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THE HIDDEN LIFE OF STONES

Historicity, Materiality and the Value of Candomblé Objects in Bahia

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Abstract

In the last century, the objects of Candomblé, a religion of African origin in Bahia, suffered radical transformations in their public value. After discussing in general terms the life of 'saint' stones (*otã*) in Candomblé, this article then focuses on the traces of the life history of one of these *otã*. This stone was seized in a police raid in a Candomblé house, and then displayed in a museum, until a legal action recently undertaken by political activists obliged the museum to withdraw the stone from exhibition. In the conclusion, I propose to recognize notions of historicity and materiality as keys to understanding the life and 'agency' of this and other objects.

Key Words ◆ Candomblé ◆ historicity ◆ materiality ◆ museums

'Stones grow.' Several Candomblé priests told me that, in a grave tone, as a sort of empirical confirmation of the material efficacy of their ritual practice. They were not referring to any stones, but to the stones hidden in shrines, the *otã*. These are the *fundamentos*, or foundations, of their religion.

Few people can look at these stones. Not even initiates. In fact, the first time I could actually see one I was not in a house of Candomblé, but in a museum, the Museum of the City of Salvador de Bahia in Brazil. I had been in Candomblé shrines before but there I had to kneel down in front of the *fundamentos*, and I could only feel their presence indirectly, in a context of ritual expectation, through the cascade of pots, wraps, offerings, scents and songs that surround them. Instead, at the museum, I could stare at it directly. It was a big, greyish, round stone.

A little information tag by its side said that it was a sacred stone of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé. One could say that it would be totally unremarkable if it were not there, displayed in a museum.

Some months later I came back to the museum. The stone was not there any more. This time, I talked to the museum crew. I introduced myself as a European researcher, interested in the Afro-Brazilian collection of the museum. The assistant to the director of the museum very kindly told me that these pieces did not really belong to the city museum, but to the Museum of Legal Medicine (in fact, a police museum). Due to a legal complaint filed by the 'Black Movement', the Museum of Legal Medicine had to withdraw the Afro-Brazilian collection, which was sitting side by side with homicidal weapons, stuffed bodies of dead people and monstrous fetuses. Temporarily, it had been assigned to the city museum, which already held a varied array of art collections – from 19th-century dolls and academic paintings to ex-votos. This was however a temporary solution: it was not yet clear where this collection would end up.

I already knew all that from talking with the 'Black Movement', actually a group of anthropologists and Candomblé leaders. I also knew that one of their main arguments against the Museum of Legal Medicine was that this Afro-Brazilian collection was the result of violent police seizures. What I did not know was that the stone was no longer on display. So I asked the assistant director, who told me that they had removed it because the people of the 'Black Movement' had specifically complained about this. They argued that the *otã* was a sacred symbol of Candomblé, an object of extreme respect in that religion which is never, never shown in public. *Otã* are kept hidden at all times. Its display in a museum was therefore a lack of respect to Candomblé, so it was hidden again. What did it mean hidden? Did it go back to the shrine it came from? The assistant director did not really know, but he guessed it was simply stored in the basement.

I thought that a basement was a rather inadequate retirement for a stone with such a convoluted life. This stone deserved better; it could be the main character, or agent, of an article. In the next pages I will explain how this stone has embodied the different and often contradictory values of Candomblé objects in Bahia in the last century – from weapons of sorcery, to symptoms of racial pathology, to works of high art. This discussion will lead to some more general considerations on the role of notions of *historicity* and *materiality* as keys to understand the life and 'agency' of this object, and maybe also other objects. But first, I shall start by describing the value of the *otã* in Candomblé: why they are hidden and, well, how they grow.

SAINTS, STONES AND BODIES

In Brazil, the term *Candomblé* makes reference to the practices of worship to the *Orixás* and *Voduns* who came from West Africa with the slaves, but also to other local spiritual entities. Traditionally, many initiates in Candomblé affirm that they did not join the cult at their own will, but because a spiritual entity, the *Orixá* or 'saint' (*santo*),¹ demanded their worship (defined as *obrigação*, or 'duty'). The 'saint' can cause physical, mental and social afflictions if the people they want do not fulfil their duties. Thus, they have to undergo initiation under a priestess, the 'mother of the saint' (*mãe de santo*), to become 'daughters of the saint' (*filhas de santo*). The process of initiation is called literally 'making the saint' (*fazer o santo*).

'Making the saint' is a very concrete, material process: it is not exactly a religious revelation or conversion, nor a schooling of the myths, songs and prayers, but it is essentially about learning to deal with the 'saint', understand its requirements, and fulfil them satisfactorily. For that purpose, the initiate has to learn a number of ritual techniques, including essential body techniques for the incorporation of the 'saint', making offerings and building shrines. This is a dialectical process of objectification and appropriation, in which the 'saint' is built, made concrete in the shrine and in the body.

