

OSHUN'S ABEBÉ: SYMBOLIC EXAMPLES OF CANDOMBLÉ'S AFRO-RELIGIOUS IMAGINARY AND KNOWLEDGE FROM AN AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVE

ABEBÉ DE OXUM: EXEMPLIFICAÇÕES SIMBÓLICAS DO IMAGINÁRIO E SABERES AFORRELIGIOSOS DO CANDOMBLÉ DESDE A ESTÉTICA

ABEBÉ DE OXUM: EJEMPLOS SIMBÓLICOS DEL IMAGINÁRIO Y EL CONOCIMIENTO AFRO-RELIGIOSOS DEL CANDOMBLÉ DESDE UNA PERSPECTIVA ESTÉTICA



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ABSTRACT: We present an aesthetic-symbolic analysis, in the light of the Theory of the imaginary postulated by Gilbert Durand, related to the symbologies manifested aesthetically in the mirror wielded by *Oxum*, the *abebé*. In order to consider the subjectivities stemming from the *Candomblé* cult body, we highlight intelligible issues stemming from Afro-religiosity from an aesthetic perspective. We return to the thought capital of an Afro-diasporic tradition and the knowledge emanating from its rites through photographing its sacred objects. The approach constructed in conjunction with the Theory of the Imaginary results in an interpretation of the apparatuses of the sacred that demarcate the artifacts that makeup religiosity and conceives a path of materialization of the presence of the metaphysical divine on land. It also transposes meanings inherent in its symbolic characteristics, synthesized through sacred artifacts and their hidden connotations.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics. Afrodiasporic knowledge. *Orixás*. *Candomblé*.

RESUMO: *Apresentamos uma análise estético-simbólica, à luz da teoria do imaginário postulada por Gilbert Durand, relacionada às simbologias manifestadas esteticamente no espelho empunhado por Oxum, o abebé. De modo a considerar as subjetividades provenientes do corpo de culto do Candomblé, relevamos questões inteligíveis provenientes da afrorreligiosidade, desde uma perspectiva estética. Retomamos o capital pensado de uma tradição afrodiaspórica e os saberes que emanam dos seus ritos a partir da fotografia de seus objetos sacros. A aproximação construída conjuntamente à Teoria do Imaginário resulta numa interpretação dos aparatos do sagrado que demarcam os artefatos constituintes da religiosidade e concebe um percurso de materialização da presença do divino metafísico em terra. Ainda, transpõe significados inerentes às suas características simbólicas, sintetizadas através de artefatos sacros e suas conotações ocultas.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Estética. Saber afrodiaspórico. Orixás. Candomblé.*

RESUMEN: *Presentamos un análisis estético-simbólico, a la luz de la teoría de lo imaginario postulada por Gilbert Durand, relacionado con las simbologías manifestadas estéticamente en el espejo esgrimido por Oxum, el abebé. Para considerar las subjetividades que surgen del cuerpo de culto del Candomblé, destacamos las cuestiones inteligibles que surgen de la afrorreligiosidad desde una perspectiva estética. Retomamos el capital de pensamiento de una tradición afro-díaspóra y el conocimiento que emana de sus ritos a través de la fotografía de sus objetos sagrados. El enfoque construido en conjunción con la Teoría de lo Imaginario resulta en una interpretación de los aparatos de lo sagrado que demarcan los artefactos que componen la religiosidad y concibe una vía de materialización de la presencia de lo divino metafísico sobre el terreno. También transpone significados inherentes a sus características simbólicas, sintetizados a través de los artefactos sagrados y sus connotaciones ocultas.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Estética. Conocimiento afrodiaspórico. Orixás. Candomblé.*

Introduction

The present research is situated within the context of the aesthetics expressed in the formal aspects constituting the vestments used in Candomblé and its devotional practices directed towards *Oxum*³. We present the *Terreiro T'Aziry Ladè*, founded in the city of Caruaru, in the Agreste region of Pernambuco, as the locus of the ritualistic practices analyzed here. This religious space has provided insight into issues emerging from the cult and preserves the traditions of the *Jeje-Mahi Nation Candomblé*. It represents a universe that allows for alternative perspectives on Afro-religious traditions, where knowledge is directly related to the agents composing its practices.

