



Insignias of Power in Congada: the use of sacred objects in the evocation of black memories

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ABSTRACT – Insignias of Power in Congada: the use of sacred objects in the evocation of black memories – The study presents reflections on evocation memories processes among the *congadeiros* in Goiânia/GO, from the agency of the sacred objects – the crowns, flags, and batons of command. The festivities of the João Vaz neighborhood were subject to ethnographic research between the years 2017 and 2020. It was observed that the use of sacred objects can evoke memories linked to ancestry and gone relatives. In certain contexts, objects are endowed with powers and are configured as instruments that enable communication with their deities, whether Catholic saints or entities of the Afro-Brazilian pantheon.

Keywords: **Memory. Congada. Popular Culture. Black Culture. Insignia of Power.**

RÉSUMÉ – Insignes du Pouvoir dans la Congada: l'utilisation d'objets sacrés dans l'évocation de mémoires noires – L'étude présente des réflexions sur les processus d'évocation de mémoires parmi les *congadeiros* à Goiânia/GO, à partir de l'agence d'objets sacrés - les couronnes, les drapeaux et les mâts de commandement. Une recherche ethnographique a été développée dans les festivités de la Vila João Vaz entre les années 2017 et 2020. Il a été observé que l'utilisation d'objets sacrés peut évoquer des souvenirs liés aux ancêtres et aux membres de la famille disparus. Dans certains contextes, les objets sont dotés de pouvoirs et sont configurés comme des instruments permettant de communiquer avec leurs divinités, qu'il s'agisse de saints catholiques ou d'entités du panthéon afro-brésilien.

Mots-clés: **Mémoire. Congada. Culture Populaire. Culture Noire. Insignes de Pouvoir.**

RESUMO – Insignias de Poder na Congada: o uso de objetos sagrados na evocação de memórias negras – O estudo apresenta reflexões acerca dos processos de evocação de memórias entre os *congadeiros* em Goiânia/GO, a partir da agência dos objetos sagrados – as coroas, as bandeiras e os bastões de mando. Foi desenvolvida pesquisa etnográfica nos festejos da Vila João Vaz entre os anos de 2017 e 2020. Observou-se que o uso dos objetos sagrados pode evocar memórias ligadas à ancestralidade e aos familiares que partiram. Em certos contextos, os objetos são dotados de poderes e configuram-se como instrumentos que possibilitam a comunicação com suas divindades, sejam os santos católicos ou entidades do panteão afro-brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: **Memória. Congada. Cultura Popular. Cultura Negra. Insignias de Poder.**

Introduction

The study presents reflections on the processes of evocation of memories among the *congadeiros*, of the feast of the João Vaz – Goiânia/GO, from the use of sacred objects, during the realization of their festivities. The analyses developed are part of the PhD thesis *Memória, ancestralidade e práticas corporais na Congada da Vila João Vaz*, produced within the scope of the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Performances Culturais, at the Universidade Federal de Goiás (Carvalho, 2021).

The *congadas* or *congados*¹ are festive manifestations that currently occur in several locations in Brazil, especially in the Southeast and Midwest regions. Through the performances of its participants, we can observe the manifestation of meanings, senses and memories of black culture that are expressed in orality, rites, gestures, dances, chants, the execution of musical instruments and the use of sacred objects.

The study of the theme has aroused the interest of researchers in the areas of History, Anthropology, Sociology, Geography, Performing Arts, Ethnomusicology, Cultural Performances, Physical Education, Science of Religions, among other fields of research. Academic production generally addresses aspects related to the notions of ancestry, spirituality, memory, tradition, ritual, intergenerational processes, as well as symbolic and material elements manifested in black reigns.

Although there is great diversity in the characteristics, conceptions and rituals experienced by the groups in each locality, in general the *congadas* can be perceived by those who attend them, by scholars of the theme and by the *congadeiros* themselves, from the unfolding of intercultural and inter-religious processes between Catholicism and African cosmologies.

Recognizing the specificities of the different groups according to the locality, regarding the research about the *congadas* in the city of Goiânia, for example, among others, the studies of Adriane Damascena (2010; 2012), Alecsandro Ratts (2012), Luciana Sousa (2016), Odete Costa (2016) and Rosinalda Simoni (2017) stand out.

Within the scope of studies of groups located in the state of Goiás, the productions of Carmem Costa (2008), Ana Paula Rodrigues (2008), Alecsandro Ratts (2012) and Sandra da Silva (2016) address the *congadeiros* in

the cities of Catalão and the southeastern region of Goiás; Sebastião Rios, Talita Viana and Carolina Santos (2010), in Niquelândia; Eliene Macedo (2016), in the city of Goiás, among others.

Authors who have researched *congado* from Minas Gerais have also contributed to this study with regard to the notions of ancestry (Viana; Rios, 2016) and the interactions between the symbolic and material elements of *congado* (Corrêa, 2018; Agostini, 2011).

In *Negras raízes mineiras: os Arturos*, Núbia Gomes and Edimilson Pereira (2000) analyzed the link between the sacred and ancestry, the notions of life after death, the importance of deceased relatives, as well as the interpretation of the ritual as a point of connection between the living and the deceased. The authors approached the Arturos community – a *quilombo* now practically urban in Contagem, metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte/MG –, presenting the importance that *congadeiros* attribute to ancestry in the relationship with the sacred.

Another study on *congado* from Minas Gerais can be found in *Os Sons do Rosário: o congado mineiro dos Arturos e Jatobá*, by Glauro Lucas (2014). The author works with the concept of soundscape, articulating it to the notion of ritual that permeates the *congado* of this region. In the study, musical events are understood as ways of evoking collective memories. In this case, the feast is seen as a moment of memory reactualization, based on the myth that is revived by the rite.

