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# THE FEMININE ARCHETYPES OF IEMANJÁ AND IANSÃ: FROM LOVING TO INSUBMISSIVE

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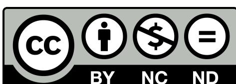


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**Abstract**: In the present work, we will try to analyze and understand, through the comparative method, how the feminine archetypes of black women are constructed in the western world and, more specifically, in Brazilian society, starting from the figures of the orishas Iemanjá and Iansã. And, in such a way, we will also seek to understand how religiosity interferes and contributes to the construction of the imaginary about Afro-Brazilian expressions.
**Keywords:** Gender; candomblé; black women; archetypes.

## THE PROBLEMATIC OF GENDER: YORUBA AFRICA *VERSUS* THE WEST

The expansion of European powers, the emergence of capitalism and the development of concepts of race and gender, all these advents of modernity, led to a series of socio-political and cultural changes. Such changes allowed, as Oyěwùmí (2004, p. 1) pointed out, that "people were exploited, and societies, stratified".

Thus, the West quickly sought to effectively produce a discourse of exclusion about the *other*. Science took care of racial issues in which, based on social Darwinism, it constructed the dichotomy of civilization (white and European societies) and barbarism (non-European and, in this case, African societies). Racial theorists then established an idea of supremacy of the white race, while blacks were described as childish, superstitious, ignorant and could even present characteristics of immorality and animalization [1]. It was then up to the white, European and rational man to ensure that these "inferior" beings were re-educated in order to achieve order, progress and civilization. Europe, under its flawed prism of reason, dominated and exploited Africa – as well as its individuals.

In Western culture, gender is *necessarily* a regulating factor, dividing individuals into male and female, which does not happen in pre-colonization Yoruba society. Since there were no socially constructed categories of men and women, thinking about pre-colonization *Òyó society* [2]based on these divisions generates numerous anachronisms. Therefore, while the West sought to divide and categorize beings by their biological issues in order to justify and guarantee social hierarchies, Yoruba society limited biology to the reproductive issue – women were responsible for perpetuating the lineage, but this did not make them socially inferior. For example, the "absence" of a gender concern is represented when a Yoruba mother often refers to her children as *omó mì* which means, in a looser translation, "my offspring" (Oyěwùmí, 2017). Just as names, for this society, did not denote the female/male dichotomy.

Fanon apud Araújo (2013) points out that the image of the black man, and more specifically of the black woman, was highly associated with the idea of uncontrolled sexuality. If the white woman sent the image of wife and mother, in an almost sacralized way, the black woman appears as an object of sexual satisfaction. It is important to understand that, while Beauvoir (1980) is thinking about the family and how this is a way of controlling and regulating western white women, what was (and still is) experienced by black women *does not* represent "sexual freedom", but rather a violation of their bodies. Besides, according to Fanon (2008), *being black* was characterized as inferior and dangerous, since these individuals appear devoid of rationality – thus, it was necessary to tame and control their bodies, especially the female.

If modernity ensured the effortless

1 Silveira, 1999.

2 People of Yoruba origin from present-day Nigeria who, before the colonization of the West, understood their social relations based on seniority and not on biological and/or gender issues (Oyěwùmí, 2017).

introduction of the concepts of race, it was no different with the concepts of gender. Davis (2016), in line with Fanon (2008), demonstrated that it is not possible to think about the second without it being intrinsically linked to the first. In clear lines: if the feminine also assumes a position of *another,* that is, *inferior,* the situation is much crueler with black women. Obviously, women, in general, have suffered violence and invalidation throughout history. However, gender, added to the racial condition, made black women practically lose their humanities. Still according to the author, in the scenario of slavery, for example, enslaved African women were seen as "genderless" when they were as profitable as enslaved men, working in plantations manually, when they could be sexually exploited and repressed, these now they started to be reduced and stigmatized in the condition of *being a woman.*

Returning to pre-colonization Yoruba Africa, Amadiume (2005) will dialogue with Oyěwùmí (2004) regarding the fact that Yoruba women do not appear as submissive or defined by their gender. The Yoruba were also born traders, being outstanding figures at fairs and markets. These women enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy, in addition to being responsible for immaterial exchanges – such as family maintenance, the formation of ties through marriages, religious exchanges... [3]Contact with "civilization" not only created, on the part of Europeans, discourses about Africans, but also forced them to cross the Atlantic and reinvent themselves. There is no doubt that the West managed to create molds and establish visions that would last for centuries and, thus, African women, as well as their descendants, came to be seen as indomitable sexual objects, an inexhaustible source of pleasure, but not amenable to affection., for example. Black female bodies became highly consumed, but never respected and/or valued.

It is not possible to forget that Western society has marginalized blacks in all their political and cultural expressions, so that the religious issue could not be left out of it. African-based religions came to be seen as very dangerous witchcraft, which needed to be fought. On the other hand, African women, as well as their descendants, found in religion a form of identification and freedom. Therefore, and now in the religious sphere, once again the conceptions of gender and race are intertwined, as will be observed below.

