

# An Absorbing Game

## The Slaughtering of Ducks and Popular Culture in the *Círio de Nazaré*

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### Um jogo absorvente

Paticídio e cultura popular no Círio de Nazaré

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**ABSTRACT** The article aims to analyze the practice of the slaughtering of ducks, the ritual killing of ducks for meat during the *Círio de Nazaré* festival, in *Belém do Pará*, between the mid 19th and early 20th centuries. Based on newspaper items, it was found that the slaughter of ducks was a collective game that followed a traditional format and was one of the main amusements of the *Nazaré* festival. What is more, it served as an important mechanism for the constitution and reinforcement of collective ties between the devout followers of Our Lady of Nazaré, and provides a better understanding of popular culture in that period.

**KEYWORDS** *Círio de Nazaré*, slaughter of ducks, *Belém do Pará*

**RESUMO** O artigo tem como objetivo analisar os sentidos sociais presentes na prática do paticídio, matança ritual do pato ocorrida na festa do Círio de Nazaré, em Belém do Pará, entre meados do século XIX e início do século XX. Com base em anúncios de jornais, constatou-se que

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a morte do pato era um jogo coletivo que seguia um protocolo tradicional e que era uma das principais diversões da festa de Nazaré. Por outro lado, servia como importante mecanismo de constituição e reforço dos laços coletivos entre os devotos de Nossa Senhora de Nazaré, o que permite conhecer melhor essa dimensão da cultura popular da época.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Círio de Nazaré, paticídio, Belém do Pará

## OUR LADY OF NAZARÉ AND THE DEATH OF THE DUCK

Imagine a frightened duck buried in the ground with only its head showing. In front of it, a boy whose eyes have been blindfolded with a very tight cloth has in his hands a huge stick, an instrument with which he is attempting to strike the head of the defenceless animal. If he achieves this feat, he can ensure lunch the next day, as he will receive the duck as a prize. However, the task is not easy. Once blindfolded, the boy is turned around several times, left dizzy and befuddled, to the point of confusion as to the exact location of the duck whose head he has to hit in one of the three attempts he has.

To complicate matters further, the noisy crowd squeezes around, accompanying everything with its shrill racket. Every moment the kid moves away from the duck, the crowd tries to trick him by shouting “OK. Now! Get it! Hit it! Go on! Go on!”. Some do this just for the fun of it. Others, because they want to take the place of the kid as soon as he uses up his third and last attempt. At each mistake, the crowd responds with laughter, shouting and boos. Even when he hits the duck’s head, the winner has to fight for his prize with the rest of the kids trying to get hold of him before the winner removes the blindfold. And so the crowd scatters, euphoric, until the next duck is slaughtered.

The slaughtering of ducks was part of the official programme of homage paid to Our Lady of *Nazaré*, in *Belém do Pará*, during the festival of the *Círio de Nazaré*. The death of the duck occurred in front of the church of *Nazaré*, in the space called the *arraial* (fairground), where the secular part of the festival took place. In the documents from the

period, there is no suggestion that anyone felt pity for the duck's condition. No reports of mistreatment of the animal, either in the newspapers or in the priest's sermon. No police raid attempting to end the torment of that helpless bird, tortured in the public square, to the delirium of the crowd of devotees. On the contrary, of note was the festive aspect of the act, the open laughter and the fun that the event provoked. The priests, when criticizing the slaughter of the duck, did so because of the profane aspect of the spectacle and not because they were concerned about the fate of the duck.

In any case, care must be taken not to risk generalization. The fact that there are no complaints against the killing of the ducks does not mean that no one was disturbed by the killing. At most, it can be concluded that if this dissatisfaction existed, it did not make it to the pages of the newspapers. It should be recalled, for example, that this ritual involved people from different cultures, particularly Afro Brazilian and indigenous cultures, who developed other forms of relationship with the animal world, in which the idea of the supremacy of humans over nature was not predominant given the nature of the non-humans. Furthermore, even among Christians, both past and present, it has always been possible to find those who do not believe that the world was made exclusively for human beings (Thomas 1988).

Although the practice was described in the newspapers as “the slaughter of ducks” or “the death of the duck”, it was not necessary to kill the duck to be considered a winner, but simply hit the animal on the head. However, depending on the strength and accuracy of the blow, it was only natural that the animal would eventually die. For today's reader, this game may not seem amusing in any way. Rather than laughter, the death of a duck under these conditions would nowadays provoke feelings of revulsion, indignation and compassion for the animal.<sup>1</sup>

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1 A video available on Youtube shows the death of a duck that occurred in the city of Luzilândia, Piauí, during Holy Week in 2011. The initial caption reads: “The death of the duck, disgusting tradition”. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1sBpvo-Jp8>>, accessed on 13 Feb. 2019.

According to Hartley's expressive phrase, "the past is a foreign country and they do things differently there" (Hartley *apud* Rowland, 1997, p. 7). When we turn our gaze on the ways of thinking and expression of our ancestors, even those who lived in our city or country, we can see that they interpreted the world and gave meaning to it in quite a different way to ours. They valued things that would not be important to us and laughed at things we would not find funny at all and that would often cause us astonishment, hatred or compassion. Thus, the ways of living, feeling and thinking of our ancestors appear before us as if they were different cultures, as if they actually were showing us a foreign country.

Anthropologists call this estrangement, a process that causes something familiar to us to become exotic (Velho, 1978; DaMatta, 1978; 1981). This is the case when we come across older narratives about the cultural practices performed during the *Círio de Nazaré*, such as the slaughtering of ducks. This festival, which has seemed so familiar to us, takes on an estrangement, even discomfort, as if it belonged to another time and place. And that was indeed the case. As we come closer to the noisy joy around the death of the duck, *Belém* seems to be a foreign place to us, inhabited by people with habits that seem rather strange to us.