Located in the peripheral geography of Monte Bom Jesus, this *Terreiro* serves as a physical space that fosters the potential of subaltern bodies, promoting the gathering of subjectivities in a space that welcomes pluralities. The exchange of knowledge driven by the strengthening of bonds within this space challenges the structures of conceptual capital, imagination, and tradition, fostering a unique cosmology. By presenting a close relationship with the knowledge propagated through *Candomblé* tradition, such derivations are reflected in the entirety of its rites, where aesthetic derivations convey their own meanings and express the imagination (Carvalho; Cardoso, 2015).

Conceived at the core of the anthropological trajectory⁴ of the individuals forming the cult body of the *Terreiro*, the imagination reveals the immanent and transcendent impressions of corporealities, extending based on exchanges, flows, and the social context in which they are situated. This imagination also resides in the possibility of not rationalizing the transcendent characteristics perceived in Candomblé, in the realization of the interpretative path stemming from experiences that are considered ephemeral but have the potential to synthesize aspects related to tradition and its symbolic traits in historical chronology (Durand, 2012).

The process of symbolization is, therefore, inextricably linked to human nature (Pitta, 2005). Furthermore, it traverses social and cultural structures, shaped by the construction of imaginaries arising from the experiences of individuals and their relationships with the spaces they occupy. *Candomblé*, as a space for the dissemination of knowledge and the construction of religious identity, creates possibilities for the manifestation of the intelligible in a sensitive field, where aesthetic impressions, recognized by the senses, are emphasized.

³ A deity of Yoruba origin, it is closely related to the river of the same name in Nigeria. In Brazil, it is associated with the developments of the diaspora and its cult is associated with fresh water and waterfalls.

⁴ As postulated by Gilbert Durand, the anthropological path is considered the path taken by human beings to give meaning to their contexts, permeated by exchanges between subjects, nature, and the unconscious.

In this study, we reflect from both an ethnographic perspective, guided by the contributions of this method to the revival of symbolic consciousness in the mental organization of social groups (Durand, 1994), and a phenomenological perspective, dealing with the search for the immediate core of conceptions regarding the sacred (Bachelard, 1993) about the symbolic dimensions arising from the aesthetic impressions that constitute Brazilian Afro-religiosity. Through the artifacts associated with the materialization on earth of the *orixá Oxum*, in dialogue with the theory of the imaginary (Durand, 1994, 2012), we seek confluences and their intersections that resonate within the indicated theoretical frameworks.

The question that initiates the observations presented here is: *how does the aesthetics of the instruments related to Oxum symbolically represent the knowledge of Candomblé, from the perspective of its imaginary at Terreiro T'Aziry Ladè?* Regarding the specific objectives, the aim is: to analyze the aesthetic construction of *Oxum's* instruments and artifacts; to present an approach to knowledge related to aesthetics considering the Afro-diasporic tradition of Candomblé; and to identify the aesthetic-symbolic projections of *Oxum's* cult artifacts in Candomblé.

We do not aim, with this study, to reach a final conclusion on the symbolic possibilities of the sacred in Candomblé; such a move would be reductionist and inconsistent with the multiplicity inherent in non-Western thinking (Durand, 1994). We believe that each *Terreiro* harbors its own cosmology, relative to the subjectivities of its members. It is based on this perspective that we establish the arguments proposed here, which focus on the tradition of *Candomblé* at *Terreiro T'Aziry Ladè* and its ancestral knowledge.

Aesthetics: From the Metaphysical to the Sensitive, Reflection of Senses

Constituted through the intersections present in the daily life of *Terreiros* and the aspects related to the pluralities composing their imaginaries, aesthetic emanations are understood as scopes that traverse subjectivities, directing them toward the formation of collective imaginaries.

