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ORIXÁS, CABOCLOS, MINKISI - ENCHANTED ARTIFACTS AND THE SOUND OF AFRICAN RELIGIOSITY, A LINK BETWEEN THE EARTHLY AND THE DIVINE

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Abstract: The focal point of this study is the exhibition “Ecoar”, which brings together percussion instruments and representations of Candomblé de Angola entities produced by a group of potters from the city of Caraguatatuba, the Ubuntu Group. The aim of this article is to shed light on the identity between Art and Religion, as well as on the essence of religious and aesthetic experiences. In order to better understand the meaning attributed to words, objects and religious images of African origin, we used the theoretical perspective of material religion, which sheds light on objects in order to think about religions, in which things appear as a cause rather than a consequence. Finally, we learned that the Ecoar exhibition contributes to promoting intercultural dialog and religious tolerance, and that each work on display is imbued with symbolism and tradition, transcending its material form and becoming a transformative force in people’s lives with its ability to touch the body and soul of devotees and visitors.

Keywords: Religion of African origin; Religious sculptures; Materiality.

INTRODUCTION

The north coast of the state of São Paulo is made up of four municipalities. Within this geographical area, there are two towns that emerged as important colonial settlements: in 1636, the town of São Sebastião, and in 1637, the town of Ubatuba.

The town of Caraguatatuba, located between the two towns, was designated as a “Termo” (district far from the town) of the town of São Sebastião, and only later, in 1857, did it become a town.¹ The city of Caraguatatuba’s development and constitution as a city differed from those of its neighbors.

On April 20, 2014, this sanctuary city, marked by Catholic religiosity that has developed around faith and devotion to the patron

saint St. Anthony, hosted the Ecoar Exhibition at the Museum of Art and Culture (MACC). Works by ceramicists Carlo Cury, Claudia Canova, Lu Chiata, Zandoná. members of the Ubuntu Group. An artistic project by a group of ceramists from the city of Caraguatatuba, which explores the power present in the sound of drums and atabaques articulated with the sculptures of orixás and minkisi with the intention of bringing art to all people. In this article we use Nkisi (singular of Santo/Orixá) and Minkisi (plural), entities worshipped by the Bantu peoples. The exhibition attracted 4,000 visitors.

The Ecoar exhibition consists of 95 ceramic pieces. There are creations based on the culture of the native peoples of Latin America, divided into thematic rooms that involve sound issues, percussion instruments of African origin and the female protagonists of the ceramist Zandoná, a universe in which femininity and femininity are manifested in a peculiar mixture of vigor and delicacy.

Our article focuses on the African artifacts and sounds room, which brings together percussion instruments and representations of candomblé deities. The Ecoar exhibition seeks to rescue sounds that are the roots of Brazil’s many facets, and are essential to preserving oral tradition and ancestry

In the words of ceramicist Lu Chiata, the Ecoar:

It is an installation that presents the energies of nature or the deities of African peoples, with their real and symbolic meaning, diversity, colors and insignia. As a complement, the main importance of the sound of the drums on display is their evocative ancestral ritual function. (Chiata, personal interview, April 20, 2024)

To produce this article, the methodological procedures adopted were: semi-structured interviews, participant observation and the use of thematic oral history. We searched for the

1. Book of Laws, Decrees and Resolutions, DAESP, CO 9735. Digitized handwritten documentation.

nature of religious experience as well as aesthetic experience; affirmation of the aesthetic character of religious experience and the epistemic dimension of art and religion.

MATERIALITIES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

Religions generate distinct cultural indoctrinations and artistic configurations through their rituals. Each religion attaches importance to a particular sense or method of sensory modulation, using unique auditory elements, aromas, tastes, visual representations and physical movements to instill and strengthen specific values. These values are subsequently internalized as innate ways of existing. The focus of the study of the sensory aspects of religions lies in examining the sensory dimensions of religions and how they shape, from our senses, our encounters, our experiences and, ultimately, our perspectives.

We analyzed the religion of African origin contained in the Ecoar exhibition from the perspective of material religion. Material religion uses things to think about religions, in which things appear as a cause rather than a consequence.

