The recuperation of Galician pottery: craft professions, cultural policies, and identity

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This chapter reflects on why certain simple and even rudimentary objects have continued to be used in the twenty-first century in the most technologically developed Western societies, and on how they are valued for having a rustic beauty despite not having any evident utility from a narrowly pragmatic point of view. The focus is on the evolution of a concrete activity – Galician pottery – within a broader array of crafts which all share, to a greater or lesser degree, the symbolic connotations that people in contemporary societies grant to objects that mark the past.

There are two distinct but complementary reasons for doing research on traditional pottery. First, because making pottery was a widely practised occupation in Galicia until recently, it is possible to gather a substantial amount of ethnographic information about this activity in relation to the still recent past. During the first half of the twentieth century, the pieces made from clay formed part of the everyday experience of the population, the majority of which was situated in rural areas, reliant on scarce resources and partly on subsistence production. Owing to its affordability and high quality, Galician-made pottery served the needs of people in the less powerful classes, i.e. the great majority.

Second, pottery has been subject to a noticeable process of ‘recovery’ in recent years. This has been encouraged by various levels of government, which have provided funding for a recovery programme in Galicia. This revitalisation of craft professions has been promoted through a shared policy developed by both the Galician autonomous government and the EU, through a gradual application of cultural policies that aim to strengthen local identities within the globalising process which implicates all levels of government.

The full spectrum of activities within contemporary societies has become incorporated into the dynamics of the globalisation process due to world economic forces (Sassen 2007). Therefore, it seems worthwhile to demonstrate the persistent presence of a set of objects from the world of craft production that began in the distant past and persists into the present, despite these globalising forces.

In the late 1990s, various Galician institutions began a gradual campaign to recuperate traditional trades. Their strategy was to select a series of activities which had formed a part of Galicia’s distinctive material reality until recent

times: in about the late 1960s. The first of these activities from previous time periods that happened to be chosen was pottery, a trade that had possessed a strong historical presence throughout the Galician territory. In addition, unlike other crafts that had disappeared completely (such as the production of linen), people continued to work in some specific locations in Galicia, though in a very residual way and mainly for the tourist market, in the 1970s and 1980s (see Seseña, Vossen, and Köpke 1973).

In fact, information existed about the presence of numerous workshops in the four Galician provinces during the first half of the twentieth century, meticulously detailed in reference works such as that of Luciano García Alén, *La alfarería de Galicia* (1983). That is, there were already a few minimal sources that could function as authoritative references and provide justification and scientific support for any actions taken later on.

The transformation of Galician pottery: inventing tradition

From its beginning, the revitalisation of Galician pottery made necessary the delimitation of certain concepts. The question of geographical boundaries did not seem to be under discussion: Galician ceramics were those produced in Galicia, though this did not refer to only one design – for the objects made with clay are very heterogeneous through the Autonomous Community's territory. Instead, the difficulties in recovering traditional Galician pottery centred on the definition of 'traditional', an ideological concept with social and political implications. In Spain 'tradition' forms part of a programme of conservative thought, which tends to select facts or cultural objects, to legitimise models of social and institutional organisation along the lines of an interpretation directed by the very same frameworks.

In this case, the political and ideological framework is determined by a politico-economic project that starts in European institutions, and which is projected on to distinct territories in different ways: the trend is towards the reduction or destruction of the system of primary production, the provision of subsidies for this decline, and the generation of local, alternative economic projects oriented to the tertiary sector, especially to the utilisation of resources for tourism. In this case, traditional pottery signifies both a product based on certain surviving traces of a more or less remote past, and also a parallel project aimed at inculcating certain values and beliefs associated with this past and, in consequence, a sociocultural construction that rests on an idea of group identity.

The passage from a model of traditional pottery to that of the recovered pottery resulted in a series of changes: physical ones in terms of the material peculiarities of the pieces and the conditions of their production; functional ones with respect to their utility and manner of existence in society at large; and structural ones in the sense of the ideological modifications (systems of beliefs, values, etc.) imprinted on the sociocultural schemes on which they are projected.

In the ethnographic description of the process of recovery we can find both these changes and a specific definition of 'traditional Galician pottery'. This denomination includes nowadays any piece produced in the workshops that have an official certificate of guarantee and originality sent by the corresponding *Consellería* [Ministry] of the *Xunta de Galicia*. Nevertheless, a process of 'recovery' has taken place in the maintenance of this handcrafted traditional activity, i.e. in a way, a mechanism of identity creation. An image was created which gave form to a homogeneous and unique past, which did not correspond either with the historical reality of the pottery trade nor with that of any other crafts: that reality was always multifaceted, adapting to different situations and contexts and, therefore, in all cases heterogeneous and variable depending on the infinite needs that could be met by pieces made with clay. To create the 'traditional' prototype, a temporal limit was established in connection with the near disappearance of the trade, which took place at the end of the 1960s. Profound social, economic, and cultural changes occurred in Galicia during this period. At the same time, regional and European institutional structures led to the creation of a brand of Galician pottery, via diverse mechanisms of authentication of the pieces, which included the consideration that these material objects contained immaterial traces of Galician identity.

To specify the material changes that occurred in the objects I am referring to, in general we can say that previously and today the potters elaborated their pieces with clay loam. In technical terms, this loam is the result of the decomposition of a feldspar rock, whose colouration goes from white (if in pure condition) to multiple ranges and tonalities between grey and yellow, even including an intense red, depending on the impurities it contains. The fundamental characteristic of the clay is its plasticity, determined by its capacity for hydration, which allows it to take on water without dissolving or decomposing. During this phase of wetting, the clay can be moulded. Then begins the process of calcination or drying, during which the moulded item contracts into a stable, given form.

