

Images and Persons in Candomblé.

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Abstract: This paper discusses the presence of “images” in the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé. In many traditional houses of Candomblé it is often said that it is not allowed to photograph or film rituals. On the other hand, in recent years, the presence of Catholic and other figurative images in Candomblé shrines has been questioned by recent “purification” movements- often lead by these traditional houses- who fight syncretism, separating Catholicism from African religion. Still, in many cases figurative images are present in shrines, and rituals are photographed and filmed. This paper argues that, beyond syncretism, images in Candomblé are contentious because they can be powerful: they can be indexes of the presence of Candomblé, *santos*, they can become instances of a “distributed person.”

Images are a problem in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, in two senses. First, the presence of Catholic images in altars has been questioned by the "reafricanization" movement in the last decades, as a form of syncretism. Second it, is often said that taking pictures or videos of rituals is forbidden. However, in my ethnographic experience, both religious images, pictures, and videos are used in many Candomblé houses. How can we understand this contradiction? What is the problem with images in Candomblé after all?

Perhaps the problem with images in Candomblé is a particular instance of “the problem of images” in general. The ambiguity between image as visual text and image as sheer presence troubles the understanding of images: that is what WJT Mitchell calls our “double consciousness” toward images (Mitchell 2005). For decades, the scholarly study of the image, from iconology to visual culture studies, has often reduced images to “visual languages” or visual texts. But in the last years, a literature that wonders about the “power”, “agency” and “presence” of images has started to build up in reaction to this “textualism”(Belting’s 1997, 2005, Gell 1998, Keane 2007, Latour 2002, Mitchell 2005,

Meyer's 2008). One of the questions that all these different authors address is: do we look at images not only as texts, but also as persons? Are images not only fixations of collective representations, or symbols, but active agents?

Alfred Gell's addresses artworks and images as instances of a "distributed person", "indexes"¹ of the person empowered with autonomous agency. Hans Belting(2005) and WJT Mitchell (2005) have made a more complex formulation of the same question. Belting and Mitchell insists in the mediation of images, the fact that they are made present, they *happen* through a medium. Beyond the dichotomy of signifier and signified, symbol and content, Belting proposes to understand images in triadic terms, from the triad image-medium- body, in which medium "is to be understood not in the usual sense but in the sense of the agent by which images are transmitted, while *body* means either the performing or the perceiving body on which images depend no less than on their respective media."(Belting 2005: 202). The relationship between image and body through the medium is not just an object-subject relation but it can be a relation between persons, in which the image can enact the "presence of an absence", of some person or some thing that is not there. Images are sometimes confused or superposed to bodies; people can become images and in the same way, images can become people, because the body does not only perceive the image, but it can also perform it, or in other terms, *embody* the image. In this sense the materiality of the medium and the body is stressed as key in the process of becoming images. This dynamic understanding of the image, as something that happens, an event, more than a representation, is central to these new

¹ Proposing to look at images not only as text does not imply a rejection of semiotics as a method .Not all signs are symbols, abstract representations in a language that we need to decode; as Keane says (2008:230), a contemporary *materialist* semiotics stresses that signs can also be indexes, consequences, effects, causally related to their meaning.

approaches to the question of the image. And perhaps, going further, the ambiguity of this event is central to the dynamism of the image. More than the fact that they can be social persons, what gives dynamism to some images, what gives them “power”, is the doubt that can be cast upon them, their ambiguous situation between text and body, the fact that they can be social persons, but perhaps not quite, just the presence of an absence, maybe just a trace or a document, In Mitchell’s terms (2005), the question we often implicitly ask is what do some images “want”, in the sense of what they are “wanting” or lacking to become full persons. .

