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Between memory and identity: museums, Afro-Brazilian culture, and heritage education in Pernambuco's Mata Norte region

Entre memória e identidade: museus, cultura afro-brasileira e educação patrimonial na Mata Norte pernambucana

Entre memoria e identidad: museos, cultura afrobrasileña y educación patrimonial en la Mata Norte de Pernambuco

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Abstract: This article discusses the educational role of museums and memory spaces in valuing history, cultural diversity, and Afro-Brazilian experiences. Drawing on a reflection on the social function of museums, the study connects debates in museology and heritage education with two sites in the Mata Norte region of Pernambuco: the Maracatu Museum in Nazaré da Mata, considered as a reference for the safeguarding and interpretation of rural maracatu culture, and Engenho Poço Comprido in Vicência, a historic complex associated with sugar-producing society. The study adopts a bibliographic and documentary approach based on references in museology, education, and heritage studies, as well as publicly available institutional information. It argues that museums, historic sugar mills, and cultural spaces can contribute to History teaching when they connect objects, buildings, cultural practices, community memories, and critical analysis of social relations. Such an approach requires accessibility, community participation, historical contextualization, and attention to both material heritage and living cultural expressions. It concludes that closer collaboration among schools, museums, and cultural agents expands possibilities for historical learning and recognition of the plurality of Brazilian society.
Keywords: Museums; Heritage education; Memory; Afro-Brazilian culture; Mata Norte of Pernambuco.

Resumo: Este artigo discute o papel educativo dos museus e dos espaços de memória na valorização da história, da diversidade cultural e das experiências afro-brasileiras. Partindo de uma reflexão sobre a função social dos museus, o texto aproxima debates da Museologia e da educação patrimonial de dois espaços da Mata Norte de Pernambuco: o Museu do Maracatu, em Nazaré da Mata, tomado como referência para a salvaguarda e a interpretação da cultura do maracatu rural, e o Engenho Poço Comprido, em Vicência, conjunto histórico relacionado à sociedade açucareira. A abordagem é bibliográfica e documental, fundamentada em referências dos campos da Museologia, da educação e do patrimônio, além de informações institucionais disponíveis publicamente. Argumenta-se que museus, engenhos históricos e espaços culturais podem contribuir para o ensino de História quando articulam objetos, edificações, práticas culturais, memórias comunitárias e análise crítica das relações sociais. Essa atuação requer acessibilidade, participação das comunidades, contextualização histórica e atenção tanto às heranças materiais quanto às manifestações culturais vivas. Conclui-se que a aproximação entre escola, museus e agentes culturais amplia as possibilidades de aprendizagem histórica e de reconhecimento da pluralidade da sociedade brasileira.
Palavras-chave: Museus; Educação patrimonial; Memória; Cultura afro-brasileira; Mata Norte de Pernambuco.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza el papel educativo de los museos y espacios de memoria en la valorización de la historia, la diversidad cultural y las experiencias afrobrasileñas. A partir de una reflexión sobre la función social de los museos, el texto aproxima debates de la museología y la educación patrimonial a dos espacios de la Mata Norte de Pernambuco: el Museo del

Maracatu, en Nazaré da Mata, tomado como referencia para la salvaguardia y la interpretación de la cultura del maracatu rural, y el Engenho Poço Comprido, en Vicência, conjunto histórico relacionado con la sociedad azucarera. El enfoque es bibliográfico y documental, fundamentado en referencias de los campos de la museología, la educación y el patrimonio, además de información institucional disponible públicamente. Se sostiene que los museos, ingenios históricos y espacios culturales pueden contribuir a la enseñanza de la Historia cuando articulan objetos, edificaciones, prácticas culturales, memorias comunitarias y análisis crítico de las relaciones sociales. Esta actuación requiere accesibilidad, participación de las comunidades, contextualización histórica y atención tanto a las herencias materiales como a las manifestaciones culturales vivas. Se concluye que la aproximación entre escuela, museos y agentes culturales amplía las posibilidades de aprendizaje histórico y de reconocimiento de la pluralidad de la sociedad brasileña.
Palabras clave: Museos; Educación patrimonial; Memoria; Cultura afrobrasileña; Mata Norte de Pernambuco.