Potters produce their pieces by mixing two classes of clay. One is a slightly plastic mud, with minimal porosity, very soft to the touch and tending towards a dark range of colours, mainly in grey, an intense blue or brown, or rarely a deep black (called *carbón*, coal). The major downside of this type is that it does not *liga* (acquire a sufficiently mouldable consistency to enable manipulation, as it is kneaded and turned) and is therefore extremely difficult to work with. The upside is that it is strongly resistant to heat, so is very useful for making objects that will have to withstand strong temperatures, e.g. cooking vessels. The most prominent characteristic of the second type of clay is its great plasticity, making it tough to the touch; its colour is lighter and ranges from yellow to ochre. These types, when mixed, complement one other because each has qualities the other lacks. A large part of the professional knowledge of the potters stems from their ability to gauge the appropriate proportions of each to create a mixture, adapted to specific cases and pieces, according to the specific qualities which they want them to have.

These types of clay are found in nature normally under about a half metre layer of soil, though that depends on the characteristics of the area. Once through this top layer, the first vein of clay appears (usually 25–50 cm thick). This clay is too sandy to use. But a seam of useful clay lies immediately below (about 30–40 cm thick); its top cap, which is of better quality, is ‘the flower of the clay’. Until the 1960s, the clay was extracted manually, by digging a circular or rectangular hole, normally about 3 m wide by 1.5–3 m deep. Once this first hole had been made and the veins of clay located, the craftspeople would make a series of underground horizontal galleries, through which they would look for the different seams of clay. These days, potters use clay from the same places as before but the procedure is completely mechanised; also, for some pieces, contemporary potters use ovenproof clays proceeding from the ceramic industry, which their forebears did not use.

Moulding comes next, usually on a wheel, formerly powered by the potter, but today is motorised. This is a phase of the work where a craftsperson can demonstrate his skill, since it relies implicitly both on technical knowledge, and on artistic considerations, whose application make the potter a ‘creator’. As one commentator claims, ‘A piece moulded on a wheel expresses as many aspects of its maker’s personality as their calligraphy’ (Hamilton 1989: 80).

After decoration, the piece is finished and the potter, wielding a wire or auxiliary tool used in the shaping process, separates it from the wheel with a clean and rapid cut. Drying comes next: here it is crucial to take advantage of the most favourable climatological conditions, without directly exposing the pieces to the sun. This is because a significant amount of water was added to manipulate the clay; once the piece is moulded, it cannot properly harden until this water has been removed. The expelling water phase must be progressive and slow to avoid possible fractures or fissures, which would ruin the pottery. Traditionally, drying time took four to six days in summer, eight to twenty in winter. Nowadays, these times can be altered, if articles are needed urgently need, thanks to the use of modern heating systems.

The last phase of the production process is firing the pots, during which the clay is totally hardened and the forms are definitively fixed. This was traditionally done in wood-fuelled ovens specifically constructed for the task by the potters themselves. Given that objective parameters did not then exist, this was a further phase when master potters could demonstrate their empirical knowledge, to determine the temperature and the necessary time to fire the items correctly. Generally, the maximum temperature reached inside the chamber did not have to be higher than 1,000°C: from this point on the pieces would begin to fuse. Firing lasted between six and seven hours, with gradual differences in temperature which the most experienced potters were able to monitor based on the changes in the colouration of the clay. According to my informants, in the initial phase they went from a dark grey (owing to the impregnation of smoke) to white. The most intense phase then began, with the constant addition of more fuel to ensure that the oven reached a maximum

Figure 7.1 Pieces made before 1960, and a modern reproduction of an original shape (the breastmilk pump piece).

temperature, for at least two hours, during which the pieces turned reddish. From then on, the pace of firing decreased slowly, until the oven's heat was finally extinguished and the pots left to rest. This phase of production has been the one most subject to innovation: today potters use electric hermetic ovens with external temperature controls. Also, in order to apply the modern glazes, the firing has to proceed through two interrupted temporal sequences; something completely new compared to the ceramics made up until the 1960s.

Until the recent revitalisation, Galician pottery could be classified functionally: pieces related to food, its production, its conservation and, especially, its preparation and consumption; pieces connected with physiological needs; some pieces had a playful character; and others formed part of a household's furnishings (Figure 7.1). This array of items covered the daily housekeeping needs of rural Galician families, and they would be acquired by direct purchase from the potters themselves at markets and local fairs.

Today, in contrast, buyers of clay pieces assign them a basically decorative function. Only clay roasting and cake pans are still used for their original domestic purpose, though these have come to be used almost solely to roast meat and fish. This shift towards the pottery's ornamental uses has gone hand in hand with physical changes. First, the objects are smaller in size and volume; second, glazes and waterproofing are now used. These additions were very limited in the past, to keep down

the final cost of the pots; today they have become generalised, given their new, ornamental use, and to help keep them clean.

Also in contrast to the past, different workshops are today producing different pieces. I investigate three paradigmatic cases: Buño, Bonxe, and Gundivós. Buño is a coastal locality of the province of A Coruña with the largest concentration of contemporary pottery in Galicia; so much so that the visual projection of the village centres on the craft and, since 2009, there is even a dedicated ethnographic museum. Buño potters have chosen to use a great quantity of decorative resources on pieces made in the traditional format, based on chromatic variety and on the superposed applications of clay in compositions that are mainly phytomorphic and geometric.

In Bonxe, a potters' village situated near the city of Lugo, only one workshop is kept active. Here pieces of traditional origin, which would have rarely been decorated, now bear a dominant geometric motif: the paintbrushed application of liquid white clay lines, in a series of hemispheres ('half-moons'). A maximum of three dots are painted inside each of these arcs. Of course, the pieces are also polished in their entirety thanks to the use of glaze. What is significant is that the father and daughter who run the workshop justify these motifs by saying they have their origin in Roman ceramics,¹ and that the half-moons represent the silhouette of the *canaveira*, a traditional tool used when turning the clay on the wheel. Their discourse is grounded on the implicit idea that, proud of their trade, they decorate the pieces with an element that is a representative element of their craft and therefore, today, comes to be a prolongation of its extension.

