

## Our Sacred: fighting religious racism

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### *Nosso Sagrado: combate ao racismo religioso*

#### **I. We ask for the blessing of the people of Santo and all who read us.**

Laroyê Exu! Together with Mãe Nilce de Iansã, coauthor of this article, we greet<sup>4</sup> and ask permission from Exu, the lord of paths and communication, the one who always goes ahead and tells us which way to follow. Laroyê Exu!

This article discusses religious racism. From a critical perspective, we advance that, in our understanding, the categories of religious racism and religious intolerance are very different.

The verb to tolerate has, among other things, the meaning of accepting, bearing something with resignation, consenting without complaining, and accepting despite the discomfort. Tolerating implies some passivity, passive acceptance, and emotional withdrawal. It is possible to tolerate pain without complaining; it is possible to tolerate the presence of an inconvenient person without complaining; it is possible to tolerate without respecting.

In this way, it is understood that an endeavor to combat religious intolerance, for instance, is quite fragile from a conceptual, social, and political point of view, since combating intolerance means investing in tolerance. And tolerance does not imply change, does not involve reparation, does not operate in the field of rights, duties, and achievements, it involves only formal and often hypocritical acceptance. It is worth remembering the famous “houses of tolerance”, which, strictly speaking, were houses of prostitution, tolerated, admitted and frequented, although not respected, by the said good people.

A campaign against religious racism is quite different and involves different understandings and practices. Confronting and combating religious racism requires a willingness to engage in daily struggle, attention to the perception of racism in everyday life, and social mobilization to collectively combat racism. It is important to emphasize that it is primarily indigenous peoples, people of Afro-Brazilian religions, particularly candomblé and umbanda, who have been the target of increasing racist attacks, both against individuals and against institutions, temples, and sacred territories.

Religious racism is present in the streets, favelas, and luxury condominiums, in schools, universities, hospitals, museums, prisons, and in some churches that dress up in Christian skin. Religious racism is also present on social media, in so-called *fake news*, those messages and news that spread misinformation, false alarms, and lies, which attempt to take advantage of moments of individual and social fragility<sup>5</sup> to disseminate and promote ignorance, hatred, anger, resentment, and violence.

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<sup>4</sup> Considering that we are two female authors and one male author, and considering that Mother Nilce de Iansã is among us, we have chosen, in this article, to use the first-person plural and a language that approaches the orality that, strictly speaking, is typical of terreiros.

<sup>5</sup> The environmental catastrophe that struck the state of Rio Grande do Sul, for example, produced a strong movement of national solidarity, but it was also exploited by opportunistic racists who tried to attribute the catastrophe to the

Religious racism is a crime. This is a crime that transgresses all democratic, republican, humanist, environmentalist, and human rights limits; it is a crime committed by concrete people, who act to destroy life, memory, and history, and cultural expressions of the Afro-Amerindian people, and everything else that is part of our civilizing legacy<sup>6</sup>.

In Brazil, our temples, terreiros, and territories are being attacked and destroyed. We are expelled from our communities and even prevented from wearing our religious clothing and strings of beads<sup>7</sup>, despite having this right guaranteed by our Federal Constitution.

The right to profess our faith is threatened, and the physical integrity of our bodies is also threatened.<sup>8</sup> Religious racism here is understood as a category of thought that helps us understand Brazilian society and recognize its manifestations in institutions and individuals. When we understand the category of religious racism, we understand that it is present in everyday work, on public transport, on the streets, in shops, in schools, in environmental and climate disasters, in pandemics, in museums, and in family settings. However, in all these cases, it is not, in our understanding, the structure of society (in the abstract) that should be held responsible, but rather the individual or those who collectively practice racism.

Our physical and mental health is threatened. We live on the brink of being publicly attacked and humiliated at any time, in any place. The threat is magnified if we carry with us any symbol that denotes our faith.

For all this, we thank all the orixás who do not abandon our struggle. We thank our ancestors, who walked such a difficult path, so that we could be here, being who we are. The fight against religious racism has been going on for a long time, and we continue to learn how to fight. We need to continue fighting and resisting, but we also need to focus on transforming this scenario, aiming at a peaceful horizon. May Oxalá be with us!

## II. It is not possible to arrest what does not fit in prison.

In the early years of the Republic, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, police violations in candomblé and umbanda temples were frequent, invariably in the name of order and public health. Mothers and fathers of saints were persecuted, and their sacred objects were stolen. Sudden invasions of the terreiros disrupted moments of spiritual communion, showing blatant disrespect for their practitioners.