But there is also the reverse process, in which anthropologists invest in the study of cultures exotic to them, but so penetrate the operational mechanisms of this culture that they begin to identify with and understand its own logic, which causes it to seem familiar to them (Malinowski, 1978; Geertz, 1978). Indeed, historians have learned — from anthropologists — that they can use this method to study past societies, including those linked to our own civilization. As Clifford Geertz stated, "anthropology can be trained to exam the culture of that which it is itself a part - and this is increasingly undertaken" (1978, p.11). Inspired by this possibility, the historian Robert Darnton (1986) set out to make a "history of ethnographic trends" by analyzing the "massacre of cats" in eighteenth-century France, a work that generated much controversy, but which is quite inspiring.<sup>2</sup>

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2 For a critique of Darnton's perspective, see LEVI, 1999; DAIBERT JR., 2004. On the controversy

In this article, I will use the condition of an ethnographic historian to analyse, through use of the slaughtering of ducks, the way in which the devout followers of Our Lady of *Nazaré* and the other participants experienced the secular part of the festival of *Nazaré*, carried out in the city of *Belém do Pará*, from 1793, and which, in the 19th century, was considered by many to be the “most popular and, of its kind, the most important to be celebrated throughout the whole of Brazil”.<sup>3</sup> From the outset, this celebration shows major signs of popular Catholicism. I use the term popular Catholicism in the sense used by Heraldo Maués: “that set of beliefs and practices socially recognized as Catholic, shared mainly by non-specialists of the sacred, who belong both to the lower classes and the ruling classes” (Maués, 1995, p. 17). In fact, the death of the duck brought together both “the common people” and the people from the privileged sectors of *Belém*, providing “shared relations between the classes” (Fernandes, 1984, p. 7).<sup>4</sup>

The guiding thread of my approach will be the “death of the duck”, one of the main amusements of the festival of *Nazaré* until the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> The way the devotees experienced “the slaughter of ducks” shows a lot about how they organized reality in their minds and how they expressed this in their behaviour. I shall start from the principle that the “death of the duck” carries a system of meanings that

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between Levi and Darnton, see SEAWRIGHT, 2018.

3 *O Liberal do Pará*, Belém, 5 Nov. 1872, p. 2. I have chosen to update the spelling of all the documents cited in this article. An essential aspect of this research was the consultation of the Digital Hemeroteca collection of the National Library of Rio de Janeiro <<http://bndigital.bn.gov.br/>>.

4 As he noted (FERNANDES, 1984, p. 5), “polysemy is a common feature of strong ideas in the Social Sciences”. This is the case with the notion of “popular Catholicism” or “popular religion”, which should not presuppose a radical opposition between “the dominant”/“the erudite” (the clergy) and “the dominated”/“the popular” (the people). According to Chartier (1995, p. 6), “A sociology involving a distribution which implicitly assumes that the hierarchy of classes or groups corresponds to a parallel hierarchy of cultural production and habits can no longer be accepted uncritically”. The “popular”, therefore, points to modes of appropriation of cultural practices between distinct groups, to their relational aspect. See, also, BOURDIEU, 1983.

5 The last record of a duck being slaughtered during the *Círio de Nazaré* dates from 1916 (*Estado do Pará*, Belém, 6 Nov. 1916, p. 2).

is strange to us but reveals much about the popular culture of Amazonia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Episodes such as the slaughtering of ducks are an interesting possible way for us to gain access to the ways of thinking, feeling and play of the illiterate masses who have disappeared in the past without a trace, especially in terms of written records. As Darnton (1986) observed with regard to the “massacre of cats” in eighteenth-century France, our relations with animals, whether cats, dogs, roosters or ducks, provide “food for thought”, according to the suggestive statement by Levi Strauss (1980).

The anthropologist Heraldó Maués states that slaughtering ducks continues to exist at the so-called *Círio* lunch<sup>6</sup> and suggests that this be treated as a “sacrificial feast” (2016, p. 234) in which its participants are not necessarily aware of the act they are carrying out. In the available documentation, at least one record points to this aspect: “Sunday, 9, festival day. (...) At 5 o'clock, the popular festivities will begin: a pig and a duck will be sacrificed for the taste buds of the first smart alec who can get hold of them by lawful means (...)”<sup>7</sup>

According to Mauss and Hubert (2005, p. 19), “sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the state of the moral person who performs it or certain objects in which he or she is interested”. This modification sacralizes the violent act which is justified through the purification it engenders. The authors point to the “nature and social function of sacrifice” (2005, p. 21), characterized by a driving force that causes the remission of sins and communion, in addition to fulfilling a purpose in the society in which it takes place. Over the more than 200 years of celebrating the *Círio de Nazaré*, the ducks have acquired a ritualistic value, acting as central element of the ceremony, whether in the slaughter of ducks in times past, or in the traditional

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6 The *Círio* lunch takes place shortly after the arrival of the image of the saint at the *Nazaré* Basilica Shrine. It is the moment for families and friends to meet up once again, with a table full of food and drink. Traditional dishes of that day are duck *à la tucupi* and *maniçoba*.

7 *A República*, Belém, 9 Nov. 1890, p. 1. The documentation of the period also refers to the occurrence of “the slaughter of pigs” at the festival of *Nazaré*, but at a much lesser level than that of ducks.

dish of duck *à la tucupi*. In this article, the analysis will focus on the duck slaughtering rituals of bygone times between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

## THE DUCK

In 1868, draft legislation submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Pará proposed the reduction of taxes for the “poultry family”. In the debate that took place at the time of the approval of the project, the author of the proposal, the Member of the Assembly Mr Cantão, argued as follows:

I understand that chickens should only be relieved of their rights because they are considered, it may be said, an object of essential need. (...) Because we know that chickens serve to feed the sick; however, ducks and other birds that do not belong to this family and many that belong to it, such as the turkey, guinea fowl, but which are not usually given to the sick, should be considered more as objects of luxury than necessity. Those who eat turkey are just those who can pay for this as a treat, and it is not an essential item, and for this reason I understand that this bird should remain subject to rights, as well as the duck and others.<sup>8</sup>

Ducks and turkeys were considered as “luxury items”, “food for a treat”, “for those who can afford them”, unlike the chickens served in hospitals, for which the Member of the Assembly argued for lower taxes. For this reason, the duck was not common food at the table of the “lower class”.

