

OPTCHA! IS ROMA A RELIGION? AN ANALYSIS OF THE ACTIVITIES, PERFORMANCE, AND RITUALS OF THE ROMA PEOPLE IN THE CITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO¹

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

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PRESENTATION

This essay analyzes the activities of the different actors that comprise the Roma scenario, which has become established in the city of Rio de Janeiro in recent years. I decided to highlight two of the rituals I have been following in field work for my doctoral research, presenting some of the Roma people who were present, and their participation and activities in these rituals. In the images, in a photographic and ethnographic narrative, I present, describe, highlight, and propose to reflect on the two rituals, as scenarios of *social situations* (Gluckman 1987)², to emphasize issues I consider central to understanding these activities in a collection of photographs.

1. The essay *Optcha! Is Roma a religion? An analysis of the activities, performance and rituals of the Roma people in the city of Rio de Janeiro*, was presented and exhibited at the IV Arthur Napoleão Figueiredo Photography Awards - EAVAAM, held in 2020. The essay received the prize for the second best photographic essay in that edition.

2. Gluckman, Max. 2010. Análise de uma situação social na Zulu-lândia moderna. In: *A antropologia das sociedades contemporâneas*, Bela Feldman-Bianco (Org.). São Paulo: UNESP.

In the first group of images (Photographs 1 to 5), I present the group called *Tenda CiganaEspiritualista Tzara Ramirez* (Tzara Ramirez Spiritualist Roma Tent) in Nova Iguaçu, Baixada Fluminense in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It is one of many religious groups, which are presented as *tents*, *tzaras*, or *tsaras*, their networks, and how they are regularly activated by other Roma representations in the city. Thus, like many other *tzaras* in the city, the *Tenda CiganaEspiritualista Tzara Ramirez* group, which is characterized for practicing a ritual called *Salamandra*, in which the mediums incorporate entities called *spiritual Roma people* (Maia 2014)³, to develop their Roma rituals, and with their dance and music performances gaining notoriety and, thereby, establishing themselves as *Roma people*, but *spiritual Roma people* in these specific cases.

The second group of images (Photographs 6 to 8) focuses on the commemoration of the National Roma and Saint Sara Kali Day, a Roma celebration with the greatest visibility that takes place in the city. The ritual incorporates civil, religious, and cultural Roma expressions. The event has taken place since May 25, 2006⁴, since Saint Sara Kali Day was established as National Roma Day by decree in Brazil on May 24 of that year. Since this time, Mirian Stanescon, who is described as a *genuine Roma*, holds a ritual to commemorate the date. The grotto has a fixed image of the saint and, therefore, the park has become one of the religious tourism destinations, being listed on the City Hall's official calendar of events in the city in 2017. The event involves the presence of approximately five thousand people, and has been transforming a public space into one of dispute and controversies about the Roma issue, their culture and religion. From this presentation of the Roma, and Mirian Stanescon's ritual⁵, I propose to highlight another of the different forms of being a Roma, which I have followed during the process of my research. In this case, it is the Roma people who are asserting themselves as *genuine Roma*, a term formulated by Mirian Stanescon.

Through this ethnographic photographic essay, I intend to present how the different forms of Roma representations, such as the *spiritual Roma* and *genuine Roma* rituals constitute *different forms* (Brah 2008)⁶ of being a Roma, performed and ritualized in the city of Rio de Janeiro in recent

3. Maia, Cleiton Machado. 2014. *Possoler a suamão?: uma análise da Tenda CiganaEspiritualista Tzara Ramirez*. 113 p. Dissertação (Mestrado em Ciências Sociais), Instituto de Ciências Humanas e Sociais/Instituto Multidisciplinar/Instituto de Três Rios, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Seropédica.

4. The festival takes place with support from the Rio de Janeiro State Special Department of Policies to Promote Racial Equality and the Department of Culture.

5. The Roma is an Advisor of the Order of Attorneys of Brazil (OAB/RJ) Human Rights Commission, founder and president of the Saint Sara Kali Foundation (Fundação Santa Sara Kali), and has held the "National Crusade for World Peace" for twenty years in Garota de Ipanema Park, in the Zona Sul of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

6. Brah, Avtar. 2006. *Diferença, diversidade, diferenciação*. In: *Cadernos Pagu*, v. 26: 329-376, Porto Alegre.

years. There have been great debates on the Roma people in Brazil in the last thirty years. Focusing on the last fifteen years, the decree to establish National Roma Day was signed on May 24, 2006⁷, and has promoted increased research, placing the topic of the Roma people at the center of new academic productions.


