



“Pomba Gira Keeps an Eye on Us”: The Presence of the *Orixás* in Rio de Janeiro Brothels

Thadeus Blanchette  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8828-3943>

Núcleo em Ecologia e Desenvolvimento Sócio-Ambiental de Macaé
Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – Macaé
thaddeus.blanchette@gmail.com

Ana Paula da Silva  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8218-8286>

Curso de Graduação Interdisciplinar em Educação no Campo
Federal Fluminense University – Santo de Antônio de Pádua

Amanda De Lisio  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3365-5794>

Economic Social Research Council
Bournemouth University

Abstract

Oswaldo de Andrade’s poem *O Santeiro do Manguê* (1991 [1950]) and Ruth Landes’ ethnography *City of Women* (2006 [1947]) both highlight how African-Brazilian religions have maintained connections to sexual practices considered to be “perverse” by Christian moralities. The present article describes the presence of the *orixás* in today’s brothels in Rio de Janeiro. We emphasize the use of Candomblé and Umbanda as counter-hegemonic forms of spirituality which protect women involved in the sale of sex and are used as symbolic languages criticizing a moral order that highlights female passivity. Through the language of the saints, that which cannot be said becomes public in Carioca brothels, highlighting agencies in a space nominally dominated by men.

Keywords: prostitution, Rio de Janeiro, African-Brazilian religions, Pomba Gira

Słowa kluczowe: prostytucja, Rio de Janeiro, religie afrykańsko-brazylijskie, Pomba Gira

The present article is based upon ethnography conducted in Rio de Janeiro's commercial sexual venues from 2005 to 2018.¹ The authors are not specialists in the anthropology of African-Brazilian religions.² Although like many Cariocas³ we respect the *orixás*,⁴ we are indifferent followers and hope the *orixás* are more impressed by our intentions than our orthodoxy. But if the past 13 years of intensive field work in has shown us anything, it is the ubiquity of the African saints wherever sex is sold. Few academic works have been written about this presence.⁵ We thus thought it was time to produce an article on the topic, even if it is theoretically poor (although, we hope, ethnographically rich). Years ago Thaddeus Blanchette was invited by filmmaker Steve Berg to talk about the sacred in brothels. Berg was making a film about Oswaldo de Andrade's poem *O Santeiro do Mangue*, which takes place in Rio's old red light district. Berg's question to us was why would prostitutes buy religious paraphernalia? At the time, none of us had given a thought to the sacred in brothels although, as it turns out, it has deep historical roots.

¹ C.f. T.G. Blanchette, A.P. da Silva, '*Nossa Senhora da Help*': *Sexo, turismo e deslocamento transnacional em Copacabana*, "Cadernos Pagu" 2005, no. 25, pp. 249–280; *eadem*, *Amor um real por minuto: A prostituição como atividade econômica no Brasil urbano*, [in:] *Sexualidade e política na América Latina: Histórias, intersecções, paradoxos*, S. Correa, R. Parker (eds.), Rio de Janeiro 2011, pp. 192–233; *eadem*, *Putas, playas e Hell's Angels: turismo sexual, classe, raça e mestiçagem em Copacabana*, [in:] *Novos estudos em relações étnico-raciais, sociedades e políticas públicas*, P.S. Farias, M.L. Pinheiro (eds.), Rio de Janeiro 2014, pp. 100–121; *eadem*, "*Sympathy for the Devil: Pimps, Agents and Third Parties Involved in the Sale of Sex in Rio de Janeiro*", [in:] *Third Party Sex Work and "Pimps" in the Age of Anti-Trafficking*, A. Horning, A. Marcus (eds.), New York 2017; T.G. Blanchette, C. Schettini, *Sex Work in Rio de Janeiro: Police Management Without Regulation*, [in:] *Sex Sold in World Cities: 1600s-2000s*, M.R. Garcia, L. Heerma van Voss, E. van Nederveen Meerkerk (eds.), Leiden 2017, pp. 490–516; T.G. Blanchette, A.P. da Silva, J. Ruvolo, L.R. Murray, *A orgia que não aconteceu: a Copa do Mundo FIFA 2014 e o comércio do sexo no Rio de Janeiro*, [in:] *Prostituição, tráfico e exploração sexual de crianças: diálogo multidisciplinar*, M.P. Conrado, C.C. Bernardo, R.M.P. Santos, M.P. Silva (eds.), Lisboa 2015, pp. 98–130; T.G. Blanchette, A.P. da Silva, K. Tiefenbacher, J. Neuhauser, *Help-less. Reconfigurations in the Commercial Sexscape of Rio de Janeiro*, [in:] *Sex Work(s)*, M. Dubel, S. Kimm (eds.), Vienna 2015, pp. 143–173.

