Objects of “imprisonment”: Diasporic museum collections on ethnographic display

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Abstract
The article reflects on the place and the narratives in which collections of the Afro-Brazilian diaspora are inscribed in the context of ethnographic museums in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Presenting a brief socio-historical analysis of two collections, one in the Civil Police Museum and the other in the Édison Carneiro Folklore Museum, it demonstrates how different regimes of knowledge are used to “imprison” objects of faith as museum objects in the eyes of the police or in those of ethnographers. “Incarcerated” in museums, these collections have been kept by state institutions that frame them either as testimonies of offenses to the public order, or as objects of folklore, religious artifacts disconnected from terreiros. Finally, recurring to a theoretical framework of nonduality to provoke museum’s stable categories, the article considers the current transformative role of museums in the “liberation” of a diasporic heritage, by proposing dialogue and collaboration as important elements in the liminal work of musealization. Ultimately, what is at stake in the case of Afro-Brazilian sacred materials kept in museums is the ability of objects disassociated from their ritual context to transmit the sacred in the museum environment.

Keywords
Afro-Brazilian heritage, diasporic collections, ethnography, museums
In reflexive analyses of museum work, procedures of classification and display have sometimes been condemned for following colonial methods, continuously informing how museums name and shape material culture. In several attempts to “decolonize” museum practice, curators and communities have been challenging the management of collections, including the traditional processes of documenting and exhibiting heritage. Objectification, an old “scientific” instrument for compartmentalizing the world and producing authorized knowledge, has been put into question in this reflexive revision of the museum, the latter perceived as a place where different forms of knowledge and contesting views over heritage may coexist. However, revising museum work is a long and complicated process. It involves excavating our own past as museum professionals and bringing our museological assumptions and beliefs to the surface in order to interrogate them.

As the contentious situation of Afro-Brazilian objects in ethnographic museums indicate, some “imprisoned” collections are yet to be liberated from the imposed frameworks and divisions from the past. In this article I will reflect on the place and the narratives in which collections of the Afro-Brazilian diaspora are inscribed in the context of ethnographic museums in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Looking back into the history of these objects and in the collecting procedures, I will expose how museums have utilized colonial methods in the classification and presentation of sacred materials apprehended during the Republican period in Brazil. Either described as “black magic,” with an evident racist connotation, or as “folklore,” in the context of ethnographic museums committed to the project of a mixed national identity, these collections are not only a trace of the living culture of the African diaspora in Rio. They are also documents of the institutional racism in which museums are embedded since Brazil’s Imperial period (from 1808) and during the Republic (after 1889).

Classifications have helped anthropologists to give order to the material world assuming an a priori distinction between persons and things, matter and meaning, and representation and reality (Henare et al., 2007). Such dual divisions have reified the position of the “scientist” as a neutral observer of the cultural materials they were objectively describing and giving meaning to. If we look into some museum classifications today as an inheritance from the encyclopedic organization of knowledge in modern institutions, we may infer that some documentation systems are still practicing the imposition of modern systems of classification as an act of domination of other forms of knowledge and being, and therefore, working as a trace of museums’ colonial heritage. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in Mary Douglas’ Purity and Danger, gestures of separating, purifying, and demarcating divisions “have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (Douglas 1984, p. 4). This imposition of an order—one that establishes the difference between within and without, with and against, about and below—is in the very origin of classification systems in different societies, therefore it is neither exclusively “Western” nor necessarily an inheritance of colonialism. What differs the colonial order from other systems of classification is its political project: to organize the world by inflicting a hierarchical classification of humanity, one that subjugates some dominated peoples to the cultural frameworks of their dominators. Such hierarchy, as I will demonstrate in the critical sociohistorical analysis of two museum collections, is projected on objects, systems, and people.

Museums have historically contributed to the colonial project and several studies have already exposed its material consequences in collections and display (Ames, 1992; Bennett, 2004; Macdonald, 1998). As I demonstrated in previous works (Brulon Soares, 2020, 2023), colonial institutions in the Global South, such as national museums in South America or in the African continent, have found fertile ground for the reproduction of colonial values among local elites. By inflicting the divisions applied by European museums in the context of the colonies, these national institutions fostered the appropriation of local cultural references through the lenses of Western “objectivity.” Operating with the notions of “truth” and “science,” ones that demarcated ways of thinking crystallized since the nineteenth century (Macdonald, 1998),
these museums helped to marginalize certain populations from their cultural heritage through the very redefinition of “culture” and of their audiences in the context of newly independent nations.

In the twenty-first century, while a new wave of decolonization reaches museums in different parts of the world, some anticolonial claims request the reparation of broken bonds between minority groups and their “imprisoned” collections. By considering two museum collections kept by different state institutions in Brazil, I will uncover some of the frameworks adopted by these museums to document and display religious objects from the African diaspora. According to the metaphor used by religious leaders who reclaim their repatriation into the sacred, these collections were “incarcerated” in ethnographic institutions. In the case studies here analyzed, this means to say that, throughout the twentieth century, they continued to be framed within heritage regimes based on the knowledge of the “scientists”: either as testimonies of offenses to the public order, in the case of the “Black Magic Collection” in the Civil Police Museum, or as objects of folklore, ethnographic artifacts disconnected from terreiros (places of worship), in the collection of the Édison Carneiro Folklore Museum.

Both are national institutions holding Afro-Brazilian collections acquired in moments of governmental repression in the country: the first constituted by Police apprehensions of religious materials in terreiros (mainly from 1889 to 1945) which were intensified during the so-called Era Vargas (1930–1945); the second was formed by the systematic work of ethnologists and folklorists (from 1950s to 1980s), in response to the rise of authoritarianism in the country before and during the military dictatorship established through a coup in 1964. In both cases, the expertise of “scientists” was employed, either to condemn or to safeguard the sacred rites in which the “objects” were once incorporated.