Everything was based on the slanderous imputation of articles from 1890 Penal Code and, later, the 1940 Penal Code, in which Afro-Brazilian religions were associated with practices of faith healing, charlatanism, illegal medical practice, and other classifications shaped by prejudice, corporatism, and ignorance. When religious communities and terreiros celebrated and held festivities, racism lurked and took action; mães e pais de santo were subdued and arrested, treated as offenders, and their sacred belongings were confiscated as if they were pieces of evidence in a crime that never existed.

Several confiscated sacred objects were reported in the newspapers of the time as “instruments of sorcerers”, “strange things”, “trinkets”, “mandingarias” and other pernicious references and other pernicious references.<sup>9</sup> The photographs gave the articles a sensationalist edge, capturing readers’ attention with brief

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presence of terreiros de candomblé and umbanda in that State. This was the case of Mrs. Michele Dias Abreu, who considers herself Christian and who “shared a video on her Instagram associating the floods in Rio Grande do Sul with the presence of the terreiros of African-based religions in the region.” This is not called religious intolerance; it is religious racism, and it is a crime. See: <[https://www.terra.com.br/nos/influenciadora-culpa-religioes-de-matriz-africana-por-enchentes-no-rs-ira-de-deus\\_ef430ab22b53ca9652473ea4c943f7c5nggm5qir.html](https://www.terra.com.br/nos/influenciadora-culpa-religioes-de-matriz-africana-por-enchentes-no-rs-ira-de-deus_ef430ab22b53ca9652473ea4c943f7c5nggm5qir.html)> (Accessed on May 19, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> The experience of Mother Nilce de Iansã in this and some other paragraphs comes to the fore. She is the one who speaks and reports the experiences and consequences of religious racism that she saw, experienced, and suffered.

<sup>7</sup> See the article about the so-called “Jesus Traffickers” published on the UOL channel: <<https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2019/06/15/traficantes-de-jesus-policia-e-mpf-miram-intolerancia-religiosa-no-rio.htm>> (Accessed on May 19, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> See the article about “Narco-Pentecostalism” published on the channel BBC News Brasil: <<https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/cj5ej64934mo>> (Accessed on May 19, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> See, among other periodicals: Gazeta de Notícias (Suplemento), “Sorcerer’s Instruments”, 24/07/1904, p. 8. <[https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=103730\\_04&pasta=ano%201904&pesq=macumba&pagfis=8040](https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=103730_04&pasta=ano%201904&pesq=macumba&pagfis=8040)>;

words, and implying a connection between Afro-Brazilian sacred objects and acts of magic practices by sorcerers; curses, witchcraft. Nothing indicated that those were cultural expressions of religious life. Nowhere were they reported as religious practices rooted in long-standing traditions. Brazenly, what was presented amounted to a complete disregard for the meanings and foundations of Afro-Brazilian religions.

From another perspective: devils, demons, *satans*, and Lucifers are religious, mythical, and symbolic constructs of Western Judeo-Christian traditions, present even in biblical texts, and they are not part of indigenous or Afro-Brazilian religions, which, in addition to being diverse, are not anchored in sacred books but in oral tradition. Nevertheless, spurious and negative associations were made in an attempt to establish false links between these different religious expressions, with the clear objective of criminalizing, disqualifying, devaluing, and demonizing Afro-Brazilian religious traditions.

Images of *mães* and *pais de santo* in forced poses added racist interpretations to what was written in the newspapers, impacting readers who, day after day, routinely encountered new forms of desecration of the sacred in the press.<sup>10</sup> *A Noite*, *O Paiz*, *Gazeta de Notícias*, *Diário Carioca*, *Diário de Notícias*, *O Globo*, among other newspapers circulating in Rio de Janeiro, filled their pages with attacks on Afro-Brazilian religions, shaping social imagination and, in some way, reinforcing the idea that these religions were not truly religions, but rather forms of exploiting public credulity. Today, a similar role is played by social media and digital platforms, with their exponential production of disinformation and fake news, often guided by racist agendas.

Through this racist lens, an attempt was made to discredit the entire Amerindian, African, ancestral, and millennial-old religious cultural heritage, which has established itself and developed ways of living and surviving in Brazil since the beginning of the period of slavery. Similarly, there was an attempt, though entirely unsuccessful, to discredit the spiritual and harmonious connection with the elements of nature, the beliefs, values, and customs, and the way of being in the world through the worship of non-Christian deities, while experiencing and renewing the traditions from which they originated.

As per Luiz Antônio Simas:

(...) Those who believe that racism is limited to the social perception of physical characteristics are certainly mistaken; that is its most odious manifestation. Racism is a phenomenon that unfolds across other fields of perception. One of its most frequent, practiced, and least recognized forms is established through the denigration of the symbolic goods of those whom colonialism has subjected. When we consider that the beliefs, dances, foods, worldviews, ways of celebrating life, burying the dead, educating our children, etc., of certain groups are inferior, we are operating within the realm of racism. (SIMAS, 2016).