1 Introduction

Museums are institutions devoted to preservation, research, communication, and education. More than repositories of old objects, they can create opportunities for different audiences to question the past, recognize disputes over memory, and relate historical experiences to present-day issues. This understanding requires moving beyond the image of the museum as a space removed from everyday life or reserved for specialists. A museum acquires social meaning when it establishes dialogue with its audiences and with the communities to which its collections and narratives refer.

The text from which this article originated already drew attention to the importance of museums as spaces of memory, knowledge, and inclusion, especially in view of the limited presence of Afro-Brazilian narratives in some traditional representations of national history. This revised version retains that concern while broadening the discussion to encompass the relationship between museum education, cultural heritage, and History teaching, incorporating examples from Pernambuco's Mata Norte region.

The region offers relevant possibilities for considering the diversity of heritage. Nazaré da Mata is recognized for the strength of rural maracatu, a collective manifestation that combines music, dance, clothing, orality, religiosity, and community organization. In Vicência, Engenho Poço Comprido preserves buildings associated with the sugar economy and makes it possible to address architecture, labor, enslavement, landowners' power, and transformations of the rural landscape. The two cases are not equivalent: one refers primarily to a living cultural manifestation and the ways it is safeguarded; the other, to an architectural complex associated with plantation society. This comparison can make different dimensions of heritage visible.

The objective is to discuss how museums and heritage sites in the Mata Norte region can contribute to critical historical education, with attention to Afro-Brazilian memory, power relations, and community participation. Methodologically, this is a bibliographic and documentary reflection that uses authors cited in the original text and institutional and academic information consulted for the regional expansion. It is not presented as field research: the educational possibilities discussed here should be further investigated through visits, interviews, and direct analysis of the activities offered by each institution.

2 Museums, memory, and the educational function

The history of museums is related to the practices of collecting, classifying, and exhibiting, but also to changes in conceptions of the public, culture, and heritage. As Julião (2002) observes, understanding the museum institution requires situating it historically and recognizing that its collections and forms of display are not neutral. Selecting what is preserved, named, and presented constitutes an interpretation of the world and can either reinforce dominant narratives or make room for historically marginalized experiences.

Pereira et al. (2007, p. 11), cited in the original article, describe museums as “cultural and educational environments” that educate by raising awareness and produce meanings from objects, exhibitions, and educational programs. This formulation emphasizes that pedagogical potential does not lie only in the object on display: it also depends on the questions asked, the labels, the mediation, and the relationships visitors establish with the collection.

Castro (2007, p. 105) draws attention to the museum as a mediator between the public and the collection and as a producer of discourse. This perspective is important because an exhibition is never merely a set of assembled objects. Spatial organization, explanatory texts, absences, and frames construct a narrative. Museum education should therefore encourage a critical reading of that narrative: Who is represented? Which experiences are emphasized? Which voices appear rarely or not at all?

The educational function of museums should not be confused with the one-way transmission of information. It can foster observation, comparison, inquiry, debate, and the construction of interpretations. Almeida and Vasconcellos (1997) discuss reasons for visiting museums and their relationship with historical learning; Santos (2002) contributes to reflection on concepts and methods of museum education. Together, these approaches help us understand the museum as a non-formal learning space that can interact with the school curriculum without simply reproducing a lecture.

A visit, however, does not automatically produce learning. It is important to prepare students, define research questions, carefully observe objects and environments, record questions, and revisit the experience in the classroom. Whenever possible, mediation should consider different ages, cultural repertoires, and accessibility needs. The museum can thus be understood as a partner of the school and as a meeting place for academic, community, and family knowledge.

3 Memory, representation, and the Afro-Brazilian presence

The discussion of Afro-Brazilian museums involves both the preservation of collections and recognition of historical subjects who have been silenced or represented stereotypically. Enslavement, Black resistance, religious practices, technical knowledge, the arts, solidarity networks, and cultural manifestations cannot be treated as peripheral elements of Brazilian history. They are constitutive dimensions of Brazilian social formation.

The Afro-Brazilian Museum of the Federal University of Bahia, inaugurated in 1982, and the Abolition Museum in Recife may be highlighted as important institutions for Afro-Brazilian memory. The work of Abdias Nascimento and Emanoel Araújo in the field of Black cultural appreciation was also significant. These examples help us understand that the creation of institutions dedicated to Afro-Brazilian culture resulted from intellectual, artistic, and political initiatives, and not merely from the spontaneous evolution of heritage policies.