We could say that through initiation, the 'saint' is built not only in the body and the shrine, but also in the person of the *filha de santo*. Initiation lasts many years, in an exchange in which person and saint help building each other, because making the saint, in fact, is also making oneself. At the far end of the process, that in most cases is never finished, the initiate has reached total harmony with the 'saint'. It is at this point that the initiate can become herself a *mãe de santo*, and help other people make their 'saints'. In a way, the process of initiation transfers the agency from the 'saint' to the initiate, from an initial moment in which the person is just a patient, subordinate to the will of the 'saint' who wants to seize her body, until she masters her relationship with it, and is able to help others.

In this sense, the process of initiation can be seen as a process of construction of the person. After Goldman (1984) we could look at Candomblé as a dynamic system that builds persons. It 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. If we see the person as an opened process, we could think that the 'saints' are active elements that collaborate precisely in the construction of a person that is always in the making.

However not everything is learnt in initiation, as much as no recipe,

ritual, or prescriptive method is enough to build a person. There are imponderable things: inasmuch as not everybody is called to 'make the saint', even fewer people are called to become a 'mother of the saint'. One not only needs a straightforward initiation, but also a particular 'gift' (*don*), an innate capacity to recognize and communicate with the 'saint' (Boyer, 1996). Candomblé is not just training, but an art.

In addition, initiation involves not only the personal relationship between saint and initiate, but also a third party: the *mãe de santo*. At the first steps of initiation, the *filha de santo* has to accept the authority of the *mãe de santo*, and obey her like the 'saint' itself. But initiates with a particular 'gift' may enjoy from the very beginning a privileged relationship with their 'saint', quickly climbing up the steps of ritual power, bringing up conflict with their *mães de santo*. Conflicts between *mães* and *filhas* are not infrequent. In fact, they are so frequent that they are almost a rule.²

The shrines of Candomblé are the *assentos*, or *assentamentos*. *Assento* means 'sitting', it makes reference to the act of 'sitting down', fixing the saint in a thing, transforming an event in an object.³ The general structure⁴ of the *assento* consists of a dais full of pots and other containers. The pots are made of clay, porcelain or wood, depending on the 'saint',⁵ wrapped with cloth and concealed. These pots contain the *fundamentos*, the foundations that embody the saints of the initiates. These objects were identified as *fetiches* by the researchers on Afro-Brazilian religions,⁶ influenced by the literature on the 'fetishist cults' of West Africa. The *fundamentos* can be different things,⁷ but stones (*otã*) are one of the more common elements. Each Orixá has particular *otã* and *fundamentos*. The *assentos* of Oxum and Iemanjá, for example, are shells and stones found in the waters, since these are the elements of these Orixás, river and sea, and they have a colour corresponding to the colours of these Orixás (yellow or gold for Oxum, white or silver for Iemanjá). The stones of Xangô are supposed to have fallen from the sky, since Xangô is the god of thunder.⁸

It is important to note that the *otã* has to be found. One of my main informants, a *mãe de santo* commented to me laughing how another *mãe de santo* from São Paulo⁹ asked her where she had bought the beautiful stones she had in her shrines. She answered: 'an Orixá is found, not bought'. In another circumstance, she told me how she found her Slave spirit by chance. Because of heavy rains, the house of her sister fell down. One day, passing by, she heard a faint voice coming from the ruins. Nobody else heard it. She stopped and started to look under the ruins, as the voice was getting clearer and louder, asking her to take him out. Finally, she found a strange stone, with the shape of a goat's skull. She took it home and placed it in the position of the Slave's *assento*: 'sitting' right behind the door.

This story tells us something basic about the *otã* and about the *fundamentos* in general: if stones are not bought or made, but found, it is because they want to be. It is interesting to point out this fact in relation to European travellers in West Africa talking about the absurdity of fetishes. One of the things they insisted upon, with scorn, was that Africans 'adored the first thing they find in their way' (see Pietz, 1985). In the case of Candomblé, there is certainly an element of chance, but a 'driven chance', a *hasard objectif*, to use the surrealist expression, in which it is the stone who is asking to be found. There is recognition of the agency embodied in the stones before their consecration, although this agency is only recognizable at the right moment and by the right person – it comes out as a gift of the object to this person. This is a basic point, and I will come back to this in the conclusion.

Once these stones have been found, they go through a ritual of consecration, in which they are 'seated' in the pots. There they will be ritually washed¹⁰ and fed with offerings and sacrifices, prayed at, begged for help, always in an attitude of extreme respect and submission. Never to be looked at directly, they are hidden in dark rooms, covered with cloth. The *assento* is not the image, but the house of the Orixá. A house that is 'seated', fixed, permanently and enduringly, ideally for the lifetime of the initiate.

