Masquerade as Memory: Conflict as Heritage in Lavras do Abade, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a discussion about the memory of an environmental conflict that occurred in the mining village of Lavras do Abade in mid-western Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century. I introduce a study of the phenomenon called *Mascarados*, part of the religious festival of the present-day town, and its relationship to the previous conflict in the neighbourhood. I report several interviews I conducted about this historical disagreement with the oldest residents in the present-day town of Pirenópolis, an old rival village formerly called Meia Ponte. Finally, I discuss theories about the individual and group implications of this 'masked memory' and its impact on the community's archaeological, historical and environmental heritage.

Keywords

Collective memory, Cultural memory, Historical archaeology, Environmental conflict, Economic disparity, Political struggle, Mid-western Brazil, Gold mining, Water pollution, *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo, Cavalhadas, Mascarados* or *Curucucús*, Remembering and forgetting, Meia Ponte, Lavras do Abade, Pirenópolis, Brazil

Introduction

Memory, whether individual or communal, is a human phenomenon that varies through time and place. Here, I intend to look for similarities and differences in the current and past memories of the citizens of Pirenópolis - the modern town which was once a village called Meia Ponte - about the Lavras do Abade conflict. We can understand certain memories associated with this

archaeological site as both private and public constructs, and the absence of other memories as the result of cumulative actions, whether conscious or subconscious. The Lavras do Abade archaeological site today is a 'lost island' in the collective, cultural and social memory of this society.

Attacked in 1887 by the neighbouring village of Meia Ponte, which is the present-day town of Pirenópolis, Lavras do Abade was a gold mining village in mid-western Brazil. The destruction of the mining village, according to local narratives, was because of a disagreement about water pollution. However, archaeological research in the area (Costa: 2003, 2006, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2013, 2014, 2014b, 2015) revealed that the economic disparities and political struggles between these two villages were also related to the control of environmental resources. The mine of Lavras do Abade was established in 1880 by a foreign company and the Lavras do Abade village developed around the mine as a community of immigrant miners. The attack on Lavras do Abade took place over three days and two nights in March 1887 by young masked men on horseback coming from Meia Ponte. They were heavily armed, fired shots inciting panic and set fire in the village, driving the miners away. The village was destroyed and the people never returned. The memory of the event is still present in local narratives. [Figure 1]

The result today is a collection of material remains 'forgotten' by the people of the Pireneus Mountains. The legacy of Lavras do Abade also goes beyond the past conflict because the environmental impact, and the memory of the event, is present in the modern landscape and is a unique example of the history of human pollution in central Brazil. The Lavras do Abade research was the first historical-archaeological investigation of an environmental conflict and its consequences in Brazil. The research included an examination of historical documents, investigations of archaeological sites, environmental studies of the area, and interviews with local residents. The last discussion presented in this article reflects on the overlap between personal and shared memories about the history of the event and the community's relationship to it.

The historical-archaeological literature on memory (Jones and Russell: 2012, Shackel: 2001, 2008) establishes four uses of memory: to reinforce the past, to select the past, to forget the past, and to reinvent the past. 'Reinforcing the past' is the most common of these, and in such cases, historical events can be physically illustrated by historical archaeology. 'Selecting the past' refers to events consciously conveyed from one generation to another, and in these cases historical archaeology can work as a mediator to strengthen or challenge selected memories. 'Forgetting the past' is a process generally related to traumatic or shameful



Figure 1
Map of the research area.
Photo: Google Earth, 2014.

events, and in this case, historical archaeology can help reveal long-forgotten events. 'Reinventing the past' refers to giving past situations new meanings, and in these cases, historical archaeology can serve to confirm the accuracy of a memory. Studying Lavras do Abade may provide insight into work involving the value of archaeological heritage (Godoy: 2012) and memories that are reinforced, selected, forgotten and/or re-invented.

