

THE POWER OF AXÉ AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS AMONG IMAGE, TRANSFORMATIONS AND VISIBILITY

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to present and to discuss some representations of Candomblé produced by those who are part of it, in three Sergipe's *terreiros*, of different lineages. Thinking about it, the imagery cutout chosen is the photograph, since, even though the photographs are seen as clippings of realities and contexts, they present a series of interpretations about what they want to communicate. In addition, I try to think about the performative and political acts that these subjects perform by making visible or not the images that are produced in these three houses. The word Power was thought precisely by the fact that the word Axé represents Force, and therefore referred to its potentiality as a maintainer of religion. With my experience in the field, listening to the reports and in many moments, seeing the photos of people in trance, especially the photos to which I had access in the houses, I heard a lot the phrases "You can feel the *axé* in the photo"; "this saint there has a lot of *axé*", among other phrases that refer to a feeling, to a ritual force, which despite being fixed in an image, is felt by those who recognize it in their daily lives.

KEYWORDS

Altars;
Performances;
Folia de Reis;
Popular Religiosity;
Materiality.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been discussed about rituals in *terreiros*, dealing with ritualistic performance, in particular trance and how to present it in the form of an image. For this article, what I want to bring up is another bias, that of performance, of the agency of this subject who also appears in the photos and who is putting her or himself as a saint's son or daughter in front of a reality that brings a lot of intolerance, a lot of prejudice.

Dealing with issues within the Afro-Brazilian religious universe is a constant challenge, whether for those who, like me, are part of one of these religions, or for those who are curious or study about it. I tried to bring some of my experience as the daughter of Ilê Axé Omin Mafé to discuss a central issue about the power of photography.

During several field trips that I took in 2015, 2016 and 2017, actively participating in the processes and routine of the researched *axé* houses, not only as a member of one of them, but also as a researcher, I was able to learn about various narratives and speeches from various people. Among them, were people who attend those religions and that occupy important positions within this religious hierarchy, as well as people who are not yet fully inserted in this religion or do not occupy positions within this context. Starting from these narratives, knowing the different processes and contexts in which they are inserted and to whom these discourses are intended for and for what purpose, further edified my concern to understand and problematize the controversies of the positions, including the controversies of the photography act and be photographed.

This implied in the discussion of an ethical and political issue that involves not only the preservation of religion against attacks from other religions, but also the *possession of a special wisdom* (Collins 2008, 48) that would give a place “crystallized” or even “naturalized” to this knowledge, as if the heritage registration of this knowledge or of the places where ritual processes take place would guarantee stability.

However, given all the history and semiotic processes that Candomblé presents, this stability based on the fixation of objects, images and heritage registration of its places and rites does not happen. In this sense, disclosing your image, regardless of whether the image is, of the person posing or of her/his embodied *orixá*, is also a political performative act, and this context, this circulation, this selection of images, are also made in a thoughtful way.

Based on examples from different fields, from my doctoral thesis, I bring the example of these three houses that I presented throughout the research: the Santa Barbara Virgin *terreiro*, located in the city of Laranjeiras; the



Abassá Axé Ilê Pilão de Oxaguian, in Aracaju; and the Ilê Axé Omin Mafé, in the city of Riachuelo, all cities in the state of Sergipe. They made me think about the importance of this image and of the *axé* power, as it carries symbols, diverse interpretations and multiple subjectivities, making this ritualistic complex.

When I talk about the potencies of *axé*, thinking of these potencies as being multiple and *axé* being able to encompass several, one of these potencies also affects the issue of image use and the way in which this image is controlled. In other words, the way in which this control and circulation have been carried out in these houses also makes me think about the performance of bodies in rituals and their images.

Geertz (2005) has shown us that religions are complex symbolic systems, whose multivocality, multiplicity of meanings and ways of performing rituals, carry different possibilities for interpreting an individual's reality. It appears that Geertz is more concerned with how subjects think and interpret religion than with a definition and classification that is based on Western scientific methods, and with how religion influences the course of life. In other words, the author thinks about the issue of interaction, what people are communicating, what relationships and meanings are being shared. This concern has a lot to do with my attention both to displacement and to the different interpretations of images and their circulation, as well as to the attention that the subjects in question, my interlocutors, dedicate to these issues.

It is important to highlight that the relationships network provided by this system of control and circulation of images in Candomblé brings different interaction forms between the symbols that are intertwined in these rituals and in the contexts and cuts made from the photographic images. Thinking about these symbolic interactions and forms of communication, we began to perceive performative aspects of these relationships, focusing on non-discursive elements of rituals, analyzing elements that assume a multi-vocal role and seeking to understand how these elements produce their effectiveness, and what are the effects of these elements combined will produce or provoke in the rituals through the production of these images.

