

BETWEEN SADDLE AND LONGING: A HORSEBACK RIDING SOCIAL REPRESENTATION STUDY OF THE “SERTÃO NORTE-MINEIRO” (2005-2020)¹

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ABSTRACT: Horseback riding practices have been gaining importance nationwide, as they establish increasingly solid connections between humans and horses. This tendency is provided by leisure and finds support in the “traditions” discourses. The practice is

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connected to different contexts and purposes, such as the women's and the ecological rides, in addition to those intertwined with faith and religiosity. Along this path, the present research aims to analyze the “Cavalgada Samambaia”, located in the rural region of Montes Claros - Minas Gerais, between the years 2005 and 2020, given that the event emerged in 2005 and, 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic began, marked by social distancing. To this end, sources from the traditional and digital press were analyzed, as well as independent audiovisual content or those linked to television, to understand the role of horseback riding in the constitution of social representations through discourses linked to print and digital media. This study is justified by the need to interpret this entertainment that takes place in rural areas, given the gap in the scientific literature on this practice. Given this, it was possible to identify an ambiguity in the representation of horseback riding, which mixes elements from the past with contemporary and urban aspects. Thus, it was noted that such activity appropriated a traditional discourse for commercial purposes.

KEYWORDS: Horseback Riding. Horsemanship. Leisure. Present time history.

ENTRE SELA E SAUDADE: UM ESTUDO DAS REPRESENTAÇÕES SOCIAIS DA CAVALGADA NO SERTÃO NORTE-MINEIRO (2005-2020)

RESUMO: As práticas de cavalgadas vêm ganhando importância em território nacional, ao estabelecer conexões cada vez mais sólidas entre humanos e cavalos. Essa tendência é proporcionada pelo lazer e encontra respaldo no discurso das “tradições”. A prática está conectada a diferentes contextos e finalidades, como as cavalgadas das mulheres e as ecológicas, além daquelas que se entrelaçam com a fé e a religiosidade. Nesse caminho, a presente pesquisa tem por objetivo analisar a Cavalgada Samambaia, localizada na região rural de Montes Claros - Minas Gerais, entre os anos de 2005 e 2020, dado que o evento surgiu em 2005 e, em 2020, iniciou a pandemia de Covid-19, marcada pelo distanciamento social. Para tanto, foram analisadas fontes da imprensa tradicional e digital, bem como conteúdos audiovisuais independentes ou ligados à televisão, a fim de compreender o papel da cavalgada para constituições de representações sociais pelos discursos vinculados aos meios de comunicação impressa e digital. Este estudo se justifica pela necessidade de interpretar esse divertimento que acontece no âmbito rural, tendo em vista uma lacuna na literatura científica sobre essa prática. Em vista disso, foi possível identificar uma ambiguidade na representação da cavalgada, que mescla elementos do passado com aspectos contemporâneos e urbanos. Assim, notou-se que tal atividade se apropriou de um discurso tradicional para fins comerciais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Cavalgada. Equitação. Lazer. História do tempo presente.

Introduction

The horseback rides have gained significant importance throughout the entire national territory, with humans and horses forming increasingly closer partnerships for leisure. This trend is intrinsically connected to the discourse of “traditions,” since the

practice of horseback riding is associated with different contexts and purposes. For example, we have women's horseback rides, ecological horseback rides, and those connected to faith and religiosity, especially within rural culture. However, it is necessary to recognize that the practice of horseback riding, particularly as a form of leisure, evokes memories and recollections of the historical relationships between humans and horses, referring to the rural context of Brazil (Adelman, 2011; 2021).

According to the Atlas of Sports in Brazil (2006), regarding equestrian and equestrian practices, they are subdivided into: classical equestrianism, rural equestrianism, therapeutic and leisure equestrianism; these are seen as practices characteristic of both rural and urban environments (Roessler; Rink, 2006). Thus, the horseback rides are understood here as equestrian leisure practices. Leisure is understood as an activity performed by individuals, or a group of individuals, during a free moment or time that is not dedicated to work (Marcellino, 1996; Dumazedier, 1999).