Group memory in Pirenópolis city today

The social memory (Fentress and Wickham: 1992, Burke: 1989, Gross: 2000, Olick and Robbins: 1998, Connerton: 1989) of the Lavras do Abade conflict is a 'masked memory' because no 'loser' group is available to claim the heritage; if they even exist, descendants of this group are now so dispersed that they have not expressed interest in it. As a result, the community investigated in this case study was the 'winning' community, that is, the descendants of the old Meia Ponte population that attacked and destroyed the gold mining village of Lavras do Abade in the nineteenth century, and who today live in Pirenópolis.

Nevertheless, if we consider the Lavras do Abade a site of 'forgotten memories' today (Holtorf and Williams: 2006, Holtorf: 2000-2007) the assault on the mine is an incident that has been interpreted from the winner's point of view in local narratives. In this way, the assault is a 'remembered event' (Saito: 2006, Schwartz: 1982, Vinitzky-Seroussi: 2002, Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz: 1991) that is presented as historical fact and is immortalised in legends and myths and today lives on in Pirenópolis festivals. To corroborate my analysis, I selected a festival in the religious calendar of the town that is performed by people descended from those who are most likely to have carried out the attack on Lavras do Abade. I researched the festival to discover if it could be characterised as a 'masked memory' of this social conflict.

The *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo*, or Festival of the Holy Spirit, is a Catholic ritual performed seasonally in rural parts of Brazil. It has its origins in fourteenth-century Portugal where the court held commemorative banquets for the poor fifty days after Easter. This ritual has been a tradition in Brazil since the colonial period. The ritual has some features particular to the different regions, but there are common elements as well, such as a white dove (a Christian symbol), a saint's crown (a religious artefact), the heart of the Emperor (a court symbol), and the distribution of alms. However, the noble and religious character of the festival has not changed for centuries.

In 1819, Colonel Joaquim da Costa Teixeira promoted the first *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo* in Pirenópolis (Brandão: 1978). The festival separates religious activities from secular ones. The church rituals and ceremonies concerning the Holy Spirit characterise the religious part of the festival, while there is a succession of fun activities and games that are purely secular. The festival is a symbolic representation of everyday life in farming communities. It combines various rituals of the Catholic Church, each one preserved and redefined by popular tradition. Despite its popularity, the church and town authorities have always organised and controlled the festival in Pirenópolis.

The festival includes many sacred and popular events, such as the *Folia do Divino*, a religious procession that travels from rural to urban houses carrying the flag of the Holy Spirit, distributing alms and summoning people to the festival. The *Folia* is always preceded by *novenas* and masses offered to the Holy Spirit, followed by processions and firework displays. The festival is also a stage for numerous folklore groups, such as *Batalhão do Carlos Magno*, an elite performance, *Contradança*, an elite dance, *Congadas*, a slave dance, *Dança do Tapuio*, a traditional indigenous dance, *Catira*, a rural dance, *Pastorinhas*, a religious performance and *Cavalhadas and Mascarados*, which I describe below.

The *Cavalhadas* is a religious representation of mediaeval conflicts between Muslims and Christians. Two troops of twelve knights are divided into teams, blue-clad Christians and red-clad Muslims. These two troops stage a choreographed fight in a special field with spears and swords. The knights and horses are richly decorated, as are the king, general, princes, princesses, ambassadors and lackeys who watch the performance. The participants are generally distinguished members of society whose performances are rigidly dictated by military tradition. The *Cavalhadas* battles last for three days. On the first day, the Christian knights kill the Muslim spy, after which ambassadors are sent to negotiate for each side. It proceeds with an encounter between the kings and fights between the knights. The

first day ends with an armistice proposed by the Muslim king to the Christian king. The redemption of the Muslim knights after a second fight, and their baptism at the end of the day, mark the second day. The third day is a tournament where the knights participate in contests, such as *cabeçinhas*, a shouting competition, and *argolinhas*, a spear-throwing competition.