Some sacred objects remained ‘imprisoned’ in the police station for over a century. In 1912, with the creation of the Scientific Police School of Rio de Janeiro<sup>11</sup>, they were placed in a sort of ‘classroom’, barely recognized as a museum space, alongside weapons, forged documents, and other misdemeanor objects. In that room, cadet classes were trained in reconstructing crime scenes. In 1945, these sacred objects were transferred to the newly created Museum of the Federal Department of Public Security, now the Museum of

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A Noite, “The police knocked on heaven’s door. And, entering *candomblé*, they saw strange things,” 11/09/1920, p.4. <[https://memoria.bn.gov.br/docreader/DocReader.aspx?bib=348970\\_02&pagfis=1407](https://memoria.bn.gov.br/docreader/DocReader.aspx?bib=348970_02&pagfis=1407)>; *Gazeta de Notícias*, “The arrest of believers and the seizure of trinkets,” 18/07/1920, p. 7. <[https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=103730\\_05&pasta=ano%20192&pesq=candombl%C3%A9&pagfis=1671](https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=103730_05&pasta=ano%20192&pesq=candombl%C3%A9&pagfis=1671)>; *Jornal do Brasil*, “The macumba bothers,” December 12, 1925, p.11. <[https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/DocReader.aspx?bib=030015\\_04&Pesq=Macumba&pagfis=42864](https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/DocReader.aspx?bib=030015_04&Pesq=Macumba&pagfis=42864)> (accessed on May 4, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> See, among others: *Gazeta de Notícias*, April 4/1914, p. 2, “Victim of false spiritualism” <[https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=103730\\_04&pasta=ano%20191&pesq=espiritismo&pagfis=31477](https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=103730_04&pasta=ano%20191&pesq=espiritismo&pagfis=31477)> e *A Noite*, January 13, 1936, p. 31. “Yellow *farofa* and palm oil...” <[https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=348970\\_03&pasta=ano%20193&pesq=%22Rua%20Salda%20Marinho%22&pagfis=28221](https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=348970_03&pasta=ano%20193&pesq=%22Rua%20Salda%20Marinho%22&pagfis=28221)> (accessed on May 4, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> “With the creation of the State of Guanabara in 1960, the Police School was renamed Police Academy. In 1984, Law No, 761 of June 29, changed the name of the institution to Sylvio Terra State Policy Academy, in honor of the Delegate. <<http://www.policiaivilrj.net.br/acadepol.php#:~:text=A%20Academia%20Estadual%20de%20Pol%C3%ADcia,policiais%20nos%20quadros%20da%20corpora%C3%A7%C3%A3o>> (accessed on March 22, 2024).

the Civil Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro. In other words, the collection of sacred objects was incorporated into a criminal museum. This is neither coincidental nor irrelevant. Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazil were (as far as is known) the only religious segment whose sacred objects were deposited and displayed in a crime museum; notwithstanding, strictly speaking, it is impossible to imprison what cannot be imprisoned.

### III. Free Out Sacred

The people of Axé demanded the liberation of their sacred goods and found strength, perseverance, and leadership in the figure of Mãe Meninazinha de Oxum, Iyalorixá of the terreiro Ilê Omolu Oxum, located in São Matheus neighborhood, in the municipality of São João de Meriti, Rio de Janeiro. Mãe Meninazinha recounts that since childhood, she heard from her biological grandmother and mãe de santo, Iyá Davina, and from many other elders, that it was necessary to take ‘our things out of the hands of the police’ (OXUM *et al.*, 2021, p. 75). She grew up with a sense of responsibility in this struggle, as if she had been entrusted with a special mission. She says:

Many of our pais de santo, mães de santo, ialorixás, and babalorixás were physically assaulted, arrested, and thrown into police stations. And our sacred belongings were seized. Our possessions are our wealth, our gold, our sacred treasures, which for us are worth far more than gold: they have immense value. But for the police, they were nothing. We were labeled as witches and sorcerers, which is not the case; we worship orixás, which are the elements of nature. (OXUM, 2017, p. 51).

Decades of struggle followed, during which Mãe Meninazinha de Oxum, alongside her religious community, progressively sought and gained the support of social movements, artists, and political authorities. In 2017, the Liberte Nosso Sagrado (Free Our Sacred) campaign was organized, generating public hearings at the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Alerj) and at the City Council of Rio de Janeiro.