Leda Martins (1997) also researched the *congadeira* community of Arturos and Jatobá. In the work *Afrografias da Memória: o Reinado do Rosário no Jatobá*, the author emphasizes the recurrence of the founding myth of *congado* in different groups that participate in the feast, through the constitution of a common *gnosis*. According to the author, despite the specificities that make up the narratives of each individual, there is a congruence in the symbologies that portray the relationship of blacks with the saint and her exclusive affinity with the more traditional aspects of the festival, such as the dances and chants of the black elders and the use of their old drums, which served as a platform for the conduction of Nossa Senhora do Rosário.

The concept of *oralitura* of the memory is presented by Leda Martins as the possibility of an orality inscribed in the memory of the *congadeiros* that is evoked in the processions of the guards. The author's approach con-

tributes to the perception of African and Afro-Brazilian aspects present in the ritualistic of *congada* that are not effected by written memory recording procedures, but mediated by bodily experience during the ceremonies.

Another aspect discussed by the author is the notion of crossroads highlighted as a nodal point that finds in the philosophical-religious system of Yoruba origin a complex formulation. Martins (1997) highlights the crossroads as a place of intersections, crossings and passages, having as mediator and communication channel the figure of Exú. Complementing the author's reflections, it is emphasized that, in addition to being a foundation of Nagô philosophical knowledge in Brazil, the notion of crossroad/crossing/cross is also an old recurring precept in some groups of other African nation-states, which also deal with this symbol by understanding the intersection between the material and spiritual planes.

Based on the authors and concepts that deal with the coronation ceremonies of black kings and queens in Brazil, this study covers part of the contributions consolidated in current scientific production. Furthermore, it focuses on the uniqueness of the *Bantu* cult of *minkisi*, which in some studies can be obliterated by references to Sudanese cosmologies that emphasize, for example, the cult of orishas and Exú as a perspective to reference and attribute legitimacy to black manifestations.

As for the origins of the coronation ceremonies of black kings and queens, they are linked to representations, performed by captive and freed blacks, of ceremonies of Portuguese and African royalty in the context of catechization in the colonial period (Souza, 2006; Viana; Rios, 2016).

The feast of the João Vaz, the focus of this study, takes place on the second Sunday of September and is part of the festive calendar of the *congada* in the city of Goiânia and the metropolitan region. In addition, the feast of Vila Santa Helena, the feast of Vila Mutirão and the feast of Goianira/GO are also held. Each event has its own set of participants, but the relationships are quite permeable, and it is common for groups and individuals from different localities to visit each other during the festivities.

During the festivities, the *congadeiros* carry out processions and ceremonies, celebrating the coronation of black kings and queens, honoring Catholic saints and worshipping African and Afro-Brazilian spiritual entities. On these occasions, dances, chants, the performance of musical instru-

ments, and sacred artifacts imprint particular characteristics on the ways in which faith, ancestry, and the evocation of memories are manifested.

Using ethnographic research resources (Favret-Saada, 1990) and analyzes promoted from cultural performance studies (Bauman, 2014; Cargano, 2013; Langdon, 1995), a field research was developed by observing the festivities between 2017 and 2020 and conducting interviews with *congadeiros*. It is worth mentioning the attribution of the first author of the text as a researcher and one of the participants of the *terno de congo Verde e Preto*, a condition that enabled the perception of intrinsic aspects of the *congadeiros'* performativity in relation to their sacred objects.

In the processions and other rites performed by the *congadeiros*, it was observed that orality, bodily practices – dances, chants and the playing of musical instruments – and the use of sacred objects – crowns, flags and batons – reveal identity aspects of the various participating groups. These practices and artifacts present significant ways to understand the processes of evoking African and Afro-Brazilian memories.

The memory and the sacred objects

In the context of memory studies, Maurice Halbwachs, in the tradition of French sociology, extended Émile Durkheim's studies on the precedence of *social facts* and *social systems* over individual psychological phenomena. In Durkheim's line of thought, the studies of the *psyche* and the *spirit* are shifted to the functions that representations and ideas of individuals exercise within their group and society in general. Thus, the importance that the social environment exerts on the individual reconfigures the notions of perception, consciousness and memory understood until then as psychological phenomena.

Having been a student of Henri Bergson at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, from his adherence to the Durkheimian school, Halbwachs (1990) filled some gaps left by the researcher, modifying and even rejecting some results of his propositions. Halbwachs advanced the notion of memory from the understanding of the social frameworks of memory. Thus, by simultaneously participating in multiple contexts of sociability, such as the family group, the neighborhood, the school, religion, profession, among

others, the individual constitutes his memory considering the peculiar reference groups in his life.

The understanding of the social frameworks of memory, proposed by Halbwachs (1990), inaugurates the concept of collective memory, distancing itself from the assumptions of an unconscious (pure) memory of Bergson (1999) and moving towards a sociological explanation of the phenomenon of memory. Halbwachs anchors the memory of the individual to the memory of his social group, respectively linked to the collective memory of each society. Unlike Bergson (1999), who states that the past is preserved in its entirety and autonomy in the spirit, Halbwachs (1990) emphasizes the initiative that the current life of the subject assumes in the course of memory.

Collective memory, thus understood, can be studied in analogy with the notion of a performative memory, due to the strong dependence on the notion of group as an instance that promotes it, especially from the encounters between those who share such memories.

In addition to the memories evoked in the orality and corporeality of the *congadeiros*, the representations of the reign and its ritual objects – crowns, scepters, musical instruments, flags and batons of command – also constitute evocations of memory that promote the cohesion of its participants by the collective identification of their meanings.

In a materialistic sense, objects and artifacts are produced to serve certain functions, for which they were designed, and generally have a finite useful life. With use, they become worn out or depleted and are replaced. Andrew Jones (2002) counters this notion of the *useful life of things* by presenting the conception of the existence of a *biography of objects*. In this perspective, objects are used as ways of attributing meanings to people's lives, building and re-signifying cultural identities. In this case, there is a concern with understanding the connections between the lives of things and the lives of people.

In line with this thought, it is understood that there is not only one possible biography for people and the things they use in their daily lives. Just as for a person, it is possible to outline a family, professional, psychological, political biography, among others, it is also possible to observe a physical, economic and social biography of things (Kopytoff, 1986).

