

IMAGES OF RELIGION IN A MANGUEIRA CARNIVAL

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

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PHOTO 1

One of the 80 Baianas of the Mangueira school wearing the costume 'Intolerance is a Cross,' representing the many people persecuted for being followers of African-derived religions. In the background, the float 'The Pained Faces of the Passion.'

INTRODUCTION¹

In this essay, we examine the connections between religion and carnival in recent parades of the Estação Primeira de Mangueira samba school, especially for the 2020 carnival – the last before the festival was suspended due to the Covid-19 global pandemic. In particular, we explore the backstage context of the show performance, extending from the *barracão* (warehouse), where costumes and floats are made, to the *concentração* (concentration) – that is, the moment that immediately precedes and conditions the school's entrance into the Marquês de Sapucaí Sambadrome during the champions parade. Given the magnitude of the event, we present an essay with alternative images to those disseminated in the commercial media, which are taken at the climax of the festival and perpetuate its monumental scale. What we propose is not an aesthetic appreciation of the parade but an analysis of how the images and performances of 'religion' are articulated and appear in a research field like carnival that is seen, a priori, as profane. To achieve this aim, we turn to the ethnographic repertoire compiled by members of the Laboratory of the Anthropology of the Ludic and Sacred of the Museu Nacional at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (Ludens/MN/UFRJ) since 2015. Exploring a variety of approaches, this research group has analysed the complex processes involved in realizing diverse festivals, the Rio carnival among them, seeking to understand the ritual in relation to the parades themselves and what extends beyond them (Bártolo 2018, Menezes & Bártolo 2019, Menezes, 2020).

Based on an *enredo*, plot/theme, which unfolds through dramatization, song, dance, percussion, scenography, costumes and diverse visual devices, the schools function like 'mobile operas' (Cavalcanti 2006). Put succinctly, the samba school parade is a competition in which the processions seek to demonstrate excellence in the integration of various expressive modalities as a means to tell a story. Inversely and complementarily, they use a story to demonstrate their excellence in these modes of expression. At the moment of the parade, the grandiose collective performance gives life and form to the narrative of the theme, at the same time as subverting it at various points, since if the songs and music imply repetition and harmony, the costumes and floats (*alegorias*) should express creativity and originality by performing facets of the story. In this aspect, the carnival parade is similar to other collective and cyclical rituals – religious or otherwise – that actualize macronarratives based on diverse sensorial and corporal devices (Pereira 2015, 2019, 2020). From the theoretical viewpoint, the study of carnival practices can benefit from the repertoire accumulated in studies of other parades and rituals, including processions, marches,

1. This essay results from the research project *Enredamentos entre religião e cultura no Carnaval Carioca*, financed with resources from FAPERJ and CNPq.

maracatus, *afoxés* and so on, in which the symbolic logics of collective manifestation come to the fore.

In terms of religion, various carnival *enredos* (themes) evoke mythological, cosmological and ancestral figures or elements that are customarily labelled historical, folkloric, popular and cultural (Santos 1999, Simas & Fabato 2015). As works-performances in action, the parades present ideas in material and sensible forms, which not only draw from pre-existing religious contexts but also set them in motion, updating, highlighting or placing them in suspension, while also permitting their critique. In this way, symbolic contents recognized as religious are reappropriated through the specific logic of the carnival competition and expressivity, generating situations of both convergence and divergence between actors from the carnival world and Brazil's religions.

This procedure has the interesting effect of placing in question the very limits of the religious domain, allowing us to consider this space in terms of its *effective dynamic*, without projecting predefined contours onto it. In the case of the research projects developed at Ludens, the parades have proven to be important case studies since they enable us to examine religious conceptions, knowledge and practices transmitted outside the temples and sacred books. Based on the ethnography of actual sociocultural experiences, researchers from the laboratory have pointed to the instability and inadequacy of projecting any rigid boundary between ritual and everyday life or between the religious and the secular (Bártolo 2018, Menezes e Bártolo 2019, Menezes 2020).

MANGUEIRA: RELIGIOUS THEMES UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

Mangueira is a samba school with a long history of success and recognition inside and outside Brazil.² Over recent years, interest in its parades has intensified since, following the arrival of Leandro Vieira as the school's carnival creative director (*carnavalesco*), in 2016, the school has won two championships and has always finished among the top six in the carnival rankings.