The *assento* is concealed and veiled, and its life is a latent mystery, a hidden breath; closed in a pot, wrapped in cloth and locked in a room that only the *mãe de santo* can dare to open. The layers and layers of invisibility of the *assento* are built precisely to enhance its force, as David Brown argues (2003: 247), multiplying the powers of its presence by making it only indirectly perceptible. In a way, too overt a display is avoided to allow a certain degree of intimacy of the *assento* and a secrecy that is indispensable for the continuity of its mysterious force. This force will explode, eventually, in the human body, through possession.

The intimacy of the *assento* is only challenged in the ritual offerings and sacrifices. The offering awakens the living force of the shrine, the *axê*, to 'switch on' the spiritual channels that bring the 'saints' down to the bodies of the initiates, culminating in the dance of possession, when the spirit takes hold of the devotee's body in the public Candomblé festivals.

The relationship between the pot and the body of the initiate has subtle nuances. Thompson has discussed how calabashes and other ritual containers in Yoruba ritual are seen as analogues of the head.¹¹ In fact, the 'saint' is supposed to enter inside the head of the initiate, to the *ori*, an organ that hosts it. The ritual of initiation includes the very important ceremonies of shaving and giving food to the head (*raspar* and *dar de comer a cabeça*).¹² We could say that the head and the body in general, stands to the *ori* like the pot stands to the *otã*.¹³

I would argue that the analogy of body/*ori* and pot/*otã* is extremely important, since they are the two opposite states through which the 'saint' presents itself. In the *assento* the saint sits; in the human body the saint dances. In the *assento* the 'saint' is fed; in the public ceremonies of Candomblé, the 'saint', incorporated in the body of the initiate, hosts a celebration with food for the guests. In the *assento*, the 'saint' is hidden, secluded and secret. In the body of the initiate, the saint is public, vibrant, and triumphant.

Through time, the *assento* accumulates the remains of this life of ritual exchange: offerings, presents of flowers, perfumes, images, pictures, clothes used in dances, embodying a spiritual and personal biography, in David Brown's words.¹⁴ It is said that stones grow; and this is said in quite literal terms. And why should we not accept it? We have to consider that the constant ritual feeding establishes a highly determined and determinant relationship between *assento* and initiate, to the extent that the *otã* almost becomes an exterior organ of her body, a part of her 'distributed person' (Gell, 1998).

These pots are organized in a hierarchical order: the central pot corresponds to the *mãe de santo*: the other pots – sometimes around, sometimes below this central pot – belong to the *filhas de santo*. They are all related by ritual kinship: the pot of each initiate is to the pot of the priestess what the initiate is to the priestess, mother to daughter.

However, practice does not always follow theory, and even the best families have their fights. When the *filhas de santo* quarrel with the *mãe de santo*, they often try to leave the house,¹⁵ but this is not easy, because their *assentos* are there, under the control of the *mãe de santo*, who owns the house and takes care of them – she is the *zeladora*, literally the 'keeper' of the saints. To leave the house for good, they have to take away their *assentos*, and often they can only do this out of sight of the *mãe de santo*, who would consider it a theft – since a part of her ritual power, her *axé* has also been poured upon these *assentos* – we could say that she considers these *assentos* a part of her 'distributed person'. Thus, often it is only through violence and 'theft' that the umbilical cord that links 'mother' and 'daughter' through their *assentos* can be severed.¹⁶

Once they have taken away their *assentos*, the *filhas de santo* may rebuild a shrine at their own place. And if they are 'gifted' enough, and keep a good relationship with their 'saint', or convince people that they have enough ritual seniority, they can become *mães de santo* on their own.

When the *filha de santo* dies, a special ritual takes place, not only to bury her body, but to resolve what is to be done with the *assento*. Most of the times the 'saint' accepts to leave with the body and the pots are broken; but sometimes it refuses to get away from its seat, and it remains in the house, asking for the other initiates to pay it homage. Sometimes

in these events, haunted images of the 'saint' and the dead person merge in strange ways.¹⁷

The life of people and stones in Candomblé are intimately linked, in ways that are not reducible to ritual formulae. This is an important point to keep in mind, when considering the interpretations and transformations in the value of these objects beyond the houses of Candomblé, as we will see in the next section.

WEAPONS OF SORCERY AND WORKS OF ART

We shall go back now to our stone – the one hidden in the basement of the museum. As I mentioned, this particular *otã* belonged to the collection of the Museum of Anthropology and Legal Medicine. We do not know anything about the origin of the stone for sure, we can only guess by outlining the history of the collection where it has spent the last decades.

This museum inherited the collection of objects that Raymundo Nina Rodrigues started to exhibit in 1895 in the Faculty of Medicine. Rodrigues was the founder of 'Legal Medicine' in Bahia. At that time, the Faculty of Medicine was the only institution of higher education in Bahia, and the scions of the decadent landowning ruling class had to pass through it to have access to public office (see Moritz-Schwartz, 1993). Thus, the medical class constituted the educated elite of the city. No wonder many students and professors of medicine had interest in issues of public order, and legal medicine appeared to correspond to this interest, as an extended form of criminology with aspirations to become a totalizing social science, based on positivism and scientific racism (see Corrêa, 1983).