In studying the biography of artifacts, Alfred Gell (1998) analyzes the agency of objects based on the understanding that a social agent is considered to be the one who promotes the occurrence of social phenomena, that is, when there is an intention in the act.

Attributing the notion of agency to things, the author understands objects as *authors* within a social action. In addition to authorship in actions, objects can even be attributed personalities, as if they had autonomy and their own will. It is not uncommon, for example, for someone to name their own car, considering it a particular personality or even to talk to the vehicle in a breakdown situation on a highway.

The agency of artifacts is discussed by Juliana Corrêa (2018) in her research on the performance of *congadeiros'* objects in Justinópolis/MG. The author addressed the meanings present in the action of *bringing back to life* creative tangles from the world of objects. These present themselves as an aggregate of vital threads in direct relation to people and things in the world. The *bringing back to life* is an argument used to extend the idea of agency when seeking to understand the status of *a happening*. For us, this view is dear to the perception of the principle of action that gives emphasis to the relational plane, *to the happening* when in contact with something, highlighting a conception of vital processes.

Thinking about the use of artifacts in *congado* from Minas Gerais, Camila Agostini (2011) mentions toys and ritual objects as clear examples of instruments to which intentional actions are conferred in their context of use. In this case, the concept of agency is not presented as merely classificatory and context-free, but as relational and context-dependent.

Common stylistic attributes express cultural values shared internally by social groups, composing their boundaries and identity definitions. The decoration of the object is usually essential to its social and psychological functionality and cannot be dissociated from the other functionalities it possesses. The decorative patterns of objects connect people to things and to the social projects they represent. In this way, the aesthetic appearance of artifacts is intentional and functional, being rarely occasional.

Each object of the *congada* has its history and promotes narratives through memories, an essential condition for the exercise of creation. According to Corrêa (2018, p. 17), “[...] the belongings [of the *congadeiros*]

cross and survive generations, [...] and become true relics”. The idea of relic carries the meanings arising from people’s great esteem for such pieces, as well as narrowing the relationship with their ancestors.

Mary Beaudry (1996) helps us in this proposition by considering the active relationship between behaviors and the material world. Artifacts, then, are objects rich in meanings that participate in social relations that are mediated by attitudes and behaviors of the past. In this case, instead of considering objects as social actors, their meaning is that of being means of communication and expression that condition and control social action.

Whether presenting themselves as social actors or as means of communication and expression, the relics of the *congada* gain social action becoming fundamental components in symbolic actions. In this way, they actively participate in the dynamics of social interactions.

As Souza (2006) points out, mantles, scepters and crowns are emblems of Portuguese origin that represented ideas and feelings that transcended their materiality as insignia of power. In ancient African kingdoms, symbols of nobility and spiritual power also composed the courts during acts of war and in the embassies between African and European kingdoms. Despite the presence of Portuguese archetypes in the black kingdoms of Brazil, the coronation of kings and queens in their festivities can be linked to the coronation ceremonies of the *soba*² (great lord) held by several *Bantu* nations in West-Central Africa (Souza, 2006).

In the Rosário siblinghoods of slaves and freed, similar objectives, ways of functioning and codes of conduct prevailed as in other religious associations. In the case of the black siblinghoods, however, there was an integration of African cultural values into these procedures, such as the choice of a *congo* king and a *conga* queen and the celebration of their coronations.

As already mentioned, there is a great diversity of customs in the formation of festive reigns in different localities of the country. Black siblinghoods in Brazil are usually organized around reigns or courts of Rosário, formed by a king, queen, judges, stewards, among other functions. There are reigns composed of perpetual kings and queens, reigns elected or drawn annually and even reigns of promise and devotion. Commenting on the functions of the reign today and the processes of succession of positions, Captain Tiago Melo, of the *terno catupé* Dourado, comments:

The king and the queen are a hierarchy of the festive part, they are the major force there. The king and queen have the biggest voice. Then there is the prince and the princess who will take the place of the king and queen when they are absent [pass away], because they are a perpetual thing, they stay there until the day they are absent. When they are absent, they take the prince and put him in the place of the king and the princess in the place of the queen, and they put others in the place of the prince and princess, so that they can take office later on. Then the general comes and passes on the orders to the captains. This is the part of the reign at the feast (Interview with Tiago Melo, conducted on Jan. 05, 2020).

More than an authority that acts in the decision-making of the feast and its community, the sense of strength of the reign to which the captain refers can be perceived in the group's link with ancestry.

In the feast of the João Vaz, the king and queen are perpetual positions succeeded by hereditary link or by choice of the siblinehoods board of directors. There is no clearly defined election system, although the decision goes through an internal approval process of the siblinehoods.

During the processions, the reign is led behind all the *ternos*. There is the representation of a war exercise, the pilgrimage of a kingdom in which the highest power is protected by its armies.

The question of the kingdom going after is because it is the following; it's said that when we take our kingdom we are going to war. So where the king goes? Where the kingdom goes? Where it is protected. In medieval times, the king never went to the front, he said everything, he gave the orders, but he was there, protected. It's the same thing, in that same lineage. There's the elite battalion that, let's say, protects if everything *lencar* [goes wrong], which is Moçambique, and there are the others, who also go to war. This is a somewhat logical comparison with the *congada* (Interview with André Araújo, conducted on Jan. 27, 2019).

Nowadays, as residual practices of the old Central African embassies, recurrent on the African continent during the colonial period, in addition to the ceremonies that take place explicitly around the reign, during the preparations of the feast of the João Vaz it is common for the *festeiros* [feast-goers] of each edition to visit the captains and other leaders of other siblinehoods. Remembering the diplomatic and warlike acts practiced by the embassies of ancient African kingdoms, these visits, usually mediated by members of the reign, are seen as necessary to strengthen relations and resolve conflicts between different *congada* communities. They aim to empha-

size the commitment to faith and tradition, highlighting mutual solidarity and co-responsibility in the organization and participation in the feast.