Furthermore, from the perspective of Joffre Dumazedier (1999), leisure in the lives of workers can be thought of based on two conditions. The first refers to the preferences of the individuals, that is, the free choice of activity. The second concerns professional work, which has an arbitrary limit, so that free time is clearly separated. It is also important to note that in current societies, leisure can be understood based on four properties: a libertarian character, a disinterested character, a hedonistic character, and a personal character (Dumazedier, 1999).

It is worth highlighting that, according to Nelson Marcellino (1996, p. 13), the concept of leisure may undergo changes, as many people relate leisure "[...] to recreational activities, or mass events [...]." Thus, this conception is corroborated by various media outlets, which disseminate terms about theater, cinema, sports, among

others. And regarding leisure, it is most often related to mass manifestations. Furthermore, concerning the definition by public bodies, the term leisure has undefined criteria. Thus, this condition contributes to a partial and limited conception of the word leisure, which hinders its understanding and can lead to several misunderstandings (Marcellino, 1996).

Also, regarding the subject, for Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (1992), individuals seek in leisure a “pleasant excitement”. Additionally, the authors emphasize the polarization of work and leisure, where the word work refers solely to a specific form of labor. Concerning more urbanized societies, work is highly specialized, and time is excessively controlled. On the other hand, the free time of individuals in these societies is occupied by unpaid work, and thus, they can engage in leisure activities only in a portion of this time. In this regard, Gomes (2023) mentions that leisure allows the manifestation of positive feelings, which are often absent from people's everyday lives.

Moreover, when it comes to studies and research on leisure in rural environments, they are predominantly concentrated on two perspectives: ecotourism and economic analysis debates. These approaches portray rural spaces as solely intended for agricultural production, overlooking other dimensions of leisure in this context. From this, we notice an evident gap in studies and research on leisure, which centralize their debates on recreational dynamics in rural settings, focusing on the dynamic relationship between humans and horses (Maziero et al., 2019; Carvalho, Nunes, 2021).

However, research exploring the history of equitation tends to focus on large urban centers, especially in so-called metropolises (Pereira, 2012; Pereira, 2016; Melo, 2021), concentrating on classical equestrianism and horse racing. As a result, this study is justified by the need to understand the development of this cultural, physical, and sporting practice in urban spaces that are outside metropolitan centers. To that end, we

analyzed the context in Montes Claros (MG), a city with strong ties to the rural environment, aiming to understand how this practice is established and manifests in this specific scenario.

Regarding horseback rides, there are studies focusing on the sociological perspective of Miriam Adelman (2011) and Pereira, Mazo, and Bataglioni (2019), which depict the transition of equestrian practices from rural to urban contexts, marking a process of change. However, this study presents a different perspective by considering that the movements of horseback rides ensure a leisure experience for the urban public in a ruralist context.

Horseback rides are a widespread practice throughout the national territory. In the state of Minas Gerais, in particular, we observe a multiplicity of these manifestations in different regions. In this regard, Truocchid and Pereira (2005) claim that it is possible to identify horseback rides linked to religious practices, initially, and later, those associated with rural tourism, connected to hotels, farms, and stud farms (Roque, 2000), as well as those that rescue and strengthen historical traditions through competitions among riders, such as in the city of Barão de Cocais – Minas Gerais (Noronha; Enéas, 2018).

In this perspective, the purpose of this paper is to understand the process of appropriation, re-signification, and social representations of equitation within the context of the Cavalgada Samambaia, in the rural region of Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, between 2005 and 2020. The choice of the temporal cut was defined as 2005, since it marked the beginning of the event, and 2020, due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to social distancing. Regarding the methodology, a documentary research was conducted to analyze the development of the horseback riding practice as

both a sport and a leisure activity, as well as its relations with the creation of representations of tradition and modernity within the context of this practice.

From the approach of Miriam Adelman (2011, p. 938), it is perceived that horses continue to be "important material and symbolic resources within rural communities and traditions in Brazil". Thus, we understand that the relationship between humans and equines illuminates a connection with a representation of great value in tradition and re-signification of the past. Thus, it becomes a representation of expressiveness within the studied context.