The duck was usually advertised on the menu of *Belém* restaurants, such as the “Souza Restaurant”, which offered, among other things, “*cabidela* duck”.<sup>9</sup> “The popular *Quatro Cantos* restaurant offered “fat, fresh and excellent meat from suckling animals, calf’s foot, roast piglet,

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8 *Diário de Belém*, Belém, 10 Nov. 1868, p. 1.

9 *Correio Paraense*, Belém, 5 Nov. 1893, p. 2, emphasis in the original.

turkey, chicken, duck, chops, fish, shellfish, etc.”<sup>10</sup> The adjective “popular” did not mean that it was a space accessible to the general population, since the menu offered foods considered as luxury items, which were hardly within the everyday reach of the “lower class”. In 1890, the “Café Chic” invited the public to:

a beautiful musical *soirée* that will take place tonight in the hall of the same establishment, along with the orchestra of the popular conductor Roberto de Barros, who will present a repertoire worthy of his merit. The chef, also wanting to show his knowledge of the culinary arts, promises to present a varied restaurant menu, including FATTENED TURKEY, TENDER VEAL and the magnificent DUCK À LA TUCUPI. So, all lovers of what is good, head for *Chico's*.<sup>11</sup>

Expressions such as “musical *soirée*”, “hall of the same establishment”, “orchestra”, “conductor”, “chef”, “culinary art”, “restaurant menu” make clear the ad’s concern to associate the “Café Chic” restaurant with a refined “tasteful” environment, intended for those who are “connoisseurs of what is good”, characteristics which were not usually ascribed to the “lower class” (Bourdieu, 2007). The duck was, therefore, food intended for the consumption of “people who can afford it”.

In many situations, the figure of a duck was used as a metaphor to refer to a person who is easily fooled. In 1874, criticism directed at Bishop Dom Macedo Costa referred to the people as “ducks deluded in their Faith”.<sup>12</sup> An item about a voter deceived by a candidate concluded: “Poor voter, who fell like a duck into the snare prepared for him”.<sup>13</sup> The duck was seen as a foolish animal that could be easily fooled, like those sacrificed in the slaughtering of the ducks. As for love relationships, this association was also common, often used to refer to male partners:

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10 *Correio Paraense*, Belém, 28 Jan. 1894, p. 2.

11 *A República*, Belém, 13 Jul. 1890, p. 4, emphasis in the original.

12 *O Santo Ofício*, Belém, 19 Jan. 1874, p. 3.

13 *A Constituição*, Belém, 21 Nov. 1884, p. 2.

“animated by a few Sibylline rages, which they truly deserved, to calm them down, a small but brave refreshing stick, Joanna da Conceição painted her slaty-breasted wood rail with her duck (duck here means man), wrinkling his chins”.<sup>14</sup> The following year, this same newspaper published an article giving advice to women who wanted to marry quickly: “girls who are in danger of not catching anybody, hold on to St. Anthony, St. Gonçalo and other worthy saints, not forgetting, within the law, to employ all the resources of seduction that can make the duck fall — from phantasy to competent melancholy and willingness to die...”.<sup>15</sup> In this case, the figure of the duck would appear as an animal insult when a human being is equated with an animal of another species in order to describe human qualities associated with the animal (Leach 1983).

There are also records of the use of the duck in religious rituals: “Julia Merandolina insulted Thereza Rosa on Constitution road, because she had found a duck’s head, which as a witchcraft practice she had left at her door...”.<sup>16</sup> Even more common was the expression “to pay the duck”, used to refer to a person who paid for something he or she did not do. Thus, an article published in 1882 read as follows: “We are told that the Head of Police had instigated a legal action against Mr. Izidoro Ferreira da Costa for having a gaming house in *Nazaré*, due to the inquiry into the fake fifty thousand réis banknote, which appeared in circulation. Mr. Izidoro was the one who paid the duck...”.<sup>17</sup>

At other times human characteristics were attributed to the duck, such as the journalist who said that, after complaining so much about the heat in Belém, he caught a cold and concluded, “I’m as hoarse as a duck...”.<sup>18</sup> A year earlier, a rhyming stanza published in the newspaper *A República* said: “Cousin Juca, I don’t care / When I drink like a duck

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14 *A República*, Belém, 16 May. 1891, p. 2.

15 *A República*, Belém, 30 Dec. 1892, p. 2.

16 *Correio Paraense*, Belém, 16 Oct. 1893, p.2.

17 *A Constituição*, Belém, 10 Jan. 1882, p.1.

18 *Correio Paraense*, Belém, 25 Aug. 1893, p. 2.

/ If I used mortars drunkenly / There wouldn't be a stick in the bush.”<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that there was not much objective justification for the way animals were perceived. “When I drink like a duck”, went the rhyming stanza. But who has ever seen a duck drunk? It was a way for humans to attribute impulses of nature to animals which they fear most themselves. Feelings toward animals are usually a projection of attitudes toward human beings (Thomas 1988).<sup>20</sup>

Unlike dogs, cats and horses, ducks do not participate in our society as subjects, they do not usually have proper names, nor do we usually talk to them. Nor are they our domestic cohabitants, so the cultural distance between ducks and human beings relegates them, without major moral crises, to the condition of edible foods that can be sacrificed for human enjoyment. This is what Marshall Sahlins defined as “the presence of a cultural thinking in our eating habits” (2003).

### FOR THE EDIFICATION OF THE “LOWER CLASS”

If the slaughter of ducks shocks today's readers, hurt by the violence dozens of defenseless ducks suffered each year, in the name of the devotees of Our Lady of *Nazaré*, for the people of those days it was just an amusement. In fact, it was an old tradition that could be seen at popular festivals in other parts of Brazil. In 1880, a newspaper from Fortaleza, Ceará, announced:

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19 *A República*, Belém, 25 Oct. 1892, p. 1.

20 For the process of anthropomorphizing the fish in the Amazon, especially the *pirarucu* (*Arapaima gigas*), see Murrieta, 2001. While the duck is defined as foolish, the *pirarucu* is seen as “smart”, a “rogue”. It is also worth considering the role given to the red-footed tortoises (*jabuti*) in the Amazonian indigenous myths, in which they appear to overcome powerful enemies by using their “cunning” and “intelligence” (HENRIQUE, 2003). For a collection of articles addressing diverse topics around human-animal interactions in the Amazon, see SILVEIRA; OSORIO, 2016.