In discussing exhibitions on African cultures and Black diasporas, Cunha (2008) offers a framework for observing how museums can produce memory, but also forgetting. The challenge is not merely to place African or Afro-Brazilian objects in display cases; it is to contextualize them, recognize the agency of historical subjects, and prevent living practices from being reduced to folkloric curiosities. Maracatu, capoeira, religions of African origin, festivals, and artistic expressions must be presented in their historicity, complexity, and relationship with specific communities.

In this sense, recognition of Afro-Brazilian culture requires an approach that connects historical violence and agency. Enslavement and racism must be studied without reducing Black populations to the condition of victims; strategies of resistance, cultural production, political organization, and knowledge transmission must also be valued. Museum education can contribute to this work when it uses diverse sources, testimonies, objects, images, performative practices, and dialogue with masters and knowledge holders.

4 Heritage education and History teaching

Heritage education can be understood as a set of educational processes that takes cultural heritage as a source of inquiry, dialogue, and social participation. Instead of presenting heritage as something remote and untouchable, this perspective invites people to recognize, interpret, and discuss the assets and practices that give meaning to their territories. Heritage is not only a protected building or a rare object: it includes knowledge, celebrations, forms of expression, places, and shared memories.

In History teaching, working with local heritage makes it possible to connect broad processes with concrete experiences. A manor house and a chapel can be used to investigate landholding, religiosity, social hierarchies, and the sugar economy; a maracatu can open paths for studying the African diaspora, race relations, religiosity, artistic work, oral transmission, and the construction of identities. In both cases, simplistic explanations must be avoided, and one must ask how heritage was produced, preserved, transformed, and contested.

A teaching sequence can be organized in three stages. Before the visit, the class analyzes maps, photographs, documents, and guiding questions. During the visit, students observe the site, record elements, talk with mediators, and formulate questions. Afterwards, they compare their records with written sources and the bibliography, producing texts, school exhibitions, affective maps, podcasts, or heritage itineraries. The activity should include reflection on what is not visible and on current conditions of preservation and access.

By making the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture compulsory in basic education, Law No. 10,639/2003 reinforces the relevance of resources that broaden knowledge of these experiences. Museums and cultural spaces can contribute to this task, provided that their activities are not treated as substitutes for curricular work and that lasting partnerships are built with schools, cultural collectives, and researchers.

5 Heritage experiences in Pernambuco's Mata Norte region

An approach centered on the Mata Norte region makes it possible to relate heritage, regional history, and cultural practices. For the purposes of this article, two sites are highlighted: the reference to the Maracatu Museum in Nazaré da Mata and Engenho Poço Comprido in Vicência. The official name, operating status, educational services, and visiting conditions of the space associated with maracatu should be confirmed directly with the local administrators before final submission.

Nazaré da Mata, located in Pernambuco's northern forest zone, has become an important center for the preservation and dissemination of Maracatu de Baque Solto, also known as rural maracatu. This tradition is deeply connected with the history of sugar-mill workers and the cultural manifestations of the region's Black and rural populations. Over time, the municipality became a reference for this cultural expression, promoting gatherings of groups during Carnival and contributing to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, music, dances, and traditions.

Official recognition occurred on September 6, 2011, with the enactment of State Law No. 14,383, which granted the municipality the title of “State Capital of Maracatu.” The initiative originated in a bill authored by state representative Maviael Cavalcanti. This title represents institutional recognition of maracatu's importance to Pernambuco's cultural identity and to the appreciation of the cultural heritage of the Mata Norte region.

5.1 Nazaré da Mata: maracatu, memory, and living heritage

Nazaré da Mata, in the northern forest zone, is widely associated with rural maracatu, or maracatu de baque solto. This manifestation brings together music, dance, characters, costumes, embroidery, oral poetry, processions, and forms of collective organization. Studying it allows us to observe heritage as a living practice, transmitted and recreated by masters, performers, artisans, musicians, families, and associations. Safeguarding is not limited to storing costumes or instruments: it includes ensuring conditions for the continuity of groups, valuing masters, transmitting knowledge, and recognizing the communities that sustain the tradition.

When publicizing education and heritage initiatives, the Municipality of Nazaré da Mata emphasizes the role of local culture and rural maracatu in municipal identity. Studies on heritage education in the municipality also advocate mapping and valuing tangible and intangible assets as part of an educational policy. These references make it possible to propose a pedagogical approach that combines museum records, interviews with masters, analysis of costumes and instruments, observation of rehearsals, and study of the public spaces in which the manifestation takes place.

