

**RELIGIOUS MATERIALITIES AND AESTHETICS: THE ROLE OF OBJECTS IN
THE PRODUCTION OF DEVOTIONAL ETHICS AND PROCESSES OF
SUBJECTIVATION**

***MATERIALIDADES E ESTÉTICAS RELIGIOSAS: O PAPEL DOS OBJETOS NA
PRODUÇÃO DE ÉTICAS DEVOCIONAIS E PROCESSOS DE SUBJETIVAÇÃO***

***MATERIALIDADES RELIGIOSAS Y ESTÉTICA: EL PAPEL DE LOS OBJETOS EN
LA PRODUCCIÓN DE ÉTICA DEVOCIONAL Y PROCESOS DE SUBJETIVACIÓN***



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ABSTRACT: The organization of the dossier was inspired by studies on religiosity and public space, with the object of investigation being the various forms and expressions of this issue in Latin American contexts where the religious dimension becomes relevant. These studies are essential to demonstrate how "processes of modernization" enable the renewed cultivation of traditional ethical sensibilities and/or practices of authority in different religions. Both perspectives deal with an issue that has been gaining ground in recent anthropological discussions: the development of a material approach to religion.

KEYWORDS: Materiality. Aesthetics. Religion. Devotion. Subjectivity.

RESUMO: A organização do dossiê foi inspirada nos estudos sobre religiosidade e espaço público, tendo como objeto de investigação as diversas formas e expressões dessa questão nos contextos latino-americanos onde a dimensão religiosa adquire relevância. Esses estudos são importantes para demonstrar como os "processos de modernização" possibilitam o cultivo renovado de sensibilidades éticas tradicionais e/ou práticas de autoridade em distintas religiões. Ambas as perspectivas lidam com uma problemática que vem ganhando espaço nas recentes discussões antropológicas: o desenvolvimento de uma abordagem material da religião.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Materialidade. Estética. Religião. Devoção. Subjetividade.

RESUMEN: La organización del dossier se inspiró en estudios sobre religiosidad y espacio público, teniendo como objeto de investigación las diversas formas y expresiones de esta cuestión en los contextos latinoamericanos donde la dimensión religiosa adquiere relevancia. Estos estudios son importantes para demostrar cómo los "procesos de modernización" permiten el cultivo renovado de sensibilidades éticas tradicionales y/o prácticas de autoridad en distintas religiones. Ambas perspectivas abordan una problemática que ha ganado espacio en las recientes discusiones antropológicas: el desarrollo de un enfoque material de la religión.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Materialidad. Estética. Religión. Devoción. Subjetividad.

The organization of the dossier was inspired by studies on religiosity and public space, focusing on the various forms and expressions of this issue in Latin American contexts, where the religious dimension gains significance. Initially, we aimed to highlight the emergence of devotional materialities in public spaces, as well as the uses and meanings attributed to objects by various social agents. We sought to gather ethnographies that focus both on the inculcation of dispositions and behaviors considered "correct" or virtuous, and on the presence of disciplinary techniques that enhance the ethical knowledge and capacities of individuals through their submission to sensory experiences.

These studies are essential for demonstrating how "modernization processes"³ enable the renewed cultivation of traditional ethical sensitivities and/or practices of authority in different religions. Both perspectives address a problem that has been gaining ground in recent anthropological discussions: the development of a material approach to religion.

Reflection on the role of artifacts and the meanings of things has long been a focus in Anthropology. To date, the emphasis has been on the implications arising from the materiality of objects and the dualism between what we consider to be a "thing" versus a "person" (Appadurai, 1990; Miller, 1994). Currently, ethnographies have been reflecting on the category of "religion" (Asad, 1993) shifting the focus to a clearer understanding of the status attributed to words, things, or images within a historically situated religious tradition.

One starting point has been the notion of "sensory form" developed by Birgit Meyer (2006). According to the author, sensory forms refer to "relatively fixed ways of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, offering structures of repetition that create and sustain connections between believers within the context of specific religious regimes" (Meyer, 2015, p. 151). These forms are transmitted and shared by adherents, as they engage them in specific worship practices, and play a central role in shaping them as subjects, particularly within their religious moral communities.