These issues are present, I think, in the contradictory discourses and uses of images in and around Candomblé, precisely because the central contention of Candomblé is to build persons. Following Goldman (1985) the worship of the Orixás, the Gods, results in the production of social persons. Candomblé does not only try to classify people through archetypes or reflect a repressed ego, as psychological interpretations of possession have often postulated, but its ritual practices produce *new* social persons. For Goldman (2008), using a Deleuzian vocabulary, the Orixás are “virtual” entites that become “actualized”, personified and materialised through their devotees, the *filhas de santo*. The result of this process of becoming, in which the Orixá is incorporated by the *filha de santo*, is the production of a particular, specific *santo*, a particular person, materialized and actualised in the bodies and shrines of the *filhas de santo*. Images, I shall argue, are important instances in this process of becoming persons.

In the next pages, I will address these issues first in reference to religious images in shrines, second in relation to reproduced images like pictures or videos. Bringing together these two instances, I am also following Belting (2005), Meyer’s(2008) or

Mitchell's(2005) approach to the relation of images and media, which does not only focus on the transformations brought forward by “new” media, such as video, but proposes to look together at “new” and “old” forms of mediation and objectification, not taking for granted that the “new” will inevitably bring radical transformations in the relationship of people and images. As Belting says, images are not produced by media, but only transmitted by them (Belting 2005: 205). For as stated above, it is the *relationship* between image, medium, and body, what makes images *happen*, not the medium itself. In that sense, he insists on using a very general notion of the “image” as disembodied, or separated from medium and body, bringing together “external” images such as sculptures or photographs, and “internal” images such as visions or dreams. By looking at the different instances in which the religious other (the saint, the divine, the holy) is seen, I propose a more general discussion of the role of images in Candomblé.

Images in Shrines : indexicality and presence.

For some of the intellectuals and priests in the more traditional and powerful houses in Bahia, like the Opô Afonjá, Candomblé shrines should not have Catholic images. According to them, Yoruba shrines, back in Africa, rarely included anthropomorphic representations of the gods, but only wood-carvings of initiates being possessed by the gods. The gods, in themselves, were not represented in human form: their presence takes place in the ritual of possession, in the body of their initiates (see i.e. Thompson 1993; Santos 1967). Therefore, anthropomorphic images in Candomblé shrines would be only peripheral, as opposed to Catholic altars, which are precisely built around the figurative image of saints. In the 1980ies, Mãe Stella of the Opô Afonjá launched an anti-

syncretism movement that included, amongst other things, withdrawing Catholic images from the shrines of the temple. Her argument was that Candomblé and Catholicism were two different things, and that they should not be mixed up. This move made quite upset some older members of the Opô Afonjá, who were devoted to these images², but in the long run, Mãe Stella's position was accepted, and many Candomblé houses now follow her model of separating religions and images (Sansi 2007).

That was not the case of Madalena's house, where I did a substantial part of my fieldwork, in Cachoeira. Likewise, in most Candomblé houses in Cachoeira, Catholic images were (still?) integral to the shrines. How to understand their resilient presence in shrines? Is this just an act of masking, or dissimulating a hidden resistance? I think that there is something else to it, something more fundamental. Catholic images in Candomblé shrines are not seen as representations of Catholic religion. In Candomblé shrines, these images are a part of the indexical series composing Candomblé shrines, which includes objects from the more random origins gathered because the devotees recognize their gods in them: more than a physical resemblance, their encounter in the image a *vision* of their "santos", the spirits they incorporate. To explain this point a bit further, maybe I should talk more extensively about Candomblé shrines.

Candomblé is a religion of the secret (Johnson, 2005). Some things can be seen by everyone, even outsiders and tourists, but others cannot be looked at even by the devotees of the cult. The life-long process of initiation is also a process of partial revelation, by and through which the initiate gains access not only to discursive or practical knowledge,

² For example, I remember one person at the Opo Afonja, telling me how she was impressed by an image of Saint George when she was a kid. Later she came to know she was a daughter of Ogun (associated to saint George), in particular in Rio). Now she sees that vision as her first encounter with her "santo"

but she also obtains the right to *see*, eventually becoming the door-keeper (*zelador*) who will allow or restrict others to see.

