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**A Phenomenological Approach to Understanding the Holy Ghost Festivities**

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**Abstract**

Devotion to the Holy Ghost is a religious dogma. In the islands of the Azores, the sincere attachment to the Holy Ghost is evident by virtue of the festivities they dedicate. The relationship between the people of the Azores and the Holy Ghost festivities is a multi-layered phenomenon in which the body is the center of cultural practices. Using a phenomenological approach to the study can permit a deepened corporal understanding and a comparison of shared experiences.

**Keywords**

*Holy Ghost festivities, phenomenology, embodied knowledge, body, culture*

**INTRODUCTION**

Social representation gives meaning to our world; it is a system of values, ideas and practices. I am interested in understanding the embodiment of these themes. This is a study of the communication of such embodied knowledge within the context of the Holy Ghost festivities in the islands of the Azores through a phenomenological framework. The particularity of such social representation is its substantial significance to the individual's identity and to the community. Research has been done on the symbolism surrounding the festivities of the Holy

Ghost in the Azores islands; however, in this paper I argue that participation in the Holy Ghost festivities has created and reinforced a unique Azorean knowledge and identity.

Perception, also referred to as worldview, is molded by established traditions and is transmitted by culture and the body. Phenomenology can be defined as the experiences in which the body and actions are at the center of understanding knowledge and perception (Gieser, 2008: 299). Phenomenology is the study of the essence of phenomena, their nature and meaning, focusing on the way aspects of life appear to people through experience (Gieser, 2008: 300). Phenomenology asks, “What kind of experience is this?”, “What does the experience mean?”, “How a person understands the world around him or her?” etc. (Finlay, 2008: 1).

Studying the social body in a physical cultural event will allow understanding of tradition, song, food, environment, patriotism as correlated to the body – how those aspects are incorporated. Kristy Nabhan-Warren distinguishes the body as the intrinsic focus when analyzing culture; “bodies are epistemological sites that allow us privileged access to our interlocutor’s worlds,” inviting the reader to see the body as a source of discovery (2011: 378). Using the body as a vehicle for learning knowledge and to call upon the use of sensorial practice to: taste, smell, see, hear, touch and empathize in order to best comprehend a phenomenon.

Psychologist Serge Moscovici said; “social representation is understood as the collective elaboration of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating” (in Wagner et al., 1999: 96). The Holy Ghost festivities have rendered countless codified expressions of art and religiosity understood only within a certain context. For instance, intangible notions like, the *Irmandade*<sup>1</sup> or physical objects like, the architecturally significant *Impérios*<sup>2</sup> and artifacts like the *coroa*<sup>3</sup> and *cepro*<sup>4</sup>. The historical tradition of the Holy Ghost Cult has for ages brought the community of Azoreans together. It has endowed the Azorean people a sense of belonging and pride. Religion is a way of life, as James Guill said; “The entire island population is absorbed by the Holy Spirit celebration [...] It is the highlight of the year,” (1972: 156) for this reason I intend to pursue the notion of social representation of the Holy Ghost Cult within Azorean identity.

The objectives of this research are to shed light on new forms of interaction with cultural representation while analyzing a tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages. I propose to

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Brotherhood,’ meaning the coordinators or representatives of the Holy Ghost Cult.

<sup>2</sup> Very small elevated structures consecrated to the Holy Ghost. May also mean the ensemble of ceremonies of the Holy Ghost festivities.

<sup>3</sup> Crown.

<sup>4</sup> Scepter.

enrich understanding of perception through shared experiences, by looking at the relationship between the Azores islands, religiosity and traditional culture with a phenomenological approach. In this paper, I present the use of phenomenology as a framework and method to advance research in this subject and to unravel unknown layers of Azorean culture and worldview.