Birgit Meyer teaches that, in material religion, we should look at how religion happens in material culture - images, devotional and liturgical objects, architecture and sacred space, works of art and mass-produced artifacts. No less important than these material forms are the various practices that make them work. In the *Material Religion Journal*, founded in 2005 by David Morgan, Birgit Meyer and Brent Plate, Meyer notes that “ritual, communication, ceremony, instruction, meditation, propaganda, pilgrimage, magic, liturgy and interpretation constitute many of the practices through which religious material culture constructs its worlds of belief [...]” (Meyer *et al.*, 2010, p. 209).

Therefore, materializing the study of religion implies asking how religions happen materially, which should not be confused with the much less useful question of how religions can be expressed materially.

Researcher Patrícia Rodrigues de Souza (2019) draws our attention to materiality and immanence as a perspective for the study of religion, so that objects are not the result, but the starting point for understanding religions.

The study of material religion, whether in the form of things, spaces or bodily practices, can shed light on the logics of religious ways of being in the world and elucidate how they are intrinsically connected to other (non-religious) ways of being in the world.

Considering this perspective, Birgit Meyer developed the concept of “sensory form” which explains that sensory form refers to “relatively fixed ways of invoking and organizing the transcendent, providing repetitive structures that create and sustain connections between believers within the context of a particular religious institution”. (Meyer, 2015, p.151)

In order to understand how the divine or transcendental affects through mediation, Meyer proposed the notion of “sensory form”. In his words:

Sensory forms are relatively fixed modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, offering structures of repetition that create and sustain connections between believers in the context of specific religious regimes. These forms are transmitted and shared; they engage religious practitioners in specific practices of worship, and play a central role in modulating these in religious subjects and moral communities (Meyer, 2015, p. 151).

Meyer points out that these forms are “configurations that guide how to proceed and induce performances, insofar as they make present what is mediated”. (Meyer, 2019, p. 210)

These forms will be transmitted and shared by the followers because they will involve them in specific cult practices and are, in addition to playing a central role in their alignment as subjects, based on their moral-religious community.

The pieces created by ceramicist and candomblecist Lu Chiata and researcher and ceramicist Claudia Canova for the Ecoar exhibition lead us to the understanding that the material study of religions begins with the assumption that things, their uses, their valuation and their appeal are not aspects added to religion, but instead inseparable from it. By making artifacts of *minkisi*, *orishas* and percussion instruments, these women seem to allow contact with the immaterial through materiality. By exhibiting their work, they seek to capture the threshold of actions that involve the body, the cosmogony, and the objects have made it possible to rework forms and give them another meaning, another sacredness, this time in the artistic environment. Ceramicist Lu Chiata teaches that Candomblé is a Brazilian religion of African origin, with three main nations: the Congo-Angola nation, which worships the *Minkisi* (plural of *Nkisi*); the *Jeje* nation, which worships the *Voduns*; and the *Ketu-Nagô* nation, which worships the *Orixás*. Studies of the historical, cultural and ritualistic content preserved by these nations underpin the details of the construction of the sculptures in this exhibition.

For the artist, everything in candomblé is “alive”, and this life is only possible if it is inserted into the very fabric that constitutes it, in this mutual engagement between forces and flows. There is no dichotomy between religion and life, and the religion of African origin is an integrated whole.

Materials in candomblé cannot be separated from the forces that constitute them, so in order to access these forces and their agency, it is necessary to pay attention to the formative process of matter itself.

As Tim Ingold points out, bringing things to life:

is not a question of adding a dash of agency to them, but of restoring them to the generative flows of the material world in which they came into existence and continue to subsist. This view, that things are in life rather than life in things.” (Ingold, 2015, p. 63)

Researcher Lucas de Mendonça Marques tells us that the process of making gods, things and people in candomblé is one of mutual and continuous engagement between the agents - engagement in which matter itself and its sensitive qualities must be taken into account, based on a process of mutual manipulation, of participation. If each *orixá* participates in the world, they participate through different modes of existence (fire, water, iron, stone, lightning, leaves, etc.) which, at the same time as existing, also need to be made. Gods, people and things are made, in candomblé, from this same common ontological plane, which requires manipulation (Marques, 2014, p. 135).