This amusement is carried out as follows: a live duck with its head sticking out is buried in the ground and four or more blindfolded boys, with clubs in hand, will try to hit the duck's head.

Whoever manages to hit it will not only keep the duck, but also be part of a beautiful game...<sup>21</sup>

In northern Brazil, the example of Manaus, Amazonas can be mentioned, with the announcement, in 1908, of “great fun, popular distraction, prize 20:000rs to be the first to hit the duck”<sup>22</sup> The earliest reference to the practice of duck killing in the *Círio de Nazaré* is from 1869:

The committee of the festival of Our Lady of *Nazaré* is today offering the following amusements for the appreciation of competitors in the fairground, which will start at 5 pm: greasy pole, where there is always a prize to soothe the fatigue of those who try and climb it; the duck game, innocent fun that provides excellent food for a day for those who are blindfolded who manage to terminate the existence of this domestic bird.<sup>23</sup>

From all the records it can be seen that the language adopted by the newspapers left no doubt about the kind of sensitivity involved in the slaughter of the ducks with regard to the devotees: the death of the duck was considered an innocent amusement, an act of public rejoicing. The language was also clear regarding the operation of this “game”: it was necessary to hit, kill, decapitate the duck, without which there would be no duck slaughter or prizes for the winner. Despite the aggressively despotic imagery explicit in the discourse of possession, conquest, and mastery of the animal, the devotees viewed the task as an innocent one from the moral point of view. According to Thomas's argument (1988),

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21 *Gazeta do Norte*, Fortaleza, 23 Sept. 1880, p. 4. For Piauí, see *A Noite*, Rio de Janeiro, 6 Sept. 1922, p. 8. For São Luís, in Maranhão, *O Combate*, São Luís, Maranhão, 28 July 1934, p. 4.

22 *Jornal do Comércio*, Manaus, 18 July 1908, p. 2.

23 *Diário de Belém*, Belém, 10 Oct. 1869, p. 2.

it was believed that there was a fundamental difference in kind between humanity and other life forms. This made men and women of that time unscrupulous as regards the treatment of other species. After all, human beings were considered a superior species and God would have put all creation at their disposal. It seems that it was this very attitude of indifference towards animals that drove the devotees of *Nazaré* in this act of slaughtering ducks.

In the late nineteenth century, newspapers in *Belém* referred to the “amusing game of slaughtering ducks”.<sup>24</sup> A few years later, an item published on the occasion of the festival of *Nazaré* announced “cycle racing, the duck game, *pitoró* betting and many other innocent games”.<sup>25</sup> The available sources leave no doubt as to the ludic dimension surrounding the duck slaughter and that the duck was a completely despised figure. In fact, the slaughter of ducks was part of a broader range of amusements that the committee of the *Nazaré* festival offered devotees, such as a greasy pole, sack race, pig race, cycle race, greasy pig, fireworks, cosmorama image display, plays, music bands, dance groups, and more. Such amusements began 15 days before the start of the *Nazaré* festival.

From 1793 until 1910, it was up to the Brotherhood of Our Lady of *Nazaré do Desterro* to manage the festival. The so-called committee was therefore made up of lay people of both sexes. They were the ones who did all the programming, publicity and who carried out the event. On the committee of the *Nazaré* festival were positions for judges and directors, which could be held by both men and women, such as Theodolina Amália de Freitas Bulhões, a festival judge in 1854.<sup>26</sup> According to an article published in 1873,

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24 *Folha do Norte*, Belém, 18 Oct. 1896, p. 2.

25 *A República*, Belém, 4 Nov. 1900, p.2.

26 “Grande Festa”, Belém, *Treze de Maio*, Belém, 5 Oct. 1854, p.1. With the creation of the Committee for the Festival in 1910, women were not allowed to take on the role of directors. See HENRIQUE, 2016; 2018.

(...) the origin of the amusements offered at the time of the festivities is known, as since that church was on the outskirts of the city, and with the people thus having to walk a long way, they provided entertainment for the people who go there to release their soul at the feet of the Virgin Mother, so that their journey would not seem so painful.<sup>27</sup>

At that time, the church of *Nazaré* was considered far from the initial nucleus that gave birth to the city of *Belém*, and there were few residents nearby. Being on the “outskirts” of the city, devotees were forced to travel a relatively long way to the church, which is why the *Nazaré* festival committee sought to provide them with some playful entertainment. Indeed, if the intention was to entertain the people, the amusements would also be popular, as we saw above. The festival of *Nazaré* had “a popular and public comic aspect, which was also consecrated by tradition” (Bakhtin, 1996, p. 4). Be that as may, the newspapers and the actual committee often considered the amusements offered to the devotees in terms of a strategy to civilise the popular classes. There was a pedagogical dimension to those “innocent games”. Thus, in 1876, the newspaper *A Constituição* published the festival programme, which said that after the religious acts themselves, there would be the presentation of an “extraordinary new firework preceded by dances in the Pavilion, rope dances, games in the fairground, and the slaughter of ducks, and a greasy pole for the edification of the lower class”.<sup>28</sup>

The same tone was repeated in the 1884 *Nazaré* festival leaflet, with the announcement of a “new extraordinary balloon, preceded by games in the fairground, the slaughter of ducks, the sack tournament and a greasy pole for the edification of the lower class”.<sup>29</sup> In some way it was thought that the “innocent revels” would contribute to the moral and cultural edification of the “lower class”, equally seen as innocent and

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27 *O Liberal do Pará*, Belém, 23 Nov. 1873, p. 2.

28 *A Constituição*, Belém, 26 Oct. 1876, p. 2, my emphasis.

29 *Diário de Belém*, Belém, 4. Dec. 1884, p. 3, my emphasis.

uneducated.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the *Nazaré* festival programme featured cosmorama images (optical magnifying instruments), theatrical performances and orchestras playing classical music. However, the attractions of the festival in the fairground were accessible to all, a space for movement and cultural exchanges between blacks, Indians and whites.