Almeida (2015) thus understands the aesthetic dimension as a perspective in which sensations conceived through the intervention of the senses are featured. Aesthetics guides primary impressions, preceding the efforts of rationalization, where the ability to feel and understand the world sensibly is exercised. This study involves an ethnographic and phenomenological exercise of sacred symbols, whose appearances synthesize moral, aesthetic,

and cultural attributes, expressing intentions that transcend form (Geertz, 1989) in its elemental sense. We consider, therefore, that the mediation of the allegorical properties of Afro-Brazilian sacredness in *Candomblé* is intrinsically signaled in the vestments of its ritual activities (Carvalho; Ferreira, 2022).

The meaning constructions attributed to instruments and deities wielding them cannot simplistically exemplify the affections and knowledge woven into the cult representations contained in the ritual vestments, nor the devotion built between Candomblé practitioners and such utensils. The art evidenced in the rites is directly related to the bodies (Silva, 2008), as it is through the carnal apparatus that the ceremonial trance of the *Orixás'* presence among people is manifested, being thus essential to their earthly presence.

Rabelo (2015) understands that the practices perpetuated in the *Terreiro* are composed of layers that aim to direct the gaze from the visible to the invisible and establish the presence of the sensitive aspect through the materialities that anchor the divine presence. Configured in the interaction between subaltern bodies and their experiences, the process of symbolization constitutes the core of human existence and is inherent to this condition (Pitta, 2005), as it involves immaterial considerations concerning the reproduction of grand ancestral images.

The notions guiding the aesthetic perception of vestments in Candomblé are grounded in the arrangement of their elements, which stand apart from hegemonic constructs and are influenced by the impacts of coloniality. This perspective transcends the reductionist bias imposed by coloniality, fostering the production of alternative knowledge. In valuing the construction and perpetuation of diverse knowledge, based on principles of ancestry and ethical and spiritual engagement for the harmonization between beings and nature (Ferreira; Freire; Oliveira, 2019), it is through religiosity that practitioners reframe both their integration into communities and their resistance to colonial impositions.

The sensitive manifestations of the intelligible dimensions present in *Candomblé* are thus dramatized through aesthetics, with multiple presentations integrating the rites constituting the tradition. Among these manifestations of transcendent characteristics, in their immanent natures, stand out the artifacts used by the *orixás* on earth. Presented in their formal apparatus, these items formalize the gestural, symbolic, archetypal, and mythological properties of the deities to whom they are attributed, thereby promoting the unfolding of the imagination into sensitive representations.

Knowledge Construction Based on Candomblé

The reflections considered here view Candomblé's religious tradition as part of the practices aimed at preserving ancestral knowledge. The micropolitics of religiosity restore the African memory brought to Brazil during the diaspora and recover identities related to ethnicities, cultures, languages, and traditions. According to Quijano (2005), such impositions led various peoples, such as the *Congolese*, *Bacongos*, *Yoruba*, *Fons*, and *Zulus*, to become merely "blacks" and "slaves" in an effort to annihilate their identities.

Parés (2007) notes that efforts to preserve ancestral customs converge at a singular point where different ethnicities and their particular rituals align within a horizon where *Candomblés* establish themselves as integrative environments. Based on the congregation of disparities and similarities within Afro-Brazilian liturgies, the scope of expressions contained in the framework of religiosity embraces cultural traits that trace back to African cultural identity, represented in its sensitive and intelligible aspects.

The constitution of an epistemology grounded in *Candomblé* refers to constructions that transcend the chronology of colonial Brazil and extend into contemporary times, where marginalized bodies resonate with their beliefs and aspirations. Enchantment (Machado; Oliveira, 2022), crucial for the recovery of ancestries, establishes an intellectual and spiritual frontier capable of articulating knowledge derived from interaction with the metaphysical present in the *Terreiro*.

Relegated to the peripheries and distanced from urban centers, these individuals organized their experiences around their communities, where they structured a collective identity in harmony with their imagination, considered a component of both ancestral and contemporary experiences, whether conscious or not. The unconscious manifested in *Terreiro* practices is related to epistemologies that recover mnemonic and ancestral particularities of an atavistic nature. According to Durand (1994), this represents a layer in the constitution of phenomena that favors a preference for symbolism, related to the metaphysical, the sacred, and the supernatural.

