

THE ALTAR AS A PERFORMANCE IN POPULAR RELIGIOSITY

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

DANIELA OLIVEIRA DOS SANTOS

Universidade Federal de Goiás, Goiás, GO, Brazil, 74690-900 -
ppgipc.fcs@ufg.br
Instituto Federal de Goiás, Itumbiara, GO, Brazil, 75524-030 -
gabinete.itumbiara@ifg.edu.br

ORCID
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7127-3212>

SEBASTIÃO RIOS

Universidade Federal de Goiás, Goiás, GO, Brazil, 74690-900 - pp-
gipc.fcs@ufg.br

ORCID
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8462-3744>

ABSTRACT

This article presents the altar as a place from which emanate performances visualized in symbols, actions, gestures, songs arising from religious practice. With a focus on popular religiosity, the experiences of the Folia de Reis are highlighted in order to provide a reflection on the performances of the altar. In the light of studies in Cultural Performances, the emphasis given to gestures, sounds, images and tunes allow reflections on the performativity revealed in the dynamic materiality of the altar, which remains alive in different contexts. The altar is thus configured as a place of the sacred that highlights the set of synesthetic qualities of the various performances involved in or before them; including those constituted by their simple materiality and presence.

KEYWORDS

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

THEME PRESENTATION

The altars are places where elements of the human connection with the sacred, material expressions of faith, are revealed in religious practices perpetuated by humanity. From the Latin, *altar*, the term etymologically carries the meaning of elevating; elevating from a lower place to a higher one, thus revealing itself as

an intermediary of the human condition before the deities, symbolically situated on a higher plane.

Among the practices belonging to Catholicism, especially those arising from popular religiosity, the altars present in the houses represent the vicissitude of the faith practiced, whether in groups or individually, from the cultural heritages safeguarded in the people's actions.

Worshiped in various religious contexts, the altar is particularly evident in the verses of *Folias de Santos Reis*, such as in this song, collected in the city of Uberaba/MG:

*In God's hours, amen/ when will we start
God save you the beautiful altar / with the saints who are in
it (bis)
God save you the beautiful altar / with pleasure and joy
God save you the Minino Deus / Saint Joseph and Saint
Mary (bis)
God save you the beautiful altar / save you with all faith
God save you the Virgin Mary / God save you Saint Joseph
(bis) (Poel, 2013, 52)*

The verses show the presence of the saints, materialized in sacred images, which then compose the space of the houses: "It is a sacred place. In it, offerings to the deity are presented, and the profane becomes sacred" (Ibid). It is about the externalization of faith expressed in things and images that connect to everyday practices in a space of multiple experiences and meanings: chants, blessings, prayers, requests, thanks.

This intimate connection of cultural-religious things and practices will be addressed here in the light of Cultural Performances and based on the assumption that the notion of agency can be applied both to people and things, and especially to their interaction¹. Arranged neatly on the altar, things, objects, images, symbols coat a range of performances and rituals as generators, guides, and receivers of gestures, sounds, bodily attitudes that solidify their permanence with groups belonging to popular religious manifestations.

1. About agency of things, read about in: Garcia (2018), Ingold (2012), Agostini (2011).

THE ALTAR



IMAGE 1
Altar exposed on Avenida Beira-Rio, in Itumbiara/GO, during the presentation of King Party (Folias de Reis).
Source: Daniela Santos (2020)

Morning of January 2020, sunny Sunday, and the uniform already put on for singing. Homage to the three Santos Kings, announced a few days ago, on the main Avenida de Itumbiara – Goiás.

CompanhiaTrêsMinistros tunes viola and guitar and stands in a row in front of the altar.

And, to decorate, flowers could not be missing.

Nossa Senhora Aparecida, São José and Nossa Senhora de Fátima accompany the Reis Magos; on the white tablecloth, a sign that the Star of Bethlehem, which had appeared at Christmas, shines there, too.

There are people everywhere: in front of the altar, some cross each other, others kneel.