Methodological Approach

In this study, we analyzed various aspects of equitation practices in the context of rural leisure and their appropriations. To this end, we explored sources from traditional and digital media, as well as audiovisual content, both independent and associated with television. Printed periodicals, newspapers, report videos on digital platforms, online news articles, and audiovisual archives were used. These sources were employed in order to appropriate a new human production, which enables an understanding of the representations and re-significations present in the horseback riding event (Almeida, 2011; Brasil; Nascimento, 2020; Bacellar, 2008; Luca, 2015; Pimentel, 2001; Napolitano, 2008).

Moreover, we investigated a variety of sources, including traditional print media, digital media, and audiovisual content, both independent and associated with broadcasters. The purpose was to examine the different aspects of equitation practices within the rural leisure scope and its nuances. The selection of these sources was motivated by the need to explore new forms of human production, which provide an understanding of the representations and re-significations embedded in the horseback

ride (Almeida, 2011; Brasil, Nascimento 2020; Bacellar, 2008; Luca, 2015; Pimentel, 2001; Napolitano, 2008).

Digital archives and sources are directly linked to the "digital turn" in historiography. They not only offer possibilities for using information technologies in historical research but also represent old sources present in digital collections, such as blogs, virtual images, social media, and websites (Barefoot, 2018; Prado, 2021). In this direction, they become the means of communication, presenting themselves as sources for research. It is important to highlight that such sources must be treated differently from conventional ones, as there is inconsistency that facilitates the modification of web archives (Almeida, 2011; Brasil, Nascimento, 2020).

Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a methodological approach in light of this multiplicity of ways to access documents that were once difficult to obtain for researchers. It is clear that the transition to the digital age has facilitated access to these documents. However, it is important to discover the roots of these documents, as well as to understand their context of production and purpose (Fickers, 2012). Moreover, it is the historian's responsibility to perform a thorough analysis and cross-reference the documentary corpus, intertwining sources to find context and juxtaposing the documents under analysis (Bacellar, 2008).

To achieve this purpose, we chose to structure the data search into three stages. Initially, we conducted a survey of news regarding the horseback ride, exploring both print and digital media, including newspaper archives, websites, and platforms such as YouTube. In the second stage, we separated and cataloged the identified materials, transcribing the videos found. The third phase focused on examining the collected contents, categorizing them based on the use of imagistic texts, the creation, and the expansion of the event, followed by cross-referencing this documentary corpus.

Subsequently, we carried out the analysis, dividing it into stages. The first involved textual analysis and examination of the event documents of horseback rides available on the internet, separated into thematic axes. Next, we proceeded to interpret and problematize the material.

Horseback Riding and Identity: Cultural Representations and Transformations in the Sertão Norte-Mineiro

João Guimarães Rosa used to say that “Minas are many”, an expression that captures the richness and diversity of the state of Minas Gerais. The novelist fully understood the depth of the pluralities of the “Minas,” especially in Montes Claros – MG. In this city, the northeastern heritage intertwines with local traditions, especially in agricultural and livestock practices, creating a unique scenario that reflects the history and identity of the region.

The municipality of Montes Claros, popularly known as the northern backcountry of Minas Gerais, due to its geographical, cultural, historical, and linguistic variety, as well as its diverse traditions, such as the sertanejo culture and religious practices, contributes to the local identity. This diversity solidifies it while simultaneously diversifying the horizons with respect to the cultural multiplicity present in the region (Santos; Souto, 2014). Moreover, Montes Claros is located in the Drought Polygon, a region marked by the predominance of the cerrado biome, characterized by a semi-humid tropical climate, especially in areas of the São Francisco Depression. Therefore, Montes Claros is configured as a medium-sized city, with a broad diversity, particularly in the sertanejo culture. Often associated with sertanejo culture, the term "sertão" (backcountry).