The interpretation and display of Afro-Brazilian culture in Brazilian museums are strictly connected to the history of ethnographic institutions and the consequences of governmental measures to impose a unified imagination of national identity in a cross-cultural and mixed-raced country. Differing from European scientific accounts on racial difference, the ideology of race in the history of Brazilian Republic is based on an additional postulate that considers the possibility of “Whitening” a population through the process of mestiçagem—a notion referring to mixtures in a people's race and culture, but also including religious syncretism. For instance, state policies in the 1930s still targeted the formation of a racial type of Brazilians, one that would be the result of a successful mixture of races, as naturally close to the Portuguese type as possible (on this discussion, see Seyferth, 1995). Following this ideology, the ambiguity of a mixed nation would translate into the museums’ institutional forms of racism: while “mestiçagem” served as an explanation for the political domination of a White elite, denying racism and justifying social/colonial stratification, it was an almost insurmountable classificatory obstacle for the racialization of Afro-Brazilians in museum collections.

My analysis of these musealized collections is twofold: first, I will uncover museum objectivity and the predominance of “scientific” classifications as part of institutional racism historically being practiced in the heritage sector in Brazil. Second, by considering the relationships between human subjects and their objects as mutually constitutive (Miller, 2005), I will propose to go beyond the dualism between subjects and objects to conceive Afro-Brazilian heritage in its connectiveness, in its capacity to reestablish the fluxes that link the implicated communities to their sacred. Therefore, following the approach proposed by Paul Basu (2011), and contradicting their objectification, I will consider that all objects in a museum can be reconceived as “diasporic objects,” as entanglements of various forms of dislocations and relocations, instead of being perceived as fixed entities determined by our museological framings.

Liberating this heritage from its colonial imprisonment necessarily involves abandoning our dichotomies between black and white, material and immaterial, scientific and sacred, etc. Therefore, I will perceive diasporic materials in museums as “the outcome of a dialectical process of exchange” (Sansi, 2007, p. 2) between religious groups and museum professionals,
leaders of Candomblé and members of a cultural elite, filhos de santo (initiated in the African cults) and ethnologists. This way, seeing museums as encruzilhadas, the crossroads where the spiritual world of orixás can engage in dialogue with the living.

ON THE “ARREST” OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN MATERIALS FROM TERREIROS

Looking back at the history of ethnographic collections in Brazil, the assimilation of Afro-Brazilian religious objects in museums has presented multiple vectors, either categorized as criminal artifacts of “black magic,” as objects of “folklore,” or, after the second half of the twentieth century, as “African art” (Conduru, 2019). As an important part of Brazilian national heritage, material artifacts used in the rites of Candomblé and Umbanda (Afro-Brazilian syncretic3 religions) have a particular relevance also for the understanding of museums’ participation in the reproduction of a racist imaginary during the Republican period.

The persecution of Afro-Brazilian objects of cult is historically connected to the condemnation of the practices of “false medicine” or “folk healing” (Maggie, 1992), which worked as an attempt to marginalize non-authorized forms of knowledge recognized as non-White or non-European in origin. While studying these collections in the context of museums based in Rio de Janeiro, I was led to conclude that their classification in the present is still marked by the history of their apprehension—either by the local police, in the repression to terreiros, or under the label of “ethnographic objects” or “folklore,” according to the culturalist perspective of some anthropologists, which was widespread in the country after the 1950s. In both cases, these objects were entangled by the social imaginary of the “fetish,” one that permitted their racist depreciation either by society in general or by the “official” state institutions.

The notion of the fetish, as described by William Pietz in his historical analysis of the colonial context, emerged in the sixteenth century on the west coast of Africa “in a mercantile intercultural space created by the ongoing trade relations between cultures so radically different as to be mutually incomprehensible” (Pietz, 1987, p. 24). The term derives from the words feitiço and feitiçaria, colonial notions that appeared in written Portuguese legal documents against sorcery, issued by King João I in 1385 and 1403. During the colonial period, the “fetish” was used to translate an “irreducible materiality,” one that marked the circulation of materials from different religions throughout the Atlantic. This reference to the untranslatable traces of African culture by Europeans was already building a colonial imaginary, one that was imported to the African diasporas in the Americas serving to persecute expressions of “evil” or “malfeasance” in certain rites. Since then, the material links between Africa and sorcery are used to prove that African legacies in the modern world are historically separated from European culture.

The history of Rio de Janeiro as the capital of Brazil throughout the nineteenth century reflects the different ways the local government grappled with the uncertainties of independence and the conflicting agendas that influenced its response. As demonstrated by Thomas Holloway (1993), during the raging 1830s and 1840s, as Brazilians sought to erect the institutions that would set apart the newly independent nation from Portugal, efforts were made to establish a distinctively urban police force as a response to an increasing need for order. From the 1840s to the 1860s, Rio's police was delegated wide authority to keep the behavior of the city's population within acceptable bounds and “to punish those who stepped over the line” (Holloway, 1993, p. 3). Policing the nation's capital city then was an institutional response for the security of Brazil's political elite and to the threat posed by the non-elites—including those considered culturally uncivilized.