The agency of objects: crowns, flags and the batons of command

As for the reign clothing, the king and queen wear crowns, which, accompanied by blue mantles – the color of Nossa Senhora do Rosário’s mantle – emphasize the image of nobility and power of the reign. However, in addition to the crowns that adorn the heads of the king and queen of the *congós*, another crown is also prominent in the festival, to which various ceremonies are dedicated. It is the crown of the feast, the object that is passed on between the *casais festeiros* [feast-gores couples] of each edition, indicating the beginning of a new cycle of the event.

Just as the (perpetual) reign is an instance of symbolic power for the group, the crown of the feast also assumes a sacred role, without detracting from the prestige and importance of the *congo’s* king and queen. Unlike what happens in festivities in other localities, in order to assume the function of *casal festeiro* in the feast of the Vila João Vaz it is indispensable that the candidates are members of the *congada* and have the recognition of the group for such an endeavor. This condition stems from the fact that, like the black reign, the *festeiros* also need legitimization by hereditary link or by their performance – present or past – as captains, *dançadores* [dancers] or *bandeirinhas* [flag bearers]³.

Commenting on the crown of the feast, Captain Tiago Melo points out that,

[...] the crown we have as the holy crown, which stays there for us to pass on to the next *festeiros*. So the whole year, from when he picks it up, he receives the crown, until the day he hands it over to the next *festeiro*, it stays with the *festeiros*. So there is the symbol of Nossa Senhora’s crown. We have it as a major force in the feast. We have it as the holy crown, the crown of Nossa Senhora (Interview with Tiago Melo, conducted on Jan. 05, 2020).

The nature of the constitution of the meanings of the crown is given by the conception of a divine object coming from the skies, the crown of Nossa Senhora do Rosário itself. It is common knowledge that the feast’s crown was bought in a store, but the perception of its power places it in a specific place within the set of rituals through the understanding of its mys-

tical powers. In the feast of the Vila João Vaz, while the reign establishes the powers of the earthly kingdom, the crown represents the powers of the heavenly kingdom.

For me, the crown is the ultimate symbol of the festival. It was descended from the skies. The crown of Nossa Senhora. It is the key to the siblinghood, in the case of the siblinghoods throughout Brazil. The crown is the cycle where the edition of the feasts begins and ends. The crown never is never alone, because it is the greatest symbol of royalty, of the divine kingdom, of the kingdom of heaven. For me, Captain Fabrício, without the crown there is no feast, because it is the crown of Maria, our protective mother, whom we call Nossa Senhora do Rosário. Whoever takes it assumes a great commitment not only with the people here on earth, but also with the angels, the angels who accompany Nossa Senhora. Because, in my view, whoever makes the feast is opening a beam of light of faith in the world (Interview with Fabrício Alves, conducted on Jan 07, 2020).

The crown of the feast is worthy of the same honors given to the reign, but its ritual functions differ in that the former emphasizes a notion of spiritual power, while the functions of the reign of the feast of the Vila João Vaz are based on the notion of social and political power⁴. This does not mean, however, that the crown does not play an important role in confirming sociability or that there is no spiritual action on the part of the reign.



Image 1 – On the right, the crown of the feast of the João Vaz and, on the left, the cushion for its transportation, 2019. Source: Researcher's collection.

Just as the crown is understood as a link for the continuity of the festival, the presence of the king and queen – even when they do not wear their garments – and their decisions in the most liturgical and sacred moments are also perceived as an affirmation of the spiritual power of the group. However, while the meanings regarding the reign are emphasized by the strength of an earthly power, related to hereditary succession and political decisions of the community, the crown has a role of magical and spiritual power.

The major symbol in the feast is the crown. The saint is Nossa Senhora do Rosário, but the greatest symbol is the crown, which is the crown of Nossa Senhora do Rosário. That's why it is passed from *festeiro* to *festeiro*, it is carried, and it is all guarded. You can see that it does not go in front of any *terno*. It is a symbol that goes behind the *ternos*. Because the older ones said that we, *dançadores*, are soldiers, that's why there's a captain, you know? And when we go to war, we have to carry that crown safely, so we're the ones who go in. If someone does something at the crossroads and you come with the crown in front, what happens? So, the crown goes behind because we go dancing, asking, cleaning the way to give protection, that's why it is one of the biggest symbols. That's why it is passed on. It is the symbol that gives continuity to the feast, because the passing of it from one *festeiro* to another is the continuity [the guarantee that] there will be next year's feast (Interview with André Araújo, conducted on Jan. 27, 2020).

The use of the crown as a symbol of royalty was introduced in Africa by Europeans, but it did not replace the traditional symbols of chieftaincy of each culture – usually caps woven from fibers that had various shapes and which among the Congolese were called *mpu*. Even as an eminently European insignia, in the enthronement of Portuguese kings the crown did not occupy the prominent place that the *mpu* had in the enthronement of African kings. Historiography emphasizes the secular aspect of acclamations in Portugal, where neither the priest nor the coronation made the connection between the king and God (Souza, 2006).

Elected within lay siblinghoods, whose structure assimilated references from Portugal, the black kings of Portuguese America adopted the use of the crown, partially assuming the European symbol of royalty, which referred to the link between temporal power and divine power. On the other hand, the use of the *mpu* by African nobles was more closely linked to the

notion of divine power, since if there was evidence of the loss of this power, the leader was replaced.

Despite not being ritually made like the batons of command, the crown can be understood as a *nkisi*⁵, as an object that embodies the qualities of what it represents. The identification of Catholic saints with *minkisi* that are part of Bacongá religiosity existed in Africa before it developed in Portuguese America. From the earliest days of conversion, Catholic images were incorporated into African Catholicism, performing functions of the *minkisi*.

Images of Catholic saints that functioned as amulets and even the crown, a symbol of the king's power and his connection with the supernatural, were objects used in rituals of the feasts of black kings, in which coronations can also be associated with traditional African practices.