Gundivós is a small village located in the very south of the province of Lugo, with an area of influence that extends to the province of Ourense. There are currently four active potters in this centre which has recently come to occupy a favoured place in the production of traditional Galician pottery because of a clearly differential feature: the finished black jet appearance of the pottery. This characteristic feature of Gundivós production is actually a recent innovation, starting in the late 1990s. Historically, only a few pieces were made this way in the village (*xarros, escurrecubas* and *xarros, escurrecubas*), and then only because they were containers used in the production and transport of wine, and therefore had to be impermeable. Potters waterproofed pieces by the application of pitch, not glaze. Pitch, or pine resin, is a solid granulated substance applied to the interior of the already baked pieces; their fusion is provoked by warming them again, directly over a fire, which also burns the piece on the exterior (Figure 7.2).

The material and functional changes in pottery production have been determined by institutional interventionism, which has gone from zero to a process of absolute direction; so much so that there would not have been any recovery of the pottery craft without this institutional presence. At the same time, the social value and the usefulness granted to the objects come from an ideological project that underlies the policies of the different public institutions intended to provide alternative economies

Figure 7.2 Pieces of traditional pottery made in the twenty-first century in Galicia.

and jobs for rural areas to replace the unviable primary-based economy. Of course, the limited economic scope of this measure, insufficient itself to replace the totality of the previous economic system, can be considered in some sense as the institutional Trojan horse, which comes accompanied by a series of parallel interventions of an ideological character.²

In this way the institutions are creating an ideological base related to an idea of tradition, already controversial, and with a certain conception of cultural, not national identity. In the Galician case, the recognition of a difference, based on culture, did not suppose a confrontational position towards the idea of the Spanish nation, when it emerged dispossessed of political connotations, unlike what could happen in other zones like, for example, the Basque Country.³ Beside lacking this disadvantage, there is no doubt that it had certain economic advantages: the provision on the part of the European Union of a series of economic measures, fundamentally based on subsidies and on the distribution of European funds directed to the most disadvantaged regions, meant that recipient institutions (town halls, provincial governments, and the Xunta de Galicia) needed to design projects in which to invest these funds in rural space and in the tertiary sector. It explains the convergence between the cultural, the economic, and the political-ideological; it is a matter of trying to preserve a cultural manifestation of rural Galicia when the economic and social conditions for it no longer exist or are dismantled.

This ideological base gives rise to the re-creation or adjustment on the part of the interested potters and of the society in which they live. In the case of the craftspeople, as I have already pointed out, this recreation leads to the construction of a discourse about their activity, adapted to the new circumstances and setting out from the fact that such a public discourse did not exist previously. It is the institutions that grant a public dimension to the potters' activity, having placed the activity in social contexts which it had never before occupied and having granted it a relevance which it had never had. In the traditional world, the public exhibition of the potters was limited to their presence in markets as sellers of their objects. In this situation, it was not necessary to create any type of speech either for the production of the objects or for their sale: the commercial exchange was limited to the pieces, not to a parallel ideological content.⁴ It is with the institutional intervention that the public presence of the potters is demanded, as carriers of a knowledge that is not only technical but also existential, experiential, and representative of a cultural model; we can say that they turn into the catalysts of the cultural transmission and of the immaterial heritage that the clay pieces carry.⁵ The new buyers need someone to explain to them what or who a traditional potter is, for which these craftspeople need a life history linked with pottery.⁶ Hence they create this speech concerning some working conditions that do not correspond with current reality. The fact that part of society has adopted a series of new values associated with the potter's craft and its past is demonstrated in the corpus of traditional pieces that the institutions create through founding 'collections' – a species of museum catalogue about the variety of clay objects. Of course, in the process, some pieces, which were in great demand and with a significant presence in Galician society fifty years ago, have been obviated in this process of recovery. The reason for this omission is that it is difficult to raise a clay urinal to the category of a cultural artefact beyond the showcases of an ethnographic museum, where the value of the artefact is determined, mostly, by its antiquity. Thus, traditional pieces such as the *canecos*, the urinals, the oil-lamps, etc., which are evocative of a past of privations and for which it is difficult to create new meanings, tend to disappear from the catalogues and the workshops of current production.

Economic reasons for change

Some researchers in cultural anthropology and related fields study the conditions that allow for the maintenance of craft and other traditional activities. This body of research usually looks at the cultural circumstances in countries that, within a capitalist socio-economic framework, are termed developing nations. These countries can be found mainly in Latin America, Africa, and Asia: places long associated in the Western imagination with the exoticisation of popular culture. In contrast to that work, I here deal specifically with the maintenance or endurance of a series of craft professions in Galicia, a society integrated politically and economically into the

EU.⁷ This is an area that while being part of Europe is also situated geographically and historically on the periphery of the Spanish State to which it belongs, and of the whole EU.

This peripherality was confirmed when the EU established comparative rankings of all regions of its Member States and designated a series of regions as worthy of attention from its Regional Funds. These are designed to be redistributive, and are therefore only disbursed to regions of lesser development and specific economic problems, according to the EU's priorities ('objectives').⁸ After Spain's entry into the EU in 1986, Galicia was designated to receive funds under more than one of the Objectives, both as an area with a lower level of development as measured by per capita Gross Domestic Product of less than 75 per cent of the EU average (of the Member States of the period), and also for being an area of rural decline. Connected with these designations was the idea of budgetary investments, presumed to be necessary (at least on paper) to achieve a level of economic balance for each territory vis-à-vis the other countries and regions which at that moment belonged to the Union.