Perceived, in its historicity, as an instrument of the modern state, the police in the capital city of Rio was established, in the early nineteenth century, as part of Brazil's transition from
colony to nation. Despite the rhetoric of a change from colonial domination to liberty during that time, the police in Brazil had no professional structure and was not separated from the judicial system. As observed by Holloway (1993, pp. 6–7) despite major changes since slavery was declared illegal in 1888, Brazil still lives with the legacy of the social relations, institutions, and attitudes built up over the previous 350 years, which results that in many situations throughout the years, the police took repeated and acknowledged action for which there was no legal basis. Following this perspective, to find clear definitions of those who should be repressed to maintain the order, the classification of African diasporic culture and religion as reprehensible was part of a tacit agreement—not necessarily legal—between the White elites and the Republican institutions.

In the First Republic in Brazil (1889–1930), the apprehension of Afro-Brazilian religious materials from terreiros followed a code that reflected categories of objects also useful to understand hierarchical separations within society. According to the thesis defended by Yvonne Maggie, the repression against Afro-Brazilian cults was directed to those practicing the so-called “evil magic” (magia maléfica) or “black magic” (magia negra), which supposedly were used to do harm to others. According to this author, what was at stake was “precisely the belief in magic and the way it relates to religion” (Maggie 1992, p. 25), which means that while the (Christian) religion of the elites was to be respected and nurtured, the other forms of “non-civilized” cults should be repressed as its counterpart.

One could ask how this repression to Afro-diasporic cults resulted in the preservation of ethnographic collections in national institutions. Going back to the definition of symbolic systems of purity, in Douglas’ analysis, and their inherent link to social order, it is worth noting that by keeping such objects in their own “collections,” the civil police was also preserving the very imaginary around “black magic,” and a belief in the efficacy of the rites. In Douglas’ words, in so far as “ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements,” such rejected elements are the by-product of a system of classification (Douglas 1984, p. 36). Rather than being expurgated, eliminated from the system itself, these elements are acknowledged as part of a transgression, so that the moral world inside the order can continue to be respected.

The principles behind the collection of “Black Magic” kept by the police of Rio de Janeiro throughout the twentieth century followed this very sense of imposing a moral and material order, strictly concerned with “purifying” an intercultural society based on racism.

THE COLLECTION OF “BLACK MAGIC”

The collection, officially named as “Coleção de Magia Negra” (Black Magic Collection) was formed by the work of Rio’s police through systematic apprehensions in terreiros since the end of the nineteenth century and more frequently in the first decades of the twentieth century. Back then, it was common for the police to disband the Candomblé houses and to put sorcerers on trial, having their instruments and sacred materials confiscated as “weapons of sorcery.” The Penal Code of 1890 (Brasil, n.d.), conceived as a milestone of Brazil’s First Republic, transferred to the state some of the regulatory mechanisms established since the colonial period, which included the accusations and the persecution of “witches” or “sorcerers” in places of worship—mainly terreiros. In this code, as commented by Maggie (1992), articles 156, 157, and 158 referred to crimes against the public health, including “the illegal practice of medicine in general” as well as, more specifically, “practicing spiritism, magic and its spells,” which involved material artifacts.

As a consequence of the code, in the first decades of the Republic emerges the new role of the “experts” (peritos), as those responsible for certifying that these objects were in fact used to do harm or in the illegal practice of medicine. As an authorized certification that corroborated with the work of the police, by recognizing the objects within a certain system of beliefs
and attesting the “spells,” these experts helped to “describe the belief in a proper manner, distinguishing, classifying, and hierarchizing the rituals” (Maggie, 1992, p. 149). They produced, thus, the “materialization of magic” (Ibidem) by establishing a systematized collecting process, which originates scientific collections of “black magic.” Here the construction of a scientific expertise for “black magic” and for the understanding of sorcery is strictly connected to the definition of a necessary opposition between “good” and “evil,” benefit and harm, white and black, structuring of Brazilian identity.

Probably the first time the term “black magic” was used in the heritage context in Brazil was on May 1938, immediately after the foundation of the National Artistic and Historic Service (SPHAN), when its first “ethnographic” collection was listed as cultural heritage to be protected (Case 0035-T-38). The collection was to be inscribed as No. 001 in the book of Archaeologic, Ethnographic and Landscape Heritage, and it was then popularly known as “Museum of Black Magic.” Despite its ethnographic classification, it was kept in the section covering drugs, narcotics, and frauds of the Auxiliary Police First Precinct, whose mission was to suppress “low spiritism and faith healing” (Rafael & Maggie, 2013, p. 287). It was not until 1945, for reasons not precisely known, that the collection was moved to the Rio de Janeiro Civil Police Museum, then named the Museum of the Federal Department of Public Safety of Civil Police.

The museum, self-declared as a “criminal museum,” was originally created as part of a reformulation of the Department, aiming at scientific advancements and safeguarding the institutional memory. In the 1940s, it assumes the educational role to “highlight facts that may interest policemen or students at the Police School, serving at the same time for study and stimulus; […]” (Costa, 2000, p. 69 in Pereira, 2017, p. 33). Its structure comprised several collections, including: obstetrics, 32 items; narcotics, 36 items; fortune-telling, 8 items; evidence, 5 items; palmistry, 4 items; false identity cards—foreign, 31 items; false identity cards—Brazilian, 17 items; pharmaceutical material, 48 items; gambling, 91 items; historical documents, 3 items; and black magic, 254 items, the biggest collection in the museum.