The flag is another object that receives the attention of the *congadeiros* in their ceremonies. Just as the crown assumes symbolic centrality during the ceremony of its delivery to the next *festeiros*, the flag is also assigned specific rites, such as the *levantação* [lifting]⁶ and the lowering of the flag, which demarcate the beginning and closing moments of the feast.

The flag of Nossa Senhora and São Benedito, which we raise on the day of the *levantação* of the flagpole, in the *levantação* of the flag, is the symbol that the feast has begun. From that moment on, it is already feast, the battalions are already gathered to dance and praise Nossa Senhora. The *levantação* of the flagpole on Saturday, which is the day we do it here, I consider a very special day. If I miss the *levantação* of the flag, I see myself as not having fulfilled my obligations at the feast (Interview with Tiago Melo, conducted on Jan. 05, 2020).

The *levantação da bandeira* [lifting of the flag], also named *levantação do mastro*⁷ [lifting of the flagpole], announces the beginning of the feast for the *ternos* of *congada*. It is one of the moments of great joy in the feast, usually carried out with a large fireworks display and the simultaneous participation of all the *ternos*.

The flag of the feast in Vila João Vaz features the image of Nossa Senhora do Rosário on one side and the image of São Benedito on the other. It is raised on a large flagpole, where it remains during the festival until it is lowered.

The use of the flagpole in religious festivals is known throughout the national territory. The cutting, transportation, decoration and *levantamento do mastro* are accompanied by religious and joyful ceremonies. Some chants are sung in praise of the saint of the raised flag. The flagpole displays the saint and points to the infinite sky, becoming an important symbol of the sacred. On feast days, the flagpole represents the axis of the earth and the center of the world, connecting the material and spiritual realms. As seen in the feast of the João Vaz, the lowering of the flagpole is usually the final ceremony of popular religious feasts.

A steward of the flagpole, who is replaced at each edition of the feast, is in charge of decorating it with colored paper. It is from the steward's house that the processions leave to take the flag to the chapel courtyard where it will be raised. The joyful ceremony of *levantamento do mastro* is done with great respect, as the flagpole and the flag symbolize the faith of the people.

In addition to the flag of the feast, each *terno* of *congada* has its own flag, which is carried during the processions. Some groups even have more than one flag, but most of the *ternos* participating in the feast of the João Vaz have only one flag, on which the image of the saint of devotion and the name of the *terno* are observed. As Captain Fabrício Alves states:

The flag, each *terno* has its own. Some carry the print of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, others carry the image of Nossa Senhora do Rosário and São Benedito. But here, in my *terno*, we carry the image of Nossa Senhora do Rosário. The flag is the guide of the *terno* for us. Where the flag goes, the battalion follows, because it is the flag that guides. Since we carry the print of Nossa Senhora, it is she who guides us. [...] Some people put a gift on the flag, a little money, five reais, ten reais, as much as they want to be helping. This money is reverted to the ornamentation of the flag of the *terno* itself, the clothes of the *bandeirinhas*, these things (Interview with Fabrício Alves, conducted on Jan. 07, 2020).



Image 2 – Flag of the *terno moçambique* São Benedito, feast of the João Vaz, 2019.
Source: Researcher's collection.

The flags of the *terno* are carried by the *bandeirinhas*, who follow at the front of the battalions. The flag is used to protect and identify the different groups and acts as a shield to protect the participants and companions of the *terno* from any illness or disease that may affect them.

The flag that we carry in the battalion is very important because there we are carrying the image of Nossa Senhora. So that is the protection of the *terno*, it is the protection of the whole group. She goes in front, opening the paths, breaking all the bad things that may be in our way. The flag also goes in front, showing who we

are dancing for, the devotion we have. So the flag for the *terno* of *congo* is the key piece. Without it, the *terno* is going with an open chest, unprotected. Always in the morning, before going out with my people, I go there, chant to the flag, kiss it, ask Nossa Senhora to open the paths, removing all the evil that I may be encountering on the way and the flag goes there in front breaking everything (Interview with Tiago Melo, conducted on Jan. 05, 2020).

During the feast, in addition to the protection it provides to participants and companions, another power attributed to the flag is that of promoting the healing of the sick in the visits that are carried out by the *ternos*. It is common for families with links to the traditions of the *congada* to require the captains the visit of their battalions.

We go from house to house. If a visit is requested, the flag stops at the house and the *terno* has to stop as well to bless that family, that place, that dwelling. The flag passes through the houses to bring blessings, as if Nossa Senhora were visiting the houses to bring blessings, the healing of an illness through the person's faith, prosperity, a promise that the person made to receive a *terno* at home and we go in encounter to these people always taking faith and resignation (Interview with Fabrício Alves, conducted on Jan. 07, 2020).

The owners of the house usually offer breakfasts, snacks and sometimes just a refreshing glass of water, depending on the family's financial conditions. What is never lacking is the warm and emotional welcome, most often accompanied by many tears, devotion, feelings of longing for the departed and satisfaction at the reunion.

The flag is the symbol that reflects Nossa Senhora. She is Nossa Senhora for us, the people who carry her imprint. That's why, where she goes, the *ternos* follow. A pilgrimage, right. We stay on this pilgrimage, dancing and praising Nossa Senhora do Rosário. So where the flag goes, the house it passes can be sure that the person, the family receives many blessings, receives much prosperity, open paths because it is a divine thing. Which is even difficult to explain, but that's what happens (Interview with Fabrício Alves, conducted on Jan. 07, 2020).

The flag is received by the owners of the house who, together with a small flag, walk around the corners of the rooms of the house, distributing the blessings of Nossa Senhora do Rosário and freeing the residents from any misfortunes.

The perception of the powers attributed to these sacred objects reveals a worldview in which the idea of strength, healing and miracle can be un-

derstood by the restitution of balance through the manipulation of energies from the cosmos. The flag of the *terno* is understood as an instrument of healing, an object with mystical powers that can be handled by the captains on behalf of those who need their intervention.