The eyes turn to the three Kings. The flag, already suspended above the altar, is a sign that yes, it can begin: the captain pulls the first verse for the three Three Kings to sing. (Santos, Diário de Campo 2020)

The altar constitutes an environment, a place prepared for daily religious practices. “A place is the order (whatever it is) according to which elements are distributed in coexistence relations. A place is, therefore,

an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability” (Certeau 1995, 201).

By stating that “space is a practiced place,” Certeau (1995, 202) awakens attention to everything that lies beyond it: a spatiality that goes beyond the physical location. Thus, the field of study aimed at the place comprises more than the space itself, as it is also about looking at gestures, bodies, sounds, and all the performances that involve it.

Turner (1974), reflecting on the symbols used in the Isoma ritual of the Ndembu peoples, clarifies that “almost every object used, every gesture performed, every chant or prayer, every unit of space and time represents, by conviction, something different from yourself. It is more than it appears to be, and often much more” (Ibid. 29). From this indication by Turner, we understand the study of the symbology present in the ritual as essential to reveal the meaning attributed to it.

This way, the altar, in addition to the materiality of things and images, is permeated by a variety of actions, gestures, attitudes, bodies, postures, which, experienced individually or in groups, comprise performances that take place in the place that is situated both in everyday life and in moments of parties and celebrations. Both the material symbols present on the altar (images, branches, objects) as well as the immaterial elements (gestures, sounds) that it generates, guides, and receives, confer meanings and meanings on those who evoke them.

The altar generates guides, receives, and contemplates practices. It is therefore not static. The reflections presented here will make it possible to observe the altar as a performative place, a space from and to where different symbols and meanings emerge.

In popular religiosity, the altar plays a prominent role: in it and from it, chants, prayers, gestures, performances that signify the event itself are revealed. Therefore, it is worth looking at these practices in order to visualize how they are carried out.

ALTARS AND CRIBS IN THE PERFORMANCES OF THE KING PARTY (FOLIA DE REIS)

In popular Catholicism, there are several manifestations that, in a unique way, through gestures, bodies, sounds, make religious practice possible. Among the expressive number of these manifestations existing in Brazil, we highlight Party (Folias de Reis),

(...) popular religious processions that rotate – more often, but not exclusively – from Christmas (the night of December 24th) to Twelfth Night (January 6th), representing the journey of the Kings of the East to Bethlehem to adore the

Child Jesus. From house to house, they ask for donations, in cash or in other forms, to hold a closing party in honor of Santos Reis (Rios and Viana 2015, 27)



IMAGE 2
Group: Three
Ministers –
Almerindonópolis/
GO
Source:
AnthonyRabelo
(2020)

In Itumbiara/GO and neighboring cities, the King Party (Folias de Reis) organize tours in the weeks before Christmas, when Catholics are dedicated to waiting for the Baby Jesus: Advent. Between the last week of December and the sixth of January, the day dedicated to the Holy Kings, the tour takes place, even more intensely, in the countryside.

When the revelers arrive at the houses, a combination is made with the owner: the singing can take place outside or inside the house. In the tours of Companhia Três Ministros, most of the time, the singing takes place inside the houses. Entering the houses, most of the time you can see the altar, either simple, with only one image, or even cribs that light up the waiting for the Infant Jesus.

When there is a crib in the residence, the revelers dedicate a good deal of time to revere it with their own tunes. This rite is called Praise of the Nativity Scene. It always occurs on occasions when there is a crib in the place where the Company is carrying out the ritual. The chantsung, at this stage, is intended to praise the symbols that make up the nativity scene, as well as the Christmas ornaments and images of saints in the Catholic tradition. Furthermore, there is, through the textual content of the verses, the reproduction of the episode of Jesus' birth. The narration of these biblical facts occurs, according to the number of symbols and ornaments that make up the nativity scene (Matos 2019, 161).

Revelers revere the nativity scene with great devotion. It is a time of great conviction and respect. “It is a solemn moment of the King Party (Folias de Reis) when the group ‘sights who wanted’ (Rios e Viana 2015, 39).



IMAGE 3
Revelers kneeling
at the altar.
Inhumas/GO.
Source: Rogério
Neves, 2014.