The craft of producing the clay artifacts created by ceramicist Lu Chiata demonstrates her degree of involvement with the religion, since she knows the codes and rules regarding color, shapes and materials dedicated to each *orisha*. Lu Chiata has produced 18 African deities corresponding to the three nations that are named differently and worshipped with particularities. On a guided tour, the artist explains that the deities are divided into family and/or relational/energetic groupings, according to the teachings preserved and passed on orally, about the legends and interaction between the elements of nature (earth, fire, water and air) that they are or represent.

In his words:

The first pair was built from two separate pieces, which were joined together at a certain stage of the clay becoming damp. The other sets were built from the same base, divided from the middle of the trunk upwards into three, four or five representations. And

the sixth piece is a duo, which was made in two separate pieces, but within the same concept. This is the representation of divinized Brazilian ancestors, the so-called caboclos, feathered (indigenous) and leathered (cattlemen, cowboys and others). Given the importance of the teaching of their knowledge, skills and beliefs combined with the African in the colonial period and the first part of imperial Brazil and miscegenation, which generated the Afro-indigenous Brazilian culture. They are founded and worshipped as Cauizas in Congo-Angola candomblé and today, they have been absorbed by various roças from other candomblé nations. (Chiata, personal interview conducted on May 28, 2024)

ART AND RELIGION MEET THROUGH MATERIALITY: EARTH, WATER, AIR AND FIRE

To support our reflections on the link between art and religion of African origin, we will start with an interview with ceramicist Lu Chiata, a resident of the city of Caraguatatuba and a member of the Ubuntu group. Our conversation began on the opening day of the ecoar exhibition. Our other meetings took place at her home and studio, which is also the site of the *Inzo Kibela Zambiri* caboclo candomblé shed. The Barracão da Inzo Kibela Zambiri candomblé de caboclo Nação Congo-Angola is coordinated by Tatetu Kasutemi (Robson Luiz Braz Chiata) and Mame-tu Ndenge Nsumbu Messamburá (Lucy Lucas da Silva Chiata), mother Lu Chiata, a ceramist and interviewee in this study. ²Located in the Rio Claro neighborhood since 2003, in the southern part of the city of Caraguatatuba, the Barracão has done significant work in serving the public through the rituals it practices.

In this sacred space we also find his studio. On the one hand, ceramics as an expressive medium of art, and on the other, the Can-

domblé religion, a manifestation of a hybrid culture. Between these two extremes are the indispensable forces of nature and its material diversity. Lu Chiata demonstrates her creative process, in which there is a complex synergy between tools. By means of skillful hands, in each piece the ceramist, in a kind of lace or embroidery, connects the extremes between candomblé and ceramics, revealing similarities in terms of clay modeling and her position as a person who looks after other people.

Marlice Almeida notes that the need to create is inherent in human beings. This need germinates naturally and cannot be stopped. In this sense, observing Lu Chiata's artistic work reflects Almeida's words: "What human beings create with their hands, expressing their life, their imagination, is the most primordial form of art, the need to act/be". (Almeida, 1994, p. 53)

Inside her workshop, Lu Chiata creates her own rites of passage and operational concepts, establishing analogies between the sacredness of matter and its immaterial correspondence. The creations are visual reflections of an attempt to expose the symbolic universe present in the cult of the orixás and the enchanted.

When approaching the creative process of artist Lu Chiata, we highlight the record of Luiza Magali Santana Oliveira Reis, who dialogues with the curator of the exhibition "Cerâmica Encantada" Sarah Hallelujah: "ceramics holds in its memory the reverse of the earth, the clay that is mud from the riverbank, in her work it also contains the unattainable. And this contain is reconstructed by the artist, the contained now escapes us, and she allows the matter to flow in a transformed overflow". (Sampaio, 2014 apud Reis, 2019, p. 166)

The photos depict the making process (before burning) of Zaze/Sogbo/Xangô, Matamba/Oyá/Iansã, Vunge/Yori/Ibeji and Mina Luongo/Obá/Obá

2; Robson Luiz Braz Chiata is Tatetu Ria Nkisi Kassutemi, Zelador do Inzo Kibela Zambiri, candomblé de Caboclo - Nação Congo-Angola, Raiz Goméia and Lucy Lucas da Silva Chiata is Ndumbu Messamburá, Mame-tu Ndenge da Inzo (Casa) Kibeka Zambiri.