Another example is the notion of "semiotic ideology," developed by Webb Keane (2007). For him, the understanding of the different ways in which people interpret the power and value given to objects and words must encompass "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as rationalizations or justifications of the perceived use and structure of language"

³ Latour (1994) described the ideological history of the development of "Western reason" by criticizing its illusory effect. The author claims that this ideal never managed to penetrate, not even in its entirety, what has been conventionally defined as "the West". In this sense, we operationally understand modernity as a discourse/project that aims to institutionalize several principles, sometimes conflicting and frequently in transformation (Asad, 2003).

(Keane, 2007, p. 16, our translation). In this conception, "semiotic ideologies" identify the significant categories of active signs and define their relationships with reality in a way that is very specific to the organization of the material world.

Both notions emphasize the mediation performed by religion in social processes that shape and authorize the validity of sensory experiences. In these cases, the context becomes referenced by religion, which acts as a medium. Although these concepts allow for progress in understanding devotional practices, they do not fully account for the processes of subjectivation contained in the aesthetic value of religious objects, which go beyond sensory experiences.

For a long time, the category of "aesthetics" was subordinated to what was conventionally called "modernism" in Anthropology, associated with the notion of bourgeois art (Overing, 1996). The problem of how individuals feel about the world, as opposed to what they think or reflect about it, continues to evoke a dichotomy between emotion and reason, which is constantly updated by the "modern constitution" (Latour, 1994, p. 19). In this sense, the analysis of the properties and efficacies of elements in devotional practices would expand the understanding of "aesthetic power" (Gow, 1996, p. 221, our translation) or objectification "a way of enhancing our capacity as human beings" (Miller, 2010, p. 91, our translation), as a significant historical-cultural construct in the invention of specific realities. The set of these religious experiences in public spaces is one of the main elements in the formation of subjectivities.

In light of this, the dossier aimed to receive ethnographic contributions interested in the interconnections, convergences, and overlaps between material and aesthetic dimensions. It would be beneficial to include studies that provide a space for reflection on the processes by which specific beliefs or practices become fundamental issues, especially through the recognition of their importance in reviving, for example, subjectivities, agencies, and motivations, as well as works that analyze how religious groups produce and mobilize subjects.

The article by Sabrina Alves da Silva, entitled "'UNLAWFUL ACTS', 'DISHONEST WORDS' AND 'FOUL TOUCHING': THE CONFESSIONAL UNDER SURVEILLANCE (MINAS GERAIS, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY)", focuses on a qualitative analysis through the lens of microhistory, examining the denunciations and inquisitorial processes that occurred in 18th century Minas Gerais. The author investigates the surveillance imposed by the Tribunal of the Holy Office on individuals accused of desecrating the Sacrament of Confession. This crime occurred when a confessor, during the act of confession, amorously or sexually harassed the

penitents. The text highlights that confession was a crucial mechanism used by the Tridentine Church as an instrument of surveillance and discipline.

Since the 16th century, when it was developed, the confessional booth was employed to mitigate the risks posed by the intimacy between the confessor and the penitent during the Sacrament. The confessional was monitored not only regarding the Sacrament and its ministers but also in terms of its construction and location within churches, with the aim of avoiding situations conducive to sin.

Patrícia Rodrigues de Souza, in “UMBANDA ENTITIES’ IMAGINARY: DILEMMAS IN SHARED AESTHETICS OVER PLASTER IMAGES”, explores the study of plaster images of Umbanda entities, which are sold in religious goods stores. The representations of entities such as *Exus* and *Pombagiras* are analyzed in light of the dilemmas surrounding the display of sexuality and a certain degree of zoomorphism. The divergent opinions among devotees about whether to cover the body parts of *Pombagiras* on the statues, as well as the representation of *Exus* with animal body parts, challenge manufacturers/designers to reconcile these differences in the production of the images. This requires the periodic updating of the statues without losing sight of what is considered “tradition.”