In the photographs above, we see two different moments of this ritual. In the photo on the left, we have the crib set up in a decorated space, waiting for the visit of the Companhia de Santos Reis. The photo on the right shows the subsequent moment, when the group of revelers, kneeling around the lady of the house (in a red blouse), sing and pray at the altar. The owner of the house, also on her knees on the ground, holds the flag of the Holy Kings, a sacred symbol for the community of devotees. Kneeling before the figure of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph is to recall what the three Magi also did, as reported by the evangelist Matthew: “they honored” (The Jerusalem Bible 2002, 1705).

The verses sung in front of the crib announce the arrival of the Child Jesus and all the details of the story are revealed in their chronological order. Starting with the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary, following through the circumstances of the Child’s birth, and ending with the narrative of the visit of the three wise men and their adoration of Jesus. The nativity scene and all the images displayed on the altar are highlighted in the verses of the tune. The event that took place is sung without haste.

As a reference for the poetic and audio creation of the first part of this chant, we bring the *Annunciation* of the Angel Gabriel to Maria, with lyrics and interpretation by Ambassador Luís Carlos and music by João Baianinho (João Reinaldo da Silva), from Inhumas/GO. The verses are adapted from the biblical narrative that tells the fact (Gospel of Luke, I, 26 - 38). Although the theme of the *Annunciation* is all given in the biblical text, it would be impossible to sing a King Party (Folias de Reis) with the verses exactly as they are found in the passage of the Bible. Thus, the theme of the *Annunciation* is transposed into a form that sings of the event that took place. The poetic form, expressed in the meter and rhymes of the song, as well as its melody, harmony, and rhythm, show the particular way that revelers adopt in creating their songs²:

In a city in Galilee / by the name of Nazareth / there was a virgin / beautiful and of great faith City of Nazareth / is where she lived / her beauty came from within / and her name was Maria It was already the sixth month / Elizabeth's pregnancy / Mary was visited / by the angel Gabriel The angel then greeted Mary / with a sweet and friendly gesture / save, full of grace / that the Lord is with you Mary did not understand / that noble greeting / and asked Saint Gabriel / and he gave the explanation I am sent from the Lord / to announce your destiny / you are blessed among women / to be the mother of God's child Mary was frightened / for being a virgin and betrothed / and asked Saint Gabriel / how she was going to be conceived The angel then answered / you will be the mother of the Savior / with the Divine Holy Spirit / the Lord prepared you He also warned Mary / of her cousin Elizabeth / who said she was barren / but received graces from heaven Mary then replied / here is the slave of the Lord / make yourself in me your word / and the angel breaks or Filled with the Holy Spirit / that God trusted in you / the word then became flesh / to dwell among us. (Rios and Viana 2015, 168)³.

Since this is an obligatory chant before the nativity scene and, in the case of the version by ambassador Luís Carlos presented above, so close to the way the theme is presented in the Bible, there is a tendency to fix the verses. But there is also the possibility that the verses of the song sung for the nativity scene are taken right away.

It is common, during the singing, that the verses are inspired by the materiality of the images displayed on each altar: the figure of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the Three Kings, and other saints of devotion to the residents. On this aspect, the captain of Folia Três Ministros, Anthony Rabelo, revealed in an informal conversation: "We don't memorize everything, but the

2. On individual creation in traditional, collective and diffuse manifestations, see Toadas de Santos Reis in Inhumas, Goiás (Rios and Viana 2015). For variations – musical and poetic – on the same theme, see, for example, the "Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel a Maria", by Lourenço Francisco Ferreira. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgJBnbVy_pY.
3. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tf2ynNafuSc&t=1s>

verses come to mind. It's the story we sing every year. This makes it easier to remember; you have to know the Bible" (Saints 2019).

Singing for the nativity scene or the altar is presented as performances that show the revelers' own making and involve various elements arising from the culture to which these groups belong. Thus, when revelers kneel before a crib, their connection with the sacred is notoriously visualized and performed. The gesture is inserted in a specific context, in a collective action: almost "orchestrated", the revelers, with their instruments in hand, lean forward and revere him.