Rodrigues was the first ethnographer of Candomblé. In his time, Candomblé was publicly despised as superstition and privately feared as witchcraft by the local elites (see Maggie, 1992; Rio, 1951). Rodrigues was the first to look at Candomblé with the eyes of science. He looked at rituals of possession not as devil worship but as forms of mental illness. He collected objects related to it as instruments of research. As a scientist, Rodrigues tried not to look at these objects only as instruments of witchcraft and evidences of crime, like the police or the journalists of his time, but as symptoms of pathology. He was even ready to concede that they were forms of art; a primitive art, produced by an inferior race, but still art (Rodrigues, 1988). In fact, Rodrigues, through his ethnographic work, was in good relationship with Candomblé priests – he became patron (*Ogan*) of one of the most important Candomblé houses, the Gantois.

Nevertheless, Nina Rodrigues' collection got together objects that for us, nowadays, may look monstrously incommensurable, or simply

monstrous. Besides 'the objects of racial analysis', like implements of Candomblé, he had objects of interest for specialists in autopsy, like a collection of necrophilic flies; and objects of phrenological analysis, like the heads of famous criminals.¹⁸ For Rodrigues, all these objects were elements of medical research, symptoms of illness, and racial degeneration.

The collection was inherited by Rodrigues' successors in the chair of Legal Medicine. At that time, when the repression of Candomblé was increasing, it is possible that the museum began to receive objects of the cults seized by the police, together with collections of homicidal weapons and other evidence of crime. In 1926, Estácio de Lima inherited the direction of the museum holding this position until the museum was closed in 1967, formally to be 'renovated' (see Lima, 1979).

In this 50-year period, the attitudes of the Brazilian and Bahian elites toward Candomblé had changed. Since the late 1940s, a new intellectual elite of writers, artists and anthropologists rejected emphatically the racism of the School of Medicine, valorizing the Afro-Brazilian culture of Bahia. The new Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) opened a Centre of Afro-Oriental Studies (CEAO) that looked at African cultures from a modern anthropological perspective. The CEAO trained academically some important figures of the Candomblé houses of Bahia, transforming the 'natives' into anthropologists. At the same time, anthropologists, writers and artists were becoming initiates in Candomblé houses. The result has been the emergence of a class of intellectuals that at the same time are Candomblé practitioners, and even priests (Sansi, 2003).

In the early 1970s, the CEAO projected the Afro-Brazilian Museum on completely different premises from the Criminology Museum, as a modern museum to be 'composed of collections of ethnological and artistic nature on African cultures and on the main sectors of African influence on the life and the culture of Brazil'.¹⁹ Moreover, the museum should also be an 'incentive to artistic creation with Afro-Brazilian content, through grants or awards of literature, music, visual arts, cinema, theatre and dance'.²⁰

The project of the Afro-Brazilian Museum outraged the senior, conservative elites of disciples of Nina Rodrigues, particularly because it was projected that it would occupy the former building of the medical school in the centre of Salvador de Bahia. The senior Professor of Medicine, Raymundo de Almeida Gouveia, declared that it was a strange and unfortunate idea to set up the Museu Afro-Brasileiro in the 'First Temple of Brazilian Medicine'.²¹ He argued that 'it would be a true profanation, especially if tomorrow, as it seems, the Museum of the Black is used as a dwelling of Candomblé practices, nowadays already sophisticated and adulterated by opportunists and wannabe ethnologists'.²²

This bitter public debate between doctors and cultural anthropologists continued until the opening of the Afro-Brazilian Museum, in 1980. In fact, the reopening of the Museum of Legal Medicine in 1976, this time called 'Estácio de Lima' Museum, has to be placed in the context of this cultural struggle.

In August 1996 a group of intellectuals, artists and Candomblé houses²³ constituted as 'Societies of Protection and Defence of Afro-Brazilian Cults', filed a legal complaint against the museum for 'threatening public decency'.²⁴ In the trial, the plaintiffs argued that beautiful creations of sacred Black art should not be displayed in an exhibition with a racist and perverse ideological discourse, in which these works of Black sacred art are exhibited as objects of criminological and pathologic interest. They asked rhetorically, what educational value could these objects have as documents of Black civilization, when grouped together with criminal weapons and freaks of nature. Moreover, these objects were kept poorly and without appropriate museographic considerations. In the light of all this, the plaintiffs asked that these objects be taken to another institution to be displayed with more dignity, observing that there is no clear reference of the origin and the meaning of these objects, and that most of them were collected during a period of police repression of Candomblé.