² We do not make substantive distinctions between Umbanda and Candomblé as we have found that these religious traditions are confused in the imaginations of most of our informants. Initiates are usually clear about which tradition they follow, but as Joana Bahia has noted elsewhere (J. Bahia, *Where Do the Prostitutes Pray? On Travestis, Mães de Santo, Pombagiras and Post-Colonial Desires*, [in:] *Lusospheres: Global Trajectories of Brazilian Religion*, M. Oosterbaan, L. van de Kamp, J. Bahia (eds.), London 2019 [in press]), the traditions tend to "bleed into" one another.

³ The adjective form of Rio de Janeiro.

⁴ The *orixás* are spiritual entities, generally of Western African origin, which roughly correspond to Greek gods. In Brazil, each *orixá* also has a corresponding Catholic saint and are oftentimes referred to simply as "the saints."

⁵ F.G.V. Santos and S.S.F. Soares' excellent article *A Pomba Gira no Imaginário das Prostitutas*, www.uvanet.br/rhet/index.php/rhet/article/download/22/10 [access: 12.12.2018] is an exception that proves the rule.

Bronze Age beginnings

In the historiography of prostitution, the linkages between religion and the sale of sex are notorious. Prostitution appears in human cultures alongside civilization and seems to be part of the consolidation of patriarchy in the Bronze Age, as noted by feminist anthropologists and historians such as Sheri Ortner⁶ and Gerda Lerner,⁷ as well as by historians of prostitution in general.⁸

As such, prostitutes appeared as a professional class about the same time as soldiers and priests. One of the earliest forms of prostitution was sacred prostitution – prostitutes were physical manifestations of the female divine and attached to temples. As Lerner and Ringdal remark,⁹ the sacred commerce of sex was intertwined with the birth and maintenance of civilization. The Babylonian goddess Ishtar was the protector of prostitutes, as were her descendants, Aphrodite and Venus. She was also the transmitter of civilized behaviour to the Babylonian folk-hero Enkidu:

Enkidu lived out on the steppes as a savage until one day he encountered the harlot from Ishtar's temple in Uruk. He spent six days and seven nights with the *harimtu* woman, who lavished him with love of all kinds: maternal devotion, tenderness, mystical transcendence, and orgiastic sex. She also taught him to break bread and to drink wine, to clean and to take care of his body. This was far more than a quick screw; it amounted to an intensive course in civilization. Ishtar herself had authorized the harlot who educated the savage.¹⁰

Anthropologist David Graeber confirms this linkage between the sacred, prostitution, and civilization in early Mesopotamian society:

One thing the early texts do make clear is that [sacred temple prostitutes] were considered extraordinarily important. In a very real sense, they were the ultimate embodiments of civilization... As such, they represented the ultimate possible refinement in everything from music and dance, to art, cuisine, and graciousness of living. Temple priestesses and spouses of the gods were the highest incarnations of this perfect life.¹¹

Symbolic sexual acts were part of fertility rituals, and Herodotus (484–425 BC) reported that all Babylonian women sold sex at least once in their lives in the temples of Ishtar. Similar activities were reported among the women of Carthage. Male prostitution was also connected to temples.¹²

Temple prostitution should not be thought of as liberatory. As Ringdal, Lerner, and Graeber¹³ all point out, it quickly became hierarchized and, particularly among poor women, a form of debt slavery. Furthermore, prostitution spread beyond the

⁶ S.B. Ortner, *The Virgin and the State*, "Feminist Studies" 1978, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 19–35.

⁷ G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford 1987.

⁸ N. Ringdal, *Love for Sale: A World History of Prostitution*, New York 1997.

⁹ *Ibidem*; G. Lerner, *The Origin of Prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia*, "Signs" 1986, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 236–254.

¹⁰ N. Ringdal, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹¹ D. Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, New York 2011, p. 181.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 22–27.

¹³ N. Ringdal, *op. cit.*; G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, *op. cit.*; D. Graeber, *op. cit.*

temples as patriarchy and market relations took hold. Graeber, following Lerner, understands this transformation in the context of a crisis of indebtedness caused by the rise of urban elites. According to Lerner, “It is likely that commercial prostitution derived directly from the enslavement of women and the consolidation and formation of classes.”¹⁴ The ambiguous nature of Bronze Age prostitution in Mesopotamia is illustrated by Eniku’s curse against the prostitute who introduced him to civilization:

*Oh, you sly woman of the Night,
Approach and hear your Fate.
I curse you. Until the Eve of Times:
The Streets shall be your Home.
On tired Legs shall you stand in Shadow.
The thirsty and drunken smite you...
Oh, Harlot, you Servant of Men,
Kings and Princes shall love you.
Young Men release their belts.
While the Old smile in their beards.
For Riches you shall both make and destroy.
For you, the fertile Wife shall be forsaken.
While the priests shall wed you to the Gods.*¹⁵