In 1826 the priest, Manuel Amâncio da Luz, introduced the *Cavalhadas* into Pirenópolis (Brandão: 1974). It consists of dramatic, secular and social rituals, serving as a representation of historic events believed by its participants to be factually correct. The *Cavalhadas* rituals performed in Pirenópolis are symbols of identity and Christian values. They are also symbols of an ideological and political order perpetuated by the local elite. In this way, the *Cavalhadas* can also be a 'theatre of memory' where the past is embodied and enacted as a form of historical transmission. The *Cavalhadas* rituals are a theatre of memory for the elite, but they are also directed at all members of Pirenópolis society. The rituals therefore go beyond the perpetuation of the present social order.

In opposition to the knights who participate in the *Cavalhadas* are the *Mascarados*, who represent an inversion of the values of the knights and who appear without any 'official' explanation (Brandão: 1974). The *Mascarados* or *Curucucús* are participants in the performance in the *Festa do Divino* and, consequently, in the *Cavalhadas*, but they have neither an individual narrative association with the ceremony, nor a datable origin in popular folklore (IPHAN: 2010). The 'maskers' are people able to stay anonymous by wearing masks, and who ride around the town on horseback, scaring people and demanding alcohol and cigarettes.

The *Mascarados* occupy the streets on the Saturday of the Holy Spirit Festival. Many wear paper masks depicting bulls with enormous horns and flowers. They are also dressed in brilliantly coloured clothes and ride around the town during the afternoon and the night until the Tuesday. The maskers are always young riders who, according to tradition, cannot be recognised by anybody, including their own parents, while they are riding. The maskers also participate in the *Cavalhadas* during the presentations, and join in with the musical band during the final ceremony which occurs in the 'Emperor's house' at the culmination of the festival.

The maskers are divided into three groups. The first group is dressed in black and white, with masks of bulls in the same colours and many white flowers hanging from the bull's horns. The second group of maskers, identified as *do Catolé*, wear blue and red striped clothes stuffed with grass. They cover their heads with fabric masks and straw hats with flowers. The third group is a mixture of the other two groups and includes additional members who wear the masks of animals and women and dress in modern costumes.

The presence of the *Mascarados* in the *Cavalhadas* and *Festa do Divino* rituals of Pirenópolis is curious but not inexplicable. Some Pirenópolis residents believe that the history of the *Mascarados* is about the slaves who did not have permission from their owners to participate in the festival, and because of this, they attempted to hide their faces. However, if we associate the historical information about the old village of Meia Ponte with the social role of the group in the modern-day festival, it is also possible to see direct parallels with the Lavras do Abade event. In my opinion, the history of the Lavras do Abade conflict partially survives in the memory of Pirenópolis citizens. I say 'partially survives' because the selective memories of the conflict are only those of the 'winners'; those of the 'losers' have been forgotten.

In addition to the use of masks, horses and the youth of the participants, other elements connect the *Mascarados* of the festival with the group of young masked cowboys who attacked and destroyed the Lavras do Abade village in 1887. One such element is that the objective of the maskers in the festival is to create anarchy in the town over the course of exactly two nights and three days (Montenegro: 2009). Much like the assault on the mining village, the maskers today 'attack and rob' people in the streets, although in a more theatrical, stylised, and far less aggressive way. Second, there is a connection between the maskers and the Almas River, which is the meeting point for this folklore group throughout the entire festival (Curado and Lôbo: 2008). The connection of this group with the river perpetuates the memory of the conflict, given the direct relationship between the maskers and the main cause of the disagreement. Third and most importantly, every year it is a member of the most prestigious and elite family of the city who assembles and controls the *Mascarados* (Brandão: 1974), the majority of whom are poor people from the city, just as in the event of 1887. Therefore, my





Plates 1 and 2
The *Mascarados* of Pirenópolis in 2013.
Photos: by courtesy of Angelina Howell.

hypothesis is that, given the above circumstances, the *Mascarados* are a 'masked memory' of the Lavras do Abade incident and a form of intangible heritage.

It is the process of forgetting and remembering that determines which facts about a historical conflict are present in the construction of contemporary discourse, and which are purely social memories of the past. The performances relating to the Lavras do Abade conflict are clearly maintained by the community; the individual does not participate directly in remembering. The collective attributed a religious character to this event which places the performance in diverse social contexts. However, if the maskers were not present during the introduction of the Holy Spirit Festival in 1819, or in the initial knights' mediaeval battles in 1826, it is possible that in 1887 they were in some way 'linked' with the Lavras do Abade conflict [Plates 1 and 2] and thereafter. To corroborate my statement, I will present some interviews I conducted with the oldest residents of Pirenópolis about the incident.