The distinction between what should and should not be seen, is fundamentally ambiguous. As Van de Port has shown (2007), despite of these radical separations, nothing is totally concealed, or invisible, in the same way that what appears to be public, or visible, is never totally accessible: concealment and revelation are dynamically related, they are interdependent.

The rituals of possession are the more public face of Candomblé. A public face that is ephemeral, taking place in a dance hall (*sala* or *barracão*). But Candomblé shrines are kept in a closed room that nobody can see (the *quarto de santo*). Candomblé shrines, *assentos*, are very different from Catholic altars. Candomblé shrines are accumulations of objects related to the Orixá, put together with pots covered with cloths, inside of which there are other objects, generally stones (*otã*), which embody the force of the Orixás, *axé*. They are not supposed to be seen, and thus the devotee is not supposed to look at them directly. Each initiate has her own *assento*, and the shrine is an accumulation of *assentos* around the central *assento*, which belongs to the *mãe de santo*, the mother of the saint who has initiated the others, their daughters of the saint, *filhas de santo*. Before the ritual of possession, the shrines are fed, they receive offerings, and these offerings result in the transposition of the *santo* to the body of the initiate during the public party. The *assento* is not the image, but the house of the *santo*. Shrine offerings open the circulation of force (*axé*) that will culminate in spirit possession. The body of the *filha de santo*, possessed, dancing and dressing the *santo*'s clothes, is the living image of the *santo*. And this image changes through time, as much as the relationship between *santo* and initiate changes.

Progressively, as the initiate grows and deepens her knowledge, her body gets better adapted to the ritual of possession, which becomes less violent. At the same time the shrine becomes bigger, richer, full of presents, an objectification of this intense interaction (see figure 1). The *filhas de santo* talk to the shrines, ask for help to their *santo*; offerings and presents are being added continuously; periodically, the pots are washed and their offerings renewed: the “life” of shrines is always renewed by the interaction with the initiates. The constant ritual feeding establishes a highly determined and determinant relationship between shrine and initiate; the shrine becomes an exterior organ of her body, a part of her ‘distributed person’ in Gells’ words: “As social persons, we are present, not just in our singular bodies, but in everything in our surroundings which bears witness of our existence, our attributes, and our agency”(Gell 1998: 103).

The objects accumulated in the shrines are part of the *santo*. Ogun, Orixá of war and iron, whose colour is blue, receives iron tools and blue robes. Oxum goddess of love, beauty, wealth and fresh water, receives jewellery, make up, golden objects and clothes. But despite of the fact that we often find similar objects in different shrines there is virtually no limit to what can be added to the shrine. The association with the *santo* can be extended to many kinds of objects just because the *filha de santo* finds that they suit him. The house of the *santo* is not a recipe but it is something more personal: it is a present, a gift. And presents are difficult to make: they are meant to correspond naturally to a person, and it is not given that one finds what one is looking for, in these cases. It is often true that we find things that would make good presents by coincidence, more often that when we are actually obliged to make them. There is an element of chance in finding

an object that we feel as corresponding naturally to somebody. This is why these presents are always, in some sense, ‘found’.

For example, Madalena found an enormous iron pan digging in her backyard (figure 2). This pot, according to her, was from the time of the slaves, who used to make *cocada* (a sweet made of coconut). She decided to put it on Ogum’s shrine, thinking that it was him who made her find this pot, to put it on his shrine. We can describe these processes of recognition of the sacred in everyday life in correspondence to surrealist theories of the “found object” and “objective chance”, to use Andre Breton’s expression, situations in which the unexpected encounter of an object is perceived as a moment of revelation, in which the arbitrary becomes necessary: the fortuitous encounter of a giant iron pot *had to* happen. In other terms, the found object is an **index** of the saint, who left it there to be found by the initiate. That means that anything can become part of an shrine, if the saint wants it to. An Ogum shrine can accumulate pots, tools, car parts, or writing machines, if he wants it to.