Photo 1 - The artist

Source: collection of ceramist Lu Chiata.



Photo 2 - making

Source: collection of ceramist Lu Chiata, 2024.

Ceramic art and the Candomblé religion allow us to get closer to perceptions of the sacred, to get in touch with natural forces and their animals, combining fire, water, air and earth. This art produces, through a set of modeled objects, a system of ideas, in which ideas and objects can express themselves mutually, emphasizing the inseparability between them. In the clay, the artist passes her fingers through the softness of the dough, which allows the artistic objects to take shape and become concrete. Chiata highlights a moment of crucial importance, which is the firing - the fire is undoubtedly the divine moment, the finalization of the piece. It is therefore one of the most “sacralized” stages. The moment when the pieces are fired is unsettling, one detail can destroy them all; a lot of attention is needed, since, in the words of the ceramist, firing the pieces is fraught with tension and danger, requiring, above all, attention to the whole that is there in the kiln. For Chiata, it is necessary to “dialog” with the fire - a dialog that extends to matter, the environment and the gods. Fire, as an active element, forms a constant interaction between the ceramist and the material - clay.

THE SOUND OF THE ATABAQUES IS AN EXPRESSION OF AFRICAN RELIGIOSITY

Religiosity can be defined as the personal bond between an individual and a supreme being, regardless of the specific religious beliefs they may adhere to. The candomblé faith incorporates the essential use of bodily sounds and the use of percussive instruments and vocal harmonies into its rituals. This link between sacred sounds and music is a fundamental aspect of candomblé



Photo 3. Caboclo Inzo Kibela Zambiri candomblé shed

Source: Lu Chiata collection (Instagram, accessed June 3, 2024).

In the Ecoar exhibition, the pieces on display are there to be looked at and no longer to be used - there have been changes in the sensory relationship. In this exhibition space, the religious experience takes place through the body and the senses. Objects can also be extensions and mediators, not only, but especially in the case of religion, becoming social agents themselves and influencing bodies. When visiting the exhibition, learning is provided by the space, shaping bodies, and at the same time, bodies define and shape spaces.

Lu Chiata believes that the aim of the installation is to cause reflection in the public by mentioning that this diversity of peoples who came here in the diaspora left a rich heritage, and that their worship of the forces of nature brings an ethical, philosophical, cosmological, technological and artistic integration that guides community life and its meaning. Even locating the human being as nature. And yet: “Another desired consequence is to help combat prejudice and religious intolerance against African matrix terreiros, here in this work, with a focus on candomblés, which have kept, preserved, experience and present this culture to the community”. (Chiata, lecture at the MACC on May 17, 2024)

Music is a fundamental component of candomblé. It is related to dance, myth and rite. Each song or type of song has its own function in specific contexts. The importance given to music was inherited by candomblé from African cultures.

The exhibition “Ecoar” transcends hearing and invites us to a deep sensory immersion, where drums and orixás come together in a cultural symphony. Ceramicist Cláudia Canova guides us through this sonic journey in an interview, revealing her research and interest in creating drums. Inspired by pieces from the region’s Archaeological Site³, Cláudia translates the ancestry and vibration of the orixás into clay, transforming them into vibrant musical instruments.

In this experience, ceramicist Cláudia Casanova understood the importance of drums in Africa, people of the culture of orality. There are regions where only women can play the drums, she says. Claudia tells us that “in a procedural look at the tools, I try to observe them in the development of the technical process, as gods, things”. (Canova, personal interview, May 17, 2024). The artist and the objects dialogue with each other, constituting

3. São Francisco Archaeological Site, in the city of São Sebastião.

4. The chordal technique means the superimposition of rolls of clay from a base, in the form of rings or spirals.

themselves as such and constituting the environment itself. Using the chord technique⁴, the ceramicist builds a drum with great dexterity. Once assembled, the piece is fired and then decorated. Then it’s time to insert the leather and the binding.



Photo 4 - Art and religion meet through materiality

Source: MACC collection - Caraguatatuba Museum of Contemporary Art, 2024.



