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THE SACRED NECKLACES OF MEMORY: CANDOMBLE'S SECRET THREAD FROM AFRICAN YORUBA MATRIX

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the conception of the sacred symbol, based on the logic of meaning of *ilequé*, also known as beads or glass beads, sacred artifacts that symbolically point to religious identity, power, defense. and the hierarchy of subjects of the religious tradition of Candombles of African Yoruba matrix. Sacred necklaces carry multiple meanings, many voices echo from their structures, because they participate in a system in which each object has function, purpose and representation in relation to the sacred, because they are products of rituals. Thus, the symbolic-religious dimension of these necklaces characterizes and conditions the relationship between the subjects and its social group and vice versa, marking, then, the interfaces between this religion originating in Africa, memory, tradition, magic and identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Behind all the experience with the sacred is the pursuit of unveiling the reality that surrounds it in its greatest depth. But how to reveal this secret world, without first having access to the portals that lead to this revelation? What keys will allow people to unlock such secrets? Will this access, when possible, occur directly? Will it be an immediate experience or will the sacred be revealed in a mediated way among social subjects, in the space and time in which they interact, through a communication system learned and experienced in the group itself? This access, when released, slips into our present world the deep sources of memory, tradition, magic, identity, myth, rite, and secret that consecrate symbols, evoking a language of exceedance of meanings of the hidden half, submerged in the unconscious.

In this text, the symbols studied are the glass beads, in Yoruba language, the beaded necklace is called *Akufi isiro*, also known as *ilequés (ilèkè)*, sacred necklaces that symbolically point to religious identity, power, defense and hierarchy of the members of this religious tradition originating in Africa.

To Jagun (2017), *ilequé* may be defined as:

Ilèkè: beaded necklace used by candomblé's adepts and deities, with color representations related to the worshiped gods, also serving to demonstrate the importance of the adept in the candomblé hierarchy, according to the beauty of the necklace. It is also called the "bead thread". The "beads thread" serves as a connecting element between men and the gods (JAGUN, 2017, p. 270, our translation).

Ilequés, as symbols, - carry multiple meanings, many voices echo from their structures, because they participate in a system in which each object has function, purpose and representation in relation to the sacred, because they are products of rituals.

Still in this sense, Lody (2001) adds:

Beads are, as its name implies, beads strung on strings or nylon threads. They were conventionally tucked into the straw, which at a later stage, was replaced by a necklace made of cotton and, recently of nylon. The colors and types of materials that make up each bead vary according to intention, and can mark hierarchy, special situations, daily use, and identify the gods. The most commonly

found materials are mass, glass, ceramics and lat last plastic, in addition to the combination of certain special beads such as coral short tubes, 'seguis' and 'African firms' that serve as threads finishers. There are also some strands of braided straw or buriti, plus beads and whelks, forming *xubetas* and *mocãs*. Also noteworthy is the *rungeve*, made of brown beads, coral and follies, as well as the *diloguns* (...). Besides beads in different materials, other objects will compose the threads, determining social and religious functions (LODY, 2001, p. 33, our translation).

Ilequês, then, are part of a system of symbols that a particular social group has created and uses to identify, empower, defend, organize, facilitate interaction and regulate the behavior of their subjects and they will be better specified throughout this text.

Symbol and its Secrets

In religious social spaces, in this case, in the Candombles of African Yoruba matrix, almost everything that is seen and that, to the less attentive eyes, may appear to be just an adornment, an ornament, an artifact, when inserted in a ritual context, present multiple meanings, although they cannot be immediately grasped by those who are not part of that social group. In this sense, Chevalier and Gheerbrant (2001) argue: *through symbols, common objects acquire unlimited new meanings* (p. XXI, our translation). Thus, in the Candombles of African Yoruba matrix, every sacred symbol is, necessarily, referred to a ritual that metamorphosed it, even if, in an abstract way, it made possible the emergence of its deepest constitutive material elements. Through the rituals, the symbol becomes a sacred symbol, recognized and legitimized by the social subjects who made it, through the magic-religious rites, in which: memory, tradition and magic, in an undisputed relationship, were responsible for the perpetuation of an ancestral inheritance, present in the collective memory of that social group and impregnated in its symbols, attributing, thus, to its subjects, an identity that marks, besides power, their status of belonging in the social hierarchy.