By that time, part of the press began to draw attention to the absurdity of the Police Museum holding over five hundred Afro-Brazilian religious objects under forced guard<sup>12</sup>, and even the museum’s then director, Gisele Brasil Vilarinho Faro, supported the campaign.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Among others, see: Repórter Brasil, 30/06/2017. “Campanha Liberte Nosso Sagrado procura reaver objetos de culto”, by Luciana Barreto. (The Free Our Sacred campaign seeks to recover objects of worship.) <<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1711195185587730>> (accessed on May 4, 2024); The Intercept Brasil, July 4, 2017. “Religiosos lutam para libertar Orixás da polícia”, (Religious people fight to free orixá from the police) by Juliana Gonçalves. <<https://theintercept.com/2017/07/04/religiosos-lutam-para-libertar-orixas-da-policia/>> (accessed on May 4, 2024); Carta Capital, 1Sept.18, 2017. “Patrimônio sagrado permanece no Museu da Polícia Civil (Sacred heritage remains in the Civil Police Museum). Movimento afro-brasileiro do Rio de Janeiro pede liberação das peças.” (Rio de Janeiro Afro-Brazilian movement calls for the release of the pieces) by Luciana Rodrigues <<https://biblioo.cartacapital.com.br/museu-da-policia-civil>> (accessed on May 4, 2024); Agência Brasil, Sept. 19, 2017. “Grupo de trabalho definirá destino de peças religiosas apreendidas no século 20”, by Isabela Vieira. (Working group will determine the destination of religious pieces seized in the 20th century.) <<https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/cultura/noticia/2017-09/grupo-de-trabalho-definira-destino-de-pecas-religiosas-apreendidas-no-seculo>> (accessed on May 4, 2024); O Globo, May 15, 2018. “Peças de religiões de matriz africana apreendidas pela polícia estão no centro de disputa” (Pieces of African-based religions seized by the police are at the center of a dispute) by or Eduardo Vanini. <<https://oglobo.globo.com/ela/gente/pecas-de-religoes-de-matriz-africana-apreendidas-pela-policia-estao-no-centro-de-disputa-22680942>> (accessed on May 4, 2024); BBC News Brasil, August 20, 2019. “A longa luta para tirar itens sagrados de umbanda e candomblé do Museu da Polícia, que os confiscou há mais de um século” (The long struggle to remove sacred Umbanda and Candomblé items from the Police Museum, which confiscated them more than a century ago), by Júlia Dias Carneiro. <<https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49377670>> (accessed on May 4, 2024); e Folha de S. Paulo, August 31, 2020. “Ela não quer guerra com ninguém” (She doesn’t want war with anyone), by Rita de Cássia Hipólito. <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/opiniao/2020/08/ela-nao-quer-guerra-com-ninguem.shtml>> (accessed on May 4, 2024)

<sup>13</sup> Agência Brasil, 10/08/2020, “Polícia enviará acervo apreendido de terreiros ao Museu da República” (Police will send collections seized from terreiros to the Museum of the Republic), by Vinícius Lisboa. <<https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2020-08/policia-enviara-acervo-apreendido-de-terreiros-ao-museu-da-republica>> (accessed on May 4, 2024).

After years of struggle, the Campaign Liberte Nosso Sagrado succeeded in transferring 519 sacred objects from the Civil Police Museum to the Museum of the Republic on September 21, 2020.

#### IV. Social Museology in Action

The selection of the Museum of the Republic as the new home for the Sacred Collection was initiated by the religious group that led the 'Liberte Nosso Sagrado' campaign. In June 2018, the museum's management was explicitly asked: Would the Museum of the Republic accept the Sacred Collection, embracing its liberation and ensuring the necessary respect and care?<sup>14</sup>

At that time, the Museum of the Republic was already asserting itself as a social museum, in contrast to the conservative practices that, especially until the last two decades of the twentieth century, predominated in Brazilian museology. The debate over the role of museums in addressing social issues was gaining momentum. The challenge was to dismantle approaches based solely on the memory of power and representations of experiences tied to dominant social sectors, opening possibilities for work associated with the power of memory<sup>15</sup>.

In this perspective, the Museum of the Republic positioned itself as a space anchored in Brazilian cultural diversity. Its events agenda presented the defense of a plural and participatory museum, engaging communities in decisions about which memories should be preserved to build a more just and inclusive social world.

Thus, it is as an instrument of appreciation of the diverse cultural and popular matrices of Brazil that the Museum of the Republic had the honor of receiving the Nosso Sagrado Collection, under the terms of a reparation of justice and as an institutional duty.<sup>16</sup>

#### V. Different Knowledge Surrounding Nosso Sagrado

With the transfer of Nosso Sagrado to the Museum of the Republic, a Shared Stewardship Group was created. It includes the religious leaders who led the collection's liberation. They established a full routine of interaction with the museum team.