Individual memories from inhabitants of the old Meia Ponte village

In August 2008 I conducted a series of interviews with the oldest residents of Pirenópolis. Among the several possible interviewees identified, I only interviewed a few Meia Ponte descendants. Despite the fact that this is only a small sample of interviews, they are rich in revealing how the 1887 incident is remembered (Crouch and McKenzie: 2006, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson: 2006). As qualitative research, I only used this extensive array of information to support the historical and social claims about the event, not presenting these individuals as representatives of an entire social class but as mouthpieces for its oral history (Pillemer: 1998).

Another important consideration is the method employed in the interviews. I chose to conduct open interviews using specific questions about the subject (Bernard: 2002). The first reason for conducting this type of interview was the emotional attachment of the interviewees to the subject which necessitated providing them with as much opportunity as possible to express their opinions. The second reason was the age of the interviewees. When interviewing people of considerable age, it is necessary to expect failures in memory, fatigue and frequent changes of subject. It is important to take an ethical stance when interviewing these vulnerable informants, and also to have some safeguards in place to handle the emotions that arise. My strategy in this case was to maintain a clear 'distance' from the interviewees to make it clear that this was a professional relationship, but also to provide comfortable support to the interviewees.

Finally, I opted not to identify the interviewees by name but rather by their profession and social status because of the personal character of some of the statements. This is not a disparity, but a research

strategy. The stories and narratives about Lavras do Abade village are alive today in the minds of residents of Pirenópolis. The interviews discussed here were testimonies about the past in the present. There could be extensive interpretations of this rich collection of oral data, but I opted for a cross-sectional analysis and study of these accounts based on the concepts of collective memory (Halbwachs: 1992, Olick: 1999a, 1999b, Ricoeur: 2004, Schuman, Akiyama, and Knäuper: 1998, Schuman and Scott: 1989) and cultural memory (Assmann: 2006, 1997, Assmann and Czaplicka: 1995).

Some of the initial comparisons in this study pertain to the ages and social positions of the interviewees. The interviews each lasted three or more hours. In total, I interviewed five elderly residents of the town: two of whom were over 70, one was over 80 and two were over 90, so the average age of the interviewees was approximately 85 which corresponds to more than three generations. This means that these interviewees were born at the beginning of the twentieth century, only 36 years or so after the conflict in Lavras do Abade. As a result, most of them had heard the history of the Lavras do Abade conflict directly from their parents or relatives.

It is important to validate the information obtained from the interviewees to establish how much we can rely on the data. I consider that the information revealed parts of a narrative, or facts transmitted from one generation to the next, and also autobiographical memories which can only come from people who have lived through the event. In the case of the Lavras do Abade conflict, the interviewees were in fact only one generation away from people who themselves had witnessed and participated in the event. In addition, during their own lives the interviewees had had sufficient time to formulate or rethink their opinions about the incident, and to construct their own versions of it.

In terms of age, the interviewees were comparable, while in socio-economic terms they were dissimilar. I interviewed a miner, a painter, a dentist, a doctor, and an heiress. The miner and the painter, both now in poor circumstances and dependent on their relatives, represented the lower class. The dentist and the doctor were professional men who represented the middle class. The widow, the heiress of a powerful planter and slave owner, represented the upper class. She was the only female in the sample. The interviewees differed in describing the reasons for the conflict and who participated in it. I observed similarities when they described specific facts but they had different opinions about the consequences.