The return to the unconscious present in the structures of worship in the *Terreiro* occurs gradually, as layers reveal themselves when contrasted with the intelligible relationships promoted by interaction with their sensitive contributions, materialized in the artifacts that substantiate the cult. The character attributed to such instruments also reveals aspects of their potential for understanding, rationalized through aesthetic synthesis (Carvalho; Cardoso, 2015),

which dynamizes the grand ideas permeating conceptions about these deities. From this attribute, hidden meanings are transposed in a sensitive manner.

The preservation of traditions denotes their presence in the aesthetic elements associated with the *orixás*, used by the deities during their stay on human territory, endowed with specific functions. The art that sketches the aspirations of the metaphysical in its sensitive dimension does not exist merely for aesthetic appeal but formalizes the manifestation of the sacred. This sacred character, related to intelligible dimensions, is aesthetically dimensioned through tangible formal representations.

When a craftsman carves a wooden oxê (axe) for Xangô, which will later be sanctified through a leaf bath, he does not attribute anima (soul) to something supposedly inanimate. Instead, he works on the form and content of an object that is already divine by nature (the tree itself), emphasizing its sacred expression (Almeida; Santos; Cardoso, 2016, p. 2, our translation).

The knowledge within this group establishes meanings for its symbolic phenomena and shapes an imagination that penetrates both its unconscious and conscious layers. As Pitta (2005, p. 13, our translation) states: "Ultimately, nothing is insignificant to human beings, and assigning meaning involves entering the symbolic realm." The symbolic nature of experiences centers around the repetition of grand ancestral images scrutinized in the unconscious, and according to Durand (1994, p. 401, our translation): "Memory and image, on the side of duration and spirit, oppose intelligence and matter, on the side of space. Finally, in the famous exposition of the theory of fabulation," since fabulation is inherent to the becoming of existence.

The Theory of the Imaginary: Centering of Images

Woven into the anthropological trajectory of personal experiences and the interactions between individuals, the imaginary is constituted by bodies and, through them, defined as the set of images and their implications that constitute human capital and its representations (Durand, 2012). Constituted through continuous exchanges subject to the concept of plurality and the breadth of experiences, this input, endowed with vicissitudes and non-reductionist, is fully present in the cultural constructions related to *Candomblé*. This notion radiates into the divinities worshipped in this tradition, whose representations intuit synthesis through their artifacts.

The imaginary that traverses the structural constructs of culture is, therefore, conceived as an expression of the intersection between four distinct spheres of the unconscious: the

schema, the archetype, the symbol, and the myth (Durand, 1994). These categories act complementarily in the structuring of narratives that permeate the unconscious, identified as inseparable from one another. In this regard, Teixeira (2006, p. 3, our translation) asserts that it is "[...] the imaginary that, through the process of symbolization, defines the symbolic-organizational competencies of individuals and groups [...]", inherent to the processes that guide the formation of identities.

Some formulations involving Gilbert Durand's theory of the imaginary gain prominence, given that this research focuses on the symbolic dimension and its particularities. The schema, considered prior to the formation of imagery, addresses gesturality and, consequently, establishes a relation of conformity to the primary impulses of physicality (Pitta, 2005). The archetype corresponds to the expressive semblance of schemas, characterized as the first space endowed with the rationalization of the unconscious, which emanations from the contexts in which their particularities are expressed (Durand, 2012). The symbol, in turn, formally represents the archetypes in a given social context and acts as an illustration of them, especially relating to the sense of vision, which is habitual in rites where implicit senses mark the presence of the sacred (Pitta, 2005). Finally, the myth is linked to rationalization capacities, provides a narrative to the structures that precede it (through its discursive apparatus), and standardizes human habits (Durand, 2012) by conceiving a materiality that governs societal morals, even if they are relative.