This is important to understand the apparently random and disordered character of the objects accumulated on shrines. They don’t stand separately for specific qualities that make a logical ensemble, on the contrary, they are accumulations of presents, of objects that people have found, feeling that they fit naturally to the spirit that lives in the shrine. Shrines are the result of a personal history of exchanges between people and their *santo*³. They are an *assemblage*, to use a *deleuzian terminology*, a (be)coming together of discrete elements that is capable of producing effects; the assemblage in this sense is something more, or something else, than the mere accumulation of these parts (Deleuze,

³ The notion that shrines are the result of processes of gift exchange has been also underscored in the case of Candomblé’s twin religion, Santeria, by authors like Morphy (2010) or Brown (1996)

1987: 554-556). Thus, the encounter of Madalena with the iron pan produces something more than just the accumulation of the object- it produces her *Ogum*, her “santo.”

One of the objects we can find in shrines are figurative images. As I mentioned for some Candomblé scholars like Mestre Didi, the gods of Candomblé are not “represented” in sculptures: in Africa, origin of the cults, the wood-carvings found in the shrines represented the initiates being possessed by the Orixás, rather than the Orixás themselves (Santos 1967). As we have seen this is partially an anti-sincretistic argument. But the fact is that, like other objects in shrines, the images can often be described as found objects (or found images, in this case), images that have been recognized as their saints by initiates. In this way, they are not seen so much as representations of Catholic religion, but as **indexes** of this personal encounter. That is probably the way that Catholic images were initially incorporated in shrines: some initiates recognized in already existing images, the images of their Orixás. With time, Candomblé shrines have incorporated many different kinds of images, beyond the catholic ones. If Catholic images were dominant once in Candomblé, it was not just because of an implicit project of “syncretism” between religions, but also because Catholicism was overwhelmingly hegemonic in the production of public images. But Candomblé has also borrowed from many other sources of popular culture. The images of the Caboclo, for example, were born out of the monuments to the Caboclo as a symbol of independence. **Other iconographies of the Caboclos were clearly inspired in Western movies and more recently, in Amazonian Indians. Oxum is represented as a strawberry blonde mermaid. Exu, associated with the devil, takes the form of evil magicians from comic books, or**

gangsters. Some images even come from paintings and drawings of the 19th century, like *Escrava Anastácia*(see Burdick 1998).

This still happens today, with all kinds of images. I was told of one case in an image factory, whose salesmen are always trying to understand the latest trends in the market of religious images. The owner of a bar decided to paint an image of a drunkard from Italy as a black man with white clothes. When one of his clients saw it, he recognized his “Preto Velho”, the spirit of an old slave. The factory decided to reproduce this image, and it had a certain success. The iconographies of these images, therefore, can be completely strange to the world of Candomblé: in the same way that with objects, there is no limit to the images that can be incorporated to the shrine.

In Madalena’s house, for example, Sara the Gipsy also has a special story. When she was still a teenager, Madalena lived with a man, in very poor conditions. One day the man abandoned her for another woman. She was crying in the door of her house and she saw a beautiful gipsy woman. Why do you cry? She asked her. Madalena explained her case, the gipsy woman laughed and said she would help her. Some days later she knew that her husband’s lover had to go to the hospital...Then the gipsy woman came back. “Do you want to stop suffering?” she said. “I can help you then you have to take care of me.” With time Madalena forgot about that event. Some years later, she had four children and her husband had abandoned her definitely. Her mother was sick and she had to take her to a hospital in Salvador, but she had no money. Then the gipsy woman appeared and said somebody would show up and would help her. In the train station she found a man who gave her money, and who eventually became her husband.

The *zigana* started to 'seize' (*pegar*) her, and she started to give parties to her. She talked to people and explained her story, and thus she learned about her: that her name was Sara and she came from Egypt. Sara's parties are very elegant: she smokes cigarettes with a long filter and drinks champagne (see figure 3). She does not like Candomblé music either: she listens to gipsy music in the radio. Sara attracts a lot of men, because of her sophistication, but Madalena's actual husband does not care much about it, since she knows that it is not Madalena, but Sara who seduces men.