Sacred prostitution appears to have spread across the arc of civilization stretching from India to Egypt up to Christian times. Long before the worship of the Virgin Mary became popular, the presence of the sacred harlot continued in the Gnostic and folk worship of Mary Magdalene, considered by many to be a prostitute (as were, possibly, several of Jesus’s female ancestors¹⁶). Certainly, an early Gnostic Christian text written around 200 CE associates sacred prostitution with sacred virginity:

*For I am the first and the last.
I am the honored and the scorned,
I am the harlot and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin...
I am she whose marriage is multiple, and I have not taken a husband.*¹⁷

As the Church became more associated with the ideologies of the Apostle Paul, sexuality became restricted to the bonds of heterosexual matrimony. This process was neither uniform nor quick, however. The Middle Ages were a golden time for prostitution, and up to 20% of the clients were men of the cloth.¹⁸ While the Church condemned the sale of sex, ecclesiastical authorities shared in its profits. Saint Swithin

¹⁴ G. Lerner, *The Origin of Prostitution...*, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

¹⁵ *Cit. per Ringdal, op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹⁶ Cf. Ch. Brown, *Mary Wept Over the Feet of Jesus*, Montreal 2016. Brown points out that Gospel of Matthew mentions only four of Jesus’ female ancestors, all “improper women.” Brown’s hypothesis is that this was a way of indicating that Mary, mother of Jesus, was also an “improper woman.”

¹⁷ A. McGuire, *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, [in:] *eadem*, *Diotima: Materials for the Study of Women and Gender in the Ancient World*, <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/thunder.shtml> [access: 10.02.2018].

¹⁸ N. Ringdal, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

built a district for prostitutes in Southwark, and King Henry II gave its proceeds to the bishopric. In 1471, Pope Sixtus IV reformed the taxation of Rome's red light districts in order to build St. Peter's Cathedral.¹⁹ While there is little evidence that the Church owned brothels, they often owned properties which were rented to the sex trade, a situation that continues to the current day.²⁰ As Carioca sex worker leader Indianara Siqueria states, "The Church might not like us, but St. Peter's was constructed with money earned by pussies."²¹

The sacred in Carioca brothels

In Rio today, connections between Christianity and the sale of sex are inadvertent, but this does not mean that the gods have abandoned brothels. In Carioca bars, the presence of a *santo* – generally Ogum²² or his Christian counterpart St. George – is practically obligatory. Carioca brothels are likewise protected by the *orixás*. This should not be surprising. Early ethnographic works regarding African Brazilian religions in Brazil, such as Ruth Landes' *City of Women* (Santa Fe 2006 [1947]), point to the connections these maintained with what Judeo-Christian traditions understand as sexual deviance. The roots of this connection seem to be threefold. To begin with, sexuality has not been separated from the sacred in south-western African religious traditions and their diasporic derivatives to the degree that it has been in the Christian religions. It is thus understood to fall within the purview of the *orixás*. Furthermore, white supremacism has cast African-Brazilian religions as the polar opposite of a Christianity that is understood in asexual terms. Following Franz Fanon, the *orixá* thus serve as a Freudian repository onto which everything that Christianity rejects can be projected. Paraphrasing Fanon, it is impossible to conceive of Christ with an erection: it is not impossible to conceive of Exú, the African-Brazilian trickster god and messenger of the *orixás*, in the same state. And where Christianity confines women to Marian ideals of virginity and motherhood, Pomba Gira, the patroness of improper women, offers up an archetype for a variety female agencies, as anthropologist Joana Bahia's research demonstrates.²³

Working class African-Brazilian populations have also been associated with forms of labor and cultural existence where sex and work intertwined, as both Brazilian historiography²⁴ and the historiography of the Western African diaspora

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

²⁰ M. Day, *Vatileaks Scandal: Vatican Properties 'Used as Brothels and Massage Parlours Where Priests Pay for Sex,' Claims Report*, "The Independent" 2015, 11.10., <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vatileaks-scandal-vatican-properties-used-as-brothels-and-massage-parlours-where-priests-pay-for-sex-a6729251.html> [access: 10.02.2018].

²¹ Communication with the author, 07.07.2017.

²² The Yoruban *orixá* of war, iron, agriculture and beer.

²³ J. Bahia, *op. cit.*

²⁴ M. Engel, *Meretrizes e doutores: O saber médico e a prostituição na cidade do Rio de Janeiro, 1845-1890*, São Paulo 1990; G. Freyre, *Casa-Grande & Senzala*, Rio de Janeiro 2005 [1933]; T. de M. Gomes, *Massais, mulatas, meretrizes: imagens da sexualidade feminina no Rio de Janeiro dos anos*

demonstrate.²⁵ Manifestations of this engagement in Brazilian popular and even *haute* culture are notorious.²⁶ (See, for example Hector Julio Páride Bernabó's – aka Carybé – painting *A Grande Mulata*.)