Who fits the definition of “lower class” in this context? Writing about a food crisis in *Belém* caused by the rise in the price of dry and wet foodstuffs for public consumption, especially of flour, a certain Argus wrote in 1892 that “the lower class, that is, in poverty or the people who call themselves proletarian, living only from their daily work, which they basically earn through heavy sacrifice to support their family, depends neither on the government nor on the public coffers”.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the “lower class” are associated with the poor, the proletarians who through their sacrifice sustain their families and who, in situations of public calamity, depend on the help of the public coffers to maintain their existence.

In other situations, the “lower class” were referred to as the “low element, the *Zé Povinho* (Joe Everyman) in the broad sense of the term”, “the actual plebs”, as opposed to the “bourgeoisie”. Regarding the popular feasts or “*Zé Povinho* feasts, it was said that: “the lower class have a certain way of holding their parties and with a certain gap between each one, so that from their modest wages they can find some savings, without sacrificing their stomach, for a new suit, for their contributions, etc.”<sup>32</sup> It was this part of the population with which the popular festivals were associated, especially the saint day feasts organized by the religious brotherhoods. Thus, according to an article published in *A Boa Nova*, in 1882: “the circus for Joe Everyman, who does not attend balls or theatres, is the festival of *Nazaré*”.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Philippe Ariès noted that in seventeenth-century Europe children’s games were seen as useful for “rustic people” whose spirit would not be any higher than that of children (1981, p. 116).

31 *Correio Paraense*, Belém, 22 Jul. 1892, p. 3. On the problem of food in *Belém*, in the nineteenth century, see SILVA, 2009.

32 *Correio Paraense*, Belém, 20 Aug. 1893, p. 1.

33 *A Boa Nova*, Belém, 4 Nov. 1882, p.1.

The games at the *Nazaré* fairground began around 4 pm and lasted into the night. The amount of entertainment offered by the committee served as a parameter for the expectation created around the event. And, for the kids, the programme made it possible to know the day and time of the slaughter of the ducks and the other games that animated the fairground. In narrating the way his imagination returned to the time of his childhood when reading the 1959 *Nazaré* festival programme, the Pará poet Bruno de Menezes stated:

I suppose my eyes would inquire, interested and insistent, where the list of recreations was printed, such as the greasy pole, the pot-breaker, the killing of the duck, the sack race, the *cangorra*, where each group sought to dominate the adversary and which, in these vanished and forgotten times, were the first demonstrations of the popular spirit that presided over the programming of this Christian and profane festival.<sup>34</sup>

Bruno de Menezes was born in 1893, and would therefore have experienced the *cirios* of the last years of the nineteenth century as a young boy. His heartfelt account is a beautiful record of these “vanished and forgotten times” in which the opening of the festival of *Nazaré* was to a large extent meant for children. In fact, the “duck killing”, as the poet said, was primarily aimed at kids. In an article criticizing the expenditure made by the Brotherhood of *Nazaré* during the festival, the Catholic newspaper *A Boa Nova* asked: “What are the alms for which are given to the *Nazaré* festival?”. And, in response, it wrote: “(...) the splendid steering committee employs the sums collected for fireworks, climbing poles, lubricant to grease these poles, flags, pennants, as sums for those who ring the bells, for prizes for the kids who kill the duck (...)”<sup>35</sup>

There are several publications that show that children were the target audience for the killing of the duck and other “innocent games”. Bruno de Menezes referred to the festival programme as “the preamble

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34 *A Província do Pará*, Belém, 11 Oct. 1959, p.2.

35 *A Boa Nova*, Belém, 18 Oct. 1879, p.3.

to the traditional Belém Festival of yesteryear, which included so many stimulating amusements leading to avid competition among the kids”.<sup>36</sup> In another extract, the poet shows us that the killing of the duck was also part of an exercise of masculinity on the part of the boys, although participation involving the girls was not forbidden. In embodying the boy Bernardino in his remembrance, Bruno de Menezes builds the following dialogue:

“Where, then, is the duck you killed in the confusion at the Nazaré fairground?

“I hit his head, Mummy... But when the man from the “killing” was going to hand the duck over to me, there were so many kids on top of me that they ended up taking the duck. I didn’t even see who took it...”

“They took you, isn’t... Well, let your father know that you took a beating from those good ones, so you aren’t soft...”<sup>37</sup>

Often there was talk of “beheading the duck”, “killing the duck”, “taking away the bird’s life”, using virile and aggressive language similar to that which Keith Thomas reports in the case of meat consumption in eighteenth-century England or Marshall Sahlins (2003, p. 171) identified with meat consumption in the United States by pointing to the relationship between the centrality of meat, which is also an indication of its “strength” and male virility. The kid who hit the duck’s head and could get home with his prize was seen as strong, unlike the imaginary scene with Bernardino who, coming home without the duck, after having hit it, was called “soft” by his mother. But before losing the prize, he says, “I remember now that I had become a hero of that afternoon, because in the last of the three attempts as a contestant I had nicked the ‘victim’”.<sup>38</sup> Somehow, the ritual of killing the duck was a way of telling the boys, “In life, don’t be a duck!”, in a projection of human attributes onto animals.

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36 *A Província do Pará*, Belém, 11 Oct. 1959, p.2.

37 *A Província do Pará*, Belém, 11 Oct. 1959, p.2.

38 *A Província do Pará*, Belém, 11 Oct. 1959, p.2.

On the other hand, by expressing his sense of having been a hero that afternoon, Bernardino points to the change of moral state of the person who was the sacrificer, according to the definition of sacrifice from Mauss and Hubert (2005). Bruno de Menezes refers to the “amusements of the children, innocent in their poverty, who rushed from the nearby neighborhoods, from Umarizal, Pratinha, Jurunas, Jaqueira, to compete to climb the greasy pole and receive the coveted money...”<sup>39</sup> On this occasion, the poor boys from the outlying areas of *Belém* had the chance of leaving the *Nazaré* fairground as a hero and, at the same time, securing their family’s lunch for the next day, with the duck they received as a prize.