The Group renamed the collection, previously labeled by the police as the "Museum of Black Magic Collection". This offensive designation was rejected by the religious community and was officially rectified by the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (Iphan) on March 21, 2023. The collection was then officially named Nosso Sagrado, following the guidance of Mãe Meninazinha and supported by the entire Group.<sup>17</sup>

Renaming the collection was not simple. On May 5, 1938, the then National Service for Historic and Artistic Heritage (Sphan), now Iphan, created to provide legal protection for cultural goods recognized as official public heritage<sup>18</sup>, had ordered the listing of the sacred objects confiscated by the police, which at that time numbered around two hundred items. The collection was inscribed in the Archaeological, Ethnographic, and Landscape Register under the name "Museum of Black Magic Collection", reaffirming the state's prejudiced approach toward Afro-Brazilian religions.

The formation of the Shared Stewardship Group guaranteed direct participation with decision-making power for eleven Candomblé and Umbanda religious houses in all actions related to the collection. This not

<sup>14</sup> At that time, three conditions were agreed: 1<sup>st</sup>, the transference of the sacred collection from the Civil Police Museum to the Museum of the Republic should be considered a gesture of reparation; 2<sup>nd</sup>, The handling of Our Sacred Collection should be supported by Shared Stewardship (Museum of the Republic and Casas de Santo); and 3<sup>rd</sup>, the struggle for the liberation of the Sacred Collection should continue to be led by religious leaders.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the debate between the power of memory and the memory of power, see CHAGAS, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> "Mario Chagas faz questão de repetir: a equipe do Museu da República não faz favor em acolher o acervo, está simplesmente cumprindo o seu dever de ofício" (OXUM *et al.*, 2021, p. 20) (Mario Chagas makes a point of repeating: the team at the Museum of the Republic is not doing anyone a favor by receiving the collection, they are simply fulfilling their official duty.) (OXUM *et al.*, 2021, p. 20).

<sup>17</sup> The document can be viewed at <http://sei.iphan.gov.br/autenticidade>, entering the verification code 4268753 and the CRC code 1B28B0DE.

<sup>18</sup> Decree-Law 25, of November 30, 1937. <[http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/decreto-lei/del0025.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/decreto-lei/del0025.htm)> (accessed on March 30, 2024)



only energized and enhanced work on the collection but also compensated for the limitations of the museum staff in addressing the sacred dimension of the collection. In other words, the Shared Stewardship Group is key. The religious leaders possess essential knowledge about *Nosso Sagrado*. It must be understood that respect for Afro-Brazilian religions requires respect for *Nosso Sagrado*, which manifests also in the ways it is organized and restored, everything involving sensitivities unique to spiritual practices. Here, we encounter innovative lessons for the museum and heritage fields; both the Brazilian Institute of Museums (Ibram) and Iphan must learn to engage with and respect other forms of knowledge, especially regarding *Nosso Sagrado*.

The Shared Stewardship Group participates in all activities related to *Nosso Sagrado* through ongoing dialogue and critical monitoring of each action. Together, we have published articles in scientific journals, participated in cultural events, shared academic activities, made decisions about the direction of the *Nosso Sagrado* Collection, and were awarded the Rodrigo Melo Franco de Andrade Prize (Iphan) in 2023.

## **VI. Racism is a crime (even if its perpetrators attempt to cling to forms of domination and to the desire to disqualify Afro-Brazilian religious)**

Religious racism in Brazil has as one of its structuring components the reproduction of scientific theories then in vogue in Europe, which gained acceptance throughout the 19th century, influencing the formation of a slaveholding Imperial State and the proclamation of an exclusionary and racist Republic.

The project of consolidating the Brazilian Imperial State aimed at the constitution of an integrated and cohesive nation. This took place in a context of autonomist struggles and strong rejection of the idea of a centralized and sovereign government.<sup>19</sup> This project had, in the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute (IHGB), created in 1838, an important institutional pillar. The IHGB, which had Pedro II as its patron, was founded with the task of producing a History of Brazil and would legitimize the Imperial State as an integrated national community.<sup>20</sup> It was particularly influenced by two philosophical references: social evolutionism and Enlightenment thought.<sup>21</sup>

The evolutionist view assumed the inferiority of colonized peoples and territories. Among the disseminators were the French naturalist Georges-Louis Buffon (1834), who developed the idea of the “childishness” or “immaturity” of the American continent, and Dutchman Cornelius De Pauw (1768-1769), who coined the notion of “American degeneration” and supposed that there existed in the Americas some kind of intrinsic pathological problem that condemned the continent to degeneration. Everything in America, the climate, the lifestyle of the native population, according to the Dutchman, would show a tendency towards degeneration.