The categories derived from the theory of the imaginary are organized from constellations of images where the isomorphism of their characteristics acts as a communal imperative (Pitta, 2005). Within this classification, two regimes influence the possibilities of rationalizing these images: the diurnal and nocturnal regimes of images, whose opposition guides their basic compositions:

Gilbert Durand perceives in the material he studies two fundamentally different intentions at the base of the organization of images: one dividing the universe into opposites (high/low, left/right, ugly/beautiful, good/evil, etc.), and another uniting the opposites, complementing, harmonizing. The first is the diurnal regime, characterized by light that allows distinctions, by debate. The second is the nocturnal regime, characterized by night that unifies, by reconciliation (Pitta, 2005, p. 22, our translation).

The diurnal regime, defined by the images reflected in the heroic dimension of symbolic understandings, is permeated by significant elements related to solar powers, under which the clarity of reason shines free of doubts. This regime is tied to the dichotomies of rationality and also to martial representations capable of removing distinct, non-homogeneous components

(Durand, 2012). The pursuit of solar reason establishes principles of gesturality, such as verticality directed towards the ascent to the light of absolute truths (Pitta, 2005). This aspect is also present in the symbolism of the arrow, an object in the martial arsenal and diurnal demonstrations, whose structure aims for flight and victory.

The nocturnal regime consists of mystical and synthetic images, and these structures provide a symbolic apparatus that aligns with intuitions, dreamlike, and imagination. Its mystical conceptions are related to the harmonizing powers between contradictions, seeking a common space between extremes through euphemization, enhanced by the perpetuation of symbols of intimacy, acting in unison (Pitta, 2005). Synthetic notions, in turn, are linked to the dramatization of contrasting attributes in organizational contexts, whether originating from the conscious or unconscious. The cosmic harmony resulting from the signs of the passage of time and agglutination is organically transmuted in the synthetic structure, given the depolarization of its opposites (Durand, 2012).

Proposing an exploration into the symbolic dimension of various stages of convergence for establishing meanings in ritual practices implies recognizing that this sphere of the imaginary encompasses sensitive elements and other possibilities of formulation, whether unconscious, metaphysical, or surreal (Durand, 1994). Essential to the liturgy of *Candomblé*, the apparatus of symbolic manifestations catalyzes the powers of the imaginary by materializing particularities inherent to the divinities worshipped in the sacred ground of the *Terreiro*. These various interpretive possibilities, emerging from the threads of the unconscious, exercise vision in ritual practices, seeking the invisible/metaphysical, reaffirmed through corporeal trance and aesthetic implements (Rabelo, 2015).

Therefore, the search for plural meanings within the aesthetic forms of worship apparatuses to *Oxum*, for example, permeates the quest for ambiguity present in symbols. The expression of hidden meanings, revealed through contact with sacred artifacts, is interspersed by the subjectivity of the cult body to which they constitute, as well as the sensitive figuration of its own members regarding these artifacts. In this regard, Durand (2012, p. 54, our translation) states: “Symbolic objects, more so than utensils, are never pure, but constitute fabrics where various dominants can interweave [...]”, such that we do not seek the establishment of a truth but aim to draw from the social reality of a cult other possibilities for the rationalization of the symbolic powers that compose it.

Methodology

For the development of this study, we adopted a phenomenological perspective derived from ethnography, given the urgency for a topic that would stimulate philosophical reflections and value aesthetic impulses. Aiming to understand the nature of phenomena in their entirety (Bachelard, 1993), we seek to highlight the proportions of phenomena that trace back to the ancestral structures of *Candomblé*. From this perspective, inference between the affections related to the relationship of affections among the categories established in ritual practices is made possible.

Bachelard (1993) postulates that descriptive phenomenology is inseparable from the processes of poetic imagination and epigenesis shaping the image, such that its mediation is conceived through the emanations from the spirit of the subject within their contexts. The polysymbolic activity is considered sensitive in all its confluences and is permeated by the complexities of memory and fabulation, subject to assimilation that does not reduce its ephemerality and singularities, whose materializations are of an aesthetic nature.