This visibility is part of a broader debate, which has been fostered since the process of formulating our Magna Carta in 1988. As author Susan Wright (1999) demonstrates, a number of international organizations have promoted public policies which understood that constructing democracy, supported on the idea of cultural diversity as a possibility (Wright 1999, 13), which has gained strength in the international context. This socio historical process has presented new actors, and new forms of involvement in the construction of our Constitution, and has continued to produce new spaces of visibility, and disputes, among a number of old and new actors in recent decades.

THE TZARA RAMIREZ SPIRITUALIST ROMA TENT *SPIRITUAL ROMA* IN NOVA IGUAÇU

The Tzara Ramirez Spiritualist Roma Tent started in the 1990s, with the medium, Juan, who is also a *pai de santo* (priest) in a *candomblé terreiro*, in a region called “Chacrinha”, in Nova Iguaçu. According to reports from the Tent mediums, initially only *candomblé* rituals were held, but he and some other followers started to feel the presence of *Roma spirits* during these rituals. Juan commented that some of the followers also attended *umbanda*, what was causing a different energy in the space. Then, one day, he incorporated Roma Juan Ramirez for the first time.

Once he had incorporated this Roma spirit (Photograph 1), the medium took the responsibility of organizing a place where these Roma spirits could be taken care of. Multiple religious belonging (Sanchis 1997) among followers is a characteristic of the Tent. Besides the Tent, it is commonplace for mediums to attend *umbandaterreiros* and *candomblé* houses, which they call the “other side”. Juan started to allocate one day solely for work with the Roma spirits in the same space that served as a *candomblé terreiro*, but this attendance of Roma people started to become well-known, and was advertised among followers and worshippers in the region. Three years later, Juan’s Roma spirit advised him to look for another, larger, space for these ritualistic activities, mainly so there was a separation between the Tzara Ramirez Spiritualist Roma Tent and the *candomblé* house. The request was complied with, and the medium started to meet with the Roma spirit that he presents under the name of Roma Juan Ramirez.

⁷ http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2004-2006/2006/Dnn/Dnn10841.htm



On this request, the mediums decided to move to a region known as “Chacrinha”, in the Santa Eugenia neighborhood, which is further from Nova Iguaçu city center, where they attained a larger area and, therefore, the rituals were separated. They purchased two sections of land with the sale of the former space; one was allocated for construction of the Tzara Ramirez Spiritualist Roma Tent, and the other to maintaining the Candomblé temple.

The religious group is one of many, which are presented as *tents*, *tzaras*, or *tsaras*, their networks, and how they are regularly activated by other Roma representations in the city. Similar to many other *tzaras* in the city, the *Tzara Ramirez Spiritualist Roma Group*, which is characterized for practicing a ritual called *Salamandra*, in which the mediums incorporate entities called *spiritual Roma* (Maia 2014), to develop their Roma rituals and music and dance performances, gaining notoriety, thereby, asserting themselves as *Roma people*, but as *spiritual Roma* in these specific cases.

THE SALAMANDRA RITUAL

Among my photographs and observations, a number of objects stood out for their constant presence in all of the mat arrangements, and became important symbols, not only due to their repeatedly invoked presence in the Salamandra ritual, but also when attending the Roma with incorporated spirits (Photograph 2). However, in order to understand the centrality of the Salamandra ritual, I highlight the candle, to demonstrate how this object, and the element of fire, are fundamental in the Tent rituals. We are able to observe how attendance by the mediums incorporated within a covered space takes place, and its collective incorporation in an open space during the Salamandra ritual.

During the services, the covered space operates as a screening process. The followers go through the pass and, depending on their needs, indicated by the person who applied this pass (Photographs 3 and 5), the person attended is referred, and placed on the consultation list with the *spiritual Roma*. On the majority of occasions, the desire for assistance is shown by the follower. Having arranged the attendance mats, the mediums sit down, light the candle and incense, and spray the Roma perfume on their hands, the mat and in the air, beginning a process of concentration. This is followed by a few seconds of silence, where at times there were set minutes until the incorporation, and the *spiritual Roma*'s arrival. The incorporation of this *spiritual Roma* takes place in a completely individual and silent way, and the silence is usually broken by a single “cry”, “shout”, or sudden movement (Photograph 5), which produces a sound, such as hand clapping, or beating of the chest, or floor. The silence and non-silence caused by the preliminary moment (Schechner 2012, 49) are the highlight, marking the incorporation. The incorporation is the

preliminary moment for the Tzara Ramirez Tent followers, and they take on new forms of identities, and of being a Roma through this.