The political and economic situation was complicated for Galicia in the 1990s shortly after Spain had joined the EU. It was disadvantaged compared to other regions that had already made the necessary changes to be more competitive in the European and world markets. Moreover, it had to confront the profound changes that had occurred since 1984 as a result of the CAP. As Edelmiro López explains:

With the perspective that can be gained as a result of the passage of time, we can affirm that Galician agriculture was integrated into the European Community at a time that was not advantageous ... This European context, along with some of the conditions the Spanish government accepted in the Founding Treaty and the concrete way in which later reforms were applied, together created a frankly unfavourable context. (López 2000: 169)

In this context, the agricultural and fisheries sectors declined dramatically in Galicia with great numbers of people who had worked in the primary sector having to look for economic alternatives. For instance, the number of agriculturalists declined from 525,000 in 1976, to 247,000 in 1996, and then, even more dramatically, to 97,000 in 2007; i.e. a drop of almost 45 per cent in those first two decades, accelerating to 61 per cent in the following decade (Instituto Galego de Estatística 2008).⁹

This dramatic decline of the agricultural and fisheries sectors in Galicia and similar parts of Europe meant that governments became interested in retraining people to take up new kinds of jobs, in some cases jobs that would allow them to exploit products and other characteristics associated with their local areas and that might fit into the tourism sector. This situation derived from a double interaction. On the one hand, this change resulted from the decline of one sector (the primary) and the emergence of another, almost totally new, one in these rural areas (cultural tourism). Some traditional communities reacted by using this new sector to strengthen their

local cultures. This is the reaction Claudia Toselli observed when she argued that 'cultural tourism can play a stimulating role when it revalorises, affirms and recuperates cultural elements which characterise and identify each community in the face of a globalised world' (Toselli 2006: 175).

The process of rural areas converting into receptors of tourism is motivated by a desire to gradually accommodate rural economic structures to this new reality. Here, the role of governmental policy is not limited only to providing economic resources for these new activities, including crafts and the traditional world in general. Indeed, as Llorenç Prats affirms, 'no heritage activity of any type is neutral or innocent, whether or not the respective managers of heritage are conscious of this or not' (Prats 1998: 68).

Looking for a way to promote culture: identity as heritage

This political and economic turning point in the 1980s was clearly connected to the definition of cultural heritage, developed by UNESCO in 1982 during the World Conference on Cultural Policies, in Mexico City. Part of this definition:

The cultural heritage of a people includes the works of its artists, architects, musicians, writers and scientists and also the work of anonymous artists, expressions of the people's spirituality, and the body of values which give meaning to life. It includes both tangible and intangible works through which the creativity of that people finds expression: languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, archives and libraries. (UNESCO 1982)

With this declaration, there was an explicit recognition for the first time at the world institutional level of what, until then, had formed a *de facto* part of people's cultures.¹⁰ According to whatever canonical definitions are most current, we no longer think about culture as little more than an adaptive response of a specific human group to the environment in which it developed. If we take a structuralist view, culture can be understood like a system; i.e. an ensemble of elements interrelated via a series of rules for coexistence and interaction (Lévi-Strauss 1984; Jaaware 2001). It is obvious that change can occur within a cultural system as a result of the disappearance of some elements, the incorporation of new ones, or the semantic transformation of those already present. This relates, therefore, to a system at once protean and dynamic, which has an 'energeia' in the sense that Humboldt (1990) attributed to languages. In this state of things, a complementary notion to that of culture is that of the heritage pertaining to cultures which act, from a traditionalist viewpoint, like a brake on social change. Under this conception, what belongs to the realm of 'heritage' tends to be conserved, and constitutes a social construction based on the official recognition afforded to this realm from the various pertinent areas of governmental policy.

The most relevant aspect of the UNESCO declaration cited above is that, under the umbrella notion of 'the cultural heritage' of various peoples, we need to include

not only those things traditionally considered to be relevant to what one might term 'official culture', but also any significant element (material and immaterial) of the culture of human communities as well. This therefore makes virtually everything susceptible to being made into 'heritage' and, in particular, into a form of ethnological heritage. Indeed, in reference to the concept of the 'ethnological', Juan Agudo Torrico has argued that:

[ethnological] does not refer, therefore, to particularly differentiating specific ethnographic components which are more or less unique but to valuing each cultural component in relation to its significance for the way of life, values, self-perception, etc., of the collective which has generated and used said heritage; in this way, it therefore turns into a witness to collective memory. (Agudo Torrico 1996: 222)

In effect, a confluence has occurred between the cultural standards which are used to mark out most cultural groups at an international level and the interests of governmental institutions at the local level, as well as those of the Autonomous Community of Galicia, the Spanish State and the EU. These have been converted into the main catalysing forces behind various actions which have placed a value on heritage under the rubric of government 'cultural policies'.

In this sense, pottery's chances of being given priority over other crafts by the political institutions came from a variety of circumstances. In the first place, there was the possibility of rekindling a dying tradition without any excessive rupture, without losing much in terms of the original forms of the objects, their symbolic values, or their uses. In practice, as we have seen, important modifications were being introduced. But this was not because potters had forgotten older designs and techniques; rather, because they adapted to new cultural and economic circumstances.

A new social consideration: what is a potter today?

These modifications were particularly evident in terms of the production process, which was gradually mechanised, making the artisans' work much easier and allowing a new generation of potters (many of whom had not previously been directly linked with the profession) to take it up and make a future of it. Another influential factor was the new conservationist and didactic interest in the craft professions evinced within different levels of government, particularly at the provincial level and, in the public education sector, where agreements were reached, to develop a two-fold programme. One part was oriented straightforwardly towards educating the public and spreading the word about the profession as a career. The other was geared towards training and technical skills, and the delivery of courses to train new craftspeople. This second option was taken up by the public with relative success as offering job opportunities, even if involving temporary or complementary work in rural areas where there were not many employment options. Therefore, for the

young people who signed up, these training courses were their first contact with pottery as a traditional craft occupation.¹¹

Thus there was a break with the traditional way of transmitting craft knowledge, above all due to government intervention, since the entire process of recovering pottery skills was made into a planned, fostered, and managed project. The traditional system of apprenticeship involves the master potter and various apprentices working together in his workshop until the latter eventually become independent. Here, that system was replaced by a formalised relationship, as a regulated system of apprenticeship of a professional and technical nature was set up. Another change was that the traditional system of transmitting knowledge as part of a direct family inheritance of a craft was similarly replaced by strictly professional relationships in which the instructors rarely had any kin relationship with their students.