With this in mind, I turned to Tambiah (2007), who states that the language of magic is not qualitatively different from the usual language, but that it acts as an intensified and dramatized form. He claims that the same laws of association that apply to language in general are present in magic and that effectiveness derives from the performative character of the rite.



For him, rituals share some formal and standardized features, but these are variable, so the ritual cannot be considered false or wrong in a causal sense, but rather improper, invalid or imperfect. In the same way, the ritual semantics cannot be judged in terms of the false/true dichotomy, but in terms of the expansion of meaning, as a continuity of meaning.

Therefore, treating images as a way of legitimizing something is one of the tools used by Candomblécists to prove, especially for the *axé* community, that the *orixá* is on land, or that the entities are on land.

Furthermore, as it is a religion that suffers persecution and that has always had its memory made invisible and erased from the history of Brazil, recording memories through image files becomes a performative act of resistance, a political act, of safeguarding the narratives through the images registered on each occasion, even if the secrets of the deities are protected from this registration in images. Preserving the image, disclosing it, is a way of demonstrating not only that the rituals exist, but also of fighting religious intolerance, since these religions are erased through various forms of violence to which they are subjected.

For Schieffelin (1985; 1998), these performative elements, and the performance itself, do not aim to construct a symbolic reality in order to present an argument, explanation or description. According to him, the purpose of performance is to make participants experience symbolic meanings as part of the process to which they are already submitted and in which they are acting, that is, the performance works through a double transfer experienced by the actors and the process of interaction between the participants and the discursive symbols and mainly the non-discursive ones.

The author points out that the world is not something concrete or given, but in constant construction, and that the question for ethnography must be how this world is produced. Can we, then, think of these cropped images as a reconstruction of realities related to these spaces?

Drawing a chronological line on my field research, I realize that over these more than 5 years of research, the realities have not been modified and altered only in the sense of having more or less interdictions and circulation of information, or even of members and supporters in the houses, but thinking of a way to also reconstruct the past through the fixation of these images.

Perhaps it is pretentious to use the word reconstruction of the past through ritual images, but I mean a reconstruction in the sense of fixing a rotating memory, which is present there in all environments, based on the preservation of symbolic objects, rituals, clothing, among other objects



that they symbolize a story to be assembled and reassembled through the lens of the person who tells it.

In other words, when we talk about assembling, fixing, circulating, we cannot fail to talk about the agency and control that these images have within these *axé* contexts. So, taking up works like Ortner's (1996), in which the question of power and control will place debates with a political bias, culture will now have a central role, such as building ideologies, which will justify certain social inequalities.

Once again, it is important to think about the context in which these discussions emerged and their limitations within Anthropology itself, especially when it comes to studies on Afro-Brazilian religions. That is precisely because in those contexts, such problems had not emerged or they had not been thought of in different ways or relevance, so that it actually constituted an issue to be problematized by the study of symbols. That's why some people point to the Anthropology of religions as theories that do not address certain contemporary issues, but because they are fixed in a current context as if these contexts and concepts were fixed and could not be revisited.

THE POWER OF SECRET

One of the elements of great importance for these supporters and the houses in question is the preservation of the secret. For mother Martha Sales, Yalaxé of Ilê Axé Omin Mafé, the secret is constitutive of the sacredness of various symbols, such as the herbs used and the way they are used in Yoruba rituals, phrases and chants to manifest something at a certain moment in the ritual, the manipulation of knives and razors, blood and animals, also considered sacred, and all the dances, costumes, and performative acts in which the trance process is imbricated, for example.



IMAGE 1
Orixá Ogum,
incorporated in
Mãe Bequinha,
Yalorixá or *mãe*
de santo of Ilê Axé
Omin Mafé.¹
(Photo: Pai Tony,
2018)

For Babalorixá, or Father, Cristiano José and his sons and daughters, caretaker of the Abassá Axé Ilê Pilão de Oxaguian, for example, it's not necessary to make posts with people in the house in a trance. The only photos I've seen on their social networks of an orixá on land, it does not show the face of the saint's son or daughter, it is not possible to identify his/her identity. Even the photos of the rituals, the ones that are posted are always the ones where people are not in a trance.

For Pai Cris, the moment of trance is something sacred, which does not need to be shared in this way. He is also concerned with the exposure of

1. Photography captures and fixes the moment when the Orixá gives his ilá, his voice, when he/she is called to dance.

the sons and daughters of saints, who often suffer prejudice in the work environment, or in the school environment, such as it was reported to me by people in the house.