One day, Madalena told me that she wanted to have an image of Sara. But she couldn't find one at the markets of images. She wanted to ask one of the local craftsmen who make wooden sculptures of the Orixás to make a little image of Sara. She showed me a picture of her embodying Sara. She had debonair looks, she was holding a cup of Champaign and smoking a cigarette with a long filter. I don't remember exactly how it started, but I ended making a drawing, modelled on the photography, of a gipsy woman holding a cup of Champaign and smoking like Madalena's spirit. Madalena was amused with my drawing abilities, and surprised at the same time: she recognized Sara as she saw her in dreams. So she decided to send the drawing to a craftsman to make a three dimensional copy.

The image of Sara is always in process: it is the result of several encounters, in dreams, revelations, incorporations, photographs, and a myriad of events that perform this image, and refine its profile, at the same time that her history becomes more elaborate, and the relationship between Sara and Madalena grows closer, more intimate. Eventually, they will end up becoming the image of one another.

The mechanical reproduction of rituals.

Candomblé seems to have a problem with images also at another level: the visual reproduction of rituals, events, and shrines, that is to say, taking pictures or videos of sacred rituals or objects. Going to Candomblé houses, visitors are often told that taking pictures or videos is not allowed. That is explained in different ways. Manny Vega, a Puerto-Rican artist who got initiated in Candomblé at the Gantois in Bahia once told me that Candomblé is like Jazz. You can't represent the Orixás in pictures: they are dynamic entities, pure energy, and their image is the moving body of the initiate, incorporating the saint. Although the ritual of possession is structured and routinized, the dance of possession always includes unexpected turns, swirls and improvisations, unexpected things happen at a pace that is difficult to follow for those who are not acquainted with the Orixás. They can't be reproduced; you have to see them live. According to the anthropologist Patricia de Aquino, the Orixás can't be "freeze-framed"(2002), that is to say, they are dynamic entities that can't be reproduced in static images. What I found In Madalena's house, however, did not exactly correspond to all this subtle theorization about the impossibility of taking pictures of Orixás. Madalena had an extensive photo album and home videos of the "festas" she had celebrated to her Orixás. Pictures and videos of the rituals were regularly taken and they were used privately, as family photo albums and home videos. On the other hand, However, it is true that visitors, outsiders, or tourists taking pictures of rituals, will not always be welcome. Extending on what Castillo has already commented (2008), perhaps the issue with photography is not so much the technique in itself, but the control of its outcomes: who takes the pictures, and for what purpose. The censorship of the visual reproduction has to do not just with the aesthetics

of Candomblé, but with its notions of the person. Photographs are, obviously, **indexes**. Our image is a part of ourselves, we don't feel comfortable giving it away to outsiders. That is true for a Candomblé ritual as it is true for any ritual in our private life- a wedding, baptism, etc. What would we do if some unknown people start taking pictures of our marriage, because they think it's exotic? I won't deny theories of the impossibility of "freeze framing" the gods, but the control over the mechanical reproduction of images in Candomblé is first and foremost an issue of privacy and intimacy. An intimacy that is central in the process of construction of the person, in particular in relation to sorcery (*feitiço*): objects that stem from the body, including photographs, as a part of the distributed person, can be used to throw spells against the people they **index**. Intimacy and sorcery are in many ways coextensive: the question is who will use the image, what for, and to what extent these images can be considered a part of the person.