The dissemination of the *Nazaré* festival programme made the residents enter into “*Círio* mode”, changing the daily life of the city. During the fortnight of the festival, complaints of slave escapes were common, eager to participate in the games and to watch the movement of people in the fairground. In October 1876, the freed black Manoel Antonio was arrested for theft: “there went Manoel Antonio to prison and no longer with hopes of killing the duck the next day in the *Nazaré* fairground”<sup>40</sup> The same story reported that “the minor black Luiz who was let free yesterday to go and kill the duck, had such misfortune that, at 6 pm, he fell into the hands of the police on suspicion of having run away”<sup>41</sup> Other blacks got into fights in the fairground and ended up being arrested by the police. This happened to “(...) two duck-killers, that is, the free mulatto Manoel de *Belém* and the black Paulino, slave of Joaquim Ângelo Gonçalves, using ducks they fought to settle a score. The noise of the commotion was responded to by a patrol of the *Nazaré* fairground, who, at the command of the 4th district sub-commissioner, sent the fighters to jail”<sup>42</sup>

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39 *Idem*.

40 *A Constituição*, *Belém*, 9 Oct. 1876, p.2.

41 *Idem*.

42 *Ibidem*.

Once again, animals were sought for as categories with which to describe human behaviour, hence two blacks were transformed into “free range roosters” because they were caught fighting in the fairground. On 6 November 1881, Mr Leonidas Barbosa noted the escape of a slave named Nicolau, who was soon arrested by the police. By making the escape public, an article in the *Gazeta de Notícias* newspaper said that the police were wondering what reasons led Nicholas to flee and added: “we helped them (the police) by assuring that he ran away so he could take part in the duck killing”.<sup>43</sup> One of the main targets for robbery at the time of the *Círio de Nazaré* was precisely the duck, a fact widely reported in the newspapers. Thus, a 1900 police report stated, “Yesterday, the robber Manoel Souto Menor, who had stolen a duck from the Guarani steamer master, was arrested”.<sup>44</sup>

Be that as may, while some blacks had to flee to participate in the *Nazaré* festival, many others attended events included in the festival programme, alongside many Indians. The newspapers of the period announced: “*tapuia* group dance (imitation)”<sup>45</sup> “the Guarani will weave to the sound of the trumpet in the Floral Pavilion, converted into an indigenous *taba* (settlement), as they offer the most appreciated dances of their nation”,<sup>46</sup> “dances of the Apinagés and Mumbicas”,<sup>47</sup> “will perform the special dances of the Zuavos, Africans and Mandaris”,<sup>48</sup> “dance of the Mundurucus and Africans in the Floral Pavilion”.<sup>49</sup> In the year when slavery was abolished in Brazil, in the *Nazaré* fairground there was “music, slaughter of ducks, and pigs” and, at night, “polyorama, Congos, Guaranis, weeping puppets, Africans...”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the fairground became

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43 *Gazeta de Notícias*, Belém, 6 Nov. 1881, p. 2.

44 *O Jornal*, Belém, 6 Oct. 1900, p. 2.

45 *Diário de Belém*, Belém, 17 Oct. 1869, p. 1.

46 *Diário de Notícias*, Belém, 14 Oct. 1885, p. 2.

47 *A Constituição*, Belém, 4 Nov. 1886, p.1.

48 *A Constituição*, Belém, 14 Nov. 1886, p.4.

49 *Diário de Belém*, Belém, 31 Oct. 1886, p. 3.

50 *O Liberal do Pará*, Belém, 28 Oct. 1888, p. 1.

the scene of multiple symbolic battles for dominance of the public space, with Africans and indigenous people claiming and exercising their protagonism. To a large extent, the present-day *Círio de Nazaré* is the result of these intense cultural exchanges (Iphan, 2006; Henrique, 2011).

It should be noted that the slaughtering of the ducks was part of a much broader and richer set of cultural activities. It was a *Círio de Nazaré* which was much more popular than that which happens today, and it was organized at that time by and for the people (Henrique, 2018). The fairground constituted a space for cultural exchanges, for the movement of cultures. Within this setting, the slaughter of ducks itself was thought of as “an amusement which the people have kept as a heritage from colonialism”.<sup>51</sup> In addition to the scheduled religious events inside the church and open-air processions, in the fairground space devotees enjoyed the slaughtering of ducks, watched theatrical performances, saw images of European museums and wars on the cosmorama, watched dances of indigenous and African origin and also listened to classical music.

This *Círio* of “profane feasts and noisy joys” (Montarroyos, 1992) became the target of harsh criticism throughout the nineteenth century. An article published in 1886 stated:

The newspapers of Pará announced and reported on the festival of *Nazaré*, in the same way the newspapers of other places usually announce and report other religious festivals, that is, as any entertainment or public spectacle; and, on the other hand, the people flocked to the festival, as they did to other entertainment, or attended any theatrical spectacle; and the saddest thing is that many of those who have taken part in these festivals, called religious, swear to serve God.

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51 *A Província do Pará*, Belém, 11 Oct. 1959, p. 2. It is important to remember that the *Círio de Nazaré*, as a festival model, was brought to *Belém do Pará* by the Portuguese during the colonial period. See COELHO, 1998. An amusement similar to the slaughter of ducks, the blind goat was part of children's entertainment in the early seventeenth century. See ARIËS, 1981.

This is how the newspapers in Pará, with regard to the *Nazaré* festival, announced ‘music bands, the slaughter of ducks, Mundurucus and African dance and fireworks’.<sup>52</sup>

In the eyes of the “Gospel Press,” what the devotees of *Nazaré* saw as an “innocent pastime” was a mystification of Christianity. The emphasis of the critique was on the lack of clear separation between the sacred and the profane at the *Círio de Nazaré*, which made the holy devotees of the saint participate in this festival just as they did in any other feast or theatrical performance. In fact, from the devotees’ point of view, the amusements were a constituent part of the religious festival. Considerable criticism also came from the Catholic clergy, especially in the period when Dom Macedo Costa was at the head of the bishopric of Pará (1861-1890). An item published in 1882 is quite expressive of the way the Catholic clergy viewed the popular festival in the *Nazaré* fairground.