What the representatives of the Candomblé houses were asking, after all, was precisely that the material culture of Candomblé be made equal to western art. They were not demanding the objects back for the Candomblé houses: they were asking that they be recognized as 'sacred art', that these objects should be displayed in art museums together with historical or contemporary works of art, and not in a police museum. In other words, they were recognizing museums as appropriate institutions for housing these objects: but in the appropriate museum and in the appropriate way.

One of the key problems raised in this case was: where do these objects actually come from? Are they really the result of police looting? That is one of the questions that the director of the Museum of Legal Medicine attempted to deny in her answer to the requirement. First, she argued that even if some objects have a religious connotation, this does not mean that they are necessarily 'sacred'. Second, she claimed that these collections did not come from the police, but had been given to Nina Rodrigues and Estácio de Lima, or had been bought by them. These arguments could be partially true. Both Nina Rodrigues and Estácio de Lima were *ogan* or patrons in the Gantois, and it is very possible that some of the pieces displayed in the museum, like the regalia, were actually bought by Estácio de Lima.

However, it is not at all illogical to think that, as well as some other materials, like deadly weapons, the objects of Candomblé seized by the

police would also end up here. The expeditions of the police to Candomblé houses are well documented in the press of the 1920s and 1930s (see Lühning, 1996). The journals mention seizures of Candomblé objects, defining these objects as 'arsenals of sorcery',²⁵ or 'war equipment'.²⁶ They also mention often that these apprehensions are sent to the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico.²⁷ The Nina Rodrigues collection is not mentioned, but it would seem plausible to think that a museum dedicated to criminology would receive also these 'arsenals of sorcery'. Unfortunately, the archives of the museum have not been preserved: they burnt mysteriously, some years ago.

One of the cases in point that demonstrates the police origin of some of the objects in the suit was the *otã* stone. The plaintiffs argued that a Candomblé practitioner would never give away a consecrated stone. Moreover, they stated that the exhibition of such a stone is sacrilege, and its commerce forbidden; it would be the equivalent of selling the Holy Host – it would be a profanation. In other words, the plaintiffs are arguing that the *otã* not only had religious connotations, but it was indeed sacred. It could not have been sold or given to Nina Rodrigues or Lima, since once consecrated it could not be sold or given away.

The representatives of Candomblé houses and the museum came to a final agreement before going to court, and it was decided that the collection would be temporarily placed at the City Museum (*Museu da Cidade*). This museum, which basically contains artistic and historical collections, is recognized by the 'Black Movement' as a correct place to display these objects, except for one case: the *otã*. The *otã* cannot be displayed in public. As opposed to the other objects, it is not a work of art, it is not an artefact; and its immanent power must be respected, it must be hidden, it cannot even be seen. In a way, even if the representatives of Candomblé have assumed the cultural values that the museum represents and have appropriated them, there are still some objects that are not attached to these museographic considerations. This is not an isolated case; for example, the anthropologist Raul Lody made a catalogue of the collection of the Instituto Histórico with pictures of all the objects it contained (Lody, 1985). He mentioned the *Otã* present in that collection, but he did not take pictures of them. Although Lody is an anthropologist, he is also involved in Candomblé.²⁸ Sometimes the duties of initiation seem to be more important than the duties of the promoter of public culture.

CONCLUSIONS: THE HIDDEN LIFE OF STONES

Why did the *otã* end in storage? We can only guess. On the one hand, the people of the 'Black Movement' could have deconsecrated it, and left it in display in the museum as a symbol of the repression against

Candomblé. But they seem to have thought that its religious value was more important. On the other hand, they could have sent it back to a Candomblé house, reincorporating it into ritual practice. If the value of the stone was the result of its consecration, as they said in court, it should not be so difficult to perform a ritual of purification, or deconsecration. But that is not what happened. Why? Maybe because this is not so simple. The deconsecration of a stone can only occur when the link to the initiate it belongs with is clearly severed. For example, in the case of the death of the initiate, the oracle will say whether the 'saint' wants to leave the *assento* or not. But, what to do when one does not know whose is this stone?

The value of an *otã* is not just the result of a generic ritual of consecration, but also of its particular history. And that stone has a long and complicated story; the traces of its origin have been lost. Which agencies may still be present in the stone? We do not know.

The intricacies of the value of the *otã* were not mentioned in court by the people of Candomblé, we could assume, because it would probably sound too irrational, too 'fetishist' to believe in the agency of a stone. Maybe that is something they would not even acknowledge themselves, since they feel that they still have to avoid accusations of fetishism and sorcery. And they are probably right about that.

This is one of the contradictions of the contemporary situation of Afro-Brazilian culture in Bahia. By presenting Candomblé as 'Afro-Brazilian Culture', the alliance of intellectuals and Candomblé leaders has proposed to valorize the objects of Candomblé as cultural symbols, visual representations to be displayed in museums and other public venues as works of art. This can be seen as a form of 'syncretism' between the values of Candomblé and the values of institutional 'High Culture' (Sansi, 2003). But this syncretism has its limits. There are objects that cannot be displayed in museums, because they cannot be seen, thus contradicting the central value of visibility in objects of 'High Culture'. So the stone is withdrawn to the storage room, hidden again, but in a different way than it used to be in the Candomblé house, in a state of indeterminacy.