In this sense, the reproduction of images does not imply that these images lose their power, but quite the opposite (Meyer 2008). But if the reproduction and distribution of images is controlled by the house, the "danger" of these reproductions seems to be less urgent. Madalena's record of the house's rituals was basically a family photo album. It included the initiation of her *filhas de santo*, the annual rituals to the different gods, etc. The changes and the progress in the house were made evident in the pictures. The videos, for Madalena, had a more shocking power. The first time she saw herself incorporating the Caboclo (Indian) spirit, she was stunned. At the house of Madalena, viewing the videos has become, more than an amusement, a formative experience. The *iawos* (initiates) regularly see the videos of past rituals. Seeing the videos they can identify details they had not perceived before. And more importantly, they can get to grips with

the fact that their bodies are temporarily occupied by other people, by becoming familiar with this other people- seeing them on video or pictures. They are used, in other terms, as “personal memory banks” (Morris 2002; Van de Port 2005). But which kind of memories are we talking about, if the person who is watching herself before has no recollection of the event? If she is seeing herself (her body) being somebody else?

Commenting on the production of home videos in Candomblé houses, Van de Port (2005) has remarked that the introduction of these new media has not substantially affected, so far, the ritual structures of Candomblé: the videos reproduce the public side of Candomblé, the *festas*, concentrating in the performances and secondly also in the foods given to the people who attend the performance; what is already the public image of Candomblé anyway. But Van de Port also argues that the form in which these videos are edited demonstrate that there are different sources of “authentication” (or legitimacy), by adopting an editing style that is akin to the TV models that are a part of the everyday life of most people in Brazil –essentially, soap operas. This makes perfect sense with the general history of appropriation in Afro-Brazilian religions, which have been consistently borrowing from popular culture models and styles since its origins: in a similar way that Catholic images were borrowed in Candomblé not just because of religious syncretism, because Catholicism was the hegemonic in Colonial and Imperial Brazil. When the public imagination started to be populated with other materials, like movies and TV, new characters, objects, and images appeared also inside of Candomblé houses. Just to give an example: Po Branca, Erê (child spirit) of Helena’s Caboclo, and allegedly the Caboclo son, is a *menino da rua* from Rio, dress up in the clothes of a tv cartoon character.

Van de Port is right in pointing out the clear televisual influences of these videos (Van de Port 2005). In some of the more heavily edited videos that one can find in the markets in Brazil⁴ what is more striking is the juxtaposition of different planes (up to three, but mainly two) bringing together the ritual plane with images of "Nature". What we have is a clearly surrealist style, in terms of the "objective chance", the juxtaposition of human and natural events I mentioned before in reference to shrines. In fact, this style is in perfect coherence with the juxtaposition that characterizes shrines in Candomblé. Curiously enough, if there is a style that these videos seem to be based on, more than telenovelas, as Van der Port mentions, it would be the style of evangelical TV programmes, who often use effects of juxtaposition, between holy or hellish landscapes and the mass. Like in the Candomblé videos, this juxtaposition can be described as a transposition of a miracle into filmic images.

In any case, many of these home videos, for example in Madalena's house, are actually not edited at all, in televisual style or any other. What is important for her is that these images keep a record of the past; the question is what past, which events it is recording, and to what extent these records manage to encapsulate the miraculous condition of some of these events. More than the ways into which Candomblé is represented, what is important for them, is the *presence* of the sacred. Through photographs and videos, they can see an image of their *santo* they had not seen before: in their own bodies.

Documents and events

⁴ See for example the videos of Pia Luiz de Iansa. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oM4G6RpKGs>)

For Madalena, pictures and video are documents of her house, which can testify her activities- they can testify that these things *really happened* there; that she was a real mãe de santo and that she was celebrating luscious festivals where the gods were descending on their initiate's bodies. The pictures and videos are a proof of the *truth* of the rituals. When I asked her for images of her house, that was not a problem for her: she allowed me to make copies of her pictures and videos. For Madalena had understood that in a way, that would also help legitimize her house in Cachoeira, or in other terms, I would project her fame, or distributed person. To an extent, the issues of privacy and sorcery I mentioned before are coextensive with the fame or the distributed presence of the house. The more famous, "traditional" houses are often more restrictive. That is partially because they already have fame, and they already have an archive, as it were- the orthodox Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá was widely documented by the famous photographer and ethnographer Pierre Verger decades ago. Perhaps back then privacy wasn't that important? Not quite. Invariably when I asked about Verger's pictures at the Opô Afonjá, I was told that he was a particular case: a member of the house, and an ambassador of Candomblé in Africa, and the other way around. And all that is true, and makes perfect sense; and ultimately having in hand Verger's beautiful, historical pictures, you don't need anything else.