The sacred symbol, then, besides having an immediate meaning, also presents multiple meanings, *which transfigure material reality and thus guarantee a mediation between the man's daily life from which this signal comes and a reality that surpasses it* (MESLIN, 2014, p. 225, our translation). So, it becomes clear that what allows the symbol to express a religious significance, becomes a sacred symbol, in the case of this study, the *ilequês*, is the fact of establishing a relationship between the memory and tradition of the social group in which the subject is inserted, pointing to their social belonging and identity. It is in this sense that the present study investigates the functioning of memory, as a mechanism of preservation and perpetuation of ancestral traditional knowledge, transmitted from generation to generation, through the magical-religious foundations, used in the *ilequês* confection rituals, seeking, so, to reveal the logic of meaning of these sacred symbols, within the ambit of the Candombles of African Yoruba matrix. Therefore, certain groups of symbols show themselves coherent and logically linked together and, consequently, they are susceptible to be systematically formulated, translated and revealed, in rational terms (CIRLOT, 1984). It is noteworthy, however, that in proposing to reveal the meanings of a sacred symbolic object, *there is always something untranslatable, because the symbol points to*

something that is absent, representing it, but not grasping all its possibilities (CIRLOT, 1984, p. 5, our translation), it is a visible mark of something that is not there concretely, however, something that can be perceived and accessed in it. Extremely reducing or specifying the meaning of a sacred symbol can lead to the degradation of its meaning that always presents a dynamic of collective memory and traditional ancestral knowledge (re)updating, according to the social configuration of the group, in space and time where they are inserted. Thus, sometimes this dynamic may separate and may unite the meanings to what the sacred symbol represents and means.

In this sense, Chevalier and Gheerbrant (2001) state that:

The symbol separates and unites, comprises the two ideas of separation and reunion; it evokes a community that has been divided and can be regrouped. Every sign contains a portion of the broken sign; the meaning of the symbol is revealed in that which is simultaneously the breaking and joining of its separate parts (p. XXI).

Between distancing and approximation, rupture and union, the symbol is marked by the lack and, therefore, by the incitement to reunite the isolated parts. The universe of the various meanings that the symbols evoke, makes their meaning rest in the reconstituted totality, albeit imaginatively. They constitute, in turn, elements that relate the psychological, biological, social and cultural that, according to Durand (1997), can be called imaginary, allowing the formation of an amalgam that is understood by representations of the subjective about reality. In this perspective, *the imaginary is no more than this path in which the representation of the object is assimilated and modeled by the subject's instinctual imperatives, and in which, reciprocally, the subjective representations are explained 'by the subject's previous accommodation' to the objective environment* (p. 30, our translation). According to Durand (1997), *the symbol is always the product of biopsychic imperatives by the intimations of the environment* (p. 30, our translation). Symbols play a fundamental role in social relations, as they are the links that circulate between the layers of culture and psychological, memory and tradition, forming an anthropological path that can be understood as: *the incessant exchange that exists at the level of the imaginary between the subjective and assimilating drives and the objective intimations emanating from the cosmic and social environment* (p. 29, our translation), traversed by the subject. This path is only possible thanks to fixed schemes, which are dynamic modes that support the functioning of the imagination, establishing an exchange between the psychological and the concrete representations, thus resignifying the subjects' lives (Durand, 1997).

It is observed that the imaginary has as its main scope the production of symbols produced by man, at the levels: psychological, biological, social and cultural, structuring a primordial system that normalizes, so, the human living, and how this living is reflected in these diverse levels that involve social groups as a whole. For this reason, the imaginary constitutes in an anthropological reservoir from which the paths and schemes that give meaning to life and the social universe in which social relations develop are taken. Durand (1997) explains that the human being is endowed with an extensive ability to form symbols in his socio-cultural life. His theory about the imaginary is organized under the convergence

method, that is, the symbols (re)group themselves around organizer nucleus, the constellations, which are structured by isomorphisms. Thus, the symbols constellate because they are developed from the same archetypal theme, because they are variations on an archetype, in the path that they travel, like the *ilequés*, to fix the analysis on the proposed object of study. In this perspective, *ilequés's* confection and sacralization for the *orixá* called Ogum, for example, will follow the same archetypal theme with regard to the constitutive elements, rituals, colors and characteristics associated with the organizer nucleus referring to that *orixá*.

This path taken by symbols occurs from the object that is metamorphosed with the reversibility of the subject's imperative drive, which Durand (1997) calls an anthropological path. In this sense, it can be seen that in this reversible walk, from the inside to the outside and from the outside to the inside, the anthropological investigation of the imaginary is installed and the logic of the meaning of the sacred symbols is revealed - in this case, the *ilequés*. Durand (1997) also reports that the constellations of images converge around organizer nucleus, that is, a psychic energy. In this sense, the use of symbols is very common to explain what is not close to human understanding, because, according to Jung (2002a) *symbols point to different directions from those we perceive with our conscious mind; and, therefore, relate themselves to things that are unconscious, or only partially conscious (p. 90, our translation)*.