Here in my *terno*, when we're going to pass a crossroad, at the corner we always give the [choreography] half-moon to scare away the bad, to close that circle, so that there is no bad thing against our *terno*. Those *engruvinhas* [conflicts] that the old people talk about, those *quebrante* [spiritual evil] and everything. When arriving at the crossroads, the flag does not pass it until the *terno* makes the half-moon. After we do it, the flag follows the corner, precisely for that, because it is the guide of the *terno*. So if it passes and the *terno* stays here, there's a risk of the *terno* catching something. On our way out here, the *dançadores* kiss the flag, which is asking for the protection of Nossa Senhora, asking for her guidance, that she be our guide day and night without ceasing. May she be with us, because we are there for her. May she be with us so that everything goes well (Interview Fabrício Alves, conducted on Jan. 07, 2020).

Another sacred object that makes up the festivities of *congada* are the batons of command (*bastões de mando*), used by the captains. The batons carried by the captains are important ritual instruments shared by the *ternos*. In addition to being a symbol of power and command for those who conduct it, it is through the batons that the captains control the *terno* and defend its participants, including relatives and friends who accompany the group in the processions. According to reports of some captains who participate in the feast of the João Vaz, their batons serve to protect the *terno* in order to avoid any spell and other evils that may affect the *dançadores*, for example, some physical discomfort that affects one or more members of the group, impairing their performance. In the words of Captain Fabrício Alves:

The captain's baton is a symbol of command within the *terno*. It is thought it that outsiders can identify who the commander of that *terno* is. The baton has been a symbol of command since the story of Moses with the staff. It has always been a symbol of command. And the baton of the *congada* brings the secret of ancestry as well. The ancestral energy of each *terno* and that each captain carries. It is with it that, when there is some spiritual demand against the *terno*, when there is some embarrassment, it is with it that the captain opens the energy portal of ancestry for that to be broken. It is with it that we call the *pretos-velhos* into the *congada*. So the baton is the main weapon of a captain (Interview with Fabrício Alves, conducted on Jan. 07, 2020).

The understanding of the baton as a kind of portal or pathway between the material and spiritual worlds is also reported by Mr. Juranda, when presenting the founding myth of *congada* in the video-documentary *Na Angola Tem* (2016), by Talita Viana and Sebastião Rios, who researched *congado* in Itapecerica/MG.

And he took the baton and began chanting to her: Oh my mother, this is my *jacarandá* baton, which became a *pinguela* [rod] for you to pass. Now I ask you, for God's sake, to accompany me. Then he took it and moved away and Nossa Senhora accompanied him to the chapel (Viana; Rios, 2016).

The wood of the *jacarandá* tree, considered a strong wood, is then compared to the strength of the baton and the captain who handles it. The batons are ritual instruments that have multiple functions in the processions of the feasts, and specific behaviors and gestures are required in their handling, especially when carrying the crown.

The baton has *N* functions. It is used to protect the crown. On one side is the sword of a crown guard and on the other side a baton. But in several places they are still crossing two batons. They don't use a sword to guard the crown. They use two batons to cross, to guard. So the baton is used for many things within the *congada*, but mainly this symbol of command and this spiritual energy that it carries. Sometimes a *terno* can't get out of place, it's kind of tied up, which is the expression of the ancients, it's enchanted.... The captain who has ancestral knowledge, he arrives at a crossroads or he arrives at the place where this is happening and hits the baton on the ground three times and asks permission for that entity that owns that crossroads, to pass. Those who have sight can see, can see and even talk to: 'Hi *cumpadi*, let me pass'. And the one who doesn't have it, but knows that there is the owner of that road, that *encruza* [crossroads], he also asks for permission by hitting the baton. So the baton creates portals of passage, but he gives you the command (Interview with Fabrício Alves, conducted on Jan. 07, 2020).

Fabrício Alves' report is also observed in the work of Viana and Rios (2016), in which Deco, the second captain of Tonho Pretinho's *moçambique*, refers to the procedure of hitting the baton on the ground to communicate with spiritual entities. Considering that the beings of the spiritual world also act in the material world, during the processions the captains identify the places where these forces act to mediate the balance in order to ensure the success of their group in completing their tasks.



Image 3 – Captain of the *congo* Real de Ituiutaba/MG, chanting with his baton at the feast of the João Vaz, 2019. Source: Photograph by Fábio Alves.

In addition to the power of protection, another power equally associated with the baton is the ability to harm someone or some *congada* group. According to Patrícia Costa (2012), who researched *congado* in Serra do Salitre/MG, just as the baton can break a spell and protect the group alongside the amulets and prayers, the object also has the ability to hinder another *terno*, compromising its performance during the feasts and sometimes even leading to its extinction, due to internal conflicts between the participants.

The baton, it is the steering wheel of the *terno*. The strength of the baton is very great because it cuts through the obstacles, it dictates where the *terno* has to go. It sets the rhythm. So, the strength of the baton..., it's like the steering wheel. In the wrong hand it will lead the *terno* to do the wrong thing and in the right hand it will lead the *terno* to do the right thing, you know? Because it's a symbol of respect, I'm not going to say of power, but of respect, of authority, right? So that's the symbol of the baton. Because, in fact, the baton, it has to be energized. For many people, the baton may just be a piece of wood, right? But before the whole feast it has to have a certain preparation, it has to have a certain..., a certain connection, it has to be blessed (Interview with André Araújo, conducted on Dec. 27, 2019).

To better elucidate the question of doing good or evil, we turn to the experience shared by Yalorisá Jane Ti'Omolu (*in memoriam*), in her house of *Ketu* matrix *candomblé*, the *Ilé Alaketu Asé Igben Bale*, in Aparecida de Goiânia/GO. On certain occasion, Mãe Jane commented that in black religions the important thing is to do good. However, in order to do good it is also necessary to learn how to do evil. This does not mean that evil should be practiced, but for it to be undone, it is necessary to know how it was done in order to apply the most effective measures.