We can observe in the interviews of the two members of the lower class of Pirenópolis society, the old miner and the handicapped painter, an initial similarity in the discourse regarding the Lavras do Abade conflict. Both men associated the beginning of the conflict with economic issues. According to the miner, the mine manager, Alfredo Arena, provoked the attack because his mine did not yield the profits that he had expected. He blocked access to clean water for the residents of Meia Ponte, thereby causing the citizens to get together and destroy the mine, and consequently he was able to obtain compensation from the government. The painter described the events differently, but did confirm that the catalyst was economic. He maintained that the destruction of Lavras do Abade was not due to the mine owner's losses but was a result of his excessive profits on which he was unwilling to pay tax. The painter insisted that the mine owner used various strategies, like diverting the road, to keep his gold away from the Meia Ponte tax inspectors thus avoiding paying taxes to the town.

These two statements, while presenting different stories about the destruction of the mining village, both feature an economic issue at the heart of that destruction, with either excessive loss or excessive profit as the problem. In combination with archaeological and historical research, I arrived at a common history by assuming that the mining losses occurred outside Lavras do Abade and that that village kept the profits. I conclude that the two arguments are complementary. If the production of the mine was diverted elsewhere, it is reasonable to assume that those inside the area would believe that the mine was not producing much gold. Following this train of thought, the spike in production and the consequent pollution of the river would reflect excessive exploitation of the gold mine and could have created an environmental basis for the conflict.

Another similarity between the statements of the miner and the painter concerns those responsible for the assault. According to the miner, the attackers included a few *jagunços*, or bodyguards, who were commanded by their leaders to destroy the village. According to the painter, the group responsible for the destruction of

Lavras do Abade consisted of 'black maskers' - most likely a 'paramilitary' militia hired for the purpose. Here is another instance where I can combine the stories, as the bodyguards and the militia are both described as armed groups that followed orders and received payment for their actions. In this case, it is also probable that the town elite engineered and financed the attack. What this elite society had to say about the event, and how they constructed and reconstructed their shared memories of the incident, are the subjects of the following interviews.

The statements by the three elite members of society, the two professionals and a planter's heiress, were similar on two points. The first was the cause of the conflict. All three agreed that the main reason for the destruction of Lavras do Abade was water pollution. Each interviewee, however, described the water pollution differently. The dentist and the doctor said that the main problem was mercury contamination in the water of the Almas River, while the planter's daughter attributed the water pollution to mud from the gold mine. This is another instance where it is possible to combine various statements into a more coherent narrative - initially the Almas River was polluted by the mud from mining the gold and later by mercury from purifying the gold.

It is a fact that the water became polluted, but the population's perceptions of the causes of this pollution differ. For the lower classes, this pollution was because of the gold production, while for the middle and upper classes, it was not a case of access to clean water but of hygiene and the health problems caused by the polluted river. It is not clear if the nineteenth-century Meia Ponte population recognised mercury as a poison or understood the danger that it posed to the human body and the environment. According to historical documents, the argument about the mud or the 'dirty' river is consistent with what the Meia Ponte residents would have thought at the time. On the other hand, the two health specialists presented the mercury argument because they had more medical information.

The second similarity between the statements of the middle and upper class interviewees relates to the members of the assault group in the Lavras do Abade conflict. The interviewees presented three separate arguments about the composition of this group. According to the dentist, the group was made up of all ranks of Pirenópolis society. His perception, however, was that his equals, liberal professionals, made up this society. According to the planter's daughter, the group included the 'brave young men of the city' along with the town authorities. The doctor did not offer any opinion about this particular issue; in his first statement, he said: 'I want nothing more to do with the Abade.' His apparent silence on the subject was perhaps a strong indication that the conflict involved some other doctor or possibly a relation. [Plates 3 and 4]

The elite class's opinions about the causes and composition of the group that destroyed the Lavras do Abade mining village in 1887 were not identical. The three statements presented personal interpretations of the facts. The Lavras do Abade conflict mobilised all of old





Plates 3 and 4
The *Lavras do Abade* conflict in 1887.
Photos: by courtesy of the National Archive in Rio de Janeiro.

Meia Ponte society but at different levels. It is also possible to combine the last three testimonies with the first two. In this way, the lower class blamed a subaltern group for executing the assault and insisted that the middle and upper classes organised the attack. The elite participated in the event, but their actions were restricted to economic matters and a political plan of action. This explains the dissimilarity between the statements of the descendants of the 'black maskers' in the community and those of their leaders.