The collection of sacred objects preserved by the police has grown over the years, and in 2021 comprised 519 items, including a diverse selection of ritual materials: atabaques (traditional drums used in rituals), a vast collection of sculptured saints and orixás (among which several sculptures of Exu, Yemanjá, São Jorge, which represents Ogun in the syncretic tradition, São Jerônimo, which represents Xangô, among others), paintings and representations of caboclos (important spiritual entities), ritual costumes and ornaments of specific orixás (including Oxum, Exu, and others), guias (sacred beaded strings), pembas (chalk stickers), talismans, a vast collection of ritual pipes, a few settlements (the assentamentos, sacred altars that connects the filhos de santo, initiated in Candomblé, to their designated orixá), and other objects used in the sacred life of terreiros.

It is worth noting that back in the 1940s, the debate around the category of ethnographic objects in Brazil was populated by controversy among intellectuals and in the context of SPHAN it mainly referred to cultural heritage that could not be inscribed under the label of “Fine Arts.” With an evolutionary value attached to the label, the “ethnographic” served to place objects from non-European cultures as inferiors according to European criteria (see Gama, 2018). As denounced by several Brazilian authors, these objects were for many years not in the center of interest for SPHAN’s directors nor were they valued in the heritage policies from that period, which mainly focused on the preservation of colonial references that attest the triumph of European tradition (Corrêa, 2009). As observed by Alexandre Corrêa, it was not SPHAN's practice, in its initial years, to produce technical reports and material research to justify the inscription of an object or a collection in the national heritage inventory. Therefore, there is no information available on the criteria and values invested in the “Black Magic” collection that can justify its inscription and preservation as cultural heritage.
According to a statement given to Maggie, in the first study ever made on the history of the collection, in 1979, the director of the Rio de Janeiro Police affirmed that the objects were reorganized in the mid-1960s, when he resorted to explanations given by the “people of terreiros,” also gathering some ethnographic information from the literature available on Afro-Brazilian cults, including the works of Édison Carneiro, Roger Bastide, and Artur Ramos. Back then, already, there seemed to be a unanimous knowledge on the objects’ meanings, but there were disagreements over the cultural and geographical origins of the different items.

Nevertheless, a list of objects comprising the Black Magic Museum, requested by the heritage service (SPHAN) in 1940, provides some precise information on the collection items, which indicates some partial knowledge of Afro-Brazilian religions and beliefs by those in charge of their preservation. The museums’ exhibition, back in the 1990s, revealed a display of the objects that took into consideration their sacred meanings and their place in a terreiro. As narrated by Raul Lody (2005), some of the ritual separations in Candomblé and Umbanda were preserved: the spirits of light were kept carefully separated from the spirits of darkness, images of Exu, the divinity of encruzilhadas (crossroads; Exu is responsible for opening a path of communication with the other orixás), were, then, separated from those of other deities, and certain artifacts used in beneficial spells or interventions were placed on a separate shelf from those used against adversaries.

In a way, the work of the police museum prolonged and preserved the sacred power of the objects in its controversial collection. Nonetheless, its original interpretation as criminal materials was never really abandoned by this institution. The objects were displayed in the museum permanent exhibition next to flags of the Integralistas (neo-fascist movement of the 1930s in Brazil) and objects belonging to famous communist figures, such as Luiz Carlos Prestes’ typewriter (Rafael & Maggie, 2013, p. 291), gathering in the same exhibition space the different testimonies of crimes and offenses that were generally condemned by Brazilian society.

Looking back at the history of these disputed objects, it becomes evident how the relentless persecution of Afro-Brazilian cults followed by the accumulation and preservation of their collections has relegated a specific kind of critical heritage to the present generation. By inventing and interpreting a collection of “Black Magic,” carefully separated and stowed in its museum, the civil police has preserved its own violence and institutional racism as a part of Brazilian national heritage.

THE COLLECTION OF “FOLKLORE”

What has been conventionally termed as “folklore” in the context of Brazil has its origins in an epistemic divergence that resulted in the materialization of some museum collections. Inspired by the notion used in Europe to refer to costumes stemming from “popular culture,” some Brazilian intellectuals in the 1940s proposed a new field of studies that should foster the establishment of a professional practice—that of the “fólclorista.” In 1947, while folklore struggled to obtain a privileged place in universities and among scholars in the humanities, the critical sociologist Florestan Fernandes (1977) stated that studies in the area evolved toward a romanticized interpretation of human relations. Meanwhile, among its defenders, the writer and expert in Afro-Brazilian culture, Édison Carneiro, insisted on seeing folklore as a “discipline” associated with an objective knowledge.

Moving away from the domain of novelists and writers, who had created a recognized regional literature in the country, his ambition was to make of the collecting techniques more professional, considering their inconsistencies in the previous decades: “there was no mention to informants, dates or circumstances; the location of [observed] phenomena was vague” (Carneiro, 1962, pp. 47–48). Fostering new ways of collecting and organizing the culture of various “popular” groups, in the case of Brazil, the study of folklore included the three major cultural
influences in the project of the country's national identity: the European, the Indigenous, and the African heritage. Carneiro based himself in the works of renowned ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep, as well as in the cultural studies of Mário de Andrade, the Brazilian poet and ethnologist, aiming to conceive the study of Folklore in scientific terms, that is, beyond its personal and eventful condition (p. 52). The configuration of material culture collections was going to be perceived as an important part of such a scientific project.

As demonstrated in studies by Brazilian historians and anthropologists (see, for instance, da Silva, 2015; and Ferreira, 2020), the folklore intellectual project pursued in the country since the post-World War period served to define a sense of nationality based on Brazil's accepted mestiçagem. Amid this encompassing project devoted to the formulation of a single national identity, the religious cults of African Brazilian groups were to be integrated having their violent past of repression glossed over by museums and in the intellectual production of folklorists. In this highly ideological context, in 1968, the Édison Carneiro Folklore Museum (renamed after one of its founders in 1976) was created as a scientific institution within the structure of the National Centre of Folklore and Popular Culture.