In this article I have looked at an historical process through the perspective of an object. Seeing the different values that have been applied to it – from divine container, to weapon of sorcery, to work of art, I have tried to explain some of the conflicts, changes and contradictions in the systems of value, the 'tournaments of value' in Appadurai's terms (1986), that Bahia has been through in the last century. However, there are elements in this story that escape a discourse on 'value', or better, a discourse on the social contingency of the values attributed to things, dependent upon context, culture and so on. It looks like things, or at least this thing, are not just blank containers of values or meanings

that can be swiftly replaced when one form of domination or one culture overcomes another. As Miller clearly argued (1987) we cannot reduce processes of objectification to reification. Particularly at the end of the story, when the stone is retired from the museum, the people of the Black Movement are in a rather awkward position, since the stone has to be left in a kind of limbo, because it cannot be either one thing or another, art work or altar stone once again: it cannot simply incorporate one value or another.

I think this is not just a question of hybridity, or superposition of values. There is something more fundamental: the fact that the stone, in spite of its value, exists as a *thing*. Even if it is hidden, it is there, somewhere, 'sitting'; a mute, immobile testimony of its own history, not just as a *sign* of human affairs. This is not just to say that things have an 'agency', but also that this agency is not only the result of acts of human consecration, in which human minds bestow their agency on things intentionally. In some cases, it looks like the agency of things does not come from humans, but from their presence in the events. It comes from their 'untranscended materiality', as Pietz says in reference to the 'fetish' (Pietz, 1985).

For Pietz, the life and the value of the 'fetish', as it was described in the spaces of exchange of West Africa by European travellers, cannot be solely understood as an extension of the personhood of humans: it is also a result of its *historicity* and its *territoriality*. On the one hand, the 'untranscended' materiality of the fetish, which is not just a symbol or icon of a divinity but a 'self-contained entity' with an active force, introduces the question of the position of the object in space and time, as a 'territorialized' (Pietz, 1985: 12) object. The 'life' of the fetish is conditioned by material constraints, in space and in time: its inability to move physically, which makes it strictly dependent upon its human associates; its inscription in a concrete, and specific place like a shrine, where it is protected.

The reflection on this 'territorialization', or 'materiality', as we could also call it, can bring about what Gell (1998) would define as an 'externalist' theory of agency, in which agency is recognized through social practice – regardless of the fact that it comes from an actually existing 'inner mind'. But going a bit further than Gell, I would not say that this 'externalist' approach to agency presupposes the notion of an 'external mind'. In fact I don't think we need to talk about 'minds', and even less about 'presupposed intentional psychology', to talk about agency. In certain cases, the agency of things does not derive from the 'abduction' of a mind, the attribution of thought, but it comes from the evidence of their physical presence and its dialectical relation with the human body. It is not because they have a mind, but because they have a body, and this body is radically different from the human body, that they are agents

in a radically different way from humans. In the case of Candomblé, human bodies dance, while stones 'sit'. The dancing body of the devotee is in fact the true public image of the Orixá, but it is ephemeral, while the *assento* is its silent, hidden and constant presence.

Going back to the argument of the fetish: Pietz notes that 'the fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is, above all, an 'historical' object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event' (Pietz, 1985: 12). The radical historicity of the fetish, which emerges from a unique event, is what most disturbed Hegel and what convinced him to put Africa out of History.²⁹ What Hegel interpreted as 'caprice' or 'arbitrary' choice is in fact the recognition of the singular values generated by events. These new values, as Latour says (2001), cannot be reduced to the list of elements that make a part of the event before it happens. Through the event, the social actors involved 'gagnent en definition' in Latour's words (2001: 131), they are modified and *more defined* as social persons, we could say, in relationship to each other. Finding a fetish is an event that cannot be predicted: it is a single happening in which people find something unforeseen that they recognize as a part of them, something that becomes personified, appropriated, it adds to their person. Pietz explains this point wonderfully making reference to Leiris and the surrealist notion of the *objet trouvé*,

these crisis moments of singular encounter and indefinable transaction between the life of the self and that of the world become fixed, in both places and things, as personal memories that retain a peculiar power to move one profoundly. (Pietz, 1985: 12)³⁰

This is precisely the question of the *otã*. Why can't the *otã* be seen, after all? Because the sitting, the *assentamento* of the *otã* tries to fix a unique event. An *otã* is not simply made by a ritual of consecration, but before that, it is the result of a singular event, in which the Candomblé priest, a person with a gift, recognizes the 'saint' in it. This act of recognition, this original vision is foundational. Hiding the stone, consecrating it, the 'mother of the saint' tries to fix this event, so that nobody else can appropriate the *otã* in their turn. The 'mother of the saint' tries to control the potential historicity of the stone by controlling its territorialization, in a complex relationship, where it is not so clear who serves whom, who is master and who is slave; but in the process, both the 'saint' and the Candomblé priest grow as persons. However, once this historicity has been so out of control as in our case, when this stone has been through so much, what can the 'mothers of the saint' do? They cannot easily appropriate it again.