As a result, a training period of one hundred hours (the typical length of the courses) now gives participants an artisan's certificate (the *carta de artesano*). With this, apprentices can open an independent craft workshop after the completion of their training. Clearly, the reduction in the length of the training period, in relation to the traditional system, is not only quantitative but an issue of quality as well. In previous decades, apprenticeship to a master potter was neither prescriptively delimited, nor were there any obligatory curricula or any regulated and formal training system; rather, it lasted the entire life of the artisan who combined domestic work with an activity which contributed to the income of the household unit. In addition, there were no professional distinctions made between the roles of master craftspeople (*maestros*), journey people (*oficiales*), and apprentices (*aprendices*). It was only the specific activity itself that distinguished, in practice, the degree of skill evident in the work executed by some potters versus others. With the present system, in contrast, a limited period of time spent in an apprenticeship grants the individual and the work produced by him or her the sacralised character that emerges from the formula 'master craftsman (or artisan)'. This provides institutionalised recognition to the person who has mastered her or his profession, regardless of the actual level of craft skill obtained in the process.

At the same time, government intervention is also evident on the other side of the apprenticeship-training process. Government offices appoint instructors on the basis of these individuals' affirmation of their level of skill, despite the government having no mechanism to affirm that these teachers have the sufficient technical skills in a craft to teach it. Therefore, this form of craft recovery did not involve a decision or initiative from the people who were associated with craft occupations in the past, but rather a new economic opportunity offered by the Autonomous Community government. After an initial period of this policy, official recognition was belatedly given to the importance of individuals who had both the technical knowledge and represented the practical history of craft production. These individuals, who had a long association with craft production, came to be seen as forming part of the collective memory of Galician identity. On the basis of the interest shown by the

government, the artisans acquired a consciousness of the importance which the new society was placing on their role and on them, and not only on the objects which they produced. This meant that they themselves were converted into symbols of identity.¹²

It is not surprising that this situation has resulted in a cultural reinvention of the potters, a group that had very little social prestige historically. This reinvention has a somewhat epic tone with respect to how the changing role of the profession is framed, not only in terms of the real-life experience of individual potters but as a reframing of potters as qualified representatives of a particular aspect of memory and the historical past. It is common for the life history of potters to be presented as central to the craft. This mythologises craft production in a way more connected to present government policies than to past practices in craft production. In the past, the halo of collective images about Galician identity, today associated with pieces of pottery and the artisans who make them, did not exist. Rather, pottery was connected to an ordinary material reality and potters were seen as being part of a useful profession that dealt with the necessities of daily life. At the same time, it is understandable that some artisans conceive of their own life histories as being almost heroically tied to the longed-for recovery of a dying way of life. This remains true, despite the fact that this craft had long since lost its primary social utility, and only became a recoverable economic opportunity when various levels of government decided to promote it as a window onto Galician culture. An obvious support for the argument is that not all of the artisans who had knowledge of the profession and had practised it for many years, decided to take it up again during the revitalisation process. Despite the relative success of this revitalisation, it is clear that the current market for pottery products will not support a large growth in the number of people working in this profession, since it is no longer related to creating pieces for people's everyday needs for tableware and other items. Rather, potting now occupies a symbolic space which is concretised through the use of craft pieces as decorative rather than practical objects. Among the large quantity of potters who practised their profession until the 1960s, it was normally those who were closer to people in government who returned to this craft activity and, in virtually every case, each person has produced a very reduced number of pieces. There are only one or two potters working in most of the productive centres aside from locations such as Buño, where pottery has managed to open up an important space of its own as a specialised form of production.

Clay pieces as cultural symbols: new meanings for old objects

Another important component in the successful recreation of the craft of pottery as a heritage activity involves the interval of time related to the relative inactivity in pottery production between the 1970s and 1990s. This two-decade lull was fundamental in allowing for a renewed semantic emphasis to be placed on both the

objects produced with clay and the artisans who produced these objects. This was a necessary phase that allowed for the distancing and objectification necessary to change the symbolism associated with the pieces from one that held largely pejorative and negative content (e.g. as being unnecessary in a modern society) to a new and more positive content. This was true for both the potters and for those who used the pieces.

In the past the potters belonged to a sector of the peasantry that either did not own land or owned very little, and for whom agriculture and livestock raising were complementary rather than main economic activities. This was in a society in which the ownership of property was a criterion for prestige and formed the basis of the social hierarchy. Those who bought and used pieces of Galician pottery prior to the 1960s were from both rural areas and from Galician cities and towns, but they were always from a lower social class. In each case, they purchased clay pieces out of necessity or because they could not afford other types of more expensive dishes, such as the fine china and porcelain which only the wealthy used on an everyday basis and which some of the middle class would bring out on special occasions. In the post-1960s period, clay was replaced by other industrially produced materials (above all, plastic, glass, and cheap metals) and it thereby lost the negative connotations it had acquired when connected with a situation of necessity. This gradual change meant that clay came to have a symbolic patina of prestige based, above all, on its value as an object that represents Galician identity in a society that is bit by bit becoming more urban and industrial, with a tendency to forget its origins, and so in turn initiating a process of mythologisation. Below I discuss some of the values that are projected via the craft of pottery as a result of its association with government policy planning that sometimes uses certain symbols in a manner similar to commercial marketing.