In Nazaré da Mata, two spaces can serve as references for considering the maintenance and preservation of maracatu culture and practice. One is the Mauro Mota Cultural Center, an important space of memory and preservation of the popular culture of the Mata Norte region. Located in the former municipal slaughterhouse, the facility opened in December 2002 and

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began to perform functions related to the appreciation of local culture, with exhibitions of costumes, ornaments, and other elements connected to Maracatu de Baque Solto, as well as works by regional artists and references to the poet Mauro Mota. The Mauro Mota center has become a place of memory, contributing to the documentation, transmission, and appreciation of the cultural traditions of Nazaré da Mata and the region's maracatu identity.

The second space is Parque dos Lanceiros, inaugurated in 2005, another important venue for valuing the popular culture of Nazaré da Mata. Construction began in 2002, and the park was designed with community participation and support from the Municipal Development Foundation (Fidem) and the Support Program for the Sustainable Development of the Forest Zone (Promata). It was conceived as a venue for cultural performances, maracatu-related activities, and the exhibition and sale of handicrafts; it also houses large sculptures of caboclos de lança created by artist Cavani Rosas. The site therefore goes beyond its function as an event space and also assumes a symbolic dimension in the representation and appreciation of Maracatu de Baque Solto and its characters.

Taken together, the Mauro Mota Cultural Center and Parque dos Lanceiros play a significant role in preserving the memory and cultural heritage of Nazaré da Mata. While the former safeguards and displays objects, clothing, and references related to local culture, the latter extends this experience into public space through sculptures, performances, and cultural manifestations. These facilities therefore contribute to the maintenance of collective memory, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and the appreciation of Maracatu de Baque Solto as a constitutive element of the cultural identity of Pernambuco's Mata Norte region. Their presence also favors heritage education activities by bringing the community, students, and visitors closer to practices, objects, and narratives that form part of the region's cultural history.

It should also be noted that the Parque dos Lanceiros complex contains a small Maracatu Museum, also known as the “Cambinda Brasileira Maracatu Museum.” This space is intended to preserve and exhibit clothing, objects, and references related to the Maracatu de Baque Solto of Nazaré da Mata. The museum is part of the complex inaugurated in 2005 and helps safeguard the material memory of the municipality's maracatu groups, bringing residents, researchers, students, and visitors closer to the practices and knowledge associated with this cultural manifestation.

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Photo 1 - Mauro Mota Cultural Center, former slaughterhouse founded in 1918. Nazaré da Mata, Pernambuco.



Photo 2 - Parque dos Lanceiros, Nazaré da Mata, Pernambuco. https://www.google.com/search?q=Museu+do+maracatu+anexo. Accessed on August 7, 2026.



Photo 3 - Parque dos Lanceiros, Nazaré da Mata, Pernambuco. https://www.flickr.com/photos/145397692@N06/31354448074. Accessed on August 7, 2026.

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5.2 Vicência: Engenho Poço Comprido and the memory of sugar society

Engenho Poço Comprido, in Vicência, is an important historic complex related to Pernambuco's sugar economy. The property comprises a manor house and chapel, whose federal protection was registered by IPHAN on May 21, 1962. Heritage documentation identifies it as a significant example of rural architecture connected to plantation society. Its educational interpretation can integrate economic history, architecture, religiosity, territorial organization, labor, and power relations.

A visit to this site requires a critical approach. The manor house and chapel should not be presented in isolation as testimonies of architecture or elite life. They must be related to the productive system that sustained the sugar economy, including the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, working conditions, social hierarchies, and forms of resistance. It is also important to make explicit the limits of what the architectural complex preserves: the survival of buildings does not, by itself, guarantee the visibility of the experiences of all the groups that took part in that society.

Connecting tangible heritage and social history makes it possible to transform the site into a historical source. Students can observe the distribution of buildings, access routes, the relationship between the chapel and manor house, and the placement of the mill in the landscape. These observations should be compared with documents, maps, accounts, inventories, and research on slavery and the sugar economy. Thus, the site ceases to be merely a setting and becomes part of the historical explanation.



Photo 4 - Engenho Poço Comprido, Vicência, Pernambuco. Photograph published on the official website of the Municipality of Vicência. HANS VON MANTEUFFEL. Engenho Poço Comprido - Vicência. 2017. Photograph. Wikimedia Commons. Available at: Wikimedia Commons - Engenho Poço Comprido. Accessed on August 5, 2026.