In this sense, it can be said that just as conscious content can fade into the unconscious, new contents, which, so far, were never conscious, can naturally "emerge" in the process of interaction between the social subject and its group. It is also important to note that symbols can never be torn from their context. To reveal and understand them, it is necessary to present exhaustive descriptions, both of the subjects' personal lives and of the symbolic context in which the symbols are inserted (JUNG, 2002b, p. 60, our translation) and seek explanations there that meet the needs of belonging to that subject to a specific social group. Thus, what notoriously distinguishes humans from other animals beyond their conceptual thinking and their ability to know and share knowledge across generations, without relying solely on genetics, it is their power of communication through symbols that function as a mechanism of social conduct. So:

Symbols are not images or mirrors of the world; they are not windows or curtains either. They do not have an imitative and pictorial function, but representational. They represent objects of communication within a linguistic community for the simple reason that human nature prepares the child in development for an impregnation with a collective language and that social tradition has made specific sound patterns in the representatives of specific objects of communication (ELIAS). 1994, p. 97, our translation).

Based on the theoretical thinking of the German sociologist Norbert Elias, it is clear that people develop in a world where their cognitive functions have evolved into a continuous social relationship between the objects to be recognized and the other individuals belonging to the same social group. Thus, the theory defended by Elias (1994) has an innovative character that resides in the analysis of knowledge systems and behavioral models as socially produced frames of experience.

Thus it can be said that *the collective unconscious does not develop individually but it is inherited. It consists of preexisting, archetypal ways that can only secondarily become conscious, giving a definite form to the contents of consciousness* (ELIAS, 1994 p. 54, our translation) that will allow the revelation and understanding of the various meanings that sacred symbols evoke.

According to Jung (2002b), the collective unconscious:

[...] it is a part of the psyche that can be distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not owe its experience to personal experience, and it is, therefore, not a personal acquisition. While the personal unconscious is essentially made up of contents that were once conscious and, yet, disappeared from consciousness because they were forgotten or repressed, the contents of the collective unconscious were never in consciousness and, therefore, were not acquired individually, but owe their existence only to heredity. While the personal unconscious consists mostly of complexes, the content of the collective unconscious consists essentially of archetypes (JUNG, 2002b, p. 53, our translation).

In this sense, Jung (2002b) clarifies that in order to understand the meaning of the collective unconscious, it is necessary to establish a direct and inseparable connection with the concept of archetype, an expression already used, in antiquity, by Plato, as a synonym of idea (p. 87, our translation). Archetypes mingle, intersect, and arrange, resulting in images and their relationships, in which symbolic structures meet themselves.

The *ilequés*, used by the social subjects, within the ambit of the Candomblé of African Yoruba matrix, appear, at first, as objects of identification of those faithful to their ruling *Orixás*. Thus, they show that there is an archetypal relationship of association of bead threads, made from different materials, colors and shapes, with the *Orixás* and hierarchical levels, to which the subjects of these groups are linked, presenting a great diversity and arranged by typologies according to the use and meanings that they present in rituals, as fruits of the perpetuation of ancestral traditional knowledge, through the memory and tradition of the group in which each believer is inserted. In this way, a layman, when sees a beads thread, can perceive it only as an adornment, an ornament, while an initiate in the religious culture of candomblé of African Yoruba matrix will perceive it as an object full of meaning, from which many voices emerge. The *ilequés* act as "keys" that unlock the first portals of the secrets surrounding these sacred symbols and the candomblé of African Yoruba. Through these beads threads, it is possible to access information and decipher the cultural universe in which they are immersed and, for some, camouflaged. There is a wide variety of beads thread, associated with the *Orixás* archetypes, classified by color, shape, quantity of thread, types of materials used in their confection and ritualistic functions in the context of candomblé of African Yoruba.

What is important at this time is to apprehend the concept of archetype:

(...) which constitutes an indispensable correlate of the idea of collective unconscious, indicates the existence of certain forms in the psyche, which are present all the time and everywhere. The mythological research is called 'reasons' or 'themes'; In primitive psychology they

correspond to LEVY-BRÜHL's concept of collective representations and in the field of comparative religions they were defined as 'categories of imagination' by HUBERT and MAUSS. ADOLF BASTIAN designated them long before as 'elemental thoughts' or 'primordial thoughts'. From these references it becomes clear that my representation of archetype - literally a pre-existing form - is not exclusively my concept, but it is also recognized in other fields of science (JUNG, 2002b, pp. 53-54, our translation).