The question of collective identity is probably the symbolic axis which best gathers together and summarises the values attributed to the craft of making things with clay. In one sense, this relates to a strong reaction to the external forces of globalisation which tend to sever local or community identities. This involves a reaffirmation of a particular identity; in this case, a Galician identity which can offer something to people in the face of some degree of cultural homogenisation prevalent on a global scale. As Ulrich Beck noted, 'paradoxically, a return to nationalism is a common response to globalisation' (2004: 17; my translation). This symbolic process involves an emphasis being placed on certain features, such as ruralism, that are considered to identify 'traditional cultures'. Alongside this more general association of Galicia with ruralism are other characteristics that are associated in popular culture and by various authors to specifically 'Galician' culture: these include the idea of Galicians having a 'melancholic' character, being sentimental, nostalgic for their place of origin, and devoted to a culture of hard work and effort (Freire Paz 2004). In the context of the revival of pottery, these types of characteristics became portrayed as intrinsic aspects of the work associated with this craft activity. This helped convert

the craft into a representation, often partially idealised, of the past and of a collective Galician identity. Pottery is now seen as a local resource that can additionally attract buyers for other products, specifically food items, which are being marketed successfully, partly due to their connection with people's individual memories and search for personal origins. Pottery containers can be used to echo the idea of being a member of a collectivity that shares the same markers of identity. The promotional efforts of public institutions are, in large part, responsible for the generation of this collective image which is nothing save the expansion of specific traditional catch-phrases or clichés that have been taken on by Galicians themselves and promoted through generalisations about common, shared cultural features associated with being 'Galician'.

It is not a total accident that the use of this ideology, which tends to create a collective consciousness, coincides with a specific political process in contemporary Spain that involves the move to a concept of a multicultural, multilingual, and plurinational state. This fits with the contemporary recognition of historical nationalities and the creation of a system of Autonomous Communities which are moving towards more and more self-governance. This process was born politically at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s and was later strengthened with the 1986 entry of Spain into the EU, which entailed accommodating to European policies. These included the concept of forming part of a 'Euroregion' that, for example, was given a concrete shape in the candidature of Portuguese-Galician Immaterial Heritage for UNESCO status. This example includes a territory that belongs administratively to the Spanish State (the Galician Autonomous Community) and another to the Portuguese State (the north of Portugal), united by the supranational fact that they possess some common cultural bases which create a link between them within Europe and distinguish them from the other territorial areas within their respective States. In short, this refers to a process whereby signs of identity are created as a result of political factors and can come from an international as much as a local level. The homogenising characteristic of globalisation can thereby have an impact alongside the reinforcement of local identities so that, paradoxically, distinct cultures seem to grow more similar the more we differentiate ourselves.

In addition, one of the characteristics of pieces made of clay, as with other crafts, is that they are timeless, in the sense that they can virtually carry specific meanings from the past into the immediate present. Naturally, the most disagreeable aspects of the past are idealised, avoided, and substituted for in this cultural process. Therefore, the image of the collective work practised by rural Galicians when there was little industrial development and the help of others was needed to complete certain tasks in a short time becomes summarised, above all, in the ludic and festive aspect of social gatherings, which in the Galician case are especially related to specific foods (Castro 2001; Roseman 2004). The majority of pottery pieces are associated with various foodstuffs, having been used to prepare or serve food on. In the past, pottery was also used in common by members of a family or broader community, and so

may reinforce an image of the Galician collective to counter the context of today's society in which individual consumption has primacy. Another image generated by pottery pieces, and especially those used for the transportation or storage of liquids, is an association with eroticism and moments when rural people escaped ordinary social constraints. Certain pieces are related to activities that took place outside domestic spaces, such as fetching water from community streams, or performing collective tasks, for instance harvesting grapes or slaughtering pigs (Castro 2003). These activities commonly involved a festive atmosphere, especially when carried out by youth, and were often connected to establishing relationships which went beyond the limits of what was strictly related to the work at hand.

The idea of authenticity is also associated with the objects made by potters from clay in contrast to those made through industrial production methods. The differences are obvious and are based on the limited scale of production possible with craftwork as opposed to mass production, in the use of manual and craft techniques as opposed to industrial machinery, and in the singularity and originality of each piece. The very fact that artisans sell their pieces or their art at the same time that they narrate or exhibit the parts of their life histories linked to the practice of their profession and/or to the history of craft production means that the pieces are being set up as authentically safeguarding the vicarious experience of the tourists who buy them. It is clear that the government attitude, as previously mentioned, is directed in large measure to certifying and guaranteeing the authenticity of these pieces and, therefore, the experience associated with them.¹³ What is being sought is a guarantee of authenticity, as though this were an indispensable characteristic that places a special value on a craft. Craftwork is, by definition, a changing activity with respect to the use of particular models, forms, decorations, and materials and tools because it adapts to a number of specific requirements. However, even in the case of a process of recovery, modifications are made with respect to the traditional models (Figures 7.3 and 7.4). This allows one to speak about the possibility of a rupture, given that it has not been possible to totally maintain a solidarity with the past in terms of the clay itself, the tools used to do the work, the forms or size of pieces, the baking process, the physical qualities of the piece (their weight, colour, resistance to the firing, porosity), the types of decoration, or naturally (and this is the first to disappear) the uses and functions for which the pieces were originally made. In reality, what guarantees authenticity are not the pieces themselves but the immaterial values associated with them and the experience of those who purchase pottery, who may not need to recover a fully 'authentic' piece or its elements in order to decide on its value.

There are also other, related values, assimilated by or easily attributed to clay, which emerge as a result of parallel circumstances. In today's world, people's lifestyles and food choices as well as other areas of life have been heavily impacted by their concerns over the environment. As part of these concerns, a distinction is made between the overall system of production and exploitation of the world in which we

Figure 7.3 Diachronic evolution of a breastmilk pump piece (*pezoeira*).

Figure 7.4 Souvenirs sold as traditional pottery.

live against the traditional systems, considered by many to have been more rational, sustainable, and respectful of the environment. In this dialectical framework, the products made from clay and, in general, all crafts are connected with an economic model promoting the ideal of sustainable development.