5.3 Connections and differences: a regional educational itinerary

Connecting Nazaré da Mata and Vicência can result in a heritage education itinerary, provided that the specific features of each place are respected. In the first case, the emphasis falls on a living cultural manifestation, its transmission, and its protagonists; in the second, on an architectural complex associated with sugar society and the social relations that constituted it. This difference makes it possible to discuss the categories of tangible and intangible heritage without rigidly separating them: cultural practices take place in concrete locations, while historic buildings acquire meaning through the narratives and social uses that surround them.

A regional itinerary can be organized around common questions: Who produced this heritage? Who preserves it? Which memories does it make visible? Which experiences have been silenced? How does it relate to the present? Who has access to the site and participates in its interpretation? Answers should be constructed with local sources and interlocutors, preventing the researcher or school from speaking on behalf of communities without listening to them.

Preparing the itinerary can also strengthen partnerships among schools, departments of education and culture, universities, community associations, masters of popular culture, and preservation institutions. This requires planning transportation, accessibility, mediation, image authorization, remuneration of collaborators when appropriate, and public return of the results. Heritage education becomes more consistent when it also benefits the groups and territories involved in producing knowledge.

6 Challenges to the democratization of museums and heritage

Expanding the educational role of museums faces material and symbolic challenges. These include continued funding, conservation of collections, staff training, physical and communicational accessibility, publicizing the sites, and building permanent relationships with schools. In regions outside major urban centers, distance, transportation, and the absence of up-to-date information can limit access. These conditions must be considered in any proposal for visits or educational partnerships.

Another challenge concerns representation. An institution may preserve objects and still reproduce limited views of history if it presents communities as passive characters or reduces Afro-Brazilian cultures to festive manifestations. A critical educational policy requires contextualization, listening, and a plurality of sources. This includes recognizing conflicts,

transformations, and different interpretations of heritage without turning the exhibition into a single, definitive narrative.

Community participation is central. Masters, performers, artisans, residents, and associations possess knowledge that is not always recorded in written documents. Their collaboration improves the quality of interpretation and can strengthen knowledge transmission. At the same time, such participation must respect authorship, consent, image rights, and local ways of sharing knowledge. Recognition of heritage must go hand in hand with decent conditions for those who keep it alive.

Finally, it is important to prevent heritage appreciation from being reduced to tourism. Visitation can generate economic activity and visibility, but educational, cultural, and community objectives must remain central. Preservation must consider the everyday use of sites, the sustainability of initiatives, and residents' interests, rather than focusing only on attracting visitors.

7 Final considerations

The reflection developed in this article reaffirms that museums and heritage sites can act as environments for historical learning, dialogue, and recognition of diversity. Their educational potential depends on how collections and places are interpreted, on public participation, and on their capacity to establish relationships between past and present. The institution is not neutral: it selects objects, constructs narratives, and takes part in social disputes over memory.

The presence of Afro-Brazilian culture in this debate requires going beyond merely decorative inclusion. It is necessary to recognize the centrality of Black populations in the formation of the country, address enslavement and racism in their historicity, and value practices of resistance, creation, and collective organization. The rural maracatu of Nazaré da Mata offers possibilities for studying living heritage, cultural transmission, and community agency. Engenho Poço Comprido, in turn, makes it possible to investigate architecture, the sugar economy, religiosity, and social hierarchies, provided that its buildings are contextualized within the historical system that produced them.

The comparison between these sites demonstrates that heritage is not limited to monuments or collections. It is also manifested in practices, knowledge, and social relationships that continue to be recreated. To transform this potential into learning, schools and cultural institutions should build joint activities, with prior preparation, inquiry during visits, and

subsequent knowledge production. The participation of cultural agents and communities should be part of the entire process.

As a limitation, this study is bibliographic and documentary in nature and does not replace field research on the educational practices currently carried out at the sites mentioned. Before submission, it is recommended that the official name and operation of the maracatu-related facility in Nazaré da Mata be confirmed directly with those responsible, as well as the visiting procedures for Engenho Poço Comprido. Future research may include interviews, observation of mediation activities, and analysis of educational materials. Even so, the discussion supports the argument that bringing museums, heritage, and schools closer together is a relevant way to strengthen historical awareness, antiracist education, and appreciation of regional memory.

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