The ideas of these European-trained white men cloaked themselves in the mantle of science and proposed a hierarchy of territories, rendering colonized regions inferior and “justifying,” cynically, colonization itself. The positivist understanding was that all peoples should go through one single evolutionary process, following specific stages. The colonized had not fulfilled the states of progress and development and therefore needed to be rescued from backwardness.<sup>22</sup> The superior model of civilization would be colonialist Europe. Here lies the explicit connection between modernity, colonialism, and racism.

In Brazil, these theories appeared in the writings produced at the IHGB, insofar as History was understood as something organized within the regularity of a single evolutionary line, one plausible path toward progress. Along this imaginary line, the Brazilian Imperial State was positioned as the conductor of Brazil’s march toward civilization, while all the conflicts of an unequal society, marked by enslavement and the subjugation of Indigenous peoples, were minimized and made invisible by the idea of a hypothetically cohesive and integrated nation.

A well-known member of the IHGB, Francisco Adolfo Varnhagen (1811 - 1st ed. 1870), explicitly argued that the Brazilian nation had its foundations, the basis of its evolutionary line in colonization. For Varnhagen, Brazil was the nation that represented European civilization in the New World.

<sup>19</sup> See MATTOS, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> The subject is developed, among others, in GUIMARÃES, 1988 and VERSIANI, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Excellent analysis around racist scientific theories is at SCHWARCZ, 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Two exponents of this thought are the North-American anthropologist Lewis Morgan, 1880 (1st ed. 1877), and the French Gustave Le Bon, 1902 (1st ed. 1894).

Educating Brazilians meant teaching that European civilizational values were sovereign, which shows how dangerous the idea can be, still very present in common sense, that the solution to the world's problems lies in education. If we do not take care to specify what kind of education we are talking about, we run the risk of believing that the Brazilian nation only advances toward progress when directed by colonialist values, which in fact amounts to a project of "mis-education," demanding the deconstruction of perverse social and pedagogical meanings.

Another theoretical framework that, within the IHGB, influenced the production of a History of Brazil was linked to Enlightenment ideals and to understanding that it was the enlightened elite that held knowledge about the country's history. Thus, it was up to this elite to undertake the task of teaching about the nation's past and present, illuminating the paths toward its future.

In 19th-century Brazil, the monopoly on knowledge of the country's history was exercised by the enlightened members of the IHGB. They were the notables, the "illuminated ones," who held the historical truth. It is no coincidence that the IHGB took care to invest in the production of biographies of those considered illustrious figures of the nation, who acted for the prosperity of the country, starting with Pedro I, the institute's sponsor. Telling and retelling the stories of these remarkable enlightened figures was a way of teaching Brazilian history, in an effort to converge the feelings and thoughts of all Brazilians toward these same references.

Regina Abreu (1996, p. 147-148) summarizes: "[The IHGB] privileged the gathering of exceptional, extraordinary, exemplary stories, in short, capable of providing guidance and wisdom, in an ethical and pedagogical direction".

The Brazil of the IHGB reflected an exclusionary civilizing project, directed by the elites and limited to the principles of a European and white education, in which Indigenous and Black people represented the part to be redeemed, rescued, and integrated into the nation, and, if necessary, repressed, subordinated, and threatened. Thus, the IHGB's historical writing influenced the formation of a particular imaginary of Brazilian nationality, based on elitist and exclusionary interpretations Manoel Salgado (1988, p. 10) states: "To write Brazilian History as the stage for the action of an enlightened, civilized State, this was the effort toward which the Historical Institute concentrated its energies".

Emblematic of this civilizing spirit, the organization of world fairs was very common in 19th-century Europe, aiming to display the progress of different countries. These expositions were perceived as showcases of the ongoing civilizing process and were closely followed by Emperor Pedro II.

Regina Abreu (1996, p. 106) confirms: "By the end of the Monarchy, Brazil had already participated in the most important world expositions held in the West, such as that of 1862 in London, that of 1867 in Paris, that of 1873 in Vienna, that of 1876 in Philadelphia, and that of 1889 in Paris."

Scientific racism appeared in these expositions, especially in presentations of so-called "human zoos." In these zoos, people from peoples considered exotic, in this case, non-European peoples, were displayed, sometimes in cages, as wild, uncivilized species. In these exhibitions, the other, the different, was labeled as inferior, strange, and even monstrous.

Racist theories left their mark on the nascent Brazilian Republic and were present in the Penal Code of 1890, making use of fraudulent, baseless charges to criminalize Afro-Brazilian religious practices. It should also be noted that the same Penal Code criminalized vagrancy, with a preferential target: the formerly enslaved, freed without any public policy that would guarantee the minimum conditions for rebuilding their lives on civic foundations.

