

Masks and dances in Portuguese history

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Introduction

When I first proposed this paper I intended to focus the contents on dance, particularly on the *Mourisca* dance (morris dance), that was a choreographic form in Portuguese feasts from the fifteenth century till the seventeenth. But, then, I realised that it could be equally interesting to discuss the concept of the mask related to that of social context.

Masks are indeed the main theme of this conference and it is about masks I now want to talk. In fact, a mask always needs a context to become a mask. During some of my classes, I teach my students how to make a mask with different materials, like paper, newspapers, wheat flour and gypsum. Besides those very simple techniques, I insist how important it is to create a general shape, a goal, in order to wear a mask.

In some way, one has to lower his/her ordinary mask to wear the new mask. Being selected by one individual person, this new mask may become closer to the real person than the other one. To wear a mask could evolve an attendance of synchronicity, in the terms described by Jung's psychoanalysis.

Gender identity, and sexual desire and ritualistic crossing, are some of the context goals for understanding the meaning of a mask.

In Portugal, for instance, some of the carnival masquerades in the northeast region of the country deal with these contexts. The *Caretos*, for example, are a group of most enigmatic and seductive Portuguese figures. Although their natural habitat is the village of Podence, which is in Macedo de Cavaleiros, district of Bragança, they are in fact the main attraction in cultural festivities throughout the country and abroad.

The *Caretos* are diabolic and mysterious figures. They seem to be an amalgam of profane, magical and religious elements, quite difficult to define. The masked boys show strength and vitality and have become mythical and sacred symbols, which are quite out of control because they come from nowhere in large noisy groups, spreading terror, excitement and laughter. Most of their fascination is due to their curious garments and ornaments. Each *careto*, dressed in red-yellow-green costume, uses rattles hanging from the waist, with which he assaults every woman he crosses with. Laughing, running and dancing, *Caretos* play the devil in the streets of the village.



Fig. 1. A masked boy (*Careto*) from Podence

Caretos are still today a symptom of transgression within a peaceful society. But masks are not exclusive to times of peace. In fact, masks could be worn publicly both in peace and in war.

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Probably they are different masks, but not necessarily. One may hear the drums, before and after the struggle. Before the battle, warriors put on menacing masks. After the battle, the winning army frequently celebrates the victory by organizing a masquerade. Then the conqueror exhibits joy and rapture over the resignation (sometimes humiliation) of the enemy.

The starting point of this paper was now to be a struggle between two opposite trade civilizations in the middle of the sixteenth century: the Atlantic European, represented by the Portuguese, and the Muslim Mediterranean civilization. In fact, this starting point is

with paintings by the Flemish artist Michel Coxie. Possibly, Alvaro de Castro, the son of the Viceroy, commissioned the work.

Besides the visual narrative, there is also, in the Library of Evora, a codex including the 'Chronicle of the valorous and distinguished feats in the government of India by the Viceroy Dom João de Castro'. The possibility of confronting two sources¹ – in this case, a visual document and a written document – which deal with the same issue may be of great interest both for iconographic and for literary analyses.

In the tapestry I am highlighting there are depictions of



a depiction of a struggle, or even better, a depiction of the victory of West over the Middle East to gain the East market of India.

Portuguese military campaign of 1547-8 on the Malabar coast

I will focus on one set of ten tapestries held in the Vienna History of Art Museum that has as a subject the Portuguese military campaign on the Malabar coast during 1547 and 1548. The set of tapestries is about the Portuguese victories against the resident Islamic forces. One may see there is a narrative of the feats of the Viceroy of India Dom João de Castro. These tapestries are attributed to Bartolomeus Adriaen, of Brussels,

dances and masks. In the middle distance of the composition one can see two groups of dancers.

The first group is made up of four men with tambourines. The other group contains five men armed with swords. Between the two groups one may see a musician playing a drum. Further to the background there are two elephants with battle turrets on their backs pulling two catapults. In the distance one can make out the carnival figures of two female *gigantones* (giants) and a devil.

It is important in my view, to highlight the simultaneously festive and warlike context of the image, and the depiction of the dances referred to.

What dances might these be? The written source that I referred to earlier provides very little towards a clarification: there are references to 'inventions', 'songs', 'dances', 'theatrical performances', but not to the name of the dances performed.

It is often extremely risky to identify a certain form of dance within coeval images. In spite of this difficulty, it is possible to identify a sword dance and probably a *Mourisca* dance. The sword dance is obviously identified by the swords depicted on the five dancers' scene. The *mourisca* may be identified by its resemblance with other depictions from the same period, like the morris dance from a woodcut frontispiece in the book by William Kempe's *Nine Days*.