The research indicates that a combination of categories, such as “spiritual revelation” (related to the dream world of practitioners) and “social construction” (related to the representations of these entities), determines the flows of the imaginaries surrounding Umbanda. In conclusion, the notion of agency imposed by the religious practitioners evokes a dialectical process, where, at times, the devotees are influenced by the plaster representations, while at other times, it is the devotees themselves who determine them.

In “AT NOSSA SENHORA'S HOUSE, I DRANK "MOCORORÓ" THAT WAS PREPARED BY THE ENCHANTED”, by Elton Ibrahin de Vasconcelos Pantoja, the principles of participation, equivalence, and the sense of intersection between the worship of Catholic saints and enchanted beings are explored at the *Terreiro de Nossa Senhora da Conceição*, located in the city of Manaus (AM). There, annually, the *Cabocla Mariana* leads the ritual of *mocororó* (beverages produced from fermentation) in her honor and in devotion to the patron saint who gives the *Terreiro* its name. According to the author, these forms of worship may intertwine, promoting an equivalence between them and the *mocororó* ritual.

The recovery of the history of rites practiced by the enchantment traditions of the Amazon region underscores the significance of most of these cults. To that end, the author utilizes focused observations of the practices in the *Terreiro* and the traditions evoked by its

practitioners, including those of the researcher himself. One of the research objectives was to understand the moments that fostered socialization among the participants in communal meals and to highlight the cultural and religious importance of *mocororó*, due to its aspects of Northeastern heritage.

The text by Maria Carolina Arruda Branco, titled “NOTES ON THE JUREMA RITUAL: PEOPLE-RELATIONS AND THE ENCHANTED AMONG THE IBIRAMÃ KIRIRI PEOPLE OF ACRÉ”, aims to contextualize the intricate Jurema ritual, which is widely practiced among the indigenous peoples of northeastern Brazil. Through dialogue with the Kiriri conceptions of “science” and “play,” the author points out how these contexts are activated in the relationship with the Enchanted Beings, whether ritually in their public and/or private aspects. The categories of *enrramação* (related to the preferences of the Enchanted Beings in approaching the bodies of women) and *dom* (referring to the predisposition and constitution for establishing relationships with the Enchanted Beings), as well as the relationships between the Enchanted Beings and women, are discussed.

All of this seeks to understand how specific interconnections of *toré* (a set of dances and chants) with the physical territory occupied and the existing cosmological contexts provide the exchanges observed in the ritual system.

The contribution by James Santos and Roberto Calábria Guimarães da Silva, titled “MATERIALITY AND INTERCONTINENTAL ETHICS OF THE DAWN VALLEY”, explores the formation of the religious group known as the Valley of Dawn (VDA) and the principles that guide their daily life. Using the concept of hybridity, the authors recognize that the routine of the VDA is permeated by various currents of the religious field, such as forms derived from Christian Catholicism, polytheistic practices of ancient Greece, European Kardecism, African-based religions, polytheistic cults of ancient Egypt, Buddhism practiced in Tibetan monasteries, as well as references to indigenous *caboclos* and *jaguars* in the Americas. All of these beliefs are ritualized in some form in the temples and hospitals of the VDA.

The authors grounded their documentary analysis through the use of articles and books, comparing them with theoretical perspectives and field data. This enabled them to suggest that a multicultural and/or New Age mosaic is composed of elements configured by the symbols evoked by VDA practitioners.

In addressing “OSHUN’S ABEBÉ: SYMBOLIC EXAMPLES OF CANDOMBLÉ’S AFRO-RELIGIOUS IMAGINARY AND KNOWLEDGE FROM AN AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVE”, Leandro Tiago Ferreira and Mário de Faria Carvalho highlight the

symbolisms aesthetically expressed in the *abebé*, the mirror wielded by *Oxum*, through a symbolic-aesthetic analysis based on the theory of the imaginary proposed by Gilbert Durand. Aiming to consider the subjectivities that emanate from the worship body in Candomblé, the authors seek to explore comprehensible issues, using the aesthetic perspective as a foundation for reflections.