## **VII. Anti-racist pedagogy**

It is essential that museums, schools, universities, cultural, educational, and health foundations, research institutes, and so many other institutions that are part of the state apparatus, at its different levels (municipal, state, and federal), explicitly embrace the reflections and practices of an anti-racist pedagogy. As seems evident, racism could not be reproduced if it were at the same time fueled by and feeding state structures.

The understanding is that racism, to exist, requires state mechanisms working in its favor. This does not mean that, to fight, it is not enough to challenge racist individuals; it is necessary to confront the political, legal, social, and economic structures that are organized and that function to establish and naturalize racist

logics and practices. But it does not mean that, to fight it, it is not enough to challenge racist individuals; it is also necessary to confront the political, legal, social, and economic structures that are organized and that function to establish and naturalize racist logics and practices. The challenge of breaking the structures that reproduce racist relations requires the construction of counter-dominant public policies, policies of reparation, and policies of profound social transformation.

It was along this path that Mãe Nilce de Iansã became one of the founders, in 2003, of the National Network of Afro-Brazilian Religions and Health (Renafro), which today has 53 regional centers located throughout the country. Renafro has established itself as a space for social and political articulation of the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition, fostering dialogues with professionals in the field and with public managers. Amid challenges and achievements, the National Health Council, since July 20, 2023, officially recognizes the importance of traditional African practices in health care, as complementary practices within the Unified Health System (SUS).

In the same direction, Renafro and Ilê Omolu Oxum established a partnership with the International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights, aimed at promoting and defending human rights, to carry out the research project “Respect My Terreiro”. Coordinated by Mãe Nilce de Iansã, this research consolidated a mapping of violence against Terreiro communities. The systematized information is already being used by the Federal Republic Defender’s Office and provides support for the formulation of public policies of moral and material reparation and for the criminal accountability of those who attack terreiros.

The impact of this work also resulted in an invitation from the Superior Electoral Court to establish a pact for peace in the elections. Additionally, Mãe Nilce was invited to attend the United Nations in Geneva in April 2024 to deliver explicit recommendations to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

It is in this sense that Mãe Meninazinha de Oxum frequently repeats that *Nosso Sagrado*, after a long and persistent trajectory of resistance, must reach schools and institutions in general, becoming an instrument of anti-racist pedagogy. *Nosso Sagrado* can help us democratize the field of Education, retelling the History of Brazil in inclusive terms.

From the identification and appreciation of multiple possibilities of action, the next step is to invest in the construction of effective public policies, with guidelines and protocols aimed at guaranteeing religious freedom. The challenge is clear, and in the social arena of disputed interests, the struggle in the field of democracy continues tirelessly, along with the hope that

everyone has the right to encounter the mystery of their belonging, in kindness and gestures of silence, in drumbeats and songs celebrating life. All that, ultimately, which one would expect from an event of communion among peoples (SIMAS, 2016).

### **VIII. The sacred cultural heritage or “fratri-heritage”**

Why are some cultural assets transformed into cultural heritage, preserved for posterity, and valued as sources of research and knowledge, while others are not?

The answer lies in the fact that cultural heritage is a choice, made in the arena of contested memories, with a view of valuing certain memories over others. Whoever decides on the constitution of cultural heritage does so based on affirming specific social values that are meant to be perpetuated. All this has the effect of highlighting the relationships between memory, heritage, and power.

In this sense, the patrimonialization of *Nosso Sagrado* opens up powerful horizons of possibility for valuing the legacies of African heritage in Brazil. What social values does *Nosso Sagrado* help us to affirm? What social problems does it help us to confront?

*Nosso Sagrado* points to a collection of social problems in which racism and religious racism are inescapable. The police seizures that resulted in the formation of this collection imposed the criminalization of Afro-Brazilian religiosities. *Nosso Sagrado* exposes and questions religious racism and the ignorance surrounding the practices and foundations of Black religions.

*Nosso Sagrado*, being the first collection inscribed in the Archaeological, Ethnographic, and Landscape Book of the Iphan, while still being a collection once imprisoned by the police, illuminates the contradictions of a heritage policy that, for decades, privileged assets related to the dominant sectors of society, disregarding the participation of various ethnic and popular traditions that contributed to the formation of the “Brazilian nation,” attempting to convey the idea of a nation without conflicts.



Nosso Sagrado also helps us understand that Brazil and Rio de Janeiro are cradles of Africanity. From Africa came, and within it converged, many different African lines and ethnic groups, originating from highly diverse regions and cultures. The Nosso Sagrado expresses this cultural diversity and the way it has shaped Brazilian culture, the culture of the state of Rio de Janeiro, and the culture of the city of Rio itself.