Whether this intertwining is a matter of choice, coercion, or simple survival, the fact of the matter is that sex work does not necessarily seem to be as stigmatizing within working class African-Brazilian communities as it is in other social universes. Landes remarks upon this, pointing out that many respected *mães de santo* have had a history of sex work.²⁷ Armando Pereira, one of the most prolific writers regarding prostitution in mid-twentieth-century Rio de Janeiro, frequently comments that many of the black women who worked in the Mangue were respected matrons in their communities.²⁸ This acceptance is relative: we do not want to cast working class African-Brazilian culture as exceptionally tolerant to non-hegemonic sexualities. Likewise, African-Brazilian religions are not necessarily approving of prostitution and homo- and transsexuality: prejudice and bigotry exist in this field of spiritual activity. It seems to us, however, that African-Brazilian religions do exclude “deviant” sexualities as a matter of dogma. Prostitution thus seems to follow homosexuality here, being something that may be frowned upon, but is not considered cause for absolute rejection.²⁹

As anthropologist Yvonne Maggie shows in *Guerra de Orixá* (2001), one of the defining aspects of African-Brazilian religions is their ability to adapt themselves to new circumstances. Far from being fossilized “traditional” beliefs, fated to disappear in modernity, they are living forms of spirituality, constantly remaking themselves. Over the past half century, the African Brazilian religions have become associated with “sexual deviants,”³⁰ particularly homosexuals, transsexuals, and

1920, “Cadernos Pagu” 2004, no. 23, pp. 121–147; C. Schettini, “*Que Tenhas Teu Corpo*”: *Uma história social da prostituição no Rio de Janeiro das primeiras décadas republicanas*, Rio de Janeiro 2006; R. Soihet, *Condição feminina e formas de violência: Mulheres pobres e ordem urbana (1890-1920)*, Rio de Janeiro 1989; L.C. Soares, *Rameiras, ilhoas e polacas: a prostituição no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX*, São Paulo 1992.

²⁵ A.L. Cabezas, *Prostitution in Havana*, [in:] *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s*, M.R. Garcia, L. Heerma van Voss, E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, (eds.), Leiden 2017, pp. 414–440; S. Dewey, T. St. Germain, *Women of the Street: How the Criminal Justice-Social Services Alliance Fails Women in Prostitution*, New York 2017; E. Landau Epstein, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans*, New Orleans 2013; M.U. Ekpootu, *Sexualizing the City: Female Prostitution in Nigeria's Urban Centers in a Historical Perspective*, [in:] *Selling Sex in the City... , op. cit.*, pp. 306–328; L. Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy*, Chicago 2016; M. Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, Durham 2014.

²⁶ T.G. Blanchette, A.P. da Silva, *Passaporte de Puta: Movimentos Internacionais de Brasileiras em Tempos de Pânico Moral*, [in:] *Migrações: Rumos, Tendências, e Desafios*, H. Póvoa Neto et al. (eds.), Rio de Janeiro 2016, pp. 433–476.

²⁷ R. Landes, *The City of Women*, Santa Fe 2006 [1947].

²⁸ A. Pereira, *Sexo e Prostituição*, Rio de Janeiro 1967.

²⁹ Cf. J. Bahia, *op. cit.*

³⁰ W.C. Souza Junior, A. Monocó, *Mona e Folhas: a homossexualidade nos terreiros de candomblé, “Mandrágora – Religião e Homossexualidade”* 1999, no. 5, pp. 21–35; J. Bahia, *op. cit.*

prostitutes. The overlap between Afro-religiosity and the “gay” universe³¹ is such that Yoruba terms in Candomblé have influenced *bajubá*, the cant of Brazilian sex workers and sexual minorities.³²

Whatever the reason for the African saints’ presence in Carioca brothels, there they are. During the course of our research, we have not encountered significant manifestations of Christianity in these spaces, but it is pretty much *de rigueur* for brothels to have an altar to the *orixás*. There are only two exceptions to this rule, both of which reinforce it. The first is that Saint Jorge the Warrior is found in brothels, just as he is in bars. However, he is a Catholic saint who is heavily associated with Ogum in popular religious belief and is considered “problematic” by conservative Catholics. The second exception is that we have not found altars in upscale Carioca brothels (we will discuss this below).

Brothel altars are well cared for and often extravagant. Figure 1 shows one of our favourites. This is a Maria Padilha³³ who occupies a wall niche in a downtown Carioca brothel. Offerings of roses, incense, and wine stretch out for a half meter to each side of her. This same brothel also had sets of Ogum’s irons³⁴ atop its check-in desk, also surrounded by offerings.



Figure 1. Maria Padilha, in a downtown Carioca brothel.

Photo by Thaddeus Blanchette.