The preoccupation with health – one of the obsessions of the modern world, along with the search for natural and organic products – also has a clear connection with the world of clay craft. Clay is, obviously, an organic and natural material that is recyclable in all phases of production. At the same time, the food industry uses clay dishes (even if they are industrially produced versions) to package certain products that it wishes to sell or label as organic, especially ones produced through artisanal methods. This relates to a reciprocal relationship in which the container and the content interact and share symbolic values that come from the notion of the ‘natural earth’. Natural products are produced from the earth and, in a purposeful play on words, clay is made from the earth.¹⁴ In addition, in a mythical allusion with religious origins, clay is associated with a confluence of earth, water, and fire and therefore a return to its origins. In this case, it is not so much the work of the institutions that spreads this semantic baggage, but more the interaction of the craft with the market, a market that had previously rendered pottery largely irrelevant in face of new products though it has now adopted this recovered craft to promote new connotations.

With the governmental creation, or re-creation, of pottery as craft, new connotations for pieces made out of clay have been conferred in a programmed and institutionalised way. It would be illusionary to think that this profession would have been able to recover and maintain itself without government support. This relates not just to the economic aid that was available in the first phases of the process of recovery but also to the ideological use of the clay pieces as part of the cultural policies enacted by the various governments in order to create new signs of Galician identity. There are two aspects to consider here: in the first place, pottery came to signify a way to identify and differentiate Galicians from others. These signs generated internal social cohesion under the rubric of a craft. And second, this semantic process reflected meanings that were associated with the past and the present, what was nostalgically yearned for and what yet might still come to pass (Fernandez 1991).

The politics of tradition and the recovery of Galician pottery

The recovery of crafts fits well with the application of the notion of a ‘politics of tradition’, with four fundamental effects (Cruces 1998: 84). The first of these is *tradition-alisation*. This is understood to be a process that involves States not only supporting heritage conservation, but also fixing on and creating hierarchies that place some forms of culture over others. One can say that, in this way, while supporting the recovery of pottery, government institutions have also privileged this activity over others which, objectively, could present the same values and importance from the

point of view of the conservation of traditional culture. On the other hand, within the full gamut of pottery, a priority has been placed on recuperating those physical pieces which, although they are accompanied in many cases through oral transmission by artisans' discourses about their own past circumstances, do not pay real attention to actual social processes. The focus of these accounts is therefore historical, like a recalling or a demonstration of the conditions associated with pottery in the past, but not like an account of actual dynamics that would recount their social roles and specific relationships.

At the same time, there is a *legitimation* effect that is mutually constituted between the public institutions and the groups or individuals who manufacture and sell objects that become 'heritage' items (Cruces 1998: 85). When governments grant a symbolic status of prominence and legitimacy to certain things, this recognition of human groups and their activities will become seen in an official and institutionalised way that could not be achieved through open competition through capitalist economic processes. The artisans working with clay enjoy a social prestige derived directly from their link with government institutions and their methods of promotion and adoption, in what one can think of as a type of guardianship. Of course, from the standpoint of the free market, this situation grants strength or a guarantee of survival despite the inherent weakness of particular economic sectors. Moreover, government institutions have proceeded to protect the work of pottery and of the artisans in a way that is both personalised and individualised. This involves the promotion of key or representative figures in each productive zone. As such, it also can be seen to become a form of control over the potters' discourse. This discourse, under government sponsorship, becomes directed towards a formal, externally oriented presentation of the special features of potters' work and indeed implies a historical reality for a role that is actually conferred by formal institutions.

The third effect of the politics of tradition is the *demarcation or establishment of conceptual limits* (Cruces 1998: 85). Government institutions contribute to the projection of the symbolic meaning of pieces of clay via the mechanisms of advertising and other forms of promotion. This process generates a web of conceptual meanings that intermingle with the meanings already existing in society in relation to pottery, as we saw in the case of the rescue of the values of the rural, the natural, and the ecological. This process of generating social meanings plays out, above all, in the conceptualisation of cultural or group identity, vis-à-vis the outside, to 'be something in the face of differences' (García 1998: 13) within the context of globalisation (García Canclini 1989). It involves the unavoidable comparison of 'us versus them' and can be used to reinforce specific values of Galician culture to the detriment of others, with the intention of creating an image based on shared characteristics that are projected as held in common. Clearly, a decision was made to opt for a recovery of traditional pottery versus other crafts or traditional occupations. Even within this rubric, specific representative types or forms of brands have been differentially

generated in association with specific areas such as Buño, Niñodagua, or Bonxe, while other areas and pottery practices have been ignored.

The fourth point is that we are talking about *objectification* (Cruces 1998: 86) – a mechanism that institutions employ to formalise the symbolic content of a specific culture or a certain aspect of heritage. This consists of a political or policy intervention that involves simplifying the contents of a society's actual heritage, by reductionism and the extraction of a limited number of common denominators. This leads to an abstraction of values in order to generate a decipherable code of significations for the members of the society that is being identified, a code that is meant to conform to a model of ideal references. In José Luis García's words: '[T]he expression "cultural heritage" draws people's attention, up to a certain point arbitrarily, to some aspects of (that which considered to be) cultural' (García 1998: 9). In this sense, the system removes the concrete in order to prioritise the global and that which is held in common, thereby suppressing the individual peculiarities that lead to the elaboration of the various versions that could be used for a collective past. Contemporary pottery in Galicia, as it has been presented, has based its semiotic efficacy on the celebration of positive values that Galicians recognise as their own. These values simultaneously minimise past social conflicts and help downplay conflicting ideologies that are present in contemporary Galicia.

Conclusion

If we generalise from this particular example, the process of recovering the craft of pottery allows us to observe the mechanics involved in government institutions' redefining traditional Galician culture, based on an adaptation to global models. This relates to a prototypical process: an ideal is formed by combining various general principles with a series of more local values. It is these more concrete values – in this case those that intersect with the practice of pottery in Galicia – that make the universal model representing the global world less automatic. The connection with local, concrete values puts this universal model into practice, giving it a pragmatic character and granting it a functional role which, ultimately, allows the local population to identify with it.