Photo 5 - Sound

Source: MACC collection - Caraguatatuba Museum of Contemporary Art, 2024.

As Lu Chiata teaches us, music is always in connection with the people of the saint, sometimes as an ordering element of the ceremonies, sometimes as an ordering element of time. We find the Ingoma or Ngoma drum (atabaque) in Bantu, Jingoma, is plural (atabaques) in the Barracão of the candomblé of Caboclo *Inzo Kibela Zambiri*, the sound produced by the atabaques is the bearer of a magical power, for this reason, they must be

consecrated. In the hut there are three atabaques that set the rhythm: Ngoma Tixina - the big one, Ngoma Mukundu - the medium one and Ngoma Kasumbi - the small one. The three have different sounds. In candomblé, atabaques are known as Jingoma.⁵ The Atabaque is a communication tool, understood as a being of pure, full energy, a being that brings together the tree, the animal and the mineral, in other words, the three kingdoms of nature. The sound of the jingomas unites people. This instrument touches all energies, explains Chiata.



Photo 6 - Atabaques

Source: author's collection, 2024.

As Goldman points out, “more than a belief system or even a ‘religion,’ candomblé is above all a set of practices and a way of life”. (Goldman, 2005, p. 113)



Photo 5 - Atabaques II

Source: author's collection, 2024.

Anthropologist Vagner Gonçalves da Silva teaches that Afro-Brazilian religious art is eminently a conceptual art that expresses collective values, even when the artists who practice it seem to stand out as individuals with their own perfectly recognizable personal styles.

This art produces, through a set of modeled objects, a system of ideas, in such a way that ideas and objects can express themselves mutually, emphasizing the inseparability between them. The religious idea is not “objectified” in the artistic piece, nor is it a mere “function” of the religious (Silva, 2008, p. 99).

THE AFFECTED BODY - AN EXHIBITION THAT BRINGS OUT THE SENSES

Upon entering the room that houses the artifacts on display, the visitor is immediately drawn in, almost irresistibly. The ecoar exhibition presents Afro-Brazilian religious art, where the body plays a central role, serving as a meeting point between the individual and the collective, culture and nature, the sacred and

5. Read more at: <https://tatakiretaua.webnode.com.br/materias/jingoma-tambores> (accessed June 3, 2024).

the human. In or through the body, the world of the invisible inhabited by gods and ancestors who can return to earth during the ritual trance, and the visible inhabited by the living in their networks of kinship and affinity, are manifested. As a result, all the body's senses have immense value in Afro-Brazilian religions: the eyes discern colors and shapes, touch recognizes textures and densities, songs and prayers that mouths utter, ears receive and memory preserves, particularly through oral traditions, and noses and mouths recognize smells and flavors when tasting elaborate ritual cuisine.



Photo 6 - Interaction between visitor and artifacts from the ecoar exhibition.

Source: MACC collection - Caraguatatuba Museum of Contemporary Art, 2024.

During our visit to the ecoar exhibition, we had the opportunity to witness the dynamic interaction that takes place between individuals and visual representations. This connection between people and artifacts is fascinating, as these objects are imbued with the characteristics and abilities of living beings, almost resembling human bodies. As a participant observer in the museum, our focus was on identifying ways of creating a symmetrical relationship between the bodies portrayed in the images and the individuals viewing them, and determining the degree of closeness or distance experienced. I specifically took note of one devout visitor who demonstrated a strong emotional response to the images of African saints. This individual's deep connec-

tion to these saints was evident through his intense emotions as he recognized his own saint being presented in a tangible form.

Through the practice of ethnographic observation, we are able to discern various aspects, such as body posture and a close look at the sculptures' costumes. When studying the orixás, I realized that devotees pay close attention to the symbolic representations carried by each orixá. Some visitors stopped in front of one sculpture or another, maintaining a reverent silence, as if in prayer or expressing gratitude through requests.