IMAGE 2
Ritual's photo for Oxalá at Abassa Ilê Pilão de Oxaguian. (Photo: *Terreiro's* archive)²

The issue of the sacred in the rituals for the Orixás practiced by these houses is very similar to a relationship of pure and impure, like the contagion relationships quoted by Douglas (1976). The author deals with purity and impurity rituals as religious acts that present extremely functional notions in people's daily lives, specifically in the daily lives of religious people, seeking to understand these phenomena by comparing them:

First, we will not hope to understand religious phenomenon by limiting ourselves to studying beliefs in spiritual beings, even if we refine this formula. At certain times in our research, we will perhaps need to examine all known beliefs in other beings: ghosts, ancestors, demons and fairies. But following Robert Smith, we will not assume that, having cataloged the entire spiritual population of the universe, we have grasped the fourth essence of religion. Instead of con-

2. For this house, unlike the first one in question, the photographs must avoid showing the moment of trance, and in this image we can see that the person who is in trance, under the allah or white cloth, does not appear completely. We know that there is someone there, in a trance (for those who are in *axé* and can identify), but for those who see the photo, it is not noticeable who is in a trance.

structuring exclusive definitions, we will try to compare the different conceptions that people have about destiny and their place in the universe. Second, finally, we cannot hope to understand others' ideas about contagion, sacred or secular, before confronting our own. (Douglas 1976, 41)

But how can we compare our ideas of contagion, purity and impurity if the context is completely different? How can we make a comparison between our forms and the forms of others, if in doing so, we are already assuming that there is a common denominator between these concepts, and that there are also the same concepts in these contexts, only with different meanings and interpretations?

Therefore, thinking of the symbol as comparable or as a representation allows the process of interaction and subjectivities that produce these meanings to pass, and not merely a representation of something as already given, pre-established or closed concept.

In the Sergipe's city Laranjeiras, a few kilometers from the capital, the Nagô Santa Bárbara Virgem *terreiro* began its rituals a little more than a century ago, becoming, for the region's residents and practitioners of Afro-Brazilian cults, one of the most traditional and old-timers of the state. An important, if not the most important, aspect for this family of *axé* is the treatment given by the *terreiro* to a notion of "purity". When questioning the Brotherhood about what makes it different from other *terreiros*, not only from Laranjeiras but also from Brazil, Lôxa, Bárbara Cristina dos Santos, responds that this *terreiro* is the only "pure" in the country, a concept developed by the group from "tradition" as a determining factor of "purity":

We classify the Nagô of this *terreiro* as pure because we preserve the African roots, that is, everything that was brought from Africa by the Africans who lived in Laranjeiras remains in the same way as it was brought. The Virgin Santa Bárbara Brotherhood did not adhere to new things such as the question of the *caboclo*, for example, which comes from the *toré*, which is from the indigenous, culture, and not African. That purity comes from there, from the preservation of what is traditional African. (Santos, in an interview with the author on 02/04/2011)

The idea of "purity" for this Candomblé *terreiro* is seen as something reminiscent of what comes from Africa, especially the Nagô cults. Dantas (1987, 122) refers the idea of purity to African cultural institutions that it aims to reproduce in a trustworthy manner, thus becoming a form of resistance to transformation. Capone (2009, 122), quoting the work of Dantas (1988), "Vovó Nagô and Papai Branco", states that this heterogeneity in the religious field means that religious identity is constantly negotiated between social actors.

According to Capone, what constitutes the daily life of certain Afro-Brazilian cults is the opposition between a “pure” form— which represents more an ideal model than a reality—and a “mixed” form, that is, this opposition marks the central difference among Candomblé houses of worship. This “mixture” would result in confusion, and it is necessary to maintain the general order of the world expressed in the classification scheme.

However, it is not always possible to prevent certain undesirable “mixtures” that introduce disorder, and in this case, it is necessary not only to identify the types of “mixtures” that cause harm, but also to determine the place for the hybrid, the one that confuses the scheme general of the world. It is this task that faces what would be “mixed Africans” (Dantas 1988, 121).

For the members of the Santa Bárbara Virgem *terreiro*, the pure Nagô model is what marks the difference between them and the “other”, previously mentioned by Dantas (1987). Those that mix other elements, those in which the original tradition is incorporated with other elements, are considered perverted. Also according to Dantas (1987, 124), this idea of purity can be articulated with the idea of power, since within this religious system, demarcating the types of *terreiro* as pure and mixed is also a way of marking the space of each one, thus seeking legitimacy and hegemony within this classification of power.

