

Colloque *Re-membering the Body*
Institut d'ethnologie / Musée d'ethnographie
Neuchâtel, 6-8 septembre 2012

Deuxième panel | Le geste comme figure de la tradition

Communication

Embodying the Cigar Tradition in Touristic Cuba

Valerio Simoni, Chargé de recherche, Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRΙΑ-IUL), Université de Lisbonne

There are just few things in the world that are known without question to be the best of their kind. A Habano, or Havana cigar, is one of them. The nature of Cuba's soil and climate combined with the knowledge of Cuban farmers and cigar makers and passed down from generation to generation makes the Habano a unique product.

(An Enthusiast's Guide to Habanos n.d. [DVD] Habanos S.A.)

All over the world, it is striking to see how tourism develops and thrives by emphasizing the 'typicalities' of given destinations, relying on the promotion and display of distinctive and unique 'traditions'. The making and smoking of cigars in Cuba is one such celebrated tradition, which is given shape and actualized in a variety of tourism encounters. In this presentation, I will draw on ethnography of these encounters to show how embodied deployments of tobacco and cigars brought about competing views of tradition, which the socialist government, informal dealers, and tobacco farmers tried to mobilize in their favour.

The success story and international reputation of the Havana cigar started five centuries ago. 'Unique since 1492', puts the caption on the label of the same DVD quoted above, evoking the colonial 'discovery' of Cuba and the entrance of its cigars into an emerging world economy. Since then, Habanos have stimulated people's imagination, becoming part of a wide range of narratives concerning Cuba and its relations with the world. I present day touristic Cuba, the cigars' tradition has found a prominent place, banking on the islands' historic association with tobacco, its manufacturing, and its uses. Images of elderly Cubans smoking cigars are integral to tourism representations of the island, and are depicted for instance in guidebooks and tourism brochures. Bringing to life and capitalizing on this imagery was the picturesque and eye-catching presence of old Cuban men and women posing for tourists in the restored streets of Old Havana, holding oversized cigars and encouraging foreigners to take pictures at 1 convertible peso rate (roughly 1 USD). These caricaturized enactments of the typical 'old Cuban smoking cigars', mostly licensed by the authorities to animate the colonial streets of the capital, were an invitation for tourists to step back in time. Their embodied qualities and striking outfits concurred with cigars to materialize an idiosyncratic and humorous translation of Cuban heritage, prompting the tourists' curiosity and wonder.

Of a less spectacular kind, but also quite efficient in catching the visitors' eye, were the enactments of cigar smoking by informal dealers. Approaching visitors with a lit cigar, and displaying expertise and pleasure in the act of smoking, the 'Cuban smoking cigar' connection helped attract the tourists' attention and could lead to a conversation on the cigar's qualities, the right way to smoke it, as well as the possibility for tourists to strike an advantageous deal with an experienced connoisseur. Walking the streets of Old Havana, visitors were regularly confronted with such informal offers to buy cigars. This was a realm

haunted by rumours of falsifications, of informality and illegality, of ambiguities and risk taking tourists. Where were these cigars coming from? What were they made of? Were they authentic? To reassure tourists, dealers could channel their attention to the properties and internal features of their products, literally deconstructing the multiple layers and internal constituents of their cigars, skilfully drawing the visitors' focus to their colour, texture, internal structure, smell, flexibility, and finally their taste and burning qualities – all of these elements exemplifying the excellence of the goods on offer.

Besides these occasional and unplanned encounters with the Cuban cigar tradition, tourists visiting the island were encouraged to delve deeper into the making of Habanos by taking part in cigar factories' tours. Here, under the guidance of official personnel, people could follow the various processes that led to the production of the authentic Havana cigar. During such tours, attention was devoted to the subdivision of the different manufacturing tasks among workers; from the selection of leaves to the meticulous task of applying labels to cigars and ordering them into their respective boxes. Cigars were therefore entangled within a web of specialized operations and rigorous controls. They became the result of a highly collaborative effort carried out by professional experts following carefully prescribed techniques, all working towards the same goal under the supervision of the Cuban government.

The reality of a socialist Cuba in which skilful workers joined efforts to manufacture world class cigars under the efficient regulation of the Cuban authorities was put into question in the course of farm visits in the tourism destination of Viñales, a rural region about 200 km west of the capital widely reputed for its tobacco tradition. The examination of tobacco's deployments in the course of these farm visits points to the possible emergence of other embodied enactments of the cigar's tradition that unsettled, contrasted and even opposed the official versions that took shape in factory tours. In Viñales, tourists were encouraged to embrace with all their senses the rural environment, as farmers displayed the qualities of tobacco fields and plants and the procedures of collection, drying, and fermentation of the leaves, channelling the visitors' attention towards their colour, smell, touch, and texture before moving on to the process of cigar making – 'natural version'. With skilful gestures, and following procedures allegedly handed down from generation to generation of farmers, they would roll a cigar and invite tourists to make their own, after which came a smoking experience that the farmers also directed prescribing proper ways of doing.

Viñales' farmers tended to refer negatively to the standardized manufacturing processes taking place in the state-run factories. The city was here contrasted to the realm of nature, uniqueness, and skilful self-sufficient people in the valley – a realm successfully mediated by tobacco deployments from the field to the farmers' manufacturing tables. Among tourists, however, there were those who did not buy into the farmers enactments of the cigar's tradition, and who preferred instead to follow the canonical script outlined in official narratives about proper procedures of cigar production, according to which farmers were first of all providers of tobacco leaves, whereas rigorous manufacturing took place in factories. In this scenario, the farmers' hand-made cigars became at best rudimentary products, and at worst quickly processed goods made for tourists' consumption, which could not match the true Habanos' tradition.

As different versions of the cigar tradition competed with each other, their embodied enactments and material entanglements could help discriminate and rank their importance and authenticity. The corporeal dimension of these enactments will be the focus of the presentation.