The manger adorations constitute the most solemn moment of the King Party (Folias de Reis) tour. However, a similar solemnity is still observed even when it comes to altars that do not contain the images of the manger, which may have one or more images of saints, the bible and a rosary and other devotional objects.

In front of the crib, the clown must keep his mask up. But the same prescription applies to other altars, especially when there is the image of Jesus. Source of emanation of good, it cannot be defiled by the clown who has a transit with evil, as we will see below.



IMAGE 4
Group of Santos
Reis of Inhumas/
GO.
Source: Markus
Garscha 2012.

The photograph above shows the moment when the singing is made for an altar with the presence of the image of the Child Jesus. The clown closest to the altar, on the left side of the photo, has his head bowed and his gaze turned to Jesus in his manger, thus venerating the image. His gesture reveals itself in prayer, and even with his lips pursed, his tender look at the manger says much more than words.

The clowns—also known in the region as watchman, shepherd, and bastion⁴—accompany and guard the flag. A good clown needs to know the prophecy as much as the ambassador and be able to do in verse what the other does by singing.

The clowns are also responsible for more playful parts of the demonstration, with playful dances and verses. They wear a colorful uniform and their face is covered with a mask that looks normally frightening, possibly with leather parts and animal teeth. Its function, origin, and representation are some of the most controversial topics in King Party (Folias de Reis). For some revelers, the origin of their games is associated with the task of delaying and diverting Herod's soldiers when killing the innocents. For others, they would be Herod's soldiers repentant and converted, perhaps in analogy with the episode of Saul's conversion. It is true, however, that, in one case or the other, clowns deal directly with the presence of evil in the King Party (Folias de Reis), and hence some precepts and prohibitions that they must observe before the nativity scene (Rios and Viana, 2015).

A culture is evidenced in the actions it generates. Hence the centrality of the interpretation of these actions for their understanding. In the specific case, it is about identifying the ways of the revelers to behave before the altar, noticing the bows, postures, not only during the chant, but also after it. This is because it is also in front of the crib that, after the singing, the revelers and the owners of the house pray the rosary in the houses that offer lunches and landings.

This practice is quite recurrent in Folias, being a custom that revelers respect and pass on to new generations. Describing the King Party (Folias de Reis) Estrela do Oriente, from the Pedro Ludovico Sector in Goiânia/GO, researcher Edsonina Carvalho (2009) states that, in addition to praying the rosary in front of the nativity scene, at the beginning and at the last mystery the two ambassadors are on their knees (Carvalho 2009, 58).

Geertz (1973) highlights that culture contemplates a pattern of meanings, thus contributing to our understanding of it as a product of the relationships established between different groups and their practices and customs.

When dealing with the concept of culture, Geertz states:

(...) it denotes a pattern of meanings historically transmitted, embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms through which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and activities in relation to life. (Geertz 1973, 67).

4. The term *marungo*, common in the south of Minas, is not current in Inhumas.

The concept of culture exposed by Geertz is essentially semiotic and carries within itself the understanding of culture associated with a web of meanings constructed by man that needs to be interpreted. This web of meanings involves several aspects of human life— religion among them— and also several elements: actions, speeches and silences, gestures and pauses, songs and prayers, ornamentation and arrangement of objects, etc.

Thus, based on the centrality of setting up the cribs and praying the rosaries in the King Party (Folias de Reis), it would be expected that these events were thematized in his chant. And this is what we can see in the corner below, by ambassador João Cigano of Ciade Santos Reis da Inhumilha, from Itauçu/GO, in which, in the greeting at the altar, reference is made to the prayer of the rosary.

(...) God save you the beautiful altar / and the people who adorned it / Jesus Christ protect you / and you will always be your protector Master of the house / I'll give you my congratulations / your house is compared / with the lapinha of Bethlehem You are a devotee dos Três Reis / you and your family / that's why the Three Kings are asking you / a dinner for the company Give a coat for the flag / and also for the instruments / give permission to the two guards / to take off the uniform All that's left is to pray the rosary / on Mary's rosary / and put your intentions / for you with your family Master of the house / turn the flag over here / with your permission / place it on the altar You take care of the flag / overnight / you are Protected by the Three Kings / we're going to stop singing⁵.