The hubbub is formed by voices that cry, that speak, that laugh, that whisper and that scream. The noise comes from exploding rockets, booming music bands, drums, harmonicas, bugles, and glass pianos that drum, squeal, whistle, and clink, giving a less pale notion of what hell would be. The multitude is made up of men and women, black and white, servants and masters, children and adults, good and bad, rich and poor, fools and the smart, the unwary and thieves.<sup>53</sup>

Buzzing, crying, laughter, shouting, noise, rumbling, thunder, whistles of the ecstatic crowd in the fairground, the disorderly mixture of all social classes, is the image of what, in the eyes of the church, would be hell itself. For the people, this was the popular form of partying.

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52 *Imprensa Evangélica*, São Paulo, 18 Dec. 1886, p. 401.

53 *A Boa Nova*, Belém, 4 Nov. 1882, p. 1. This was the context of the so-called “Romanization”, the action of sectors of the Catholic clergy which intended, among other things, to strengthen the ties of the Brazilian Catholic Church to the guidelines of Rome, to moralize the clergy and to reduce the autonomy of the devotees. Dom Macedo Costa was one of the main names of this movement, which became known as “Ultramontanism”. See NEVES, 2009.

## THE SLAUGHTER OF DUCKS AND POLITICS

In the secular programming of the *Círio de Nazaré* in the nineteenth century, it was common to show images in the so-called Floral Pavilion, in the fairground area. In 1877 devotees exhibited pictures depicting nude women.<sup>54</sup> Most likely, they were reproductions of the theme of Venus, as in Rubens's painting "The Three Graces", in which three women appear naked (Simson, 1996). Outraged, Bishop Macedo Costa forbade the continuation of prayers in the church of *Nazaré*. In turn, the people broke down the church door and continued their prayers, even without the presence of the priests. The conflict remained in 1878 and 1879, the years in which the so-called "taper processions" took place, that is, the *Círio* was performed only by the devotees carrying the image of the saint without the presence of members of the church. In 1878, the newspaper *O Liberal do Pará* published an article stating that "these figures are nothing more than the reproduction of those that the whole world sees in museums and even in the Vatican itself, already representing mythological characters, namely the works of celebrated artists".<sup>55</sup> In the same year, a lithograph by Wiegandt<sup>56</sup> alluded to the "slurs" of João Crisóstomo da Mata Bacelar, one of the members of the *Nazaré* festival committee who rebelled against the ban on the festival by Dom Macedo Costa. Bacelar, besides being a doctor, was a Freemason, a fact that made him a target of the Bishop of Pará:

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54 *A Boa Nova*, Belém, 31 Oct. 1877, p.2.

55 *O Liberal do Pará*, Belém, 26 Nov. 1878, p. 1.

56 Hans Karl Wiegandt, German lithographer and caricaturist who lived in *Belém*, where he died in 1908. He recorded various "*Nazaré* customs" in illustrations published in the newspaper *O Puraquê*, which were published in *Belém* in 1878. See *A Província do Pará*, Belém, 11 & 12 Oct. 1992, 2nd edition, Magazine, p. 15.

Figure 1. The Slaughter of Ducks



Source: O Puraquê, Belém, year I, no. 7, 1st quar. 1878 Collection of the Manuel Barata Collection, IHGB, Rio de Janeiro.

Dr. João Crisóstomo da Mata Bacelar, whose face can be clearly made out, is portrayed as a fleeing duck with a star on its chest, perhaps in reference to Freemasonry. Behind him are several blindfolded men holding huge wooden sticks with which they are trying to hit his head. On the bodies of some of these men it is possible to identify the names of some of the newspapers of the time, such as *A Constituição*, *Diário de Belém*, *A Boa Nova* and *O Puraquê*, itself, responsible for the slurs made by Bacelar in their pages. In the background, the crowd is watching. The association with the slaughter of ducks is not literal, for in this case it was men, not boys, who were seeking to hit the target. And this particular duck had the advantage of being able to escape, unlike the animal duck, which was buried, with only its head showing.

A year later, the Catholic newspaper *A Boa Nova* criticized the holding of one of the “civilian *círios*”: “The Nazaré programme has

gone further and has promised to take the lives of God's Ministers. A lithograph-lesson was passed from hand to hand in which Dr. Joao Crisostomo da Mata Bacelar, with his club in hand, was killing the priests he came across".<sup>57</sup>

Unfortunately, this lithograph has either not survived to the present day or has been misplaced in some archive. The phrase "club in hand" is a clear reference to the slaughtering of ducks and priests would take the place of the ducks to be slaughtered. The political imprint of the "lithograph-lesson" is evident, fully targeting the authority of the clergy, in its Romanizing eagerness which sought to diminish the autonomy of the devotees in the organization of the festivals for saints. In this case, the roles are reversed and Bacelar no longer takes the position of the "duck", which is now adopted by the priests. The use of the slaughter of ducks as a political instrument on both sides should be highlighted. If this was the amusement chosen for the symbolic attack on the other, it is because its language was clearly perceptible to the general public. Like every festival, the *Círio* is also political (Pantel, 1998).

The analysis of the slaughter of ducks allows us to delve into the theme of rituals and popular symbolism. It shows that ducks are "good to consider" because our relationship with them, our form of signifying this animal reveals a lot about ourselves, our forms of sociability and our classification systems. In this sense, it can be said that the slaughter of ducks which took place at the *Círio de Nazaré* was also a "sociological entity", which managed the varied experiences of everyday life, being set apart from that life as "just a game", an amusement and reconnected to it as "more than a game" (Geertz, 1978, p. 211).

As Darnton observed in the "cat massacre", inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas, the same "Rabelaisian laughter" could be seen at the *Nazaré* festival in bygone days, the same "tumultuous hilarity" that "could turn into a riot, a carnivalesque culture of sexuality and insubordination in which the revolutionary element could be contained in symbols and metaphors, or explode into a general uprising" (1986,

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57 *A Boa Nova*, Belém, 26 Nov. 1879, p.1.

p. 133). In France we have the example of the French Revolution, which broke out in 1789. In the Amazon of the nineteenth century we have the example of “*Cabanagem*” (Harris, 2010) and the “*Civilian Círios*”, with their displays of figures of nude women in front of the church of *Nazaré*.