2. The *Grêmio Recreativo Escola de Samba Estação Primeira de Mangueira* was created in 1928 from the merging of various carnival groups (*blocos*). The name derived from the hillside where it is situated and the nearby train station that used to take workers to the city centre. Its colours, green and pink, were chosen by the composer Cartola. Other *bambas* (ingenious samba composers) have left their mark on its history, including Nelson Cavaquinho, Xangô, Tatinho, Nelson Sargento, Carlos Cachaca and José Ramos, or artists like Alcione, Beth Carvalho, Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso, Maria Bethânia and Leci Brandão. However, its support base is found among Rio's black families, given it is a school known for its 'ground' or being part of the 'community.' In recent years, its parades have involved around 3,500 performers, but the number of *mangueirenses* is much bigger, linked to what is usually described as 'the largest school on the planet.' Available at <http://www.mangueira.com.br/>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

Vieira's lively themes have brought diverse religious elements and figures to the sambadrome, giving them a new emphasis, visibility and aesthetic treatment. In his very first carnival for Mangueira – which, although a highly traditional school, had not won a parade since 2002 – the creative director became a champion with the theme *Maria Bethânia, the Apple of Oyá's Eye*. The samba theme was a salute to Orixá Oyá, 'Mother of the Storm,' as well as Orixá 'Oxalá, Xeu Êpa Babá!' and blended the 'Rosary of Mary' with the *xiré* ritual dance performed in *candomblé*. In 2017, Vieira produced *Only with the Saint's help*, a theme that focused on and deepened the intimate relations between saints and worshippers, announced in the parade of the year before. With a sequence of *alas* (blocks of dancers) and floats that began with an altar and ended with a *candomblé* temple (*terreiro*), the theme announced that 'Mangueira wants to pass through and command the procession. Its green and pink, everyone knows, already became a religion long ago.'³

In the following years, the Rio carnival felt the effects of the municipal government of Marcello Crivella (Brazilian Republican Party), a licensed bishop of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, and representative of a neo-Pentecostal sector closely associated with conservative viewpoints and right-wing parties (Menezes & Santos 2017). Assuming office as Rio's mayor in 2017, Crivella introduced changes to the funding mechanisms for the samba schools, slashing funds, as well as remaining absent from the parades – deprecating one of the city's most important events. In this context, Mangueira's carnival themes constitute responses to the political setting: in 2018, *Money or No Money, I'm Playing!* defended maintaining the revelry despite the scant resources and presented the mayor as Judas being lynched on the last carnival float, as well as including the following refrain in the main samba theme: 'I am Mangueira, my lord / Don't get me wrong / The real sin is not playing in carnival.'⁴

In 2019, *A Lullaby for Big People* won the school another championship. Emphasizing the 'history that history doesn't tell,' the theme highlighted figures obscured in the official narratives like Marias, Mahins, Marielles and Malês, valorising the role of subalternized groups in the nation's history, as well as celebrating the PSOL councillor Marielle Franco, murdered in 2018. The symbolic, sensorial and narrative logic that characterizes the carnival parades responded, in its own way, to central aspects of social experience in the city and the country. The conscious recognition of carnival as a cultural and political platform appeared in the words of the *carnavalesco* himself: 'From the moment that the parade of samba schools achieved the notoriety of speaking for millions of people, it acquires an

3. Available at <https://liesa.globo.com/2017/por/03-carnaval/enredos/mangueira/mangueira.html> Accessed 10 April 2021.

4. Available at: <http://liesa.globo.com/memoria/outros-carnavais/2018/mangueira/samba-enredo.html> Accessed 10 April 2021.

important role as a disseminator of an idea' (IPHAN 2017: 87). And, for Vieira, among the important ideas to emphasize in the current context of a dispute of narratives is the valorisation of Brazil's cultural and religious diversity.


In 2020, the theme chosen was *The Truth Will Set You Free!* The proposal was to recount the life of Jesus Christ in 'a carnival opera divided into five acts, no different from the content of other artistic approaches to the theme' (Vieira 2020: 122-123). The production thus included floats and costumes related to the nativity, Christ's adult life in Jerusalem, his trial, torture and death on the cross, ending with his resurrection on the Mangureira hillside. While the creative emphasis in previous years had been on religious plurality and the combination of forms of worship in the country, this time the aim was to rescue the mythic and historical figure of Jesus from the monopoly of fundamentalist and Eurocentric interpretations. Affirming that 'your samba is a prayer,' the samba theme converted Mangureira into the 'First Station of Nazareth' where a Christ would be born among the popular classes. Vieira said:

[...] I believe that if he came back to earth via a hillside that touches the sky – to be born in the same form: poor and darker, raised by a humble father and mother to live among the oppressed and give them succour – he would descend via the steepest part of one of this city's favelas. [...] He would be on the side of those without a roof to their head, bemused by the sight of his statue [Christ the Redeemer] erected in the picture postcard scene so far away, his back turned to those for whom his embrace is so much needed. (Vieira 2020, 119)