To emphasize the aspects related to religious practices, Durkheim (2009) understands that the religious man is a collective being. Regarding the collectivity, the author reveals that “the group performs, in a regular way, a moral and intellectual uniformity (...)” (Durkheim 2009, 11). The social being does not overlap with the individual, however, Durkheim affirms that religion is an eminently social thing, with religious representations being seen as collective representations. The elements that mark the collective character of a rite are time and space. About time, Durkheim points out its construction throughout history: “the division into days, weeks, months and years corresponds to the periodicity of rites, festivals and public ceremonies” (Ibid. 17).

The Christmas season marks the practices of the King Party (Folias de Reis), since it is the period when the revelers leave their homes and go out for the tour, and several companies, as usual, move to the countryside. In residents' homes, revelers spend the day and night singing and socializing. Also, in this space, they plan and fix what was not good in the singing.

5. Available at: https://youtu.be/oNO_AwqrRbE

Looking at the altar and its relationship with popular manifestations, especially the King Party (Folias de Reis), consists in considering the whole tangle of practices that arise on it and before it. Therefore, it is necessary to observe what the groups do and observe the performances built during the practices carried out. Bodies, smells, gestures, movement, colors, shapes arise and happen “as an event in itself and as a representation, as a communication, as an aesthetic act, a symbolic act and, mainly, a locus of experience for whoever looks at it and who is looked at” (Camargo 2015, 02).

ALTARS AND THEIR MEANINGS AND PERMANENCIES

*Cith God I lie, with God I rise, with the grace of God and the Holy Spirit.
(Evening Prayer, Popular)*

The practices that involve the altar together with the King Party (Folias de Reis) demonstrate a state of permanence of the devotions that, from generation to generation, revelers preserve. Through singing, praying the rosary and praising the crib, the revelers emphasize the presence of this very important space in which faith is presented in the performances performed.

The residents, when preparing the altar, deposit their faith and hope in it and, with great care, dispose of the images and symbols that well represent what they celebrate.



IMAGE 5
Altar in a devotee's house in Inhumas/GO.
Source: RogérioNeves, 2014.

The altar “tells”. In it, faith is present in its materiality: sacred images of Santa Clara and Nossa Senhora da Abadia, in the oratory, flowers to decorate, the glow of candlelight and a photo of the loved one in memory. The

image of the flag that has already appeared in so many homes, also blesses this home. Therefore, she is given the deserved prominence. Well-placed, the image of the Holy Kings worshipping the Baby Jesus gains momentary prominence during the stay of the flag and the group in that house.

The altar, as we have seen, is worth as much for its materiality as for eliciting gestures and actions incorporated in devotional practices, especially when it comes to popular religiosity. Present in almost all devotees of the Three Kings, it has, however, a presence that goes far beyond the limits of this specific devotion. A place par excellence for individual or collective prayers, altars are practically omnipresent in the various manifestations of popular religiosity; without prejudice to its presence in other social strata as well.

Popular prayers are forms of prayer that are born from the people, from their experiences of faith rooted in life. “For everything there is prayer. Knowing popular prayers is knowing a good part of logic and popular faith” (Poel 2013, 904). And here we are understanding prayer in a broad sense, which goes beyond the words uttered and also involves a whole repertoire of forms of expression that involves gestures, songs, construction and arrangement of objects and images; all of this constituting closely related performances.

In this sense, our gaze in this essay is primarily focused on spaces and contexts —the altars and their rooms—where prayers and singing take place as action. The altars are configured, therefore, as places of the sacred that emphasize the set of synesthetic qualities of the various performances involved in them or before them, including those constituted by its simple materiality and presence.