The period comprehended between 1947 and 1964, prior to the museum's foundation, was marked by a significant intellectual movement for the preservation of national folklore, which included Carneiro's leading role among several others. Taking up the cause of the protection and promotion of national folklore through cultural and political actions, the Brazilian Folkloric Movement (Movimento Folclórico Brasileiro, MFB), as it was known, can be perceived as a reaction to a particular moment of increasing repression of the culture of the masses. As recalls Vânia de Oliveira (2011), the Édison Carneiro Folklore Museum, resulting from this intellectual movement, was created at a time when Brazil's military regime became even more rigid. A few months after its inauguration, the fifth of a series of Institutional Acts (the AI-5) was issued, giving extraordinary powers to the President of the Republic and suspending several constitutional rights. Facing the uncertainty of a dictatorial regime with a clear commitment to contain cultural expressions from marginal groups, the movement, which resulted in a Campaign in Defence of Brazilian Folklore after 1958, helped to preserve some of the traces of the African cults as a part of national “folklore.” Eventually, these traces were accepted in the unified project of the nation.

Going beyond the known critique of folklore as a bourgeois idea of culture that aims to consolidate a model of civilization within broad society (Cavalcanti, 2002), it interests me in this analysis to understand how the materials of Afro-Brazilian groups, historically persecuted in the context of Rio, were assimilated and valued in a national ethnographic institution. First, it is worth considering that what was collected and documented as “folklore” by the Édison Carneiro Museum in the years after its foundation had been determined by the intellectual movement in defense of “popular culture” established in previous years.

The assimilation of religious objects of Afro-Brazilian cults in the collections of the Folklore Museum during the 1960s and 1970s involved the recognition of these cults as part of a national project of “popular culture.” However, the constitution of these collections as “scientific” and based on scholarly criteria and methods led the museum to neglect its religious and political entanglements. As noted by de Oliveira (2011), this had to do with the fact that the project of preserving the memory of “popular culture” under the military dictatorship required a delicate negotiation between the agents of the museum and the authoritarian government under which they conducted their work.

After Édison Carneiro resigned from the center in 1964, a new management was implemented with the mission to place folklore at the service of the national project, aiming to preserve the traditional elements of Brazilian culture, while helping to maintain the civic order and promote the values of the economic and political elite (Ferreira, 2020, pp. 119–20). When it opened its doors, in August 1968, the Folklore Museum presented in its main exhibition a room dedicated to the cults of Afro-Brazilian religions. Among the objects on display, the
Audience could see a selection of religious insignias, sculptures of orixás, utensils used in rituals of Candomblé and Umbanda, all established as elements of the “popular.”

Most of the objects in the museum collection then had been obtained by ethnographers and folklorists working for the Campaign in Defence of Brazilian Folklore—some of which belonged to personal collections and were assimilated by the museum after 1968. Our research in the historical archives and documentation system considering the initial decades of the museum revealed a total of 920 objects related to Afro-Brazilian cults, systematically collected from 1950 to 1989. Most of the information concerning the context of their acquisition, including their provenance (in the case of objects from terreiros) were not retained in the existing documents, and the lack of details concerning their religious use and value reveals that this was not of primary relevance in the process of their musealization.

In the museum’s classification system up to this date, the objects of Afro-Brazilian culture are not distinguished from the general collection of “popular culture.” Furthermore, the objects of devotion are only referred to as “sacred” (“objeto sagrado”) when no other use can be assigned to them. Conversely, for the majority of items in the collection from this period, objects are categorized according to their function, obeying to traditional documentation systems of museums of history or art: such as “sculptures” (in the case of the imageries of orixás), “musical instrument” (in the cases of agogôs and atabaques, for instance), “costume” (“traje,” in the case of ritual clothing), or even as “recipient” or “bowl” (“tigela”), referring to certain parts of assentamentos (religious settlements or altars). In most cases, no reference to their religious use is made in the cataloguing sheets.

Isolated from their parts, or alienated from the ritual context where they were produced and potentially used, these objects of “folklore” are reappropriated as fetish. Building upon the thesis proposed by Ferreira, we may conclude that in its project of preserving and integrating these stigmatized religions in the national project, the Folklore Museum has helped to present such cults as “exotic,” and by doing so, it has concealed the racial and ethnic conflicts that are constitutive of Brazilian culture, and which define their insurmountable relation with the colonial past.

In the museum environment, the less we are aware of the objectification of things, the more powerful objects become. The museum narration of certain objects in collections may convince the audience of their “true” identity, while presenting “truth” itself as a cultural performance. Classified and displayed according to the “scientific” viewpoint of the West, the museum object is the meaning it portrays, to the point that it can determine our professional expectations “by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge” (Miller, 2005, p. 5). Contradicting some of the claims made by museum studies scholars for the focus on physical objects and the value of sensory experience over their contextual interpretation—“things as things” (Dudley, 2012, p. 5)—we can argue that this renewed centrality of the museum object reifies its fetishization in the colonial sense contested by subjugated groups separated from their cultural heritage.