The creative reading of the divine figure and his history would allow Mangureira to appropriate a central character in Brazil, 'God Above All,' associating him with other meanings. The school's intention was to stimulate critical thinking about the power asymmetries that structure relations of violence and subalternity involving peripheral collectives in an ample sense:

On the cross, he is a man and also a woman. He is the naked indigenous body in which the church saw such sin and no humanity. He is the *ialorixá* [mother-of-saint] who professes faith after being stoned and vilified. He is the frail and dirty body of the minor you fear when he holds out his hand on the sidewalk. On the cross he is also black-skinned with curly hair. Like it or not, the androgynous body that perturbs you is also the extension of his body. (Vieira 2020, 119)

Tell Christ's story in carnivalized form; actualize and multiply his face, making him reborn as a resident of the Mangureira favela and other subalternized groups: these were the solutions encountered by Vieira and performed by Mangureira to present their version of Christ's message through



samba. The narrative constructed in this essay through the images taken by Edilson Pereira presents more than a documentation of this setting. For both authors, it seeks to reinterpret this artistic appropriation, offering an anthropological reading of an exemplary case of the carnivalization of the religious, while simultaneously pointing to the ‘staged’ dimensions of the festive performance and its effects.

CARNIVAL AND RELIGION IN THE SAMBADROME

The spectacular explosion of the samba school at the parade venue – the climatic moment of its competitive performance – is preceded by a process of physical and intersubjective staging that interconnects materialities, images and persons. While the parade is the school’s moment of full existence when it presents itself to its members, fans and competitors, that is, to itself and to the world, the context that precedes this ritual space-time, known as the *concentração*, ‘concentration,’ is established as the setting in which the parade itself is transported and assembled, ready to enter the spotlights. In the quest to capture attention, in which surprise is a fundamental element, there is a series of mediations and interdictions in terms of what is made visible, registered and divulged before carnival.

The monumentality and narrative coherence displayed in the sambadrome are constructed in the school’s *barracão* (warehouse) where, however, what is found is a plethora of materials, floats, costumes and people arranged in non-linear form. If we take the samba school carnival as a rite of passage, marked by the liminality embodied in the climax of the parades, the *barracão* is the space that anticipates and creates the conditions of the posterior ‘subjunctive’ state (Turner 2015) outside the habitual structures. Behind the scenes, though, numerous unforeseen reconfigurations already emerge, since the elements that make up the floats can generate an unplanned and indeed disordered ‘staging.’ In visual terms, the *barracão* encompasses numerous conflicting planes, generating unexpected transgressions of the canonical forms of presenting figures like Christ – such as his cross strewn on the ground or cut in half, since it is only at the time of the parade that the sculptures will be fully assembled, assuming their finished state and final positions to be adopted during the procession. This is done both to facilitate the transportation to the avenue and to ensure the mystery that will impress the audience.



PHOTO 2
The Mangueira warehouse (*barracão*) in Samba City: planes in conflict. The floats are restored between the parade on Carnival Sunday and the Parade of Champions the following Sunday.



PHOTO 3
Fourth float in the parade: Calvary, in which a gigantic crucified Jesus assumes the face of a young black man with tattoos and bleached hair. Lying on the warehouse floor, the cross was raised by a crane only at the entry to the sambadrome due to its size.



PHOTO 4
The fifth float, 'Jesus Rises to Heaven,' depicts a black Christ on the Mangueira Hillside. In the warehouse, many floats are disassembled to fit in the space and allow them to be transported later.




PHOTO 5
The fifth float being assembled in the concentration for entry into the sambadrome.

It is precisely in the concentration area – a section of Presidente Vargas Avenue adjacent to the Marquês de Sapucaí Sambadrome, blocked off during the carnival period to prepare for the parades – that the final touches are made. It is there that the costumes, *alas*, floats, special participants, *baianas*, percussion bands, *Velha Guarda* and so on all assemble some hours before entering the venue itself. The floats taken to the city centre merge into the landscape as diacritical signs of the process of assembling the dramatic space. Being on the physical and symbolic margin of the carnival ritual – on the margin of the margin to borrow an idea proposed by Dawsey (2013) to describe liminal situations – the concentration is composed of a state of things and persons that converge and, once assembled, begin to organize themselves. It becomes a space and also a movement of adding the finishing touches and readiness, which will condition the subsequent performance in the avenue. In sum, the concentration is the setting that enables a float to be transformed into a scene and a person into a *desfilante*, a member of an *ala* and part of Mangueira.

By interacting with people in this setting, the photographic camera becomes one more catalyser of the staging of their performances in emotional and physical terms. As in other ritual contexts (Pereira 2019), it participates in the pre-established relations and can stimulate the acting of the performers. In front of the camera, they begin to act in a self-conscious way to produce an image of themselves, for themselves and for others. When they perceive that they are being seen, many smile and pose, as though rehearsing to become part of the school about to make its presentation. As well as serving as a mediator that allows relations to be established through the process of taking portraits and the subsequent conversations that they generate, photography appears as one of the first devices to signal entry into the position of an agent to be perceived or, more precisely, admired.