The value system offered by the global model, which is abstract and generic, lacks a true link with tradition; however, society accepts this imperfection on the altar of authenticity, avoiding the negative aspects of what was objective historical reality in order to permit elements of the past to function as present day symbols of identity. In this way, people are practising a principle of socially cooperating with the discourse proposed by government institutions. As part of this discourse, that which is defined as pertaining to the idea of traditional culture alludes to a system of symbolic values that are embedded in an ideological construction, which is in turn justified through a reference to the past and is of a meta-referential character (i.e. it ultimately refers to itself). The past is constructed as an ideal model from the

perspective of the present day, given that the idea of traditional culture is created in the present and gives a coherence and continuity to that which likely did not exist. This occurs on the basis of a discontinuous memory that is purposefully created in the present through an idealised copying of the past, incorporating elements of that past but placing them within a new system.

It can therefore be argued that government intervention into the recovery of craft traditions involves a double construction: first, the elaboration of the objects being manually produced; and second, the play of symbols. The memories that are generated by the objects which are displayed by potters and viewed by others become part of a ritual process, and the objects become a type of fetish in which our dispersed memories are deposited, unifying our identities through common, abstract values. Following Martin Heidegger's (1994) idea of the importance of the foundational myths of distinct peoples, it is possible to argue that pottery is part of a common history that explains Galicia's contingent present.

Notes

- 1 It must not be overlooked that the reference to the Roman world or to that of the '*mouros*' is not historically precise but rather of a mythical or atemporal character. Conversely, it is also obvious that there can exist an appropriation of the values associated with the Roman culture given that the city of Lugo had its origin (though with a previous pre-existence) in a military camp in the epoch of Augusto under Paulo Fabio Máximo's delegation, and abundant vestiges of this epoch exist throughout the whole city and its environment.
- 2 A telling example of this insufficiency to replace the total economic system is the fact that, in the whole province of Lugo, only six persons produce pieces of traditional pottery, and only three of them are dedicated exclusively to this work; the others combine it with other economic activities.
- 3 A certain line of Galician regionalist thought of the nineteenth century, as represented by Alfredo Brañas – Catholic and traditionalist regionalism – is adopted, in some senses for the political party that governs the *Xunta de Galicia* between 1990 and 2005, placed politically in the spectrum of the Spanish right, inheritor of certain ideological and personal contents of the pro-Franco period. At the same time, this same ideological trend, foreign to political revivifications, had a presence in the pro-Galician and anti-Franco sector from the 1950s onward, through figures such as Ramón Piñeiro.
- 4 Certainly, traditional cultural products exist that are based on the social figure of these craftspeople, as similar cases. Nevertheless, they tend to be limited to reproducing certain social stereotypes and not to projecting a new image. Therefore, for example, there are sayings that vulgarise this figure and his trade such as '*Non te cases cos oleiros, que os hai na miña terra; / os oleiros de barro, de barro fainos calquera*' ('Don't marry the potters, there are some in my area; / the potters of clay, anyone can make [things] with clay'), together with others that emphasise the managing of cash money as '*Casa connigo, Rosiña / mira que son cacharreiro / durmirás en boa cama / e sempre terás diñeiro*' ('Marry me Rosiña / look I'm a maker of crockery / you will sleep in a good bed / and always have money'), or '*Non te burles do oleiro / que da terra fai diñeir*' ('Don't make fun of the potter / from land one makes money').

- 5 The already existent commercial circuits are neither periodic nor local (fairs and traditional markets); today buyers acquire the objects in the craftspeople's own workshops, conceived of through the networks programmed and supported by different institutions as museistic workshops, or exhibitions-fairs.
- 6 Young people who mainly come from urban Galicia, disconnected from the system of traditional production, approach these pieces with a conscious attitude that makes them think they are buying a part of their identity or from their past. The foreign tourists who buy are moved by another type of motivation which has a cultural base but is more linked to the idea of originality, in their search of differentiation, exclusivity, and uniqueness, but not of identity.
- 7 Encarnación Aguilar argues that the idea of promoting rural development on the basis of strengthening existing cultural values and the natural attributes of different regions are the 'results from our [Spain's] integration into the CAP' (Aguilar Criado 2002).
- 8 In 1991, the European Union established the LEADER (an acronym from the French name *Liaisons entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*) to disburse some of the redistributed funds. The first LEADER lasted until 1994 and LEADER II until 2001, being replaced by the programme LEADER Plus.
- 9 These figures refer to changes that had a major economic impact over a short period, affecting not just economic production but also social organisation in Galicia.
- 10 Since 1982 UNESCO increasingly recognised the immaterial facets of heritage, in 2003 defining these as 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognized as part of their cultural heritage' (UNESCO 2003).
- 11 Only some of them would go on to develop this employment possibility as a full-time professional occupation (Roseman 2003).
- 12 From a semiotic point of view, it is significant that the government's advertising posters during this period concentrated iconographically on two elements: certain objects were chosen to illustrate the typical pottery of each region or community; also, the hands of older potters were included with a clear reference to the past.
- 13 In 1992 the Galician Parliament passed the *Lei de Artesanía de Galicia* (Law of Galician Crafts) prescribing that 'the Ministry in charge will dictate the precise rules for accrediting the quality of craft products and will create distinctions and will confer certificates of quality' (Xunta de Galicia 1992). As a consequence, an identifying logo was conferred by the Ministry of Industry (*Consellería de Industria*); it is now used alongside potters' individualised stamps.
- 14 Earth and clay are actually different materials, as much for their composition as for their physical qualities, uses, and look. Another paradox is that the glazes used traditionally are toxic and have had to be substituted for others.

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