Moving away from a theory of objectification, which leaves little space for a concept of the immaterial connections that give meaning to material culture, I intend to approach Afro-Brazilian heritage in museums in its “syncretic complexity,” which, according to Basu, is a particular trait of diasporic materials. Basing myself in the two collections briefly analyzed in this article, it is my intention to perceive museum objects not in terms of fixed definitions, but as the traces of “histories of borrowing, displacement, transformation, and continual reinscription” (Basu 2017, p. 2 quoted from Gilroy, 1993, p. 102). Thus, proposing a social perception of museums no longer as places of imprisonment, but as arenas for the liberation of incarcerated histories and knowledges.
In the history of museums, it is between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries when a particular kind of taxonomic knowledge was established as “scientific knowledge.” According to Macdonald (1998, p. 8), it was “based upon ideas of objective observation, visibility, mathematization and the ambitions of a science of order,” therefore following the Cartesian perception of material reality that was orienting European thinking since then. In this context, containing isolated bodies of information as “evidence” for the study of scientists, the museum showcase, the vitrine, exerts the principle of the prison, as elaborated by Foucault in his description of disciplinary power. Discipline, in the Foucauldian conception, is responsible for organizing an analytical space (Foucault 1995, p. 143). The distribution of bodies in the disciplinary cell inflicts a distribution of posts and the creation of a certain hierarchy of power according to a classification. Ordinance, in prison as well as in the museum, is a way to regulate bodies in space and hence to establish disciplinary control.

The collection referred to as “Museum of Black Magic” in the Civil Police Museum was not only preserved for the study of scientists and policemen, or for the institutional knowledge of the reprehended cults. From the 1940s to 1999, the objects were showcased in the museum's long-term exhibition, stirring the interest of an audience while nurturing an imaginary of depreciation of African religions—one that is colonial in its roots but that is still present in Brazilian society today. Authorized knowledge was, then, effectively used to condemn such religious, extirpating their expressions from the public sphere. From a legal perspective, even though a change in the Penal Code in 1942 has modified article 157 (which referred to the condemnation of “charlatans”), this document would still refer to the practice of “candomblé” and “macumba” as “criminal” and “dangerous” to society. It is only in the Penal Code of 1985 that these references were abandoned in Brazil's legal documents. Nonetheless, it did not extinguish the racist imaginary that fostered the persecution of these religions and the violence against terreiros.

Meanwhile, in the displays of the Folklore Museum, the ambiguous discourse of “popular culture” permitted religious materials to be showcased as part of Brazil's syncretic identity. Such a strategy adopted by ethnographers and museum professionals allowed the museum to pursue its educational role, even in the repressing years of the 1960s and 1970s. Through pedagogical activities and a soothing exhibition discourse, the museum nurtured new ways to approximate its audiences to the unknown in the Afro-Brazilian cults represented in its collections. In 1972, the short-term exhibition “Afro-Brazilian Cults” was based on a romantic social imaginary involving the trajectory of these cults since colonization, while considering their place in Brazil's national identity. The show opened on December 8, a day dedicated to the deity Oxum in the religious calendar of Candomblé, deliberately chosen by the museum to acknowledge, in its appeasing narrative, the national acceptance of these religions, ignoring any friction, either racial or cultural.

In both museums, the speech of science as an authorized knowledge allows the presentation of contentious collections in a harmonious discourse that doesn't acknowledge its own disciplinary power. Visibility in museums, as we know it, can actively be used to discipline their audiences and reiterate divisions that form the popular imaginary, thus, shaping identity through a certain visual culture. Conceived to impose systematic taxonomy upon humans and non-humans, glass windows serve as the perfect scenario to (re)produce a division of the world that is at once material and political. Moreover, as the histories of these collections show, such museological divisions can also delineate racial identities and foster religious values.

**LIBERATION AND THE SACRED: THE ROLE OF COLLABORATION IN MUSEUM WORK**

According to contemporary studies of material culture, all objects are objects of a certain appropriation—which means to say that there are no pre-objectified forms (see, for instance, Sansi, 2007). Such a transcendence from anthropology's duality of subjects and objects can
imply, from one side, that museums are liberated to objectify cultural objects as they wish; or, from another, it may relegate to museum curators the obligation to put into question their own viewpoint over the materials they objectify. Shifting my perspective to recent movements of contestation and re-appropriation of museum collections, I will propose that the syncretic materials objectified in this analysis can be subjected to multiple appropriations: an idea that is being put into practice by the very institutions that hold them in the present through active collaborations with the concerned communities.

After being displayed in the Police Museum since the 1940s, the Collection of “Black Magic” raised the interest of religious leaders during the 1960s and 1970s, who were aware of their appropriated heritage in the museum's collection. When, in 1999, the museum closed for repair, the sacred objects misrepresented in its main exhibition were finally removed from the access of the public. For more than two decades, the collection remained stowed in boxes and out of sight. Meanwhile, the claims raised by individual leaders were going to gain the hearts of other leaderships from various houses of Umbanda and Candomblé, as well as the support of intellectuals, politicians, and some museum professionals. In 2014, upon several claims for repatriation, the Civil Police Museum removed any reference to the objects from its institutional website. A process of silencing the collection competed against the growing campaign for its restitution to the sacred.

Amid this turbulent context, the cause gained the attention of academics and professionals from the National Museum of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (MN/UFRJ) in favor of incorporating the collection into their reserves considering both their ethnographic and sacred value. This first approach from a museum with a massive ethnographic collection was never officialized and the process of negotiation with the religious people was hindered due to the museum fire in September 2018. The main issue, however, was the fact that the police preserved almost no information on the original terreiros from where the objects were taken, and it was known that many houses were closed or had been destroyed after the police action in the previous centuries. The realization that the transaction for their “liberation” from the police jurisdiction was dependent on the very institutions responsible for their apprehension came with time and after a long process of heated debates. When the Liberte o Nosso Sagrado (“Liberate our Sacred”) movement was created, in 2017, the claims from religious leaders from different houses were already well known and were gaining more supporters from civil society.