The batons of command of the *congada* bear similarities to the *minkisi* of West-Central Africa. In that region, the batons of command were *minkisi* that embodied the qualities of divine entities and served as a means of contact with the spiritual world. Their use nowadays in the coronation of black kings and queens festivities is a consequence of the transmission of knowledge involving their *feitura* [making], meaning and ritual treatment, directly linked to African cultures by previous generations and even by communication with ancestral spiritual entities of the *congada*.

It is observed, in the carvings of some batons, the presence of human or animal figures, adorning their shapes along with beads and rosaries that are tied to their bodies. With these figures, usually carved on the head of the instrument, these zoomorphic or anthropomorphic batons are not so common in feasts. There are reports among the *congadeiros* of the city of Catalão/GO stating that local priests often criticize the configuration of these batons. Interfering in the forms that materialize conceptions and cosmologies of African and Afro-Brazilian origins, priests repudiate these batons, praising only those that are adorned by insignia more easily linked to liturgical Catholicism, among them the rosaries and images of Nossa Senhora do Rosário and São Benedito.



Image 4 – Type of zoomorphic baton, of the Captain of the moçambique Coração de Maria, Catalão/GO. Source: Researcher's collection.

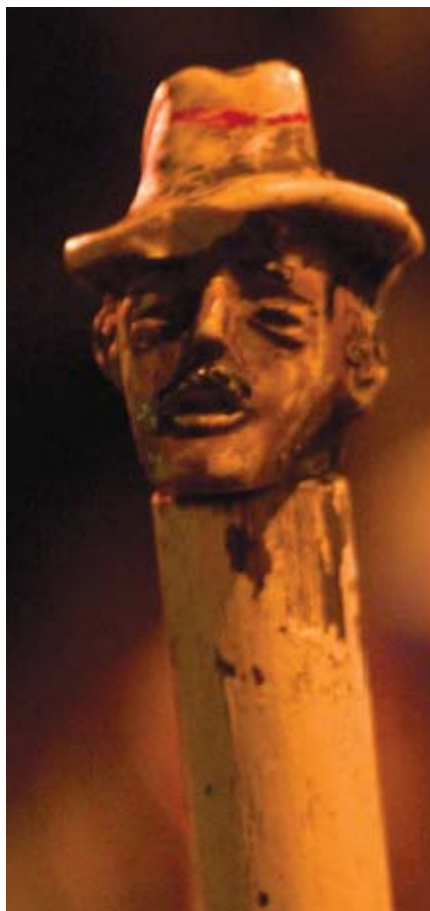


Image 5 – Type of anthropomorphic baton with the image of Zé Pelintra, of Captain Tonho Pretinho, from themoçambique in Itapecerica/MG. Source: Viana & Rios (2016).



Image 6 – Baton with the image of Nossa Senhora do Rosário and detail with the image of Nossa Senhora do Rosário. *Dançadora* of the moçambique Ogum Beira-Mar at the feast of the João Vaz, 2019. Source: Researcher's collection.

Some captains resort to spiritual consultations with their personal protection entities or of the *terno* they command. It is common that, in the periods leading up to the feasts, some captains seek guidance regarding the previous procedures to be carried out and even whether the *terno* will be allowed to participate in that event.

It is through learning from the spiritual entities, as well as through the relationships between generations, that one also learns to craft the baton. Making the baton is the primary task of the one who will become commander. It does not consist only in the manufacture of the object, but in its preparation, making it suitable for the defense of the group. Preparing the baton therefore means endowing it with powers by performing specific rituals on the object, through practices that have been transmitted by the elders and spiritual entities.

Sacred capacities are incorporated into ritual instruments during their manufacture, consisting of the production of the object together with its preparation. The power of ritual instruments is therefore not an intrinsic capacity of these objects. Although they are manufactured only once, they can be periodically prepared for use during the feasts.

In addition to the manufacturing processes of the batons, another way of acquiring it is through the donation of an older captain, when there is not only the succession of the object, but also of the ancestral spiritual force linked to it.

The baton is the captain's strength, all his strength is there in that baton. So he has a great affection, a great responsibility in the baton he carries. The baton stays with the captain until the day he passes away [dies]. And if he wants, if he sees that there is another younger captain who deserves to win that baton, to have that baton with him, the captain donates it to a younger captain. But there are many captains who see that there is not a captain there with the capacity to have his baton, to carry that baton, so when he dies he takes it with him. The baton is Samson's hair for Samson. Without the baton the captain is practically nothing. I myself, without my baton I can't do much (Interview with Tiago Melo, conducted on Jan. 05, 2020).

Among the captains who take part in the feast of the João Vaz, it is common to report the passing of the baton to a successor of the *terno's* legacy. The choice is made based on the wisdom of the old captains who, before passing away, identify among the younger ones the one who is predestined to continue the mission, the one who possesses the same spiritual potentiality necessary to lead the battalion.

On a certain occasion of the feast of the João Vaz in 2019, Captain Fabrício Alves reported that since the age of six he was encouraged to temporarily take command of the *terno*, chanting songs during some visits. It was also at this age that he received the succession of command from his grandfather, at the time captain of the *terno catupé* Vermelho e Branco in the city of Três Ranchos/GO. According to Fabrício's account, a few days before his grandfather died, he called his relatives to a family meeting. He remembers that at some point his grandfather called him to the center of the circle, put his baton in his grandson's hands and asked him to chant a *congo* song for his grandpa. Not intimidated by the situation, the little grandson chanted his favorite song, which was appreciated by all present. Proud of his achievement, his grandfather then told him that the baton would be his as soon as he grew up a bit and took command of his battalion.

Understood as one of the relics of the *congada*, the batons are considered personal objects that should be handled only by their owners. In *Afrografias da Memória* (1997), Leda Martins brings the report by the *congo* king José dos Anjos, from the *congado* of Minas Gerais in the Jatobá region, about the care his father gave to the instrument.