We used the narrative of Euclides da Cunha, in an excerpt from *Os Sertões*, in order to show how prayers have long been established among the people:

At dusk, the voice of the bell called the faithful to prayer. Work ceased. The people gathered under the trellis covered with foliage. It spilled across the square. He knelt down. The chorus of the first prayer was spread in the air. The night came, about to come, barely foreshadowed by the sertanejo twilight, fugitive and brief as that of the deserts. The bonfires, which were customary to light up along the perimeter of the square, were burning. And their wavering glares framed the scene half drowned in shadows. According to the old practice, or, better, the whim of A. Conselheiro, the crowd was divided, separating the genders, into two detached groups. And in each of them a huge shuffle of contrasts... (Cunha 1984, 87-88)

The profusion of performances presented in the highlighted excerpt reveals that prayers emerge from doing, from revealing actions and from practices

that are established in groups. The actions perceived in the act of “ceasing work” and in the exposed gesture, “they knelt” stand out. And, still, the expression which highlights that the people “spread through the square”, indicating the collective character of the action and already insinuating the capacity of mobilization of the charismatic leader.

Without going into considerations about the nature of messianic movements— which go beyond the scope of this essay—, it is interesting here to characterize the longevity of the action of collective prayers and the centrality of such popular practices, especially when dedicated to the sacred images that culminate, among many expressions existing, on the altars; a characteristic to which a good part of the studies of popular piety linked to Catholicism has already drawn attention.

The use of sacred images is among the cultural manifestations of a private or community character that are strongly established in popular Catholicism. In such a way that it also finds recognition in the formal instances of the Catholic Church:

An expression of great importance in the context of popular piety is the use of sacred images that, according to the canons of culture and the multiplicity of the arts, help the faithful to face the mysteries of the Christian faith (Directory on Popular Piety and Liturgy 2003, 25).

The mounting of altars with images, however, raises gestures incorporated in other practices of popular religiosity that do not enjoy the same recognition; on the contrary, they are often regarded with suspicion by the clergy. This is the case, for example, of blessing practices, which are closer to popular festivals such as the King Party (Folias de Reis) and Congado than to the official Catholic liturgy, which does not prevent several healers and healers, revelers and *congadeiros* from being sincere Catholics and assiduous attendees of church rituals.

On blessing, Van der Poel (2013) clarifies that the use of altars in their practices is common. The researcher states that, in the healing rituals he observed/attended, healers usually put on the altar table the name of the patient and his illness, whether spiritual or physical, in order to obtain the response from the one who evokes (Ibid. 53). In the same sense, the faith healers pronounce the names of those to whom they pray for healing.

I, Daniela, remember that it was a family tradition for my mother and grandmother to take me and my brother to the healer; a very close neighbor, who always received us with great attention.

Arriving at his house, we could already smell the rue and other herbs exhaling in the backyard. No doubt the aroma of rue predominated. On

the table, everything was already prepared: a white tablecloth, a candle and some intertwined rue branches; the ritual could already begin. With the branches in hand, she asked that the evil eye, the broken one, the fallen longhorn be expunged... I confess that I did not understand these terms, but just hearing my parents and grandparents talk about them, I was sure that thing good was not. After the conversation with the adults, we left with light soul and body. After a few months, we were there again.

Bringing this memory as a background for a reflection on the performances that the altars produce, we consider that the blessings are also made up of significant practices, in their symbols, words, gestures and smells. And it is interesting to note that this cultural practice, originating from strata and popular religiosity, also comes into contact and dialogue with (or for) mass culture. A good example is the *samba-enredo* of the 2020 carnival by Escola de Samba Renascer, from Jacarépaguá RJ, and its promotional poster.



IMAGE 6
PhotoDisclosure
Renascer de
Jacarepaguá
Samba School
Source:<https://www.srzd.com/carnaval/rio-de-janeiro/leia-a-sinopse-do-enredo-da-renascer-de-jacarepagua-para-o-carnaval-2020/>

With the motto “I am the one who blesses you, God are the one who cures you”, the samba school’s promotional poster reveals the plurality of symbols that evoke and intertwine with the sacred. It is important to highlight that there is no explicit reference to this or that religion on the poster. However, the ambience of that figure who bridges the gap between believers and the spiritual sphere and the deities is evident in the poster: the healer.