But the situation at Madalena's house was different. She opened her house recently, her legitimacy was under question, and she saw pictures and my presence in the house as a source of authentication and fame. I wanted to take some pictures of the house myself, and from the very beginning I offered to give her copies. Madalena started seeing then the outcome of my research as a *Livro de Actas*, a Register. Before opening the

Candomblé house, she had worked for a long time at the local archive, so she was familiar with Registers. She thought about a book where I would explain the history of her house, with descriptions of the initiations and *festas* that took place there, together with pictures. I would be like a notary who would testify that all these things really did happen. Partially that is what I have ended up doing in my dissertation and then my book, at least in the first chapters. But what I could give her on the spot were the pictures.

One day she decided to make a photo-shooting. She dressed up in her Ketu initiation clothes, and she ordered Dona Dete, her *mãe pequena* (second in command) and Mama, her daughter and *ekede*, to do the same, dress up in their Ketu full attire. Ketu is the ritual tradition of the main houses of Salvador, and also Dona Baratinha's, next to her. Shortly before, she had gone through the ritual of *Deca*, which entitled her to initiate in the *Ketu* tradition. Ketu is the dominant tradition of Candomblé in Bahia, lead by houses like Casa Branca, or Opô Afonjá. In the last years, the federation of Afro-Bahian cults has put pressure on Candomblé houses to follow the Ketu tradition, presented as the right and legitimate form of Candomblé. She hanged the picture next to the certificate of the Federation of Afro-Bahian Cults that allowed her to exercise as a Candomblé priest. Her original "nation" was Angola, although she is quite of a self-made *mãe de santo* in many ways. She had initiated in Ketu because of the increasing pressure of the local Candomblé elites, but she was still practising most of her *festas* in the Angola "line". I took pictures of them in the main room, with the *assentos*. She liked in particular one picture with her implements for initiation, and she decided to hang it on the wall of the main room. According to Dona Dete, one could see Iansã through that picture. Only in

that one, not in the other pictures, she said. Iansã is Madalena's main Orixá; something had happened in the picture- an image of Iansã had emerged (Figure 4)

Some years later, I went to visit a *pai de santo* in a neighbouring town with Madalena. This *pai de santo*, like Madalena, had not been initiated; he was a *rezador*⁵, and he incorporated a Caboclo spirit. He had asked Madalena to initiate him in Ketu Candomblé, which she did it. Madalena became then his *mae de santo*. On this occasion, when we were leaving the house, Madalena asked him for a picture, to hang it in her *barracao*. He showed her a couple of pictures. Madalena looked amused at one of them, saying that one could see his Oxum in the picture. Oxum is one of the Orixás of this *pai de santo*, but not the main one- Ogum. But in that picture, Madalena recognized a shade of Oxum as it were- her literal words were- *da pra ver Oxum encostada*, “one can see Oxum encostada”; an *encosto*, is the presence of a dead person in one's body, and this is a term more widely used in the context of sorcery; but in this case it meant something like that there was a presence of Oxum on the picture, without being fully incorporated into the *pai de santo's* body.

Conclusion.