The understanding of social phenomena in their tangible spheres is formalized from the aesthetics manifested in the everyday possibilities of a religiosity's practices, its rites, and doctrines, for example. Thus, our objective is to embrace the similarities and disparities composing the dimensions of the imaginary's totality that touches the chosen field's sensitive impressions. The configuration of this field for the research involves integrating with the territoriality of the environment it occupies, as well as the fact that the primary researcher is a member of the *Terreiro*.

We relied on a qualitative framework grounded in Cardoso and Carvalho (2015, 2018) to understand the subjective and symbolic dimensions that emerge from the emanations of individuals and phenomena present in the sacred spaces of ancestral worship. In this sense, immersion in the significations of the field, where phenomena unfold, is essential for constructing a plural symbolic perspective based on the agents composing material and immaterial realities, in dialogue.

Photography was employed to crystallize the formal aspects related to the artifacts that permeate *Candomblé* practices, as well as to manifest the tangible presence of the metaphysical aspect of *Oxum*. This approach allows for the observation of aesthetic traits in the time to which they belong, as well as highlighting social practices (Ball; Smith, 2011). The records, made by the authors during their engagement with the *Terreiro*'s collection, are contrasted with Gilbert Durand's theory of the imaginary (1994, 2012) in search of perpendicularities and connections.

The information collected through organic contacts with the *Terreiro*, via ethnographic and sensitive photographic observation and the construction of a field diary, will be subjected to phenomenological analysis based on the dimensions embodied by aesthetics, considered symbolic and sensitive, comprising the subjectivities of the members of *Terreiro T'Aziry Ladè* and the ritual items associated with the *Orisha Oxum*. This information allows for an understanding of the inferences regarding the artifacts that inhabit the symbolic constructions and *Candomblé*.

Discussions and Results

Return to Oxum: Alignment of Images

A revisit to the unconscious nature of *Terreiro* traditions evokes their hidden dimensions, present in the symbolic organization that constitutes the metaphysical notions related to the pantheon of deities. The expressions of these aesthetic scenarios are synthesized in the forms of elements used for the sensitive manifestation of the divine in human territory, marking the presence of the sacred in rituals. These artifacts thus imbue issues that traverse the imaginary of the sacred.

The immersion into the *Terreiro* and the return to perpendicular senses to conventional sciences unfold from the imaginary constructed at the core of the unconscious of what are considered Eastern traditions. In marginalized spaces, where these traditions were relegated to resisting colonial impositions and Eurocentric conceptions sustaining Western reason (Mignolo, 2005), other potentialities for the exteriorization of immanent issues emerge. Regarding the bodies, being transcendental in juxtaposition to the sacred, other forms of experiencing the sacred fill them. Thus, in *Candomblé*, knowledge that was relegated to the status of “superstition” reverberates, establishing a counterpoint to the hegemony of Western knowledge.

In this way, we provide a response to the provocation established by Teixeira (2006, p. 8, our translation): “So, in the world that is being born, which mythical currents emerge, even if timidly? Which gods are heard in the post-modern pantheon?”, by exposing conceptions of other gods distant from Western pantheons and binary impositions. We dedicate ourselves to the plural cosmologies from the *Terreiro* traditions, whose resistance is closely related to forms of re-signifying communal life and defying homogeneous knowledge. Thus, Teixeira (2006, p. 10, our translation) states: “A pedagogy of the imaginary as a metaphor would be the

spokesperson for the gods that are reborn,” prompting us to consider the return to knowledge from African origins in search of the genesis of the imaginary of sacred artifacts, such as those of *Orisha Oxum*.

Mythological narratives about *Oxum* describe her through her physically expressed qualities and interaction with her corporeality, whether in self-care, which fosters self-esteem, or in her extreme beauty, seduction, elegance, and charm—attributes inseparable from the construction of her imaginary: “*Oxum* lived in the palace in *Ijimu*. She spent her days in her room looking at her mirrors. They were polished shells where she admired her beautiful image” (Prandi, 2001, p. 323, our translation). The reiteration of the use of aesthetic elements, whose reflections highlight the reproduction of physical attributes and the mirroring of her inherent nature, is related to the properties attributed to *Yabá*⁵.