³¹ Here understood in its Victorian sense as taking in all forms of non-monogamous sex performed for money or pleasure.

³² W.C. Souza Junior, A. Monocó, *op. cit.*

³³ A Umbanda avatar of Pomba Gira, the *orixá* of shameless female sexuality, based on a Spanish noblewoman from the late middle ages (J. Bahia, *op. cit.*).

³⁴ Small iron representations of western African implements of agriculture, iron-making, and war, sacred to Ogum.

A more typical altar can be seen in Figure 2. This is in an apartment brothel in Copacabana, set behind the bar, on the floor.

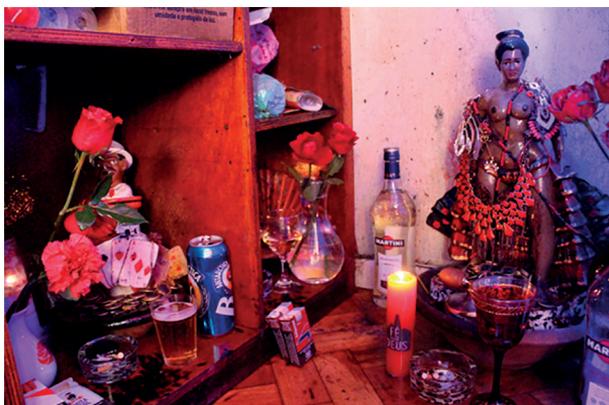


Figure 2. Altar in Copacabana privé.

Photo by Amanda De Lisio.



Figure 3. A sixty-year-old brothel madame shows off her St. George the Warrior tattoo in a downtown walk-up brothel. An altar to St. George is behind the photographer.

Photo by Amanda De Lisio.

To the right, we can see another Maria Padilha – who, together with the Cigana³⁵ and Pomba Gira, is probably the most popular entity in brothels – and to the left, Seu Zé Pelintra. We refer readers to Joana Bahia's excellent work on Maria Padilha for

³⁵ Yet another Umbanda manifestation of Pomba Gira, the Candomblé *orixá* who represents shameless female sexuality.

more information.³⁶ Zé Pelintra is an entity originating in the Catimbó religion of north-eastern Brazil, migrating to the cities in the 1960s and becoming incorporated into Umbanda as one of “the street hustlers” (*a linha da malandragem*) under the leadership of Ogum (St. George the Warrior). Described as the “lawyer of the poor,” he is the advocate of those considered to be socially “marginal” who find themselves in disputes with their “betters.”

Altars range from the small to the enormous. One of the most impressive we have seen is in the most decrepit brothel in Rio. Each of the five floors in this rundown nineteenth-century townhouse contains an altar dedicated to Pomba Gira, occupying a square meter of floor and maintained with red roses and other offerings. Other manifestations of African-Brazilian religiosity are also present in brothels. In Figure 3, a madame shows off her Saint Jorge the Warrior tattoo.

A temple brothel

One of our favourite brothels, Venus’s, considers itself to be a temple brothel and, in this sense, harkens back to the earliest forms of prostitution. A complete set of *rixás* is buried below its entrance staircase and another set is arranged in an altar in its attic. The check-in desk is flanked by a large statue of a manifestation of Iansã,³⁷ to whom the brothel is dedicated (Figure 4).



Figure 4. This is understood to be a manifestation of Aphrodite (also Venus) and the *orixá* Iansã, mother of the evening and goddess of the winds and storms.

Photo by Thaddeus Blanchette.

³⁶ J. Bahia, *op. cit.*

³⁷ The Yoruban goddess of storms and a manifestation of female strength and fiery temper.

Although the statue was originally a representation of blind justice, it has been repurposed as Iansã, who also carries a sword and is often portrayed with a veil over her eyes (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. A more traditional portrayal of Iansã, the manifestation of female strength and fiery temper.

Source: <https://www.iquilibrio.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/IANSA-768x478.jpg> [access: 12.12.2018].

Around the foot of the statue's pedestal are piled offerings: wine, flowers, candles, and incense. The house's altars are maintained by the manager, Estevão, a jovial gay man of 28 who sports an Elvis Presley-style pompadour.

As the women come in, many of them kneel before the altar and make offerings. Estevão is a follower of Candomblé, but not an initiate. He claims that the brothel's owner, a woman, is. When we visit, he is often performing acts of sympathetic magic to draw clients into the establishment or to protect the women. On one occasion, he had the brothel's "program book"³⁸ open on the desk, covered with "call money dust," an incense that can be bought at any of three religious supplies stores near Venus's. As each man walked in, Estevão used a razor to scrape half the dust away from one line of the book, sprinkling it in a lit brazier at the foot of the Iansã statue. If the man went upstairs with a woman, the rest of the dust would be scraped off and burnt. During slow periods, Estevão would scrape the dust back and forth across the open lines of the ledger, meticulously covering the unfilled entries.