The transfer of the items from the reserves of the Police Museum was an urgent matter for the representatives of this growing movement, which led to the involvement of the Republic Museum of Rio de Janeiro. This museum, another federal institution responsible to tell the story of the Brazilian Republic, was open to start a collaboration with the people from terreiros in order to properly care for the “incarcerated” collection. Thanks to a negotiation between institutions and the commitment of specific actors in the cultural sector, as well as the endorsement by the Public Prosecutor's Office of Brazil, the removal of the objects from the Civil Police Museum was authorized in response to the claims. As a result, on August 7, 2020, the transfer agreement was finally signed by both museums. In September 2020, the collection entered the Republic Museum, finally becoming accessible to the religious people.

The ongoing process of co-curating this collection, now entitled “Nosso Sagrado,” is based on shared knowledge and syncretic procedures. According to some guiding principles of the work being conducted, collaboration, here, is not perceived as a given, nor as a one-way action from the museum toward the religious communities. Rather it can be seen as a chance for museums, and notably state institutions, to redeem themselves of their racist past. Through the involvement of religious people and knowledge in its practical work, the museum itself becomes a mediator: a liminal space where multiple regimes of knowledge and value can coexist. In the syncretic sense evoked before, the specificity of this collection is that it can tell multiple stories and present a plurality of meanings, some of them yet to be revealed. It is an evidence
of institutional racism in the history of Brazilian Republic, but it is also and at once the connection of present generation of priests and priestesses with their violated ancestors. When speaking with religious leaders and members of the involved communities, one can notice that Nosso Sagrado holds in itself hope and distress: the belief that a violent past can be amended, while the story it holds is one of a nation built on the persecution of those perceived to be in discord with the established order and the dominant canon of knowledge—defined “since the West left witchcraft as it embraced the Enlightenment” (Maggie, 2011, p. 146).

In a somewhat different manner, the Folklore Museum collection continued to grow and enrich itself with materials from Afro-Brazilian cults up until the present. Its collecting methods and the knowledge that based its acquisitions have, however, changed with a new approach introduced in the museum to the resisting role of “popular culture” in national institutions. The collection of Afro-Brazilian culture formed between 1969 and 1977, after the museum was already opened, considered the active collaboration between museum professionals and terreiros in the city of Rio and its outskirts. Not exclusively dependent on ethnographic research, most of the objects acquired in that period were commissioned from terreiros, and they were produced by the filhos de santo (the people initiated in Candomblés and Umbandas) specifically for the museum collection and based on the principles of their faith.15

While other objects were still being acquired through private collectors, feeding an existing network of exchange spread around all national territory, the museum showed a greater pre-occupation with involving the concerned communities and particularly the specific knowledge produced in terreiros. This is the time when the classification system becomes more precise, and more in-depth descriptions of the “sacred objects” are included with particular attention to religious terms from the Yoruba tradition. Up to this date, however, the objects referred to as belonging to Afro-Brazilian cults are kept indistinguishable within this broad collection of “popular culture,” and a specialized terminology is still to be standardized to deal with this collection. The role of the museum as a mediator, in this case, might involve broader projects of community participation and knowledge sharing that will potentially challenge the ethnographic categories conceived in a different political moment of Brazilian history.

Currently, the collection Nosso Sagrado in the Republic Museum and the Afro-Brazilian collection of the Folklore Museum can be found in the same headquarter; both reserves are in neighboring buildings surrounding the Palácio do Catete, the former presidential palace, in Brazil's old capital. Nevertheless, a long history of appropriation of Afro-Brazilian sacred materials separates them. Having received different treatments and being apprehended in radically distinct contexts, these collections are a testimony to the issue of representing the heritage of the African diaspora in Brazil's national identity. It goes without saying that the inconclusive process of their liberation is still an open window for the challenge of social participation in collections management, one that pledges new forms of negotiation between museum professionals, agents of the state and the communities invested in the restoration of their sacred.

**THE MUSEUM AT A CROSSROAD: THE POWER OF THE ENCRUZILHADA**

If, from a technical perspective, musealization can be seen as an ordered set of scientific procedures—comprising research, classification, conservation, and communication—engendering a separation in the material world, from a symbolic one, it can also be the work of reconnecting separated parts. Among other things, musealization creates a liminal space where a communication between different worlds may occur. Like in the terreiro, its materials are incorporated with a meaning (either spiritual or scientific), and objectification can serve multiple purposes and create various effects. Following this approach, we may
understand that the constitution of a museum object does not begin at the moment of its entry into a collection, but rather through all its “entanglements” and in the fluxes of materials (Ingold, 2011) that precede its objectification. Hence, we may perceive material forms in museums as “a way to find stability amidst the fluxes” (Menezes, 2019, p. 108), which may give some room for freedom and transformation in museum work when curators and scientists are open to challenging their own learned categories and authorized systems of classification.

Museums’ transformations in the twenty-first century have involved the re-interpretation of museum objects aiming to expose underlying structures of power and past omissions. New research involving ethnographic collections have activated “taxonomic transgressions” (Deliss, 2020, p. 31), which resulted in gathering objects into new critical assemblages unleashing their potential to tell multiple, and sometimes conflicting stories. Communities’ reactions and feelings toward certain material assemblages have been considered in the transformation of museum display by helping curators to think outside the stable categories inherited from previous periods and to work for destabilizing matter and meaning (Alberti & Bray, 2006). In the case of sacred materials alienated from the religious contexts where they were produced and ritualized, their institutionalization in museum collections has propelled religious groups to demand new ways of civic participation and co-curation. In the process of sharing curatorial authority and becoming cross-cultural spaces, some museums have been pushed to not only open their storages and cataloguing systems to alternative forms of knowledge, but also to unlearn some of their traditional methods and procedures, therefore liberating themselves from their own forms of “incarceration.”