Like in the case of the fetish, the historicity, and the untranscended materiality of the *otã* are irreducible to acts of consecration or attribution of value of any kind. The value of the *otã* is not just arbitrarily

attributed and cannot be simply subtracted by humans. The dense, complicated history of the *otã* of the Estácio de Lima museum cannot be quickly obliterated; and its material presence cannot be easily erased. Perhaps it is precisely in this historicity and in this materiality, in this obstinate presence that sometimes we can find the 'agency' of things, their resistance to be reduced to the condition of symbols of our values, or surrogates of our personhood.

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Notes

1. *Orixá* and *santo* are not exact synonyms. We could say that people talk about the *Orixá* as the spiritual entity in general: its mythology, characteristics and so on. But when one talks about its particular manifestations, about the entity of an initiate, one talks about the *santo*. In these terms, we could understand how these spiritual entities are one and many: one *Orixá* and countless *santos*, one entity and countless shrines, countless initiates that can incorporate the same entity simultaneously.
2. The presence of ritual conflict in Candomblé was documented in the 1970s in the excellent *Guerra de Orixá* (1972) by Yvonne Maggie. However, few authors have followed this research, preferring to focus on the (supposedly) 'normal' procedures of reproduction of Candomblé houses. But in fact it can be argued that it is this ritual conflict that is at the core of the dynamic force of Candomblé, that makes it not only a folkloric 'survival' but a thriving, expanding religion.
3. *Assentamento* and *assento* also have other connotations. *Assentamento* means settlement, a place chosen to settle down. A *livro de assentos* is an ancient Portuguese term for a legal register of property – a book where all the changes and additions in property of a plantation (*fazenda*) are written down.
4. This model of the *assento* is very general and does not reflect the diversity of shrines that we find in Candomblé practices. But it corresponds to the model of ritual practice that has been imposed in the last decades – the *nago-ketu* and its structure of initiation. Since the purpose of this article is not to discuss the variation and innovation in Candomblé *assentos*, I will not pursue that question. For more information on the variety of *assentos*, see Sansi (2003), particularly chapter 2.
5. According to Binnon-Crossard, the pottery of male Orixás are *alguidars* (amphorae of clay) and women's '*soupières*' of porcelain, except for Oxala that has porcelain also, and Xangô that has a wooden mortar (Binnon-Crossard, 1970).
6. The first author to use the term specifically was Nina Rodrigues in 1906 (1988 [1906]). Ruth Landes (1947) still used the terms 'fetish' and 'fetishism' in the 1940s, but it was abandoned afterwards because of the negative connotations that the terms acquired.
7. For example in an *assento* of Iansã: besides the *otã* there are cowrie shells,

idês (bracelets), wooden spoons, the horns and tail of an ox, a fan, obi and orobó (African dried fruits) in specific numbers that are secret, and I am not supposed to reveal.