Regarding the Virgin Santa Barbara *terreiro*, in order to understand how they conceptualize, see and use this concept of purity in their daily rituals and practices, it was necessary to deepen what this native concept is and how a non-native anthropologist can deal with this concept without appropriating it as your own.

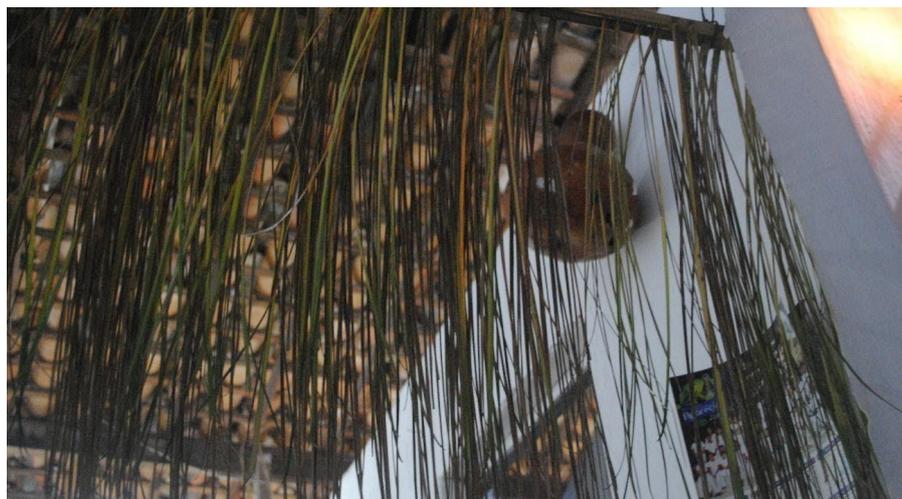


IMAGE 03
Terreiro Santa Bárbara Virgem, prepared for the yam harvest ritual, september, 2017. (Photo: The author).

3. In this house, photography of people in trance is prohibited, and photographing or fixing on images, as people in these *terreiros* studied think of photographs, of moments of trance and sacred rooms of the house is to disrespect movement, memory, which should be fixed, for them, but not through the photographic image.

According to Deleuze and Guatari (1992), the way of operating the concepts is not through the mode of contemplation or communication. For the authors, concepts are not objective and do not need to be, they arise in the controversy or rivalry between knowledge. The authors claim that several components make up the concept and it is always under construction.

In this sense, they make use of the notion of the other to demonstrate the relationship with the other, showing that there is no transcendental self, but that the self and the other are interconnected. Therefore, the way to work the concept within this scope is to think about how the concept was assembled, in this case, how the concept of purity was built by the Nagô Brotherhood, without assuming our vision of purity as something rooted and fixed, but working with conceptions as possibilities, destabilizing the concept we are used to. Thus, the translation of the concept varies according to the individual view, the context and the purpose, therefore, it cannot be treated as just a form of mediation:

There is no simple concept. Every concept has components, and is defined by them. So, it has a figure. It is a multiplicity, although not all multiplicity is conceptual. There is no single-component concept: even the first concept, that by which a philosophy “begins”, has several components, since it is not evident that philosophy must have a beginning and that, if it determines one, it must add to it. a point of view or a reason. Descartes, Hegel, Feuerbach not only do not begin with the same concept, they do not have the same concept of beginning. Every concept is at least double, or triple, etc. There is also no concept that has all the components, since it would be pure and simple chaos: even the so-called universals, as ultimate concepts, must leave the chaos circumscribing a universe that explains them (contemplation, reflection, communication...). Every concept has an irregular outline, defined by the cipher of its components. This is why, from Plato to Bergson, we find the idea that the concept is a matter of articulation, cutting and superposition. It is a whole, because it totals its components, but a fragmentary whole. It is only under this condition that it can leave the mental chaos, which does not cease to spy on it, to adhere to it, to reabsorb it (Deleuze e Guatari 1992, 25).

Based on these assumptions, Sahlins (2001) reiterates that the concepts are linked to other concepts, the readings or the way of doing things, it is that they are different, and therefore, the translations are different. In this sense, “purity” becomes directly related to the concept of “tradition”, since the pure is the unmixed, that is, that which is not impure, profane, which for them would be the elements of Umbanda or *caboclo* rituals. In the case of the Catholic religion, for them, the elements are not considered impure, but sacred. Douglas (1976, 196) cites in his work ‘Purity and danger’, that purity is the enemy of change, that is, it is incompatible with ambiguity, and, therefore, inflexible. In Nagô, it is exactly this



relationship with purity that the members of the house want to pass on to the “outside”, the other, that purity refers to an unchanging tradition.