As pointed out by Bernardes (1995), rural culture is linked to the rural towns of Brazil, with few European inhabitants and a significant presence of the cerrado, a biome that, according to the 19th-century European view, contributed to economic, technological, and cultural underdevelopment, in contrast to the Atlantic Forest, which brought great profits to the public treasury. According to Bernardes (1995) and Amado (1995), the term “sertão” has nourished the Brazilian social imagination since its first use, referring to areas distant from the coast, that is, unknown lands. These areas were seen as mysterious lands that did not satisfy the colonizers’ interests, as there were no reports of commercially valuable riches for the colony.

When discussing the concept of “sertão”, it is important to clarify the figure of the “sertanejo” (countryside people), who, according to Cascudo (1975), was for a long period distant from the coast, where the country’s cultural formation and intellectual progress were concentrated. Moreover, Martins, Oliveira, and Chagas (2007) describe the sertanejo as a caretaker of the land through hard labor, with calloused hands and skin usually darkened by daily sun exposure, with features marked on the face by the hardships of farm life. This is just one facet of the sertanejo, as there are different representations of men who deconstruct the stereotypes attributed to them.

Northern Minas Gerais consolidated itself historically and geographically as “sertão” due to the characteristics of its occupation and settlement, which resulted in impacts from the emergence of economic development in the early 20th century (França; Soares, 2006). Thus, in light of regional changes and the phenomenon of rural exodus in Brazil, which began in the 1960s, followed by industrialization and the expansion of the mercantile network, the countryside became a secondary space. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, in Montes Claros, the industrial development process began, promoted by the Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE),

distancing the region from its characterization as an agrarian city, concentrating its population and political influence in the urban space (Gomes, 2007).

However, the migration from the countryside to the city resulted in the formation of a new identity, driven by technological advances and the influence of “globalization,” causing horseback rides to become symbols and builders of an identity that evokes the rural past. Thus, understanding the dichotomy between city and countryside, connected to the process of modernization, is essential to understand the reconstruction of meaning and symbols, especially in light of the identity instability produced by postmodernity (Hall, 2014).

In this line of thought, Dumazedier (1999) states that the introduction of leisure in society and its organization, as happens in large urban centers, underwent structural changes that reflect in urban life models. With this in mind, Pereira (2016) clarifies that the practice of equestrian leisure, through horseback riding and rides, contributes to the formation of a sociability that establishes an intense and continuous interdependence among practitioners. Thus, we realize that the structural transformations in the introduction and organization of leisure in society, akin to urban spaces, impact urban life patterns, while the practice of equestrian leisure solidifies the social bonds between individuals.

João Guimarães Rosa, in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (2015), explains that horseback riding transcends the mere horseback journey; it is an epic journey through the sertão, full of physical and emotional challenges, making it an element deserving of attention in the study, especially when seen as a form of entertainment and leisure today. It thus becomes a fundamental object of study, allowing for a historical understanding that reflects a lived past. Therefore, we prioritize the understanding of the emergence of this new interpretation and its representation in the social imagination.

The approach of New Cultural History, as per Chartier (2002), is directed toward how a given social reality is constructed, understood, and interpreted in different places and moments. Accordingly, we analyzed the positioning of the selected sources regarding the Cavalgada Samambaia and the production of discourses and representations of the rural traditions environment during moments of leisure. From this, we observed that the event is created and mobilized around economic and sociocultural meanings for the region.

As pointed out by Chartier (2002, p. 20-21) “[...] representation is an instrument of mediated knowledge that makes an absent object visible by substituting it with an 'image' capable of reconstructing it in memory and depicting it as it is”. From this understanding, we infer that the elements embedded in the horseback rides function as instruments aimed at recreating an absent scenario, harking back to a time before the rural exodus in Brazil in the 70s and 80s, when ruralist culture was perpetuated.

On Hooves and Traditions: Reflecting on Cavalgada Samambaia

Cavalgada Samambaia emerged in 2005 as an initiative by Alex Samambaia, a student of the Physical Education program at Faculdades Integradas do Norte de Minas - Funorte. Due to increasing demand, the event's organizer began holding it annually, expanding it to accommodate more and more riders and audience. The cavalcade takes place at Rural Parque, located 28 kilometers from Montes Claros, following the Estrada da Produção in the village of Samambaia, in the rural region of Montes Claros (Queiroz, 2018).