More than the images on the wall (Santo Antônio, the dove of the Divine Espírito Santo, Nossa Senhora da Conceição Aparecida in the waters of the Paraíba do Sul River, Nossa Senhora do Rosário and the rosary), precisely those on the altar refer to this transit which directs the viewer’s gaze and understanding towards popular Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian traditions, expressed in the images of Cosme and Damião — often associated with the Ibejis or Meninos d’Angola —, from São Jorge, do Padre Cícero, in the plan of the sword of São Jorge and in the photo that refers to a figure of a saint’s mother or father or an old black man.

In the samba-enredo of the Escola de Samba Renascer de Jacarepaguá, which rocked the passage through Sapucaí in 2020, the performances that emanate from the altar displayed on the poster thrive in the form of poetry.

*Bring prayers and blessings to ease your physical and heart
discomforts.*

*I break and disconnect from any and all curses, spells and
seduction.*

Smell the herbs, incense and smoker.

I'm also a healer, yes sir.

*I have in my hands symbolic objects such as rue, rosary,
branches of leaves, crucifixes and candles.*

*I have in my speech, in my gestures, and in my closed eyes,
the gift of healing my brother.*

To alleviate the ailments! (Junior; Rocha 2020)

Set in the first person, the synopsis of the school's plot helps to visualize the practices of the healer. In this, the plot is also performative, as it reveals actions based on the profusion of elements and sensations presented in the poster: smells, objects, gestures, supplications, chants, blessings. Everything settles down in him and with him. Associating the notion of agency of things with the theory of cultural performances to identify different modes of articulation between things and people, we can say that, in the symbology exposed, the altar performs.

The current context of the COVID19 pandemic (Sars-Cov-2) has changed the social and economic scenario and this has a clear impact on the religious field. The conditioning to the deprivations caused by the pandemic allowed the world population to “rethink” their daily practices. Whether in the simplest day-to-day situations, such as going to the supermarket, or in the way of dealing with work—whether in the restrictions and safety measures in face-to-face work or in the tools and platforms of remote work—, the pandemic “rocked” our way of seeing life and living regarding religious practices, most often experienced in groups and in somewhat public spaces—even if it is a room in a house that opens to receive a King Party (Folias de Reis) group—, the scenario has also been changing, especially due to the absence of people in these spaces, as a result of the pandemic.

However, some religious practices resisted the restrictions imposed by the current context. Among them, the devotions that take place around an altar stand out, which, in the impossibility of carrying out a broader and collective rite, also lends itself to individual or family devotion at

home, and can even be extended to a limited circle from relatives, friends and neighbors⁶.