Final considerations

An individual remembers by placing himself within the perspective of a group, while at the same time, the memory of the group is realised and manifested in the actions of each individual. It is therefore only within society that the individual makes sense of their collections of mental images because it is only within society that people normally acquire, recall, recognise and localise their own memories. This interplay is, in the case study of Lavras do Abade, a mosaic of individual experiences, group constructs and communal interests. The changes in the individual Lavras do Abade narratives are inherent in the process of reconstructing and re-interpreting past memories in the present, and they reflect the re-creation of individual and group actions.

The memory of Lavras do Abade is the collective or shared memory developed over time. The nature of the Lavras do Abade conflict has been illuminated by old documents, material remains, environmental changes and in this case, oral history, which generally becomes unreliable when recalling events that happened over a hundred years ago. However, the lifespan of this 'cultural' memory is different, as this memory is learned, taught, changed and practised.

Therefore, if in one way community is a combination of individual particularities, in another way, particular memories are also a social construct. At this point, the individual is both a receptor and generator of the material and immaterial group recollections. Consequently, personal memory serves as both the product of, and support for, social memory. Individual memory constructs various versions in diverse forms and at different times, with many links to past and present group memories. In the Lavras do Abade case study, community memory has constructed a common past from the remembered interests of specific social groups; collective memory is the agreement between individuals in this process of remembrance. The social groups that I investigated as a part of the Lavras do Abade research constructed their own images of the world by establishing an approved political, environmental and economic version of its past and present heritage.

The recognition that the inhabitants of Lavras do Abade did not offer any resistance to the attackers who destroyed their village is highly uncomfortable, and the collective suppression of this particular historical fact still affects the construction of individual memories today. In this case, forgetting is another 'instrument' used by individuals and groups in society to construct their shared, present-day memories - the Lavras do Abade archaeological site is a 'forgotten place' but also an 'island of memory' because of the retrospective view of the historical conflict and on-going environmental concerns.

The traumatic events at Lavras do Abade are still part of community identity and are re-enacted in the festival, even though the events themselves are largely forgotten. Each generation interprets historical events according to current political, economic and societal issues, and the Lavras do Abade conflict is a case in point. The individual memory characterised in the Lavras do Abade case study has changed over time. Today, the focus is on environmental issues and the conflict is represented largely as a historic environmental disaster. On the other hand, the oldest residents' narratives represent actual communal memories about those events. The descriptions differ from interviewee to interviewee, but each person has a relationship with the events that particularly impacted on his or her own past. In Pirenópolis, individuals have the ability to distinguish between recent events and earlier events that depended on autobiographical memory. However, they have 'rewritten' the past to reflect their present-day interests, and consequently, they have established a shared view of their heritage.

In the Lavras do Abade case study, the individual memories of people from the old village of Meia Ponte, and the group memory of the present-day town of Pirenópolis, have been created by using both the approaches for remembering and forgetting the same

event. The *Mascarados* performance illustrates this; it is performed to keep the past alive, even if its historical origin is not generally recognised. The *Mascarados* has transformed group memory about a historical conflict and has created a new tradition. Thus the Lavras do Abade conflict is not only a popular commemoration, but also an important aspect of Pirenópolis society because it reflects the way that this society perceives its common heritage.

In summary, the Lavras do Abade event was politically controversial and socially questionable, an event that calls into question the belief that moral integrity is the ultimate object of commemoration. In the *Mascarados* performance, the participants' masks are not only viewed as symbols of solidarity, but rather as objects that render more explicit and more comprehensible Pirenópolis's conflicting conceptions of itself and its past and present heritage. However, in 2010 the *Festa do Divino Espirito Santo* in Pirenópolis was placed on the register of the National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN) with the title of 'Brazilian Intangible Cultural Heritage'. In this way, the remembering and forgetting of the Lavras do Abade incident is not only an intangible heritage, but also a 'masked memory'.

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