Equally important is to think about the very field of knowledge from the perspective of Nosso Sagrado. Cultural heritage in Brazil was born elitist and racist, and this collection brings conceptual construction and non-academic knowledge that need to be considered for its preservation, suggesting that the production of knowledge does not always reside within the university.

Among many other domains of social life, Nosso Sagrado stands out as a relevant actor in the construction of knowledge. It is both a source and a living object of research; a vehicle of teaching, and it helps us to think about society and the ways we construct and deconstruct the memories we want to be remembered and valued. In this sense, the collection received by the Museu of the Republic helps us understand that Nosso Sagrado is not only cultural heritage (which already means a great deal); it does not concern only a paternal inheritance. It also involves a “matrimony,” in the sense of maternal heritage, and, above all, it invites us to understand, practice, value, and construct a “fratrimony,” in the sense of a fraternal inheritance, an inheritance that is produced, invented, created, and transmitted here and now.

### IX. Learning with Nosso Sagrado

The expression Nosso Sagrado (Our Sacred) holds certain mysteries and certain possibilities for teaching and learning.

The word *our* is used to designate what belongs to us and concerns us, that with which we have some relationship of identity or belonging, but also what we produce together, what originates from us. Here, it is important to emphasize, we are not referring to the so-called majestic plural,<sup>23</sup> which may be identified in the writing or speech of someone who refers to themselves using the first-person plural. We are speaking of *our* as something that goes beyond the individualistic *I*, beyond self-reference. In our view, the word *our* in this concrete case refers to a collective, to a set of communities that identify themselves and recognize themselves in Nosso Sagrado. And yet, the word *our* in this context carried the powerful desire to be recognized and accepted as an even broader *our*. This mysterious and Utopian *our* seeks to bring the country together in the anti-racist struggle. It does not want to be only the *our* of the people of the saints, of the people of *axé*, of the people of the *terreiro*. Without proselytism, it seeks to contribute to the unification of the Brazilian people around their different and multiple relationships with the sacred.

The word *sacred* originates in Latin (*sacrum*), referring to the gods or to something under their power. The etymology of the word *sacred* is important, but it does not help us much in understanding the sacred we are speaking of here. To speak of the sacred, turning the circle of the *gira*, implies understanding that the sacred exists in relation. The recognition of the sacred – whatever it may be – is not universal; it is not something accepted and recognized by everyone at the same time. The sacred always implies relativization. In all cases, however, the relationship with the sacred involves transcendence, the recognition that lived life is not sufficient to meet all the needs of life; it also involves acknowledging that the life we live is not enough – we need more life: more life to love, to be fathers and mothers and friends, more life to dedicate ourselves to the causes we believe in. All this signifies the transcendence of life itself. Philosophy, poetry, science, and art, strictly speaking, are desires for wings in a body born (in)capable of flying.

The expression *Our Sacred* opens (or may open) a dialogue with the collective, with the *our*, with the common, with that which both unites and distinguishes us. Nosso Sagrado has the power to bring us together in difference – we do not need to practice the same religion; we do not need to be bound by the same religious guidelines; we do not need to have a religion or religiosity; we do not need to be theists, pantheists, or atheists. Nosso Sagrado has the power to tell us: here we are speaking of transcendence, of respect, of the fight against religious racism, of defending our humanity and our different ways of expressing the human; here we are speaking of culture, religiosity, and art. As per poet Ferreira Gullar: “Art exists because life is not enough.”<sup>23</sup> The same may be said of religion, and of our relationship with the sacred.

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.campos.rj.gov.br/exibirNoticia.php?id\\_noticia=25356](https://www.campos.rj.gov.br/exibirNoticia.php?id_noticia=25356) (Accessed on May 19, 2024).

Art, philosophy, religion, and science constitute different forms of knowledge and, in our view, they are (and should be) treated as public goods, a perspective that finds support in contemporary debates on the universalization of knowledge. Our understanding is that knowledge production is a collaborative domain, since no one produces knowledge alone. Invariably, we draw upon those who came before us, we build dialogues and find inspiration from them, and this is part of the knowledge that is produced.

Knowledge is affirmed as a value that makes all the difference in people's lives, and therefore it must be available to everyone – something that becomes especially important when dealing with knowledge produced with public resources.

The construction of knowledge around Nosso Sagrado requires understanding that this collection is not merely a set of material goods. Nosso Sagrado brings together generations of people who share ways of living religion and of being in the world, who share cosmologies and worldviews. These people need to be heard, and this is not trivial. It is not trivial that practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions produce records of their experiences. It is not trivial to incorporate perspectives on Nosso Sagrado that represent the viewpoints of practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions. Doing so makes it possible to build a version of history that is more plural and more representative. As Mãe Meninazinha de Oxum says, it is necessary to tell about Nosso Sagrado to be able to tell about Brazil.

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