The rejection of images, either in the form of Catholic images in Candomblé shrines, or the reproduction of video and photography in rituals, stems from a similar, if perhaps inverted, concern with representation. The movement of “reafricanization” in Candomblé has not just been a movement of “purification” of practices, but it has been a movement of “purification” of semiotic ideologies (Keane 2007), in which an intellectualized elite

⁵ A Catholic lay man with a gift for prayer, often also a specialist in the use of plants.

of Candomblé practitioners has incorporated certain theories of representation, and of the relation of objects and images with people. On the one hand, Catholic images are rejected because they are seen as “representations” of Catholicism, and therefore contradictory with a purely African religion. What this perception of Catholic images as representations of Catholicism seems to ignore is the fact that in religious practice, these images are re-appropriated, and transformed into indexes of everyday practice in Candomblé, in ways that may be totally subversive from its official Catholic representation. On the other hand, the prohibition on the reproduction of rituals through the use of video and photography seems to revert to a notion of “presence”, more than representation: the reproduction of this presence through mechanical means would be perceived as implicitly contradictory with the ephemeral nature of this presence in rituals of possession. And yet, interestingly the opposite is often true: in and through certain photographs certain unprecedented images of the “saint” appear: people recognize in these photographs images that they had not recognized while the picture was being taken. It is clear that the total prohibition of the mechanical reproduction of images, the issue is the control over its distribution. The control over distribution is a control over the “aura” of images, to follow the benjaminian terminology, or over their *axe*, to follow its Candomblé equivalent. In any case it is clear that the problem is not the technology itself, the possibility of reproducing images of the ephemeral, but it’s uses. In this sense, images can be “representations”, yes, but in a wider sense than just as texts that encode a certain message, also as “ambassadors”, as Gell (1998) mentions, extensions or tokens of a certain power.

Although in theory, the Orixás do not like to be “freeze framed”, in practice, Candomblé practitioners are using the reproduction of their images as means of documentation, education, and legitimacy. The use of images often also falls into these processes of production of documents and inscriptions that can be used to legitimize or testify for one or another form of truth. In this sense, the mystique of the image as a document is not exclusive, or particular of, these Candomblé practitioners, but it takes a very particular shape, I think, in these contexts: like when Dona Dete recognized in that picture- and only in that picture, the sight of Yansã, as an elusive presence.

The problem in general is that images can become not only representations, but persons. **The conflict over images is not only about the control of representations,** but for the control of distributed persons. In this sense, their dynamism is of a more complex kind than just “freeze-framing”. What is more interesting in these images is the dynamic ambiguity, not only between presence and representation, but between object and subject of representation: who is represented in these images? Gods or humans? Magdalena or Iansã? Both, at the same time. That ambiguity, that unstable superposition, is what makes these images more powerful, and challenging, for the people of Candomblé themselves. Because it embodies their greatest secret, their greatest truth, also: that eventually, the spirit and the person are to become one and the same, in the *santo*.

It is in regards to this great mystery of *becoming* that we shall rethink, more generally, how images are “*wanting*”, in Mitchell’s terms. Mitchell addresses images as objects of desire. But desire, for Mitchell, is not to be understood just in Lacanian terms, describing images as “singular objects of longing and lack”(Mitchell 2005:68), but in deleuzian terms, it can be better described as the dynamic force that builds and is built

through “assamblages”, constructed collectivities. The image is an event, “an interruption in the process of desire” (Mitchell 2005: 68) that renders desire visible in an objectual form; but precisely, by manifesting desire, they make visible what is left to achieve it, because they are an interruption, they are “wanting”; not of what they are missing –what is left behind- but because they are offering a vision of completion-in the future.

Following Mitchell, we could look at the image in Candomblé as events in the becoming of the assemblage- something that adds to and points to what is to be, not an object of lack and what is repressed. In Candomblé, images in their different forms reveal new aspects of the person as an assamblage, a person becoming the *santo*. It is this emergent aspect – what they *can be*, their potentiality, what makes them powerful, but also what makes them dangerous, since images are also an interruption, an objectification of becoming. Hence, images of Zigana Sara or of Oxum in dreams, drawings and photographs are momentous events in which the *santo* is partially revealed; but they are never fully satisfying, because they make manifest what is left to achieve the full unity of the human and the divine.

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