In the ethnographic incursion made at the school's *barracão* and the parade *concentração*, we observed that the participation of people in the restaged drama articulates two complementary dimensions of the experience of assuming a particular figure: *transformation* and *transportation* (Schechner 1985). The first of these expressions refers to the transformation that results from the performer 'leaving' her or himself, seeing themselves from a new perspective, as in the case of those who transform into Christ, Our Lady and other characters from the Scriptures. The idea of *transportation*, in turn, indicates a displacement: 'during the performance the performers are "taken somewhere,"' Schechner writes (1985: 125-126). This movement can be understood as emotional too since although the notion of 'transportation' has taken on fairly unpoetic meanings over the course of history, until the eighteenth century the term designated in European literature a kinetic movement that occurred within human



bodies (Nhaoum-Grappe 1994). Emotions result from a stimulation that leads the sentiment from inside the person to overflow on the surface of the skin.

For those who deal with the ludic arsenal of dressing up together in costumes to parade, the diacritical signal of the beginning of their performances resides in the emotions expressed when they ‘concentrate’– a psychological, corporal and material state that combines with the action of dressing up, embodying a role and feeling part of a collective dedicated to the common goal of representing the school well. Entering the game of seeing and being seen, their bodies and faces start to interact in a ritualized form with the cameras and gazes that multiply from backstage to the climax of the competition. In this dynamic, the human face, the sacred zone of the body insofar as it concentrates the traits of individual identity (Le Breton 2019), gradually transforms, opening up in smiles and producing bonds. The portraits presented here provide a glimpse of what happened on the edges of the parade and, above all, the diversity of human forces that composed, along with the floats, the carnival appearance of the Mangueira Jesus.



PHOTO 6
The first float, opening the procession, symbolizes the birth of Christ with nativity scenes showing the Baby Jesus as black and as indigenous. Joseph and Mary were represented in the parade by the *sambista* Nelson Sargento and the singer Alcione.



PHOTO 7
A member of the school directorate, dressed as a shepherd, helps a participant put on the 'Body of a Woman' costume. The photo shows the encounter between the history of Jesus, a Galilean carpenter in a land of shepherds, and his actualization as a victim of violence against women.



PHOTO 8
Carnivalizing the miracle of the fish: Jesus liberates the people from their anguish by giving them food – and drink.



PHOTO 9
The percussion group, composed by 250 members, embodied Roman brutality in centurion clothes. In Rio de Janeiro, the skull image can be associated with death squads.



PHOTO 10
One of the crucified prepares to get on the Calvary float. The makeup combines the scenography of wounds with the colours green and pink of Manguera and with a purple beard with glitter in a carnivalesque modulation of the Passion.



PHOTO 11
Our Lady of Sorrows
interpreted by a man: the
purple, gold and silver evoke
the opulence of baroque
images and the suffering of
Lent and the Passion.



PHOTO 12

The last act of the parade, in which Jesus is reborn on the Mangueira Hillside and in the Carnival, the school muses, as 'stars,' announce the Good News in costumes that evoke the funk aesthetic.



PHOTO 13
The Pharisees, the maintainers of appearances, are the hypocritical and arrogant figures criticized by Christ for their obsession over following the rules. Although this is a negative role in the biblical story, the joy of the *desfilante* points in another direction.



PHOTO 14
In the *ala* 'The good criminal is a dead criminal,' Jesus is crucified by a discourse of justice frequently supported by Christians.



PHOTO 15
Bate-bolas or Clóvis, traditional characters from the street carnivals in the centre and suburbs of Rio, update the figure of Christ in revelling bodies.

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ABSTRACT

A photo essay containing images taken behind the scenes of the Mangueira samba school parade from 2020, whose theme was "The Truth Will Set You Free!" The school proposed a modern carnivalized reading of the life of Christ, depicting him with faces from subalternized groups of contemporary Brazil. More than a documentation, the images in this essay offer

KEYWORDS

Mangueira; religion and performance; religion and carnival; samba schools; religious materialities.

a reinterpretation of the parade's visuality, providing an anthropological reading of an exemplary case of carnivalization of the religious, while also highlighting the 'staged' aspects of the festive performance and the social critique that it encompasses.

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Authorship contribution. The two authors contributed to the elaboration of the textual essay and in the selection and ordering of the images. Renata de Castro Menezes has conducted research on the Mangueira samba school since 2016, while the photographs for the essay were produced by Edilson Pereira.

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