In the two examples here analyzed, the real cultural contexts from which objects were “collected” and the circumstances of their acquisition are difficult to be recovered, notably from the perspectives of powerless groups, with more precarious ways of recording their actions and cultural productions. Material evidence of Afro-Brazilian terreiros has in great part been destroyed or hidden, including through syncretic camouflage and religious conversion. Thus, the material evidence of their resistance and cultural survival is available primarily through the records preserved by the very institutions involved in their repression—including the police and its collections of criminology. While some national museums work for the pacification of history by adopting “scientific” categories to present unsettling collections, the collecting methods remain concealed in their forgotten archives and absent in most objects’ documentation. In the case of apprehended items or religious artifacts collected by ethnologists, what is not documented, the absences, are also telling of their history. But are our institutions of knowledge prepared to open a communication with the unknown?

According to what we learn from the sacred knowledge of babalorixás and ialorixás (priests and priestesses), currently involved in the work of some museums, the museum object is a piece of communication. It is, therefore, not their materiality, but their ability to speak that was lost in the imprisonment of sacred collections. What is at stake in the case of Afro-Brazilian sacred materials kept in museum collections is the ability of objects disassociated from their ritual context to transmit the sacred in the museum environment. In this sense, it can be argued that the restitution of diasporic objects marked by a violent process of repression and silencing of certain voices is dependent on perceiving museums as liminal spaces, where we may witness “the materialization of movement and mediation between worlds” (Basu, 2017, p. 4). Such an approach allows us to envision the transformative role of museums in the return of diasporic materials to their sacred. A role that involves taxonomic liberation through the active collaboration with the bearers of other forms of knowledge: the curator here being responsible for opening up the museum space for meaningful exchanges between worlds of meanings.

As holders of a living flow of materials and meanings, museums are also changing. This is why critical analysis of museum work should not be looking into dismantling their vitrines to
liberate its “captured objects” from their epistemic prison. In this article, I have proposed that while museums can be compared to prisons in their long history of colonial appropriation and segregation, they can also be spaces for freedom and undetermined creation. Rather than attaching them to the self-depreciatory image of cabinets of curiosity, where objects have historically been drained from their fluxes of life, I defend that museums are a crossroad. Behaving as encruzilhadas, a diasporic term to the sacred junctures where different worlds can meet, museums are facing their own liberation by incorporating new ways to crossover toward the unknown.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
No conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES
1 As a colony of the Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil became the seat of the Portuguese Empire in 1808, when the Portuguese Prince regent, King Dom John VI, fled from Napoleon’s invasion of Portugal and established himself and his government in the city of Rio de Janeiro. This is a moment in Brazilian history when most institutions for the functioning of Imperial Brazil were established, including its first museum, opened in 1809 (the National Museum of Rio).
2 Brazil’s military dictatorship was a governmental structure established on April 1, 1964, after a coup d’état by the Brazilian Armed Forces against President João Goulart.
3 “Syncretism” in Afro-Brazilian religions commonly refers to the incorporation of cultural elements from another culture or religion, notably Christianism in the context of colonization and its aftermath. Even though “syncretism” and “hybridity” may be used to describe “exotic” or “mixed” phenomena, some scholars consider that they point toward the processes of appropriation and objectification that constitute human history and culture at all places and times (Sansi, 2007).
4 Brazil becomes an “independent” nation from the United Kingdom of Portugal after 1822.
5 In Rio de Janeiro, regular policing began in 1808 with the Police of the Court, established in Brazil following the transfer of the royal family from Portugal, in January that year. This police intendancy was based on the French model introduced into Portugal in 1760. Improved administration of police patrols by armed and uniformed men began in 1831, contemporary with similar institutional developments in western Europe and earlier than in the United States (Holloway, 1993).
6 The inscription on the Livro de Tombo Arqueológico, Etnográfico e Paisagístico refers to cultural goods “belonging to the categories of archeological art, [and] popular or indigenous ethnography” (Brasil, Decreto-Lei n° 25/1937).
7 Museu do Departamento Federal de Segurança Pública da Polícia Civil, renamed as Museu da Polícia Civil (Civil Police Museum) in 1954.
8 According to a report of the Ministry of Justice and Internal Affairs of the Federal Public Safety Department, from 1946, recovered in Rafael and Maggie (2013).
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9 Founded in 1958, the Centro Nacional de Folclore e Cultura Popular (CNFCP) became part of the federal structure of the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, IPHAN, former SPHAN) after 2003.

10 The so-called Campanha de Defesa do Folclore Brasileiro (CDFB) was, then, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

11 A derogatory term used to refer to African-Brazilian rites and religions.

12 On the process of the transition and reinterpretation of the now called “Nosso Sagrado” collection from the Civil Police Museum to the Republic Museum, see Brulon Soares, 2024.

13 This collaborative process is narrated by Mário Chagas, Maria Helena Versiani, Mãe Meninazinha de Oxum, and Mãe Nilce de Iansã in a collaborative chapter with some contextual information on the collection Nosso Sagrado (de Oxum et al., 2021).

14 In the overall context of museums, I use the term “syncretic” to refer to the entanglements between religious knowledges invested in the preservation of collections and the nonreligious procedures or museological standards, which are combined in collaborative projects involving communities.

15 These acquisitions are documented in the museum's historical archive, and details were verbally given by the museumologists Raul Lody and Elizabeth Pougy who worked with the collections for several decades (Pougy is still the main person in charge of the collections up to the point my research was conducted).

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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