While Estevão manages the brothel, his assistant, a 25-year-old white heterosexual male, will often be behind the check-in desk, threading beaded necklaces for the *orixás*, known as *guias*. Several of the women who work in the brothel are initiated into Candomblé and the space is considered to be "alive with the spirits." People who spend the night report knocks on their doors, footsteps in abandoned halls, and laughter coming from empty rooms (Iansã – the entity to whom the brothel is dedicated – is also the Lady of the *eguns*, or spirits of the dead). The workers and managers of the

³⁸ The spiral notebook where each day's tricks are listed.

brothel receive messages from various entities in cryptic phrases spoken by clients or by people who come in off the street. In the eyes of the people who work there, Venus's is a house of the spirits.

“Put this goddamned henhouse in order!”

The *orixás* also mediate relationships between the women who work at Venus's, as exemplified by a fight that broke out during the 2016 Olympic Games. On this occasion, Drs Ana Paula da Silva, Laura Murray, and other members of our research group³⁹ were interviewing Estevão when crashes resounded from the private rooms upstairs, accompanied by shouting. These were followed by a half-dozen naked women tumbling down the staircase, five of them punching the other. As the fight spilled into the space around the main altar and cash register, Estevão pulled himself up from his chair and bellowed, “For the love of God, put this goddamned henhouse in order!” The security guard came bolting up from the brothel entrance and pulled the woman who was being beaten away from the others, taking her into a back room. The other women then simultaneously began to explain what had happened, using one of the male student researchers to illustrate their points.⁴⁰

The woman who had been beaten was a new worker, taken on at Venus's just before the Olympic Games in the expectation that there would be an upsurge of clients. There had not been. Now the newcomer was being accused by the veterans of stealing their clients. This can be a motive for murder among Carioca sex workers. The women were led by “Cougar,” a formidable 44-year-old white woman who had turned tricks in almost every brothel in Rio. Once, Cougar admitted to us that she had twice killed men who had tried to rape her. She considered herself to be an initiate into Candomblé and had a powerful Pomba Gira whom Estevão respected. Faced with a united front led by Cougar, Estevão agreed that the accused woman would be expelled. At this moment, the accused reappeared, dressed and escorted by the security guard. One of the other women punched her and the alleged client-stealer fell to the floor, grabbing on to Dr da Silva and pulling her down. After much kicking and shouting, order was restored. The accused was escorted out of the house and the other women filed back upstairs. No sooner had Estevão returned to his perch behind the cash register, however, than a new series of thumps and cries rang out. “Estevão!” one of the girls shouted, “Cougar's incorporated her Pomba Gira!”

Four naked women came back down the stairs, half-carrying the still naked Cougar who, now possessed, was laughing uproariously and calling for beer. The women trouped into the brothel's back room where some of them consulted with the Pomba Gira while others tried to make the entity return to the realm of the spirits. Meanwhile, the brothel's half-dozen clients huddled in a corner muttering and looking nervous.

³⁹ Which on this occasion included Doctoral Candidate Thayane Brêtas of the National Law College and other interns of our extension group, Prostitution Policy Watch.

⁴⁰ This caused discomfort as he was the only male in the group, the fiancé of a researcher, and was being groped and pulled at by five naked women.

Over the next few weeks, information about the fight came to light. Apparently, the “client stealing” had initially been tolerated by the veteran workers. Expecting to make a lot of money at the Olympics, they had been sending problematic regulars to the new hire. As the Games progressed, however, not only did the expected sex tourists fail to turn up, regular clients stopped coming in. Business fell and *any* client became a “good client.” At this point, the veterans began demanding the “problematic” clients back, and tensions rose, culminating in the fight.

As anthropologist Gilberto Velho⁴¹ points out, the belief that spirits exist and can be accessed by gifted people is hegemonic among Cariocas. This does not mean that everyone believes in the *orixás*; it means that behaviours which might be interpreted as insanity in other cultures are likely to be understood as spiritually inspired in Rio. As Cougar was carried down the stairs, swearing, laughing, and demanding booze, no one in the brothel saw it as anything but possession. Cougar’s domination of the codes of the spirits and her ability to manifest a powerful Pomba Gira reinforced her moral authority as Venus’s oldest sex worker, even among people who did not believe in the spirits.

According to some of the women, Cougar’s Pomba Gira criticized Estevão for letting the client-stealer into the brothel and claimed that a lack of maintenance of the house and its altars was keeping clients away. She also expressed that “negative influences” from another brothel were upsetting the spirits and that the client-stealer had brought said influences into the house. This incident is an example of Lévi-Strauss’ “symbolic efficacy,” wherein accepted cultural myths integrate unsettling occurrences. Lévi-Strauss illustrates this phenomenon through childbirth among the Cuna people of Panama:

[People believe] in the myth and [belong] to a society which believes in it. The tutelary spirits and malevolent spirits, the supernatural monsters and magical animals, are all part of a coherent system on which the native conception of the universe is founded. The sick woman accepts these mythical beings or, more accurately, she has never questioned their existence. What she does not accept are the incoherent and arbitrary pains, which are an alien element in her system but which the shaman, calling upon myth, will re-integrate within a whole where everything is meaningful...