## **SHARED PARTICIPATION**

The body is the doer of all actions; it demonstrates the knowledge learnt by social institutions like culture in forms of techniques or movements (Lock, 1993: 138). For philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, all experiences whether devotional or patriotic can be traced back to bodily experience, which in turn makes the body a prerequisite to all consciousness development (Gieser, 2008: 302). Connections between body movements and cultural actions are the source of the phenomenal argument. When experiences are shared within a community, between a sender and receiver like a parent and a child or a participant and a researcher, presumably those people are physically learning the same knowledge. At the center of the learning process are body movements. Nevertheless, a movement is only learned once the body has understood it and added cultural meaning to the actions or performance, which is why the movements will immediately be attached to a cultural phenomenon (Gieser, 2008: 302). In regards to the Holy Ghost festivities, the procession followed by the coronation and finally the feast where the community gathers to eat and drink, are all actions dictated by localized religious meaning. These traditions are embodied knowledge; here the body not only carries visible and sentimental roles, such as key values of a society, but is likewise the instrument that executes said values. Embodied knowledge is enclosed within a collective experience; it is contextualized, making the body a symbol of a specific culture. Embodied knowledge is the interpretation of the individual's behavior in a social environment already conditioned by cultural guidelines; it is a key determinant of cultural identity. Embodied knowledge connects people within a community. Finally, phenomenology suggests this connection can be better understood through the act of shared participation, if immersed it can lead to the manifestation of new cultural knowledge (Gieser, 2008: 300).

Culture is lived and experienced in and through the body. The goal of phenomenology is to portray culture as lived (Nabhan-Warren, 2011: 382). Culture by definition is practiced by the moving body and experienced via the participation of two parties: the sender and the receiver, the parent and the child or the participant and the researcher. Entering an empathic relationship between two parties through a synchronization of intentions and movements encourages a visualization of worldview (Gieser, 2008: 299). This theory and method being most effective through shared participation, reflexivity and comparison. Bodies are mediums for cultural expression, belief and practice; it is the idea of conceptualizing culture into the

physical body. Nietzsche's axiom central to phenomenology, impeccably explains how body movements are a mode of communicating culture; "that there is no doer behind the doing but that the doer is constructed in and through the doing" (in Currah, 2011: 14). The body is the object of embodied knowledge of a culture to be studied in a contextual form; where the doer is in a privileged position of communication with direct access to the experience. In the field, observation and participation results in empirical and scientific data, phenomenology supplements the gap between knowing and being. Observable expressions of embodied knowledge of the Holy Ghost festivities are collective demonstrations of cultural phenomena. The interactions with traditional elements such as the *cepro*, *coroa*, *Impérios* and the offerings during the celebration not only ensure the future wellbeing of the community but are dynamic, inclusive and phenomenal displays of shared participation (Leal and Vanhove, 2000: 53).

## **SYMBOLIC IDENTITY**

Azorean identity is most prominently represented by participation and activities with the Church. The Holy Ghost festivities are events that are profoundly connected to all aspects of life on the islands. João Leal says the; "Holy Spirit festivities can then be considered elements of 'being Azorean' " (2011: 5). In the Azores islands, religion is centered on the belief and devotion in Holy Ghost Cult (Guill, 1972: 156). The Holy Ghost in Catholicism represents the energy and essence of God, often portrayed as a light or a dove. Around the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Cult of the Holy Ghost assumed a position of importance in Azorean culture becoming a unifier of the population of the various islands (Montez, 2007: 171). Traditional culture, in particular the Holy Ghost celebration has not only survived the test of time but it has become a renewed phenomenon forming part of modern culture. Catholicism was the first religion brought from abroad to the islands, since then it has intertwined with the whole of society (Guill, 1972: 97). On the islands, traditional beliefs are still intact from myths to folktales and rituals such as agricultural festivities. For instance, the *Impérios*, concrete symbols of religiosity also associated with identity are fundamentally tied to feelings of collective belonging (Leal and Vanhove, 2000: 53). The premises of such sustainability can be attributed to constant cultural performance of embodied knowledge, strong identification to the community and a connection to the environment. Such festivities represent Azorean culture, society and its utmost traditions. According to James Guill, "every Azorean shares two things in common: religion and traditions" (1972: 97).