The candles are the “requests”, “desires”, or “work” carried out during the day (Photographs 2, 3, and 4). The people attended by the *spiritual Romas* have their concerns and needs in this ritual, in addition to the work, attendance and advice that are agreed to be conducted at specific times between the *spiritual Roma* and the follower. In the ritual, the Roma recommends that a candle is lit on that day by each person who is present, according to the need noted on the previous visit. Thus, those present always have a candle in their hands, and they all have “something to offer to Salamandra”⁸.

With the candles lit, the music of the Salamandra ritual begins to be played, and the same eleven recordings are always played in the same sequence. The first two are a *Prayer to Saint Sara* and *Our Lady*, respectively, and the call to *Invoke Salamandra*. At this moment, all of those present at the Tzara Ramirez Tent start to pass their candles from one hand to the next, from the back to the front, until all of the candles are stored and, together, they light the large bonfire, the *Salamandra* (Photograph 4).

During candle storage (Photographs 1, 3, and 4) in the *Salamandra*, the song *Invoking Salamandra* is intoned; the lines from the song are like a call to the *Salamandra*⁹, “its powers”, “its strength”, “its spirit”, and all of its “mystery”. In the last verse, in a tone of invocation, a shout in the space is exclaimed from all of the loudspeakers: “SALAMANDRA, SALAMANDRA, WE SUMMON YOU. SHOW YOUR MYSTERY!”. Following this prayer, nine songs are played on the Roma topic, or by Roma groups¹⁰ used during the ritual. The author, Richard Schechner (2012, 70), in his analysis of the ritual performance, emphasizes the impact that the *sacred space* has on participants, as if this place is part of a collection of *ordinary symbols in the performance* (2012, 61), highlighting the songs and chants as a lease mechanism for this performance. The importance of the sacred space in this ritual can be noted, and music plays an important role in the incorporation ritual at Tzara Ramirez.

THE GENUINE ROMA AND COMMEMORATING NATIONAL ROMA AND SAINT SARA KALI DAY IN IPANEMA, ZONA SUL OF THE CITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO

Among the activities which I followed in my field, the actors involved and networks activated, I selected another ritual to illustrate some of these

8. Is the “spirit of the Roma caravan”, or “Roma spirit”, as the Tent members refer to *Salamandra*.

9. The caravan *Roma spirit* which the followers assign to the bonfire.

10. I highlight that this analysis of Roma music, its disputes, legitimacies and circulation are taken up once again.

Roma mediations in the city: commemoration of National Roma and Saint Sara Kali Day in Ipanema – Rio de Janeiro. The event to celebrate National Roma and Saint Sara Kali Day, took place in the Saint Sara Kali grotto in Garota de Ipanema park in 2017, in the Zona Sul of the city of Rio de Janeiro. I highlight this particular event, since it is the celebration with the greatest visibility which takes place in the city of Rio de Janeiro, and since it is a ritual that incorporates civil, religious and cultural Roma elements.

The event has been held since 2006, and May 24 of that year established Saint Sara Kali Day as National Roma Day in Brazil. Since that time, MirianStanescon, who is called Dr. MirianStanescon, a *genuine Roma* (Photograph 7), holds a festival that was organized for many years in a joint action with the Rio de Janeiro State Special Department of Policies to Promote Racial Equality and the Department of Culture. MirianStanescon is an Advisor of the Order of Attorneys of Brazil (OAB/RJ) Human Rights Commission, founder and president of the Saint Sara Kali Foundation, and has promoted an event called the “National Crusade for World Peace” for twenty years in Garota de Ipanema park, Rio de Janeiro.

In 2006, the Roma, MirianStanescon, was invited by the federal government to write a pamphlet entitled “Roma People, the law in their hands” launched on May 25 of that year. It was a joint undertaking by the Ministry of Culture, Special Department of Human Rights, Department of Identity and Cultural Diversity, Special Department of Policies to Promote Racial Equality (SEPPIR), and the Saint Sara Kali Foundation (FSSK). Following the pamphlet launch, the author was invited to personally publicize it in the Brazilian states, helping to promote Roma culture, and the right to citizenship in Brazil. Also, as established in the federal decree¹¹, Saint Sara Kali was promoted as the “Patron Saint of the Roma people in Brazil”.

At her monthly meetings, Mirian frequently highlighted the Garota de Ipanema Park grotto as the “first Saint Sara Kali temple in Brazil¹²”, thereby meaning that the “Roma people and the saint’s worshippers and devotees” had a space to worship her in Brazil¹³.

11. The decree to establish National Roma Day was signed at the same event by the president at the time, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who made a point of posing for photographs and kissing the image of the Roma saint which had been presented on this occasion.

12. Parallel to her activities with the federal government, and the wide range of areas in which she participated throughout her life, Mirian has maintained the foundation and some of the activities that are her mark, such as chains and commemorations, with the greatest highlight being the month of May and the festival in tribute to Saint Sara Kali.