[...] he was jealous of it, he wouldn't allow anyone to put their hands on it. He always kept it closed in a corner of the wardrobe. When the feast was over, he would roll it up, that baton, tie that paper around the outside and put it away.

If mom went to clean the wardrobe, if she talked to him, he would take out the baton, and he wouldn't even let her put her hand on it [...] he had that precept, the precept that it was dangerous (Martins, 1997, p. 95).

Given the capacities they hold, the batons receive the necessary care for their *empowerment*, from their manufacture until the moment when their owner will no longer be able to handle them, a situation in which they must be passed on to a successor or will have the same fate as the body of their deceased owner. The *congadeiros* recognize in the baton the strength of the ancestors, of the forebears, and of tradition.

The batons differ from the use of sticks and staffs that also compound the collection of instruments used by some battalions, as in the case of the *vilões* [villains]⁸. As mentioned by different captains, the use of sticks and staffs links them more to the performative aspects present in the dances than to the sacred meanings attributed to the batons. Although they participate in the symbolic contents that delimit the identity aspects of each type of guard, the sticks and staffs do not have the strength of the batons and do not receive the same care in preparation and ritual foundation.

Through the notion of ancestry, faith and the transmission of content between generations, the reign and the various relics of the *congada* are recognized as symbols of spiritual and social power that evoke memories. They are understood as royal insignia for the mystical role they play and for the attributes of nobility that adorn their forms and garments. To understand the sacred from the role of things in relation to bodies, we must think of them as agents, as protagonists of performances. In the words of Juliana Corrêa (2018, p. 198):

This represents keeping in mind that both narrative discourse and embodied practice are holders of meaning. [...] what is revealed is that they also establish communications of their own, from thing to thing. In this place, there is an inversion in the relationship of people and things, where people become the mediators of relationships through their bodies, which serve as a support to give life to things, and allow a content to be communicated by things. Both the body and things assume their own places and, simultaneously, extensions: the object becomes an extension of the body itself and the body as an extension of the object.

In the processes of evoking memory in the *congada*, sacred *body-thing-memory* compositions are observed, formed by instances that interact in the

production of meanings. It is in the primacy of the body, as a language constituted from a set of signs that have been recurrent and resignified for several generations – even if as residual practices of the past –, in dances, in chants, in *batuques* and in the interaction with sacred objects, that *congadeiros* feel the innervation of the body in contact with ancestry.

In the interaction between things and bodies, memories, recollections and forgetfulness are aroused. As narrators of their stories, the texture of each artifact comes into contact with the skin of its bearer, reshaping it and being reshaped. The incorporation of *congada* traditions as an event is the result of the friction between bodies and *congadeiras* things. The *bodies-thing-memory* are revealed in performances as mediators of new events, allowing the past to have something to say to the present, bringing out narratives not yet told by history.

Final considerations

The *congada* festivities are imbricated by gnosiological diversity, especially of *Bantu* Africans – but also Sudanese –, Europeans and Native Americans, and the set of their celebrations reveals a redefinition of the notion of black culture in colonial and post-colonial contexts. The diversity of cultural ties and ways of relating to the sacred find in the feast a common place, where differences coexist – although not without tensions – and multiple meanings are experienced and shared in a relationship that only happens in its completeness through the multi-vocality that manifests itself in the ceremonies.

Considering the academic production on the theme addressed, the uniqueness of this study seeks to highlight the diversity of African and Afro-Brazilian religious/cultural references that make up black culture in Brazil, among them the cult of *minkisi* – arising from the great *Bantu* cultural linguistic trunk in central-western Africa – the cult of *orisás* – which descends from regions where *Yoruba* peoples live in present-day, in Nigeria – as well as the cult of *voduns* – coming from regions of the *Fon* peoples in present-day Benin. In this sense, the study revealed among the *congadeiros* of the Vila João Vaz the manifestation of symbolic aspects especially inter-related to the cult of Catholic saints and the cult of *minkisi*.

The meanings attributed by the *congadeiros* to the use of batons of command and other personal objects inherited from deceased captains (uniform buttons, hats, musical instruments), as well as the ways of dealing with the sacred, of worshipping their spiritual entities, of admiring and preserving the memory of their ancestors, especially during the festivities, emphasize the recurrence of aspects already observed in ancient Congolese cosmologies. The manifestation of Sudanese traditions in Congada, mentioned in some studies, when it occurs in the feast of the João Vaz, are isolated expressions and of recent context, which do not interfere in the ritualistic process of the festivities.

Objects and artifacts, such as the batons of command, the crown, the flags and even musical instruments compound the rituality of the feast. Their uses and meanings evoke memories linked to ancestry and reverence for departed relatives. The objects are endowed with powers and are configured as instruments that enable communication with their deities, whether Catholic saints or entities of the Afro-Brazilian pantheon.

Notes

- ¹ The term *congada* is widely spread in the state of Goiás. The term *congado* is more recurrent in the state of Minas Gerais.
- ² *Soba* is the name given to village chiefs in the present-day region of Angola, since pre-colonial times. Nowadays they present themselves as ancestral community leaders who lead the life of the community using their experience and knowledge passed down through generations.
- ³ Functions performed by the *congadeiros* during the festivities.
- ⁴ This is not a rule in *congadas* and *congados*. In the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, for example, the *trono coroadado* [crowned throne] and the perpetual *congos* queens and kings have a direct link to the presence of spiritual power in the feast.
- ⁵ *Nkisi* (singular) and *minkisi* (plural) are terms of Quimbundu origin that refer to the use of objects in the relationship with the sacred and to the forms of worship generally recurrent in West Central Africa.
- ⁶ Instead of the term *levantamento*, the expression *levantação* is more common for the denomination of this ceremony in the Festa da João Vaz.

- ⁷ Although the terms *flag* and *flagpole* can derive distinct meanings and senses, in this context they will be referred to as synonyms.
- ⁸ Like the *moçambiques*, *congós*, *catupés*, *marinheiros* and *penachos*, the *vilões* are also constituted as one of the types of guard/group/*terno* of *congada*.

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