The recurrence of the mirror in the mythology referring to *Oxum* traces back to a space of convergence in symbolic imagination, woven from subjectivities and constitutive of practices, social phenomena, and their constant intersections, which tend to converge around singular symbolic constellations (Nogueira, 1993). Such representations, grouped by similarities and gaps in perspectives derived from Afro-Brazilian ancestry, as well as the pluralities inherent in religious beliefs, eliminate the possibilities of reductionist thinking and point to the divine.

The metaphysical characteristics that manifest the sacred directly relate to the corporealities expressed in the trance for *Oxum*. Through the manifestation of the sacred in the subordinate bodies, appropriated by the divine, artifacts and ornaments are wielded that resonate with the unconscious intents related to the deity's imaginary. In this sense, the symbolic character evoked in such objects, like the *abebé*⁶, concretizes the link between the intelligible and the sensitive and exposes plural understandings of their meanings, on the brink of transcending mere perceptible reality (Durand, 2012).

⁵ Word of African origin, common to *Yoruba* dialects. Generically designates “Queen Mother”. In Brazil, the title is attributed to female deities, especially the Orishas *Oxum* and *Yemanjá*.

⁶ Word of Yoruba origin, designates the most characteristic artifact of the cult of *Oxum*, the hand mirror.

Reflections and Inflexions: Alignment of the Sensitive

Oxum, a Yoruba Orisha⁷, originating from the cults in the regions of *Oxobô* and *Abeocutá* (Sàlámi, 1990), had her religious dimensions transported to Brazil through the crossing of enslaved peoples under the slavery and colonial systems. Her mythological construction is permeated by natural attributes related to her fluvial character from fresh waters, as well as human aspects of femininity. In Brazilian soil, her worship is directed toward the sacred faces of freshwater bodies, such as rivers, streams, and waterfalls. Regarding her more human aspects, they are closely related to beauty, passion, and seduction, imbued in the liquidity of honey.

The *abebé* of *Oxum*, an inseparable mirror of her sensitive connotations, is used in all its manifestations in human territory, acquiring the status of a sacred artifact, with sensitive and aesthetic formulation of the sacred, in visualities. Guiding the possibilities of significance expressed in symbols, vision acts as the principal sense for appreciating the characteristics materialized in the sacred surroundings.

Permeated by multiple concerns, the construction of meanings about the foundational artifacts for *Oxum*'s imaginary aligns with the collective unconscious of *Candomblé* tradition, as it safeguards meanings whose expression resides in the sensitive domain. We perceive in these artifacts a symbolic polysemy in the imaginable confluences between the various pluralities that cohabit and structure the senses of the divine and reflections through the sacred mirror.

Figure 1 – *Abebé* of *Oxum*



Source: Authors' elaboration.

⁷ African people from the regions of Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Trafficked to Brazil, they were responsible for the majority of the cosmologies inherent to the *Candomblés* of the *Ketu* nation.

Made of brass and covered with fabrics of various compositions, as well as elements evoking precious stones and metals like gold, the *abebé* of *Oxum* symbolizes the nocturnal and lunar structures present in her mythology and its developments, as well as in the interactions between the devotees dedicated to her worship, whether initiated or not. Endowed with a multiplicity of meanings, the mirror establishes a connection with water, representing a return to oneself, the primordial portrait of the diffusion of subjectivities (Durand, 2012), under which the mysteries of fluidity, hidden to eyes that merely glimpse the surface, are revealed.

Aligned with the return to primordial waters is the presence of the womb in the formalization of the mirror, a structure that underpins other forms of life. This shape gives rise to fundamental idealizations related to the worship of great mothers, whose archetypal proportions are also manifested in the symbolizations of the *Yabás* (Pitta, 2005).

