galicia, Spain).

For historical reasons, shellfish harvesting has been a bastion reserved to fisher-women, and it represents a victory over nature, over society, and over limitations imposed on women past and present.

Professionalization of shellfish harvesting has been customarily researched from viewpoints related to commercialization and its consequential changes. Thus, there are few in-depth studies dealing with the identity of women and, more precisely, the extent to which all those changes have informed the identity of women shellfish harvesters and the image they project to society.

Works such as that of sociologist Begoña Marugán's¹ call for an approach which is immediately necessary, namely carrying out an analysis of the process of professionalization not only as a social phenomenon, but also with regard to identity and, therefore, cultural imagery in a changing society.

This thesis aims to contribute to the stream emanating from UNESCO which highlights endangered cultural values. In turn, this approach makes this thesis a hybrid document in response to a social demand to put visual and artistic languages at the disposal of the documenting of cultural processes which would, otherwise, remain invisible.

SYNOPSIS (AIMS AND RESULTS)

Getting to live together with these women and taking pictures of them implied a process of "progressive reduction of distrust", by which the author went from being

¹ Marugán Pintos, B. (2004). *E colleron ese tren...Profesionalización das mariscadoras galegas* (Xunta de Galicia, Consellería de Pesca e Asuntos Marítimos; Spain, 2004)

just a reporter to becoming the transmitter utilized by those women to tell what they wanted to be told, and choose the images they wanted to be shown.

This was a reflective meeting which demonstrated how indispensable the actual protagonists are in the treatment of culture.

It is not the aim of this thesis to become a work of anthropology, but to underscore an approach to a way of life and femininity through an empathic link based on the respect for the subjects at its center.

The common usage of the phrase “take a picture” had to be reassessed in order to analyze the extent to which the photographer betrays the trust of her subject, insofar as the author’s taking on that common usage may imply her assuming the authoritarian, even colonialist, connotations of said phrase as part of the process.

After immersing in an exercise of visual anthropology and sensory ethnography, the author was able to create her own atmosphere, in which the photographs evolved and, even now, await being dissected over and over by their own subjects and their viewers, by testing and analyzing ways by which the “other” gets to identify themselves with an external look.

These images turned themselves into visually perceivable manifestations of immaterial concepts, thus demonstrating how artistic visual languages can document and interpret the subject while respecting them.

From the realm of the visual to reflective ethnography through art-based research, fieldwork was subjected to a ground-breaking approach to data-collection and to the strategies of representation and distribution.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis constitutes a self-reflective analysis in which the ethnographic work is presented as part of artistic experimentation; an observational laboratory where the concept of “drift” within authorship was allowed to grow and be observed in a struggle against stereotypes. This thesis gathers a variety of voices which try to consider the author’s “emic” point of view as a photographer, bringing forward the outward journey from within, as well as artistic empathy.

The final objective was to forge a feeling of collective cultural heritage and a shared history through a creative and interactive activity. First, through the relationship between the artist and the models, with the subsequent transition to co-authorship of the images; and then, when the models were able to look at the photographs in a gallery and share the experience with their community, through the dialogue about how they saw themselves, thus reducing the distance between models and photographer.

As they become public and are shared by a whole community, these images may foster a process of self-pride, acquiring their own cultural value as they preserve the models’ experience and wisdom (an immaterial cultural heritage).

A fundamental part of this collaborative process was to incorporate the models' own thoughts regarding this ethnographic experience, and to facilitate, through photography, a "visual language" as valid in artistic disciplines as in sociological studies.

Bringing to reality the possibility of incorporating the models' critique, and showing the work carried out before their own community, were among the most satisfactory results of the author's research work.

These images made it possible for the subjects to step back and carry out a self-assessment, thus becoming observers of their own identity.

In order to reach a definition of this reciprocal and open method, the author went through a previous process of adaptation to a state of conscious and partaking observation which implied, to a large extent, the reanimation of otherwise unused senses necessary to incorporate anthropological methods in the author's creative processes. This immersion became the basis of both the author's ethnographic knowledge and the artistic process.

The micro-cosmos of Cambados under research in this thesis is at the heart of a wider work carried out with the aim of becoming global. This is an open project whose methodology is designed to encompass other communities in the future. It already includes two instances where it has been put to work, in Iceland and the Netherlands.

The study of fisheries, depending on their cultural context and the role of women in those diverse geographical environments, makes it indispensable for studies to evaluate, from a gender perspective, the trajectories followed from the traditional modes of organizing work to current ones.