For Eliade (1996), the sacred means the manifestation of an entity that is considered sacred, like certain objects in some societies. The construction of the sacred is given by human consciousness, that is, the author presents the sacred also in opposition to what is profane and adds that the sacred is related to power, because for the religious man, nothing can begin or manifest itself without previous guidance.

Within this context, the sacred, as well as purity, assumes a primordial role in the Santa Barbara Virgem *terreiro* as a guiding element of the house’s ritual activities and, consequently, purity is an element that for these members is directly related and, sometimes, incorporates to the sacred, establishing a relationship that interconnects, forms and transforms together. For Strathern (1995), it is the relationships established between the concepts that must be observed, and that anthropologists have insisted on focusing on the parts that can form a whole, instead of observing the relationships that these parts establish and how they change and promoting displacement of concepts.

When it comes to the pure and impure in Nagô, Lôxa Bárbara Cristina dos Santos says that this *terreiro* is the only pure in the country, as it comes from their ancestors and they maintain this tradition in the same way it was passed on to them. Furthermore, purity is also linked to a notion of sacredness, making it an inter-relational concept and composed of multiple elements characterized by the own family.

In the Nagô *terreiro*, the notion of sacredness and purity is present at all times, including in the rites and rituals performed by the *axé* family and by Lôxa on a daily basis. These rites must fulfill a sequential step in which everything must be respected as a way to preserve the sacred. The objects of the holy room, for example, can only be handled by people who have a ‘clean body’, that is, who have not ingested alcohol, drugs, or had sexual contact. Therefore, the definition of purity as a native concept from these authors demonstrates that the concept is multiple and operates in different ways through the relationships established between them, and that there is no way to define a native concept through our perception of the world without searching the context, logic and purpose with which it operates, within a locus of complexity, for elements that are often unknown to us.

POWER OF AXÉ AND ITS PERFORMATIVE ACT

If the control of the use of photography in the context of Nagô is intimately linked to the very concept of “purity” and the disputes surrounding the



preservation of a “secret” sphere that surrounds the “knowledge” and the “foundation” of this purity, this control leads to other issues in a broader disputes territory over recognition, and therefore power, in the relationships network of these religious houses.

Although there is a standardization and chronological sequence of events and the material use of symbols, no ritual is equal to another. Unpredictability is also an important marker for these and other Afro-Brazilian houses.

There is no way to predict certain events, the trances of some people who are not part of the family and, often, the saint’s daughters who have never gone through the incorporation process and who go through these rituals for the first time. In addition, there is also a dispute territory and power relations that is not evident to the “outsiders”, but which is recognized by the “insiders”, as situations in which fathers or mothers of saints from other houses participate in the festivities not only as a way to honor, but to observe what is being done, if there are “flaws”, if the Yawós are really incorporated and incorporated with the orixás, among other situations that were reported to me and others that I experienced in other ritual moments in the houses.

These power relations and these disputes also operate as symbols within the social dynamics that are experienced by these groups, at least in the city of Riachuelo, in which the *axé* house I am part of is. All this material and immaterial symbology is not visible in the photos, not even to the eyes of those who photograph, or those who act as interlocutors through the images taken.

According to Dubois (2010, 168), the photographic act implies the idea of passage, unlike our time, which is thought from the idea of duration, the time of an image abandons the idea of real, chronic time, and passes to the idea of a symbolic time, that is, inscribed in a new temporality, and this small passage or fragment is installed forever as something immutable in the image.

The article by Etienne Samain and Fabiana Bruno (2016), “How to think about a photographic archive: a double experience”, in which they write about the experiences and sensations provoked by seeing images, and how to think about photography and photographic archives, leads me to reflect on my own experience when looking at the photos I found in the field—whether those kept in bags in people’s homes, or those stored in social media albums or even those displayed on the walls of *terreiros*—an experience that provokes sensations and emotions that also evoke feelings related to the past and my trajectory with these people and in these homes.

Samain and Bruno (2016) state that images are also a documentation, a memory and a revelation:

Seduced by the curious appeal of the images, the producer, in turn, undertakes a slow descent into the heart of his/her images. With them, he/she evidently goes to encounter memories, and other reminiscences that surface without, however, satisfying him/her. Not only do the images remain silent but, in this case, they do not necessarily recall the context of the records, even less the reasons and reasons for the emergence of the photographs. This muteness provokes the memory that demands a response to which the return to the text of the diaries offers a way out (Samain e Bruno 2016, 115).