8. According to Santos, many of the stones we find in Xangô shrines in Africa are stone axes 'prehistoric stones shaped like an axe which according to popular belief fall along with the lightning and remain buried in the earth' (Santos, 1967: 88).
9. São Paulo is the economic capital of Brazil, but not the centre of Afro-Brazilian religion, Bahia has this honour, and people from São Paulo and all over the country come to Bahia to learn from the 'originals'.
10. The washing of these stones is done with different materials, depending on the *Orixás*: honey, blood, palm oil, but especially water and *amassi*, which is water with sacred leaves (see Binnon-Crossard, 1970).
11. In Africa, the pots of the *assentos* could also be calabashes. The calabash, the pot, is a recipient of the *Orixá*, standing for the 'head', *Ori*. Thompson tells us about certain archaeological remains demonstrating that the famous sculpted heads of Ife could have been altars, replaced in later times by calabashes and vessels: 'implicit in the shrines of today is the belief that the head and other avatars of *axé* and *iwà* can summon the spirit to an altar, to be fleshed by possession devotees' (Thompson, 1993: 149).
12. Although the *raspado* ritual is often associated with the dominant ritual tradition, Ketu, not all nations of Candomblé do it, preferring, instead, to 'baptize' the initiate. In any case, there is a clear idea that the head has to be fed ritually, and purified.
13. The genially perceptive discussion of idolatry through the analogy of the internal and the external in Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998: 134–53) can be perfectly applied in this case.
14. In reference to the shrines of Santeria, the *tronos*, David Brown says how 'the throne thus embodies an emergent spiritual and personal biography, in which the objects themselves, prepared and given by ritual elders, colleagues, friends, or godchildren, have their own histories and "biographies"' (Kopytoff, 1986). In short, the throne becomes both the focus of a cyclical ritual process – a sacred life cycle – and the aesthetic and emotional focus for the production and exchange of objects' (Brown, 1996: 93).
15. The *filhas de santo* do not necessarily live in the house of Candomblé, but they have to spend periods of time there – for the initiation period. The literature on Candomblé has often idealized the image of the *terreiro*, the Candomblé house where initiates live in 'community' (see Bastide, 1978). The reality is more complex if we consider the patterns of habitation of the urban poor in Bahia in general, in which there is a high mobility and the creation of 'families' of women based on one house or compound is not restricted to Candomblé houses. These 'families', on the other hand, are highly volatile, there are always people joining and splitting.
16. The ritual reproduction of the *mães de santo* can also follow conventional or established terms, through a ritual called the '*deka*' in which a *filha de santo* receives the ritual instruments to initiate other people. In fact, arguably the success of one particular ritual tradition within Candomblé, the *Nagô-Ketu* nation, stems from its appropriation of this method of ritual reproduction (Sansi, 2003). However, it is not infrequent that many *dekas* are done after the fact – when the *filha de santo* has effectively already opened her own house, and often the *deka* is not given by their own *mãe de santo* (with whom they are obviously in conflict) but by some other *mãe de santo*.

17. This happened with one of my informants, who sadly died last year. Her 'santo', Omulu, refused to leave its *assento*, and the other initiates have to take care of it (*zelar*) and feed it. When they are not keen on spending too much time and effort on it, the ghost of her Omulu – or of herself, it is not clear, has appeared in dreams to them, complaining about their laziness. And when the offerings are done, some have visions of her Omulu dancing.
18. One of the heads in the collection belonged to the famous prophet Antonio Conselheiro, leader of the revolt of Canudos. Later on, the heads of the famous bandit Lampião and his band were also included.
19. 'Constituição e manutenção de um Museu Afro-Brasileiro, composto de coleções de natureza etnológica e artística sobre as culturas africanas e sobre os principais setores de influência africana na vida e na cultura do Brasil' *Termos de Convênio* Ministério das Relações Exteriores/Ministério da Educação/UFBA./Prefeitura Municipal de Salvador, quoted in Santos (2000: 128).
20. Point (i) of the first clause of the Convênio: 'O incentivo à criação artística de temática Afro-Brasileira, mediante subvenções ou concursos de natureza, literária, musical, teatro e dança'.
21. 'IBHM conta instalação de Museu na ex Faculdade de Medicina', in *Tribuna da Bahia*, 08/08/1974.
22. 'Considero que haverá verdadeira profanação sobretudo se amanhã, como será possível, o Museu do Negro servirá de abrigo às práticas do Candomblé, hoje já sofisticado e adulterado por aproveitadores e improvisados etnólogos', *Tribuna da Bahia* 08/08/1974.
23. The houses of Opo Afonjá, Cobre, Casa Branca, Bate Folha, Bogum, and Alaketu.
24. 'Amenhaça para a moral pública' Process n. 27007049–5, 9/10/96. In the next paragraphs I will not be able to quote directly from the court process to respect the requirements of the plaintiffs.
25. 'Arsenais de feitiçaria' (*A Tarde* 20/5/1920).
26. 'Apertrechos bélicos' (*A Tarde* 3/10/1922).
27. See *A Tarde* 20/5/1920; *A Tarde* 19/4/1934. In *A Tarde* 12/11/1926: 'The delegate Federico Senna has already invited the secretary of the IGH to choose what he could use between the remains of Pai Crescêncio, among which there are several reminiscences of Africanisms' ('O delegado Frederico Senna já convidou o secretário perpétuo daquela instituição para escolher o que lhe serve dentre os troços de Pai Crescencio, entre os quais muitas reminiscencias do africanismo' *A Tarde* 12/11/1926.).
28. Lody is an *ogã*, a sort of secular 'Lord' in the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá temple.
29. After Pietz, in the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel noted that Africans lacked the principle that accompanies all our ideas: the category of universality. This lack is reflected in fetish worship, which 'is merely a creation that expresses the arbitrary choice of its maker' (Quoted in Pietz, 1985: 7).
30. There is no question that surrealist ideas about the object and chance are, at best, ambiguous, yet they are extremely evocative. If we put aside strictly psychoanalytical connotations, we can appreciate how the surrealist notions of '*objet trouvé*' and '*hasard objectif*' capture the revelatory nature of everyday events, in which the outcome is never only the sum of its terms. These events mark a before and an after in a personal (or general) history, since they bring to light something that was not clear before – maybe because it was repressed or hidden.

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