With each edition, the event grew in scale, reaching more than “500 riders and horsewomen” (Vieira, 2015). Given this scale, public authorities began participating in the event by providing infrastructure to offer logistical support to the participants. From

then on, various advertisements were incorporated into the event space (Ronda Geraes, 2017).

Considering its role in representing a lived past, the discourses present in texts and images within the documentary corpus reveal the formation of an identity shaped by this particular group, as Roger Chartier (2002) explains:

The representations of the social world thus constructed, although they aspire to the universality of a diagnosis based on reason, are always determined by the group interests that forge them. Hence, in each case, the necessary relationship between the discourses presented and the position of those who use them" (Chartier, 2002, p. 17).

Taking place in the Rural Parque, the event reproduces or creates objects and practices typical of the rural environment, aiming to represent the past—such as the ox cart, the wooden mill, leather clothing, and the hat. Despite its recent creation, it is linked to a strong discourse of "tradition" by incorporating memory, bringing to the forefront the debate on how the event revives elements that compose a rural context connected to components of popular traditions. This attempts to invoke the participants' memory as a constitutive part of their past. However, the event also features elements typical of urban settings, such as DJs, who are presented as one of the attractions and play electronic music.

The image below highlights an additional element that transports us to a distant past: the ox cart. In this image, taken from an independent video available on the Cavalcade's YouTube channel, the cart driver emerges as a central figure, wearing a leather hat and high-top boots. These accessories reinforce the representation of a different lived moment, now in a leisure context, evoking a time when transportation was more rudimentary and life followed a different rhythm.

Image 1: Cavalgada Samambaia, 2016



Source: Screenshot - YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAS2K4rIYmw>

In the current context, this image represents a reinterpreted past, in which the ox-cart driver and the ox-driven transport become symbols of leisure. By incorporating these elements into a cavalcade, individuals participate in the recreational activity and construct a living representation of regional culture. Thus, this composition of accessories visually enriches the scene while enabling the creation of a unique experience, connecting the present to the past in a tangible and emotional way.

From this perspective, Chartier (1991) highlights the influence of the interests and perspectives of the groups involved in the construction of discourses and social representations. Thus, the frozen scene in the above excerpt reflects not only an attempt to understand the past but also the values, beliefs, and objectives of the individuals and communities that produced them as representations of the past.

In the context of equestrian leisure practices and rural horsemanship, the event reproduces or creates practices and objects characteristic of the rural environment, with the purpose of representing the past, as discussed by Froehlich (2004):

To move between various cultural universes on different spatial-temporal scales and to deal with a broad repertoire of symbolic material—raw material

for the construction or redefinition of social identities. The coexistence of these different symbolic codes—in the same group, individual, or locality—distinguishes the social landscape of contemporary societies. Individuals no longer belong to just one group or locality and, therefore, no longer have a single distinctive and coherent identity" (Froehlich, 2004, p. 274).

From this perspective, the representation reconstructed through the act of riding evokes a past era, life in the countryside, while incorporating new elements from the contemporary world, such as electronic music, agricultural machinery, and other artifacts that symbolize the urban space. Thus, it can be interpreted, according to Froehlich's words (2004, p. 275), that "rurality can be seen as a dynamic process of constant restructuring of the elements of local cultures based on the incorporation of new values, habits, and techniques".

I see that we manage to add value; you can bring together three or four generations within a single event. Where there is a great exchange of experiences between these generations", says Alex. According to him, it is also a unique opportunity for individuals in the countryside, who lack leisure activities in rural areas. "It is a moment of relaxation, where people meet again, reconnect with friends for a chat", adds the event's creator (Queiroz, 2018).

Thus, there is no possible neutrality in discourses about "traditions," as they are embedded in a field of disputes for social control and imposition of values, producing strategies and practices that aim to legitimize power and dominance. In this sense, Roger Chartier (1991, p. 182), when addressing collective representations and social identities, mentions that various propositions can be created that newly link social divisions and cultural practices.