In this sense, photography “represents” something that is not itself, referring to something outside of itself, bringing a transfiguring character to the signs and symbols that compose it, not only refracting these signs, but also re-signifying them. Based on this re-signification of signs, Gonçalves and Head (2009, 11), when speaking of mimesis as a “perception through images that allows a fusion between the object of perception and the body of the preceptor, creating a relationship that is not limited to the visual or audiovisual, but that permeates the senses”, make us think about how the image and its use are capable of affecting not only those who see them, but also as an anthropological practice, through corporeality and all the connections that the photographic image is able to arouse. One of these connections that became evident throughout the field research is the issue of image and its relationship with memories.

Between texts and images, complicity as well as reciprocity are obvious, necessary and decisive. It is good to remember what Gombrich wrote: “If we consider communication from the privileged point of view of language, we will discover that the visual image is unique in terms of its ability to awaken, that its use for expressive purposes is problematic and that, reduced to itself, the possibility of being equal to the enunciative function of language is radically lacking” (Gombrich 1995, 323).

It will be important, therefore, to discover even better the complex grammars of the verbal and the visual, when their singular conjugations decline. (Bruno & Samain 2016, 115).

There is a dispute over the costumes (which look like the garments of the old court, made with expensive and sumptuous fabrics), there is a dispute over the dances (the orixás who dance well, the orixás who don't dance well), dispute for the public (more crowded parties, less crowded), decoration (room with lots of flowers, fabrics, etc.), chants, strength of Rum, Rumpi and Lé (three drums that are considered entities because of the sounds they emit to call the orixás), in short, this whole range of



symbols that appear through the relationships and experience of those who see and experience something related to or close to religion.

Therefore, I also return to Briggs' argument (1996), when he says that culture is performed in small acts (which for me would be rites), and that these acts are dynamic, that is, they are reiterated daily, transformed through contexts, moments, situations, in which conflict permeates relationships. Briggs and other authors argue that the symbol creates processes of communication and relationships that will give its meaning in the context in which it is inserted and that it is also transforming through experience and practice. The contexts and appropriations of symbols and their meanings are different, and to understand or seek the meaning of each symbol, we must first understand in which context it is inserted and its meaning as emergent in each of these contexts.

So, if we take this type of photography—the photograph of the sacred or secret—as a “product”, we can see that this product is formed by a set of practices, which go beyond a bricolage of symbols that fit together, but that include a series of factors that act simultaneously, such as sound, action, movement, and which can be “read” and interpreted as something that expands beyond what is “visible” and mounted on a piece of paper or a picture on the wall.

According to Mitchell (1996), in “What do pictures really want”, images are not intended to be decoded and interpreted. They do not speak, but whoever speaks produces them through their eyes, the voice we perceive in the image is the voice of the interlocutor. Anyway, the interpretation of those who see the image is also what gives voice to it, that is, those who produce and those who see the image act as interlocutors.

In addition to the interpretation and elements that an image presents, Didi-Huberman (2012) alerts us to think of the image as a visual impression of time, in which the present acts more as a supporting element than as a main element of all relationships of time that an image presents and that are questioned by the different interpretations and interruptions. Thinking about it, how to treat the symbols that the photographs present within this religious context, without defining them?

In “Stories, Becomings and Fetishes of Afro-Brazilian Religions: An Anthropological Symmetrization Essay”, Goldman (2009) provides an overview of symbolic discourses and interpretations within Afro-Brazilian cults, focusing on the forms of interaction between these studies on the symbols with society.



Historically, in Brazil, the stories and myths produced about Candomblé were told by its followers, but adapted to a scientific language in academic works, since, until today, the discourses produced by science tend to be classified as the “true ones”, to the detriment of the discourses of religious adherents as “fictitious”. Goldman points out that perhaps this is why what would be “the other” is necessary, to become “the self” in the academy.

In this sense, I place myself as a researcher, but also as a native of the religion, even if with limited knowledge within this sphere, since in Candomblé, learning is constant and continuous, and time acts almost in a materialized way, as a body that determines the right time and time to learn the rituals and meanings inside the *axé* house.

What appears is not always what it is, and what it is, is not always what appears. But if we cannot delimit the symbols and define them, how can we also define what it is or is not inside these houses? How to deal with these symbols and with this entire performative event that is a celebration or ritual in Candomblé, without delimiting and defining the symbols and without transforming them into a universalization of characteristics?