The shaman provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed and otherwise inexpressible psychic states can be immediately expressed... [This] induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favourable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected to.⁴²

Although the women of Venus’s did not suffer from any physical malady, the disappointment of the Olympic Games, coming as it did after a long economic crisis that saw the geography of sex work in Rio disrupted (with many new workers coming into brothels such as Venus’s), created unease among the women. The expulsion of the alleged client-stealer put a focus on this discontent and linked it to the structural

⁴¹ G. Velho, *Projeto e Metamorfose: antropologia das sociedades complexas*, Rio de Janeiro 1994.

⁴² C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Effectiveness of Symbols*, [in:] *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, W.A. Lessa (ed.), New York 1979, p. 324.

changes that were taking place in the downtown sex markets (discussed below). It also reinforced Cougar's position as a leader among the veterans, putting newer hires on warning as to who was in charge in the house. It thus expressed otherwise inexpressible psychic states and induced a reorganization of Venus's in a direction which empowered the cadre of veteran workers.

Christians and the non-devout

There seem to be three attitudes among the women who work in commercial sexual venues towards the African-Brazilian religious presence in these spaces. The majority simply take it in stride. Although these women do not profess belief in the spirits, they – like many Brazilians, including us – may give them offerings as signs of respect. This is similar to the New Year flower offerings for Iemanjá that Bahia has studied, where non-followers participate in public ceremonies.⁴³ Another manifestation of this phenomena can be seen in popular newspapers which run ads by and for *pais* and *mães de santo*, where one frequently finds prostitutes thanking *exús* or *pomba giras* for bringing them clients and money. One typical example of this, which we recovered from the July 7th 2008 edition of “O Extra” newspaper, had a sex worker thanking Exú because after she had sacrificed to him, her clientele improved in quality and number.

A minority of the women seem to be active in African Brazilian religions or themselves initiates, able to receive the spirits. This is particularly true among those women who are older and/or higher up in the brothel hierarchy: madames, managers, or veteran prostitutes. Finally, there exists a minority of women who are followers of other religions, particularly Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians. We have not found any who reject the African saints' presence (although extremely Christian women are probably self-selecting to not be in brothels). More interesting, however, are the women who combine respect for the *orixás* with Christianity. Some drift between African-Brazilian religions and Christianity as their personal lives warrant. These women seem to be using both religions as a counterbalance to one another. An example of this is one of our interlocutors, a follower of Candomblé until she felt that her ex-husband's Exú was interfering with her life. She then became an evangelical Christian in order to free herself from this influence. As a Christian, however, she felt she needed to stop doing sex work and thus suffered economically. Finally, she received the support of a *mãe de santo*'s⁴⁴ Pomba Gira, which allowed her to resume sex work while protecting her from her ex-husband's influences. At that point, she stopped attending church.

Others seem to be situationally involved with Christianity and African-Brazilian religions. The common pattern here concerns women who are Christian in daily life,

⁴³ J. Bahia, *O Rio de Iemanjá: uma cidade e seus rituais* In *Revista Brasileira de História das religiões*, “ANPUH” 2018, vol. 10, no. 30, pp. 177–215.

⁴⁴ An Afro-Brazilian religious priestess.

but respect the *orixás* inside the brothels. As one of them put it, “Jesus doesn’t come in here, but Pomba Gira keeps an eye on us.”

Many Christian sex workers would object to this and some might even cite Christ’s remarks about prostitutes getting into heaven before publicans and Pharisees. But, as Amanda De Lisio discovered in her field work, the lack of Christian religious images in brothels seems to indicate a consensus that Jesus is not really the entity to go to when one has prostitution-related problems. Our Christian informants seem to agree that prostitution is a sin and that they cannot ask for Christian spiritual succour in this regard. As one of them put it, “The true Christian attitude would be to leave prostitution. I can’t because I need to pay my bills. But that doesn’t mean I’m shameless.”

And this seems to be the main role of the *orixás* in the brothels: they aid a stigmatized population involved in dangerous work – a population drawn from Brazilians, a set of peoples which is notorious for its strong belief in spirits and gods (plural). What this simultaneity of Christian and African-Religious beliefs suggests to us is that even after the evangelical explosion, Brazil is still a syncretic religious space. Rather than being categorically set against Christ, the *orixás* are at one end of a polarization not defined so much by “good” versus “evil,” but “respectable” versus “non-respectable.”