**Gender, race and religiosity: the archetypes of Iemanjá and Iansã**

The diaspora, contact with Europeans and slavery made blacks incorporate new elements into their religious practices. However, such a practice already occurred within the African territory itself, since these individuals, even before the arrival of colonization, already had the presence of Islam and Christianity [4]. Thus, it becomes valid here to state that Africans, now in the condition of enslaved, had no difficulty in syncretizing both culturally and religiously. Some clear and well-known examples of this syncretism can be seen in: Ogun was associated with São Jorge; Iemanjá with Our Lady; I hope with Jesus Christ; and so on.

Bastide (2000) brings to light that candomblé appears, in the diasporic scenario, as a way of rebuilding, both temporally and symbolically, Africa. Black men and women aimed to bring "the past to the present", applying ancestral knowledge in everyday life. Candomblés and their ability to cure (and cause) diseases, the presence of incorporations and rituals involving the slaughter of animals (in candomblés), as well as the use of amulets, herbs and African dialects, brought fear to white society, which still is currently present.

3 Bernard, 2005.

4 Opoku, 2010, p. 592.

Thus, the dichotomy appears again: the black man who frightens *versus* the white man who guides and heals. From these concepts, the figures of Iansã and Iemanjá, respectively, will be thought about later.

Gonzalez (2018) demonstrates that, in the slave scenario, many facets emerge for black women, but the most latent is that of the maid, which is the pillar stereotype of Brazilian society. On the one hand, the "housemaid" represents the sensual woman; on the other, the workforce that maintains order. Even with the end of slavery, such a place continued to be reserved for these women, later transforming them into domestic servants. A second stereotype – just as striking as the first – still according to the author, is that of the mulatto woman. Once again associated with sensuality, this woman is valued at carnival, on the streets on feast days, but they are not free – on Ash Wednesday they return, with their voices muffled, to take care of their employers' children and endure the abuse of bosses.

Built into Brazilian society over four long centuries, stereotypes have kept black women in a cruel position. Although in recent decades, and with much struggle, these have achieved a certain social ascension, leaving the "Big Houses" to occupy higher positions of power, universities and scientific productions, the mark of a society that misses a time of slavery, still chasing them. But it is in the space of the meeting places, whether Umbanda or Candomblé, that these women express their strength and heal their wounds. Here, they are not just house maid or brown women. It is, looking at the female archetypes of warrior and powerful goddesses, that these women identify. There is a strong correlation here between Orisha and medium. Jung (2000) explains that such identification, through archetypes, will happen because they are a tool capable of tracing psychological profiles that, present in the unconscious, reverberate in the daily lives of these individuals.

Therefore, the archetypes carry psychic traits, as well as representing a symbolic formation of roles that can be exercised. Obviously, it is necessary to emphasize that it is not appropriate to reduce the Orishas to fanciful figures, since their images, even if they have different ways of representation, are entirely linked to the reality of their practitioners. The figure of these deities, they are beyond the Greek [5]*mithós*. Therefore, the mythology present in Candomblé is also part of a *psychosocial construction*.[6] and, therefore, it interferes with how people from this community and "daughters" of specific Orishas, see themselves in the world and relate to each other.

The archetype of Iansã will be taken first for analysis. Also known as Oyá, the Yoruba name of the Niger River, where it is worshiped in Africa [7], it is the orisha of winds and storms, represented with a sword and a whip in her hands, riding a buffalo. Iansã is impetuous, brave and the owner of herself (and several loves). The Orisha has many faces: while it can be seductive, it can also prove to be indomitable. Iansã arouses, in the same proportion, fascination (for feminist women, especially black women) and crossed eyes (from white, patriarchal and Judeo-Christian society).

Oyá's archetype is strongly linked to female empowerment to the point that much is said about her *daughters*. The women of Iansã have very specific psychic aspects in meeting place communities. These women, like their mother, are strong, brave and independent, and Bernardo (2003) understands this relationship as a representation of the violence and transformations to which black African

5 This, in turn, is understood as a lie and/or fantasy.

6 See Silva, 2021, p. 28.

7 Verger, 2002, p. 168.

women and their descendants were subjected. But, of course, there is the other side of the coin: Iansã is also seen as an Orisha that is often "masculine", due to the same attributes mentioned above. Despite not being as marginalized as the figure of the Pombagira, the Orisha represents the woman who does not fit the standards and molds of femininity expected by society – and who, therefore, is uncomfortable.

Although she can also assume the expression of a warrior, the archetype of Iemanjá is highly associated with motherhood and, not by chance, she is often compared with Maria. Although it is common to observe the other Orishas represented in a *white way,* Janaína – the name to which she also responds – is the greatest exponent of this: her most common image is of long, straight hair, white skin and the dress that covers practically her entire body.