The approach constructed based on the proposed theory results in an interpretation of the expressions that represent the notion of the sacred, outlining the artifacts that comprise religiosity and establishing a path for the materialization of the divine presence. Furthermore, the analysis seeks to transcend the underlying meanings of the gestural, archetypal, symbolic, and mythological characteristics present in *Oxum's* mirror, synthesizing the guiding questions through the relevance of sacred artifacts and their hidden connotations.

The interview “THE MATERIAL TURN: INTERVIEW WITH RODRIGO TONIOL” aims to present the trajectory of Rodrigo Ferreira Toniol, an adjunct professor in the Department of Cultural Anthropology (DAC) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and a permanent professor in the Graduate Program in Sociology and Anthropology (PPGSA) at UFRJ. His research primarily focuses on the themes of body, health, science, and religion. The purpose of the interview was to examine how material artifacts reflect and shape the values, beliefs, practices, and identities of a specific culture. Unlike traditional research approaches, which often focus on textual or discursive analyses, the interviewee’s research emphasizes objects as valuable sources of information. This approach recognizes that material artifacts are not merely accessories but play a central role in people’s daily lives, reflecting their history, collective memory, and social relationships.

The dossier includes a translation of a text by Birgit Meyer, professor of cultural anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and one of the editors of the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief*. This journal aims to explore how religion manifests itself in material culture, encompassing elements such as images, devotional and liturgical objects, architecture and sacred spaces, works of art, and mass-produced artifacts. Ritual, communication, ceremony, instruction, meditation, propaganda, pilgrimage, display, magic, liturgy, and interpretation constitute many of the practices through which religious material culture constructs worlds of belief.

The article entitled “MEDIATING ABSENCE – EFFECTING SPIRITUAL PRESENCE: PICTURES AND THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION”, addresses the complex nature of images, highlighting them as both material presences and products of the imagination

simultaneously. This distinction directs our focus towards exploring the circular relationship between internal mental images and their sometimes overwhelming pictorial manifestations, which not only impact the sense of vision but also engage the senses of hearing, touch, smell, and taste. Meyer argues that the “pictorial” or “iconic” journey arose from a deep dissatisfaction with the current state of the art, emphasizing the need to reinvent art history through critical reflection on the conditions of its establishment and the conceptual stance towards images that followed.

In criticizing the teleological narrative that gave rise to art history centered on the overwhelming presence and appeal of images, Meyer highlights the opening of an exciting intellectual space. The involvement of scholars from diverse disciplines, such as art history, literature, media studies, film studies, religious studies, and anthropology, resulted in the creation of a forum for a broad conversation that transcends the problematic distinctions between “us” and “them,” “here” and “there,” and the study of art/aesthetics and religion.

The perspective known as “material religion” can be linked to the “material turn,” especially within the field of anthropology, influenced by thinkers such as Bruno Latour. According to Birgit Meyer, Latour’s interpretation of belief as a construction is intrinsically tied to the essence of the notion of sensory form, functioning as a mechanism to evoke the sense of extraordinary presence. Meyer emphasizes that considering humans and objects as fluidly and relationally intertwined eliminates the feasibility of maintaining rigid boundaries between separate categories of people and things. According to Meyer, this approach resonates significantly with a material understanding of religion.

The interaction between the material and aesthetic dimensions in religious practices plays a central role in the configuration and manifestation of devotions, as well as in the constitution of processes of subjectivation within the religious context. Objects, rituals, and symbols serve a function that goes beyond their practical utility, transforming into meaningful mediators in the experience and interpretation of beliefs. Religious materiality encompasses a wide variety of tangible elements, ranging from icons and vestments to sacred spaces and ritual utensils.

These elements acquire meaning through the lens of religious aesthetics, which not only shapes visual perception but also evokes sensory, emotional, and intellectual responses in adherents. In these cases, religious objects are not passive but active in shaping devotional ethics. Through touch, worship, and physical interaction, adherents establish an intimate relationship with the sacred, shaping their ethics and moralities. Materiality provides a tangible

means to express the multiple forms of religiosity, consolidating values and guiding ethical behavior.

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