An image can be assembled through the experiences of those who are photographing, but it can also be multi-interpreted and have several intertwined readings, not only for those who observe the photograph, but also for those who photograph and transpose countless passages and experiences to that montage that helps to compose the photographic act. The body, in this context, manifests itself as a holistic being, in the sense that the body manifests itself as a whole, including in writing— writing also expresses a corporeality.

From this, there is a fine line between what may or may not be real in the image, not because of the incorporation itself, but because when showing a fixed image of the trance, its *axé* potency will only be understood as such, through the image, for those who know this power, for those who have already had access to it. That is, even if there is a photographic image or a video showing some symbol or ritual that supposedly makes up the secret of *axé*, such a secret is not necessarily unveiled or it is not shown how to reproduce it by other people who are not religious, or even for those that are, because each ritual is unique, even if the same tools, the same fundamentals are used.



IMAGE 4
Xirê's opening in Olubajê, or ritual to Orixá Omolu at Ilê Axé Omin Mafê. (Photo: The author).

In the photo above, for example, there is a food used for Exu that, for those who do not understand, it is just a food, and for those who understand, even though it is a known type of food, they may not know how it is made, what is the order and arrangement in the clay dishes, as well as the songs that are sung when celebrating this orixá, among other factors that make up the potency of the axé of Exu's food. There is a gap between the world and what human beings produce. This void between the thing and the copy produces something, it can be a reaction, reproduction.

As much as the image has the ability to freeze, fix, the meaning and the signifier, it is important to think of the body as a whole, and its parts, as something that cannot be externalized as a whole.

The fixation of the image is a cutout, it shows something incomplete, even in relation to the extension of the body, if we think of trance as an extension of the orixá in the body— or vice versa. Also, according to Dubois (2010), it is worth noting that the photo is not just an image, but an act, that is, something that is not possible to be conceived outside of an action technique, and when I use the word incomplete, it is in sense of conceiving the image as an act without limits in its conception and reception by not only the one who manufactures it (or activates it), but also by the one who receives it.

If we think of this mounted image as an experience of perception, we can think of photography through another bias than the reinforcement of stereotypes, Rabelo (2008) proposes to think of this type of photography in another way, thinking of the image as a political act developed from past experience. The political act that the author mentions, refers, above

all, to fixing these realities that reflect these daily lives, but which are daily erased out of this imagistic world.

The surface of the body—dressing is a way of communicating our social status—and body adornments constitute a cultural medium, perhaps one of the most specialized in forming the communication of a personal and social identity. Turner (2008) says that we can think about the social roles and social structure of a people through their ornaments. If Turner is interested in how we adorn the body, other authors are concerned with the body itself in this social participation:

The body is in constant relationship with space, not only inhabiting it, but also being space. Thus, the body is a social space, it relates to other spaces and participates in the production of space. In this way, bodies have an enormous potential - bodies outside the norm even more -, as they have a strong potential for subversion that can allow the transgression of the norms that regulate public spaces. If we add artistic performances to the body, we perceive forms of activism and resistance in which we use our own body as a support for action in the public space, which makes visible the relations of domination and social injustice, generating a new way of doing activism (Santos 2019, 137).

We make the mistake of treating differences as things and things as naturally different from others, not thinking in a reflexive way about what the networks of relationships produce, especially when it comes to forms of sociability also between houses.

We know that there is a lot of research on the persecution suffered by Afro-Brazilian religions, as well as a lot of material about this in the press, in discussions in social movements and in other spaces for welcoming the *terreiro* population. In this sense, I do not come through the research to show the violence rates against these peoples, or the intolerance crimes, or talk about the persecution suffered over so many decades.

What I tried and proposed to think and do, as an Orixá's daughter, anthropologist and researcher, is to reflect, based on my experience in *axé* and as a researcher—since I became a Orixá's daughter throughout the research, between the master's end and the beginning of the doctorate—on the preservation of memories fixed and reflected through photographic images, as resistance acts in moments of intolerance and political conservatism, in addition to thinking about the ways in which subjects, through their bodies, as means of communication between the sacred and the mundane, bring a potentializing perspective of *axé* through what is fixed in the image during ritualistic processes.

The permanence of these *terreiros* is also an act of resistance, and all these images of ritual performance extend their existence beyond a temporal moment when people gather for the consecration of the sacred.

CONCLUSION

This article was developed from my inquiries and experiences over a decade, since I had my first practical contact with Afro-Brazilian religions and cults. My work field started from the Santa Bárbara Virgin *terreiro*, in the city of Laranjeiras, which culminated in a master's thesis on gender relations and kinship in the area. From there, for the doctorate, I decided to research the circulation of images, the control over their production and circulation, and I added two houses: the Abassá Ilê Axé Pilão de Oxaguian, and the Ilê Axé Omin Mafé. The first is the house of a great friend and pai-de-santo, and the last is the house of which I belong as an Orixá's daughter.