Religiosity, characterized as devotion, is a social marker of identity. Socialization aids this characteristic to develop, in which individuals learn and are brought up to understand their surroundings. It is also essential to instructing preferences, habits, meaning, recognition and most importantly embodiment of cultural knowledge. Though this research focuses on a collective identity, the socialization process explains the bond that an individual has to a culture

and to certain actions. Pierre Bourdieu's term *habitus* explains the individual's position in a shared setting due to the socially learned dispositions, skills and ways of acting, that are acquired through the activities and experiences of the everyday life and also through special occasions (Cuche, 2004: 80). Even more explicitly, Bourdieu relies on collective human memory, for instance history of traditions, to explain how *habitus* is transmitted. Religiosity coordinates further with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* due to the implications of corporal dispositions that create a particular rapport that additionally benefits identification to one particular group (Cuche, 2004: 81). During the Holy Ghost festivities, the celebration determines roles played by the individuals in the community (Leal and Vanhove, 2000: 54). In other words, certain acts such as worship, devotion and rites, like the crowning of the *imperador*<sup>5</sup>, reflect affiliation to the group and the shared knowledge. In addition, it shapes a sentiment of belonging between the individual, their actions and their social connections. In brief, identity is shaped by human actions, and in turn our bodies are set to a certain understanding of the world (Lock, 1993: 133).

When researching culture, exploring social representation of a group and individual can provide evidence of motivation for cultural phenomena. Social representation establishes an order that "enables the individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world" (Wagner et al., 1999: 96). Its second purpose is to provide a mode of communication; "a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their worlds and their individual and group history" (Wagner et al., 1999: 96). Traditions and values are social representation; symbols of a nation or a region. These symbols are also aspects of embodied knowledge. A nation or a region is marked by social concepts such as religion, geography and history. Moreover they are each defined by their boundless attention to identity, territoriality and culture (Kingsbury, 2005: 3). Common symbols of social representation such as language or government laws are part of the nation, but the Holy Ghost festivities are rather regional due to the vast and radical differences between the nine islands and diaspora<sup>6</sup>. A region represents a definable community, like the Azorean way of life that is both described and visible through tangible and intangible elements. A nation too, is mode of organizing a society via culture; culture being the center of inspiration for human behavior. The nation or the region serve as social representation of a group, like a category of identification, but most importantly as a feeling that unifies the people.

Concisely, the Azores islands can reveal a distinct cultural perspective through phenomenological research; the final element of Azorean society to be considered is:

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<sup>5</sup> The crowing of the emperor (*imperador*) by the priest is the most important ceremony of the festivities (Leal and Vanhove, 2000: 52).

<sup>6</sup> The Holy Ghost festivities are celebrated all over the world including places such as Canada, the United States and Brazil.

geography. Often called insularity<sup>7</sup>, the Azores are characterized by the sea, volcanoes and earthquakes present in the every day. These elements manifest into “behavior conditioning agents” which means the physical environment profoundly influences embodied knowledge (Da Rosa and Trigo, 1994: 10). On the islands, cultural knowledge is acquired and exchanged through shared environmental experiences more intensely lived due to isolation from the mainland. The surroundings of the islands implement a state of mind, a collective consciousness. Furthermore, as part of Azorean identity, there is a communal attachment to the land, a heightened awareness of one’s heritage that shapes one’s spirit; an awareness of ‘being Azorean’ (Da Rosa and Trigo, 1994: 11). Identity lived and translated by the body that derives from geographical factors.

## **CONCLUSION**

Bodily enculturation over habitual interactions is inevitable; under a phenomenological framework there is a clear path to detect connections between culture and embodied knowledge. A bodily perception of the world, phenomenology, allows anthropologists and researchers alike to study the Holy Ghost festivities through an interactive point of view. With phenomenology the link between social representation and embodied knowledge can be better understood with methods of immersion, participation and harmonization of movement. Perception plays a key role as to how people understand and engage in the world. It is linked to the body and actions. Altogether, the body is a representation of culture; carrying habits, traditions, depictions of the environment and worldview.

Azorean culture, like any other culture today, is concerned with preservation of cultural knowledge. Continuous cultural performance and shared experiences can promote the dissemination of traditional knowledge. Dilution of identity makers is avertable through enlightened cultural communication. Since identity is shaped by human actions, phenomenology can be used as a method to provide understanding of embodied knowledge, alongside diverse techniques such as film or photography (Lock, 1993: 133).

As a participant of the Fifth International Congress on the Holy Ghost Festivities in June 2012, I learned body language is ‘heard’ before language. While at the Congress, constant embodiment celebrated Azorean knowledge and heritage. The Holy Ghost festivities are not just profane celebrations but a never ending reciprocal relationship with the Holy Ghost. The Congress was a successful and beautiful exchange of a local and global ritual; the same experience lived differently.

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<sup>7</sup> Pertaining to an island.

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