Significantly, the most represented entities in brothels are female: *pomba giras*, Maria Padilhas, and *ciganas*. It is also significant that these entities do not appear in upscale brothels. This may be due to the fact that these brothel’s clients tend to be higher class and whiter than the clients who frequent the *fast fodas*⁴⁵ where *orixás* are prevalent. Sauna brothel owners and managers are also almost 100% male, while their counterparts in downscale brothels are often female. It is no coincidence, in our view, that the brothels with the most *orixás* are also those which tend to be owned and/or operated by women. This hypothesis has recently been reinforced.

Over the past years, a group of investors who seem to be mostly male have been buying up and renovating downtown brothels, many of which were owned and operated by women. In every case we have seen, the *orixás* disappear when the new owners take over. This notoriously occurred in the case of the brothel with the extravagant Maria Padilha in Figure 2, above. This brothel had previously been controlled by women who were active in Candomblé and allied to the owner of Venus’s (it was from this brothel that the accused client-stealer had migrated). The niche containing the *santa* was boarded up by the new owners, and shortly thereafter a fire mysteriously started near Maria Padilha’s compartment, with no harm to her. Disaster was narrowly avoided and the interpretation of the event in Venus’s was that Maria Padilha was upset. “Now the new owners will have to find a way to safely extract her from that whorehouse,” said Estevão. “And that will be difficult, because they aren’t ‘of the saints.’ They aren’t of the saints, but now they are scared of Maria Padilha,” he concluded, laughing.

⁴⁵ A pun on “fast food”, with *foda* meaning ‘fuck.’ These are the cheapest of downtown brothels.

Final considerations

As Bahia points out, European saints, spirits, and goddesses have a rich tradition of being involved with brothels and prostitutes.⁴⁶ Pomba Gira herself encompasses Maria Padilha who, in turn, is linked to a long lineage of “Mother Goddesses” of the Mediterranean basin, who Christianity has stripped of their sexual aspects. These can be traced back to the goddesses of the Late Bronze Age.⁴⁷ It is important to realize, then, that the *orixás* in Carioca brothels are not a Brazilian invention. In the words of Bahia “Pomba Giras have been circulating for centuries between the Iberian Peninsula and colonial Brazil”⁴⁸ and some of their antecedents have been circulating around the Mediterranean for millennia.

But one does not need to rely on romantic notions of sex goddesses descending across hundreds of generations to explain why they continue to be present in today’s brothels. The strength of the *orixás* is that they are archetypal representations of human experiences. The sale of sex is one of these. As Christianity has distanced itself from female sexual agency, it is not surprising that these entities find themselves constantly (re)created by women who move, work, live, and love outside what Gail Rubin calls the “charmed circle” of monogamous, heteronormative, reproductive sex.

This seems to us to be the most important aspect of *orixás* in brothels: they are markers of female agency, outlining a femininity that is not afraid to fight, fuck, or finagle. In this sense, they fill a space which Christianity has left empty. It is thus not surprising, then, that nominally Christian women who sell sex and who must deal with the attendant stigmas and acts of violence would look favourably upon entities that are willing to lend a hand in their day-to-day struggles.

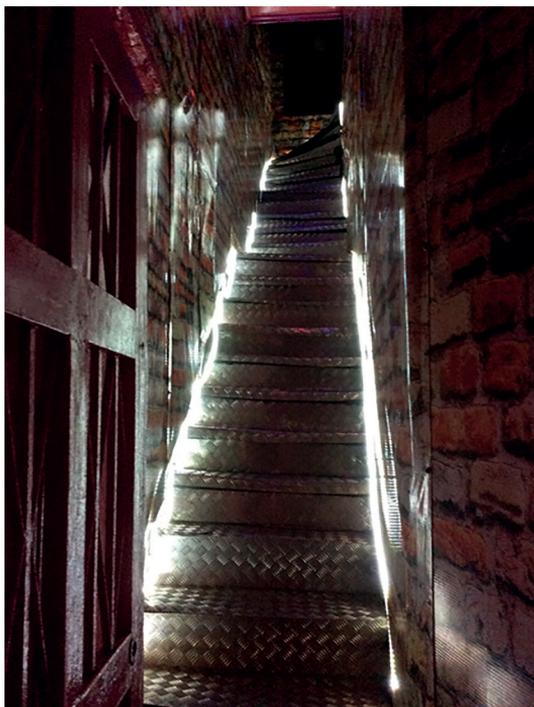


Figure 6. The entrance stairway of a typical Carioca downtown *fast foda*.

Photo by Thaddeus Blanchette.

⁴⁶ J. Bahia, *Where do the Prostitutes Pray?...., op. cit.*

⁴⁷ N. Ringdal, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ J. Bahia, *Where do the Prostitutes Pray?...., op. cit.*

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