The first nourishes the hope of dispelling the false debates surrounding the division, assumed to be universal, between the objectivities of structures (which would be the domain of the safest history, which, by handling massive, serial, quantifiable documents, reconstructs societies as they truly were) and the subjectivity of representations (which would be linked to another history dedicated to discourses and situated at a distance from reality)" (Chartier, 1991, p. 182).

Thus, the first conception considers the construction of social identities as a result of the power relations between the representations imposed by those who have the power to classify, as well as the meaning of acceptance or resistance that each community produces about itself. The second concerns the social division, intended "as the translation of the credit given to the representation that each group makes of itself, hence, its ability to have its existence recognized through a demonstration of unity" (Chartier, 1991, p. 183).

In a report recorded for a local television channel, Ronda Geraes, most interviewees referred to the event as something "traditional", recalling another time, with the persuasion of an added value linking tradition to the enjoyment of the cavalcade. In this regard, by referring to the event as "traditional", the interviewees emphasized the importance of preserving and valuing the customs and rituals associated with the cavalcade, highlighting the central role that these "traditions" play in the identity and cohesion of the community. The word "traditional" not only describes the event itself but also evokes a set of values that have shaped its practice over time. In addition to having a bucolic effect, as it refers to a construction of another time, which, according to Machado (1999):

Powerful are the images of the past, powerful are the experiences lived in the countryside. The recurrence of the bucolic may seem like a localized dream: tranquility, innocence, abundance, and the simplicity of rural life are part of every place and have the strength to multiply over time (Machado, 1999, p.178).

Furthermore, the idea of tradition seems to be intrinsically linked to the pleasure and enjoyment experienced during the cavalcade. The interviewees suggested that adherence to traditional rituals not only enriches the event experience but also adds a layer of meaning—or more precisely, a representation of the past—to the Cavalcade, transforming it into something more than mere entertainment, embedding it with values and norms.

In the construction of representations, the act of riding emerges as a symbol encapsulating the bond between humans and horses. Moreover, when considering the participation of a heterogeneous audience in shaping the event—marked by the interaction between urban and rural settings—we observe a contextualization that can be understood as the reconfiguration and reinterpretation of rural symbolic practices. Thus, horseback riding is not merely an activity but an event imbued with meanings deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions, evoking a past in which this connection was even stronger.

It is worth noting that the event attracts two main audiences: rural dwellers and city residents, coming from different social and economic backgrounds. In this regard, the involvement of these individuals in the act of horseback riding fosters both the reinterpretation and strengthening of this practice in today's context, both in rural areas and in the city.

Within this context, the event is not merely a cultural and traditional celebration but is also characterized as a social and economic phenomenon widely practiced in the countryside of northern Minas Gerais. Therefore, as observed through the narratives, cavalcades transcend their recreational nature to become a practice enriched with meanings, evoking a context of traditions with essential values—not only as an ancestral practice but also as an important element in the social imagination of its participants.

Final Considerations

The event grew with each edition, reaching larger proportions and establishing itself as a significant manifestation of rural leisure, securing a fixed place in the regional cultural agenda. As an activity characterized by elements that represent a space of

popular tradition, it interconnects social classes and citizens while conveying great symbolic value to riders, horsewomen, and other participants. In this event, the horse and the human become a unified composition that evokes a discourse and symbolic practices aimed at representing a lived past, intertwined with a moment of leisure.

Thus, we observe that the cavalcade seeks to revive a representation of a shared past, a time when rural culture was predominant, turning the discourse into a common narrative about origins. The event, therefore, evokes a profound sense of belonging among its participants.

However, despite invoking a rural setting reminiscent of pre-industrialization and pre-rural exodus times, the presence of advertisements and sponsors demonstrates that the discourse and representation within the event are influenced by commercial interests.

Finally, we identify a duality between the representation of the past and the introduction of symbols that reflect modernity. In this regard, we understand that the cavalcade is the crystallization of a project designed to be marketable, adapting to the massive presence of advertising. This demonstrates that such a cultural practice has been shaped for commercialization within a leisure context, where representations are constructed for profit, transforming an open space into yet another source of revenue for capital.

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