In addition to the relationships of affection, the choice of houses was due to the fact that they are from different nations, within the Afro-Brazilian religious universe, as well as because they are houses with relationships of sociability between them, but that think very differently about the control and circulation of photographic images in religious rituals.

I opted for field research, or the ethnographic method, taking on the role of a native researcher, after many reflections on whether or not to move away from the field. I stopped to think and I couldn't make this separation, and I wouldn't even be able to, because there are the relationships and I believe they are what make the body of this text have substance, perhaps not as classic theoretical research, but thinking of a bias that also raises questions from a native and academic point of view, thinking that it is not necessary to dissociate one from the other.

Initially, my proposal was to analyze the uses and potencies of photographic images in Candomblé *terreiros* in Sergipe, thinking of introducing concerns about the photographic image in Candomblé, in order to seek to think, through its relations and concepts, the issue of secrecy, prohibition and its relations with the public and the private. These concerns were considered throughout the text, since houses have different ways of doing and thinking, as we could see throughout the writings presented here.

It is in this sense that I think the most coherent way to deal with the use of these images and their circulation has been to point out the processes by which I arrived at certain interpretations and to pass this on to whoever is reading them. After all, we can no longer think of an Anthropology that can handle everything, and this reflection on how we can speak or pass



on this knowledge and in what context we can do it is what seems to me to be the most pertinent path, closer to what Anthropology intends to do.

In line with Benjamin's (1987) critique of the way photography is generally used as an index of the real, as a clipping of reality in some way, we were able to problematize here, albeit briefly, the power of the photographic image to fix something and be able to shift it to another place, showing that the image is the medium of the real and not a copy of the real. The great challenge of working with images, especially ritual ones, is to think precisely about the context and the image in a relational way, how they are thought of in relation to the other by those who are watching.

In addition, photography takes us to a multivocality based on the interpretations of each subject and their experience or experience. It is as if the photograph approached what is considered real, as if it penetrated reality. And this is where questions that are still open come in: How do we deal with the other's scene without running the risk of creating dichotomies between the other's knowledge and ours? Thinking precisely about how to portray this intersubjective space that presents itself between what would be reality and the imaginary.

We have also seen that the power of photography to establish a world of images that replaces its referents is found all the time in our daily life. Photography produces an immediate moment, while in anthropology temporal displacement can be seen serving specific power interests.

Dealing with issues within the Afro-Brazilian religious universe is a constant challenge, whether for those who, like me, are part of one of these religions, or for those who are curious or scholars of the subject.

I tried to bring some of my experience as the daughter of an Orixá of Ilê Axé Omin Mafé to think about the power of photography. This whole premise, as far as I was able to verify and perceive throughout my observations and conversations with members of the houses, is that it is founded not only on the experiences lived and told by mothers and fathers to children of Orixás, but also on the narrated and told stories intertwined within the contexts presented in the images seen.

The word Power was conceived precisely because the word *Axé* represents Strength, and, therefore, refers me to its potential as maintainer of religion. In Candomblé, when people want *axé* or say that a house or ritual is full of *axé*, it means saying that there is strength, there is an energetic potency that makes people there come out strengthened and move this *axé* so that everyone who is there present, receive this force from the energy of the Orixás.

With my experience in the field, listening to the reports and in many moments, seeing the photos of people in trance, especially the photos I had access to Mãe Bequinha's house, I heard a lot the phrases "You can feel the *axé* in the photo"; "that saint there has a lot of *axé*", among other phrases that refer to a feeling, to a ritual force, which despite being fixed in an image, is felt by those who recognize it in their daily lives.

When I talk about the potencies of *axé*, thinking of these potencies as being multiple and *axé* being able to encompass several, one of these potencies also affects the issue of image use and the way in which this image is controlled. So, as I mentioned before, in this issue of the uses of images and social networks and the way in which this control and this circulation have been carried out in these houses, it is also necessary to think about the performance of bodies in rituals and their images.

I leave these questions here, and I go on to say that this work was an attempt to catch a breath to also face the lack of physical archives, such as academic production on Candomblés in Sergipe, and the lack of research production on these stories that should be recorded beyond orality.

I believe that there is still a lot to be thought about, added and said, however, I leave the open lines in these writings, which, as in Candomblé, flow to the most diverse fields, paths and present contexts that unfold over time and processes of the houses.

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