13. In reference to the Saints Maries de La Mer festival in the south of France, where there are annual peregrinations, a great pilgrimage, and festivities in tribute to Saint Sara Kali.

THE SAINT SARA KALI GROTTO RITUAL

The Garota de Ipanema Park grotto has a fixed image of Saint Sara Kali (Photograph 6) and, therefore, the park has become one of the religious tourism destinations in the city of Rio de Janeiro, being listed on the City Hall's official calendar of events in 2017. There have been editions of the event which have involved the presence of approximately five thousand people, and has been transforming a public space into one of dispute and controversies about the Roma issue, their culture and religion. From my presentation of the Roma people in this chapter, I propose to highlight another different form of being a Roma, which I have followed during my research process, and the Roma people, asserting themselves as *genuine Roma*, defending values linked to the Catholic Church, as a way of being legitimized in the Rio de Janeiro public sphere.

I have followed the event for several years, but in my analysis, I highlight the event which was held in 2017, with the objective of emphasizing how MirianStanescon performs, and gives new meaning during the ritual, which is held in the square, and the ethnic, civil, religious and cultural symbols. Therefore, I highlight how these elements are incorporated in the narrative that MirianStanescon (Photograph 9) provides on her trajectory, political accomplishments, and creation of her products. I emphasize how MirianStanesconamends and performs Pastoral Cigana da IgrejaCatólica (Roma Apostolate of the Catholic Church) guidance in her actions¹⁴.

The ritual is taught pedagogically by MirianStanescon every month, holding a blessing which is called the “blessing of seven herbs and seven essences”. Those present then burn their incense, representing their requests, on a bonfire. The blessed bread of Saint Sara Kali s then distributed by members of GRASSA¹⁵. During the event, Mirian highlighted on the microphone that “as in every Roma festival, our blessing ends with a great celebration, accompanied by traditional Roma music, and a lot of dancing and happiness!”. As scheduled in the program, a live concert was held, announced by Mirian as being an action to: “promote Roma culture and traditions, and helping to combat discrimination¹⁶”.

Meanwhile, the Roma read the last verses of her pamphlet over the microphone: “Say no to discrimination! Support Peace!” In order to provide further information on the story of Saint Sara Kali and Roma traditions, she read the book *LiláRomai – Cartas ciganas*(Roma Letters), which she authored, and immediately amended her reading of the prayer to Saint

14. As I will present, the organization has different names, depending on the time and place. For formatting issues, I will adopt the single name of Pastoral Cigana da IgrejaCatólica (Roma Apostolate of the Catholic Church) throughout the text.

15. Grupo Amigos de Santa Sara (GRASSA)

16. Section of the speech by Miriam Stanescon, National Crusade for World Peace, Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro, Field notebook, March 24, 2017.



Sara. The prayer was led by Mirian, in Romani, followed by the crowd who read aloud in a chorus, in Portuguese. On occasions, this ritual is conducted alternately, verse by verse. At the end, they all say the “Thie Diel o Dhiel” in Romani, and “amen” in Portuguese. The microphone gives way to the bundle of herbs in the Roma’s hands, the crowd strains against the RIOTUR railings, seeking a blessing and piece of bread. Simultaneously, the voice of her daughter, Lhuba, takes charge of the ambiance, and the young woman instructs them over the microphone: to remain “calm”, “everyone will receive the blessing”, “there is bread for everyone”, or “move”, since she is responsible for directing the devotees (Photograph 10) to the grotto, to burn incense at the small fire at this specific time (Photograph 8).

TRANSLATION
Christine Eida
Madureira.





















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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the activities of the different actors that comprise the Roma scenario, which has become established in the city of Rio de Janeiro in recent years. I decided to highlight two of the rituals I have been following in field work for my doctoral research, presenting some of the Roma people who were present, and their participation and activities in these rituals. In the images, in a photographic and ethnographic narrative, I present, describe, highlight, and propose to reflect on the two rituals, as scenarios of *social situations* (Gluckman 1987), to emphasize issues I consider central to understanding these activities in a collection of photographs. In the first group of images, I present the group called *Tenda Cigana Espiritualista Tzara Ramirez* (Tzara Ramirez Spiritualist Roma Tent) in Nova Iguaçu, Baixada Fluminense in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The second group of images focuses on the commemoration of the National Roma and Saint Sara Kali Day, a Roma celebration with the greatest visibility that takes place in the city. The ritual incorporates civil, religious, and cultural Roma expressions.

KEYWORDS

Culture;
Subjectivity;
Religion; Ethnicity.



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