The womb, as a natural shelter for the amniotic fluid contained within human corporeality, is thus the cradle for the warmth of waters that encompass the genesis of life formation. Considered the primordial river upon which the possibilities of the outflow of existence converge, the organ is reinterpreted as a symbol of intimacy (Durand, 2012), characterized by its essence of nurturing and protection.

The golden hue present throughout the composition of the *abebé* directly relates to the possibilities arising from the inherent ambiguity of the deities worshipped in *Candomblé*. The golden color manifests aspects related both to the celestial powers of the sun and to the rhythmic movements of embracing the light of treasures guarded within the intimacy of secrets.

A distinct conception falls upon *Oxum*, beyond the solar rationale that preserves the golden hue, presenting gold as a fragment integral to her own mythological narrative (Prandi, 2001). Associated with brightness, gold has the ability to project reflection through the clarity of its fairy-like surface, while also connoting a return to the essentials of its internal principles (Durand, 2012), being inseparable from the alchemical principles that encompass the potentialities of reality transmutation.

Centered on the mirror and surrounded by a myriad of other symbolic foundations, a golden-hued crystal can be identified, protected by the white fabric that alludes to the circular movement, as well as by embroidery reminiscent of golden petals. These elements encircling the jewel refer to the function of protection assigned to the secrets possessing properties extending beyond the rational, aiming to symbolize the covering of another fundamental natural component in the mythologies related to *Oxum*: honey (Prandi, 2001). The golden drop, symbolizing the powers of honey, attributed with sweetness and seduction, refers to the liquid

used in rituals to smooth dissent and sweeten relationships. This function is achieved through euphemization and synthesis, aspects linked to the nocturnal regime of images (Durand, 2012).

In contrast to the characteristics present in various shades of gold, the white present in the structure of the mirror is associated with spectacular symbols (Pitta, 2005), as well as with the heroic powers described in the theory of the imaginary. The expression of the sacred, therefore, projected through this color, indicates the ideal of purity distinctive of metaphysical aspects, as well as its convergence towards achieving a transcendental clarity, traversed by the crossing of verticality that aims at sacred ascension.

Final considerations

The symbolic analysis of the most characteristic artifact of *Oxum's* mythologies, and integral to her sensitive manifestations, exemplifies the meeting of aesthetic recurrences and alignments with Gilbert Durand's theory of the imaginary. The inferences about the multiplicity of implicit connotations present in the *abebé* have a direct relationship with the imaginary constituted by and through the cult body of the *Terreiro*. Subjectivities permeate symbolic dimensions, and ancestral images aestheticize them.

Fluid in its knowledge, the imaginary of the *Terreiro* suggests the embrace of pluralities, culminating in practices that bring together ancestral specificities in contrast to contemporary issues. Resistance, for the maintenance of Afro-Brazilian religious activities, dialogues with the desires of its members to shape a border space in which multifaceted knowledge prevails, distant from hegemonic reductionist universality and colonial undertones.

The retrieval of atavistic characteristics demonstrates relevance to the ritualistic practices proposed in the conservation spaces of Afro-religiosity in Brazil, as well as to the accommodation of the pluralities of the subjects that compose it and provoke changes in its structures. The harmonious coexistence between tradition and innovation constitutes the imaginary of such practices and their vicissitudes, projecting them into a space of resistance.

The knowledge inherent to religious practices is materialized in the aesthetics of the artifacts belonging to the deities worshipped in *Candomblé*. The analysis, grounded in Gilbert Durand's theory of the imaginary, reveals the confluence between these artifacts and the regimes of images, as well as the constellations of images that permeate the human unconscious and refer to the knowledge developed through collective experience in the *Terreiro*. It is worth noting that the interpretations arising from this cult body are unique and mutable, varying

according to the chronology of immersion and the specificities of the individuals who are part of it.

The artifacts attributed to *Oxum*, the maternal deity of the Yoruba pantheon, represent elements that materially crystallize the path from the metaphysical to the rational, traversing the bodies touched by the sacred of non-hegemonic religions. These sacred objects spectacularly manifest the properties belonging to the transcendental plane, perceptible through the senses, especially sight.

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