According to Bakhtin, “festivities have always had an essential content, a profound meaning, always expressing a conception of the world” (1996, p. 7). On the one hand, they are contained in a kind of “second life of the people”, which temporarily penetrates the utopian realm of universality, freedom, equality, and abundance, in which social hierarchies are momentarily abolished.<sup>58</sup> However, on the other hand, they consecrate and sanction the current regime, as they show the devotee, in the case of the *Círio of Nazaré*, that such freedom is only possible in a festive, exceptional time. In the words of Mary Del Priore, “without stopping time or contradicting it, but rather articulating it, the festival ends up giving daily life its usual armour” (1994, p. 11).

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our inability to see humour in the slaughter of ducks is an indication of the cultural distance that separates us from those men and women. These people did not hate ducks. Furthermore, they were no less human than we are in allowing and participating in a ritual that for us is a crime involving the mistreatment of animals. The feeling of humanity did not change, but the definition of the area within which it was allowed to operate, extending the boundary that delimited the region of moral concern, in order to understand other species besides the human one. In an article discussing the change in sensitivity to the presence of animals in circus shows, Regina Horta Duarte states that “the historicity of moral values is also evident in the relationship between men and animals” (2002, p. 196), so what is objectionable to one society may not be to another. The devotees of Nazareth who saw the slaughter of ducks as an “innocent amusement” lived at a time and place where these

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58 For a similar analysis applied to the Brazilian Carnival, see DaMATTA, 1997.

animals — and many others — had not yet been incorporated into the sphere of our moral consideration: “it was a world in which much of what would later be seen as ‘cruelty’ had not yet been defined as such” (Thomas, 1988, p. 177).<sup>59</sup>

The slaughter of ducks, as one of the main attractions of the *Nazaré* festival, was an important part of this broad cultural circuit. The poet Bruno de Menezes said that this was the time when “the brats and even the clean cut family boys mingled with the children of the washerwomen, the cooks, the ironers, the *açai* palm oil kneaders, the *tacacá* soup sellers, and the single women who lived in Jaqueira”.<sup>60</sup> The event allowed the exchange of experiences between blacks, Indians, and mestizos of the most varied nuances. But also between the “lower class” and the *chic* people of Belém. For this reason, I understand the slaughter of ducks as “an absorbing game”, making use of Geertz’s classification of the Balinese cockfight he analysed.<sup>61</sup> As Philippe Ariès (1981) observed with regard to games in modern Europe, the 19th and early 20th century fairground at *Nazaré* takes us back to a time when games were of much greater importance for collective sociability and in which there was not such a strict separation between the play of children and that of adults. The author states that

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59 The codes involving stances in the *Bélem* of the nineteenth century forbade the mistreatment of animals, especially those that were used as draft animals, namely horses and oxen. In any event, that ban was more related to the utility of the service and the public hygiene of the city than with the animals themselves. It is worth remembering that in the same *Belém* bullfights took place from the end of the nineteenth century, considered by the local elite as a symbol of civility. See SARGES, 2008; VIEIRA, 2015. For São Paulo’s pioneering experience in the defence of animal rights, see OSTOS, 2017. In Brazil, animal protection measures were established only by Decree No. 24,645 of 10 July 1934. Available at: <<https://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/decret/1930-1939/decreto-24645-10-julho-1934-516837-publicacaooriginal-1-pe.html>>, accessed on: 13 Feb. 2019. On this topic, see MÔL; WINNING, 2014. For discussion in other countries, see AGULHON, 1981; FAVRE; TSANG, 1993; AMARO *et al*, 2013; MONZOTE, 2013.

60 *A Província do Pará*, Belém, 11 Oct. 1959, p.2.

61 The Balinese cockfighting analyzed by Geertz constitutes an “absorbing game” because it involves “a set of people absorbed in a common flow of activity and relating each other in terms of that flow” (1978, p. 193).

Games and amusements extended far beyond the furtive moments we dedicate to them: they were one of the principal means a society had to strengthen its collective bonds and to feel united. This applied to almost every game, but this social role was most evident in large seasonal and traditional festivals. (Ariès, 1981, p. 94)

In fact, these festivals involved the whole of society, constituting a form of periodic expression of its vitality. In them, the children participated on an equal basis with the adults, occupying a place reserved by tradition and, in the case of the *Círio de Nazaré*, made official in the programmes publicizing the festival. Initially dedicated to children, the slaughter of ducks was a collective game that followed a traditional protocol.

The festival in the *Nazaré* fairground let out the daily tension, as it was possible to laugh loudly, shout and boo others without worrying about police repression. After all, the mixture of people and colours which made up that “devout carnival” (Alves, 1980) was recognized as the main hallmark of the *Círio de Nazaré*. Marked by diversity, the festival of Nazareth featured various forms of popular comic humour: in addition to the slaughter of ducks, the newspapers of the period refer to “the slaughter of pigs”, greasy pig, “the mischief of Lisbon’s *gaiato* boys”, “ mischievous and impish little black boys”, puppets, greasy pole, and sack race, among others.

In a certain manner, the *Nazaré* festival expressed characteristics of the popular comic culture which Bakhtin (1996) analysed in Rabelais’s work. This was the specific culture of the public square and popular humour in all the richness of its manifestations, opposing official culture, the serious and religious tone that the Catholic Church tried to impose on the event. The *Círio* space was the people’s space. In its popular conception, the sacred and the profane were indissoluble elements of the tribute to Our Lady of *Nazaré*. What is more, in the sequence of the ritual as a whole, the duck was fundamental, as it guaranteed the amusement of the devotees, happy for the blessings they judged they had obtained from Mary and, at the same time, signalled an abundant table, breaking the daily frugality of the food of the “lower class”.

The fairground was a space for the expression of Brazilian cultural diversity, with the strong presence of Indians and blacks in a devotional act brought here by Portuguese whites, in dialogue with elements of other cultures of the world. Many of the amusements that took place in this space were linked to a rurally based society. In this predominantly agricultural society, animals figured largely as a workforce, which influenced how they were treated by humans. As *Belém* underwent urbanization as well as the church's fight against popular amusements, the fairground underwent changes, along with our sensitivity to animals.

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