We invited teacher Rose Mary Teles Sousa to record her interactions during the visit to the exhibition:

Each year, they go deeper. The ecoar exhibition brought us the sounds of diversity, of what colonization wanted to erase. I was at the museum on the day that Lu Chiata, of whom I am a friend, showed a lot of knowledge about the admirable set of deities represented, with all her talent in clay, presenting them. I've been to the artist's family yard a few times, where I'm always moved by the love that surrounds that house. (Teles Souza, personal interview, June 18, 2024)

Teles said she was fascinated by the opening of the exhibition: "Being in the museum, seeing my friend in her sacred garments really moved me, because we live in a context of attacks on African religions. She reveals that she admires the artist's courage, highlighting her creative act. Professor Teles also said

In addition to molding in clay, this time Lu dressed the deities in fabrics, weaving details with mastery, marrying them harmoniously with the colors of the engobe. As the daughter of a seamstress, I applauded the novelty! (Teles Souza, personal interview, June 18, 2024)

He ends the interview by saying that "I held Lu's hand to get in touch with the main creative tool of that wonderful pantheon. Aesthetic emotion, for me, always has a mystical character". (Teles Souza, personal interview, June 18, 2024)

The sculptures are considered embodied beings: all made of ceramic and adorned with their symbols. For example, Matamba / Oyá / Iansã, who is the force of nature or deity of fire and air, of transformations, lightning, storms, winds, passions and intense feelings, with her colors: red, pink, coral, is portrayed accompanied by her symbols, which are a sword and a staff with buffalo or ox tail hair at one end (which serves to direct the spirits and energy of the dead). For the faithful visitor, they are treated as people.



Photo 7 - Matamba / Oyá /

Source: Lu Chiata's collection (the set features Matamba / Oyá / Iansã Zaze / Sogbo / Xangô; Vunge / Yori / Ibeji).

Artifacts are not just lifeless objects; they have the potential to act and impact the devotee's life in various ways. Normally, all objects have an owner and their existence depends on their relationship with the one who created them. However, according to the myth, objects can establish their own existence independently of these principles. In this sense, they cease to be just "things" and take on a living identity - as subjects and not as passive elements. This idea makes them responsible as agents of transformation who embody a central concept within cosmologies: that all entities are constantly evolving and influence each other's being.

The 18 deities represented are grouped as follows:



Photo 08 - Deities Aluvaiá / Legba / Exu / N'kosi / Gun / Ogum:

Source - Collection of ceramicist Lu Chiata, 2024



Photo 09 - Mutalambô / Odé / Oxósse; Mutalambô / Odé / Oxósse; Dandalunda / Oxun / Oxun; Terê kompensu / Logun Edé / Logun Edé; Katendê / Agué / Ossain.

Source - Collection of ceramicist Lu Chiata, 2024



Photo 10 - Zaze / Sogbo / Xangô; Matamba / Oyá / Iansã; Vunge / Yori / Ibeji; Mina Lugano / Obá / Obá

Source - Collection of ceramicist Lu Chiata, 2024



Photo 11 - Zumbarandá / Nanã / Nan; Angorô / Dan or Bessen / Oxumarê; Kaviungo / Azansu / Omolu or Obaluaê; Kitembo; Mina Aganji / Ewá / Ewá
Source: collection of ceramist Lu Chiata, 2024.



Photo 12 - kaitumba or kaiala / Aziri Tobossi / Yemanjá; Lembá Dilê / Olissasy / Oxaguiã; Lembarenganga / Olissa / Oxalufã.
Source: collection of ceramist Lu Chiata, 2024.



Photo 13 - Caboclo de Couro, a Boiadeiro;
Caboclo de Pena, an indigenous man.

Source - Collection of ceramist Lu Chiata, 2024.

CONCLUSION

The Ecoar Exhibition was a meeting of religions that showcased the richness and diversity of Afro-Brazilian religious practices in a predominantly Catholic city.

In contrast to the elevation of Caraguatutuba to the category of sanctuary of the Patron Saint St. Anthony, this exhibition reveals the coexistence of different cults in the same urban space.

The Afro-Brazilian works of art on display at Ecoar are more than just aesthetic objects, demonstrating their ability to touch the body and soul of devotees and visitors alike. Each piece is imbued with symbolism and tradition, transcending its physical form to become a transformative force in people's lives. The ecoar exhibition contributed to promoting intercultural dialogue and religious tolerance, valuing the richness of Afro-Brazilian culture and broadening understanding of African religious practices.

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