Considered the "mother of all heads", the Orisha occupies a high position in the Pantheon of African deities and even beyond, since her devotion breaks down barriers and is not restricted to Afro-Brazilian religions. Ortiz apud Batisde (2000, p. 297) describes Iemanjá as the Orisha of universal motherhood, being also temperamental and of vivid emotions [8], but also very vain and always beautiful, her archetype refers almost exclusively to femininity. However, this does not necessarily represent how women are, but rather how *they must be.*

But if the mother archetypes represented by Maria and Iemanjá are close, these two characters are equally distant. While Maria is good "by nature", being charitable, mother, virgin and worthy of the kingdom of heaven, Iemanjá emerges as ambivalent, being able to assume these traits in her personality, at the same time that she is vengeful and furious – here, referring to your *Africanness.* Therefore, Iemanjá and Maria would be, in reality, two sides of the same archetype, but representing a positive face *versus* a negative face [9].

As it was said before, the West created molds in order to regulate the *other* – and it would not be different with the feminine either. Women were expected to have such a latent maternal side to the point of creating the idea that this was a universal and instinctive condition, which Batinder (1985) demonstrated was not a reality. So, this Western society merged the Catholic persona with the African orisha solely and exclusively for motherhood, which is not entirely flawed, but limiting.

Archetypes are somewhat complex manifestations. Bringing together a range of symbolic, material and immaterial components, these are expressed emotionally, and can be negative or positive. In clear lines: in the form of a projection, the archetypes generate fascination or annoyance. Thus, the archetype of Iemanjá, when associated with Mary and *whiteness,* generates an image of affection, care, serenity. Iansã, on the other hand, is more complex: if this appears as a strong exponent for feminist women who, in recent decades, have sought to understand and reframe their positions in the world, it also generates displeasure in a society that is not ready to recognize the feminine beyond the reductive figure of maternal/"domestic".

Iansã is much closer to the Yoruba woman who is in the markets and fairs, who moves around, who is a body present in social and family life. Her representation of a warrior, holding a sword, distances herself from Iemanjá with mirrors and combs – in an allusion to vanity. Not that Oyá wasn't vain, quite the contrary: her hair is always long, soft and shiny, and she doesn't lose her immense beauty when she turns into a buffalo. Therefore, it becomes more comfortable, at this point, to claim that the great dichotomy is in Iansã

8 Souza, 2015.

9 Iwashita, 1989, p. 326.

approaching the Yoruba woman; as the best-known face of Iemanjá (within its powerful syncretism) it approaches the western woman and what is expected of her.

## POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS

Black women were invalids for centuries, including in the feminist movement itself, which emerged in the 19th century. While thinking about what it was like to be a woman, the racial issue, left aside, left entire gaps empty. Black women ‘s experiences have always been different from whites, undeniably. Even though “woman” entails violence, black women were much more sexualized, made invisible, marginalized. Now, as proposed by Chakrabarty (2007), it is time to break the master-slave dialectic that the West and colonialism have planted in the social imaginary as an organizing element of this society, in which the first would represent civilization and knowledge, while the second is only archaic and barbarian, and here, the meeting places appear as an important element for this rupture: recognizing the value of Afro-Brazilian religiosity is recognizing that these individuals produce *knowledge.* Memory is a striking trait in “meeting place life”, which is preserved and transmitted from generation to generation through orality [10]. That is, the ancestral memory is reconstructed and reproduced in everyday life, but this goes beyond the walls of the shed, embracing all the sociability of these individuals. Religiosity allowed black women to find, in the past, the strength to change the present. The *black* hair, the clothes, the guides around the neck: far beyond aesthetics, it’s a way of (re)placing yourself in the world.

Thus, the feminine archetypes, within these religions, are extremely important for these women, especially black women, not only to identify themselves, but to recognize themselves. These allow for the “breaking” of the patriarchal order as a social hierarchy, in which the feminine is a creative force and is also movement. The present work focused on Iansã and Iemanjá, but it could have worked on Nanã, Oxum, Obá, Maria Mulambo, Padilhas... All these female personas who, with their particularities, create, recreate and resist. That if, on the one hand, they bother and cause “fear”, on the other hand, they hug their daughters and protect them.

In short, Iansã and Iemanjá represent female strength. Whether in the midst of war or latent motherhood, both are characters who, in different ways, break with previously constructed ideals. Although it is thought that these are completely antagonistic, they are very similar and talk to each other. As the feminist movement had already demonstrated, it is not possible to fit all women into the same frameworks of experiences, experiences and meanings. And here, once again, it is possible to observe how the archetypes, so embedded in the collective unconscious, are part of everyday life*: they represent different aspects of what it means to be a woman.* Carrying a red (iansã) or blue (iemanjá) leash around your neck means resisting violence and impositions. It is to protect the bodies that, for a long time, have been being carved. It’s belonging. And belonging indicates *being.* Be woman.

10 Carneiro apud Cury, 2008.

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