Sword dance and *mourisca*

These were dances that were usually included in religious festivities and 'entrées' in Portuguese cities and villages. At this point, it is of interest to mention that in one of the most important religious festivals on the peninsula – the feast of *Corpus Christi* – it was usual for *mouriscas* and sword dances (*Danças de espadas*) to be included within the profane section of the procession. For example, in the city of Coimbra, in the sixteenth century, amongst different figures like the serpent and St. Georges, there was a parade of a Moorish troop with its Moorish king.

Were these real Moors? In Portugal, a century before, the "free Moors", dependents of the Portuguese King, lived in the Moorish quarters, where they had their religious and social institutions. Besides the extra tributes they had to pay to the crown, they were subjected to several different obligations, among which it was that of appearing in public feasts with their dances and songs. In the sixteenth century this situation would be altered. At the beginning of the century, the Portuguese King Dom Manuel presents the Portuguese Moors and Jews with a dilemma: either they converted to Christianity, or they had to leave the country. Those who decided to stay became new-Christians. It wasn't easy to be a new-Christian, particularly if one recalls the persecutions by the Inquisition, which become especially fierce in Portugal during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In same way, new-Christians had to learn how to wear masks in their daily lives.

In 1712, Raphael Bluteau, the author of one of the most important dictionaries of the Portuguese language, stated that *mourisca* 'consisted of many young men dressed up in the Moorish style, with their *borqueis* (bucklers), and rods like spears, they had their King with a scimitar in his hand, and when a signal was given, a sort of battle began to be fought to the sound of drums. It is somewhat similar to the dance which the ancients called *Pyrricha*.'² He also added some quotations in Latin, and this curious transcription from the *Monarquia Lusitana*: 'The Moorish Dance which the free Moors were formerly obliged to perform during feasts.' It is important to mention that the book *Monarquia Lusitana* dates from the seventeenth century, written by António Brandão, an author who

lived between 1584 and 1637.

There are two different perspectives of the origin of the dance called *mourisca*: one is that *mourisca* is a representation of the battles between the Christians and the Moors staged by Christians; the other is that *mourisca* comes from the dances of the Muslims that remained on the Iberian Peninsula till the end of the fifteenth century, with its centre in Cordoba. The depiction on the tapestry indicates the first perspective, and the *Monarquia Lusitana*'s quotation indicates the second one.

Possibly, the two hypotheses are not contradictory, if we accept both the overall plastic nature of the choreographic forms, and the processes of acculturation which necessarily accompany the – so many times contentious – contacts between cultures and civilizations. It is possible that the Moorish dances began by being a dance by the Moors, then becoming a Christian dance. José Estevão Sasportes suggests precisely this hypothesis, considering that these Moorish dances carried out by peninsular Moors were 'mimicked by the Christians, some representing their side, others that of the infidels, and symbolizing the triumph of the faith, in such a manner that we still find today, in the north of the country, different types of music-dramatic representations with a Moorish character'.³

In fact, the relatively widespread idea that the *mourisca* is only a dance in which there was a depicting of the combats between Christian and Moors may result from a kind of ethnocentricity. I mean that there is a tendency in the History of the Christian civilization to consider itself like a victorious society over others civilizations.

There are two additional questions related.

One is that of the durability of these dance forms. In Portugal, one could see a permanence of these dances particularly in the Island of Madeira. To prove this hypothesis, there is an exercise to be made, which is to compare pictures of some of contemporary practices with coeval depictions. When this is done, the resemblance becomes established.

The other question concerns the relationship of this dances with madness, maybe the madness inherent to the War. This is normally considered when a relation is established between *mouriscas* and *mattaccino* dances. In the dictionary I have mentioned, there is an entry for *mattaccino* (in Portuguese, *Muchachim*); the author considers that the word *muchachim* derives from the Castilian *muchacho*, which 'is the name given to some masked young boys, dressed in painted cloths, who danced around in the processions'⁴ Being dressed in painted cloths could make us recall the *caretos* I firstly presented...

On the other hand, the *gigantones* (giants) and the devil, depicted in the tapestry, illustrate both a kind of martial carnival of the victorious army over the infidel. Still today, during the carnival, the *gigantones* remain in the Portuguese folk tradition. In the north of the country, groups of *Zés Pereiras* (male musicians

playing drums very energetically) flood the streets with dozens of giants.

Definitely, masks are still playing their roles!

Notes

1. Excellent reproductions of the tapestries, as well as the transcription of the “Chronicle”, are available in the publication *Oceanos*, March 1993. This issue includes the following articles: “New data for an enigma”, by Maria Antónia Quina Carvalho Fernandes; “The son of the Viceroy” by Rafael Moreira.
2. Raphael Bluteau. *Vocabulario portuguez e latino (...)*, Coimbra, 1712, tomo V, pp.612-613.
3. José Estevão Sasportes. *História da Dança em Portugal*, Lisboa, 1970, p.32.
4. Raphael Bluteau. *Idem*, p.615.