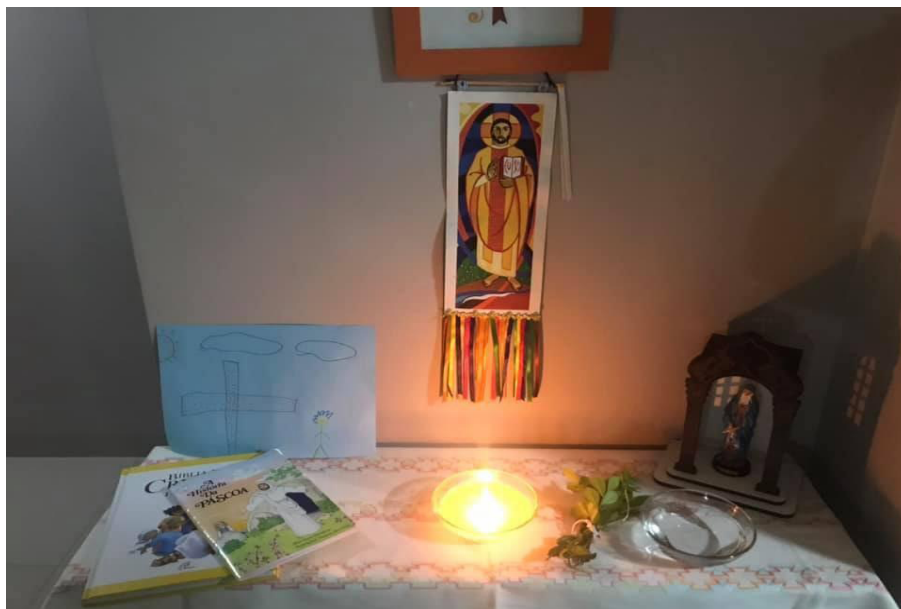


IMAGE 7
Home altar.
Source: Author

In the photo above, the image of Jesus Christ stands out on the wall and on the altar a children's drawing with a cross, children's books of religious stories are present together with the image of Our Lady of Sorrows, in the oratory. Along with the symbols, the candle lights up the scene. The water prepared for the blessing is company with the branches caught from some evergreen branches. The altar reveals the presence of a child in the house; its imprint on the drawing and personal books, it says: I am here.

(IN) CONCLUSION

In the development of this essay, we tried to think of the altar as materiality and presence that constitutes in and of itself a performance that, in turn, generates, guides, receives other performances; performances by revelers and other adherents of popular religiosity forms, such as healers, who manifest themselves before the altar, performing, from it, kinesthetic actions that elucidate various aspects of this form of religiosity.

Understanding the interweaving of such performances requires a keen eye both for things and their agency and for the details of the actions that unfold before the altar. As in a samba school plot, from and through its images, the performances tell and sing the event, placing all the participants in the same action and bringing out the senses and perceptions

6. Another possibility for (responsible) devotion in these times of pandemic, in addition to the attendance to churches by a limited number of believers or to perform more restricted rituals with some distance, was the broadcast of masses and other religious events on TV or the internet. And, again, the altar is highlighted in these broadcasts.

of what is venerated in the act. And this is also valid to a great extent for meetings of individuals and family nuclei— more or less extensive— around their altars, in the intimacy of their homes.

Thinking of the altar as a performance agent itself also implies looking at everything that the altar transmits or evokes, whether images, words, bodily gestures, sounds, smells. Everything is part of the event itself, in its moment and context. Around the altar—a space for exchanging knowledge—on the altar and through the altar, religiosity is evidenced in the performances held there; be it for the images and things, for the revelers, for the families that receive the groups, for those who approach them or use them for the purposes of their spiritual and religious practices.

Developing a look at the space in which faith is visualized, that is, the altars, helps us to understand how performances are produced. It is a look that goes beyond what is set, a look that checks the details of things and actions, without haste, savoring the scene and what emanates from it.

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Daniela Oliveira dos Santos is a doctoral student in Cultural Performances - Universidade Federal de Goiás (2020-2024) with ongoing research on the Divine Office of Communities. She has a Masters in Arts from the Universidade Federal de Uberlândia (2012) and took a specialization course in Christian Liturgy at the Jesuit College (FAJE – 2018 to 2019). She holds a degree in Artistic Education with Major in Music from the Universidade Federal de Uberlândia. She has been a music teacher at the Instituto Federal de Goiás - Campus Itumbiara since 2011. She is interested in research in the fields of Popular Catholicism, Catholic Rites and Liturgical Music. E-mail: danielaoliveira@ufg.edu.br

Sebastião Rios is a professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences and at the Graduate Program in Cultural Performances at the Universidade Federal de Goiás. Associate researcher at the Center for African Studies at the Eduardo Mondlane University (Mozambique) and collaborator at the Zentralinstitut für Lateinamerikastudien at the Catholic University of Eichstätt (Germany). Doctor in Sociology from UnB / University of Innsbruck, Austria (1998), Master in Literature (1993) and Bachelor in History from UnB (1987). He works in the areas of Brazilian Society and Culture, Brazilian Literature, Music and Society, Popular Culture / Intangible Heritage, with several records of Folias de Reis and Congados on CDs and videos. E-mail: sebastiaorios@gmail.com

Authorship contribution. Daniela Oliveira dos Santos, Sebastião Rios: conception, data collection and analysis, elaboration and writing of the manuscript, discussion of the results.

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