As elementary or primordial thoughts, pre-existing forms, archetypes are portions of life itself - images wholly linked to the individual through a true bridge of emotions. Therefore no single or universal form of interpretation should be established for any archetype. Thus, the *ilequês* will have their meanings linked to the archetypes, according to the memory and ancestral tradition to which they are linked. The archetype can only be interpreted from the social context and general living conditions of that particular individual with whom it relates to (JUNG, 2002b, p. 96). In this direction, it can be seen that, according to the author, the archetypes are endowed with their own initiative and also with a specific energy, that is peculiar to them. They can, so, by virtue of these powers, provide meaningful interpretations (in their symbolic style) and interfere in certain contexts with their own impulses and thought formations (JUNG, 2002b, p. 79). Thus, when these archetypes are presented, in this perspective, it is possible to understand that religions in general, and, in the specific case of this text, the candomblés of African Yoruba, figure the archetypes in order to make them intelligible within a cosmogonic system, in which part of its potential contents become manifest in the form of mythical reports, which, in turn, become principles that govern the existence of the religious group members, as they explain the ways of being in the world by justifying what happened in *illo tempore*.

Chevalier and Gheerbrant (2001, p. XXI) argue that, the symbol contains the ideas of movement, continuity, self-fertilization and, consequently, eternal return. This points to a dynamic in the construction of their meanings, once it seeks to take into account the relationships between social subjects and their respective groups with their imaginary. In order to understand memory, tradition and magic, encased in the *ilequês*, sacred symbols of the candomblé of African Yoruba, it is effectively necessary decline, at first, a special attention to those relations mentioned above, besides establish a conception of symbol, from several complementary perspectives, and the semiotic perspective, namely: philosophical, sociological, psychoanalytical and anthropological, which allow the understanding and the revelation of multiple meanings that constellate the sacred symbols in question.

In the philosophical perspective, Ricoeur (1990) discusses:

The symbol stimulates thinking; this sentence that delights me says two things: the symbol gives; I do not make the sense to it, it is IT who gives meaning, but what it gives is "what to think", of what to think. From the donation, the position. The sentence, therefore, suggests, at the same time, that everything is said in enigma and, yet, that it is always necessary to begin and start over in the dimension of thinking (RICOEUR: 1990, p. 283, our translation).

From the Ricoeur's logic (1990), to decipher the puzzles brought by the symbols, it is necessary *to start and restart in the dimension of thinking*. Thus, it proposes the establishment of a bridge of complementarity between phenomenology and hermeneutics, once one perceives the insufficiency of the phenomenological element to understand the symbol. This reconciliation, according to Ricoeur (1990), aims to generate thought from the symbol, which for the author, composes the properly philosophical stage, *thought from the symbols, according to the symbols, which in turn, constitute the relevant background of the speech that lives among men* (RICOEUR, 1990, p. 294, our translation). In the sociological perspective, the concept of symbol used in this study is the Eliasian concept that postulates symbols as syntheses that propagate relationships established between beings and things in the world, thus functioning as a mechanism for guiding behavior in this same world and as knowledge (learning), are also "things of the world" participating, therefore, in the constitution of new symbols, in continuous processes of synthesis (ELIAS, 1994). In this sense, to synthesize means to establish connections and, in that, to bring closer what seems distant and distant what seems close. Symbols, thus, work as symbolic webs or networks created by human beings, but eventually ending entangled.

In the psychoanalytic perspective, using the Jungian side, *the symbol is a term, a name or even an image that can be familiar to us in daily life, although it has special connotations beyond its obvious and conventional meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden to us* (JUNG, 2002a, p. 20, our translation). The symbol protects a plurisignification, possible to be revealed in the context in which it is presented. From an anthropological perspective, the meaning of symbol used here is that of *object, act, event, quality, or relationship that serves as a vehicle for a conception - conception is the meaning of the symbol* (GEERTZ, 2008, p. 67). To understand man and the culture in which he is inserted is to interpret this web of meanings. However, Geertz (2008) argues that, as much as social, cultural and psychological are intertwined in everyday life, it is useful to separate them at the level of analysis. Still in this perspective, the symbol, also, can be defined *as everything that, on the part of man, includes beyond its immediate meaning a second meaning, which transfigures material reality and, thus, guarantees a mediation between the man's daily life from where this signal comes from and a reality that surpasses it* (MESLIN, 2014, p. 225, our translation). That is, only inserted in the social context can reveal the multiple meanings of a symbol.

Thus, by bringing together approaches from different areas of knowledge, such as philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, among others, it is sought an exchange of information and experiences that integrates the different ways of analyzing the *ilequês*, which are not, therefore, exclusive or antagonistic, but complementary. This option includes approaches and methods specific to each science, but it is precisely this integration, which precedes the construction of an interdisciplinary knowledge, which allows a depth in the study of *ilequês* in the Candomblé of African Yoruba matrix. It is evident, then, that what enables the symbol to express a religious significance, in the case of this study: the beads threads, it is the fact of establishing a relationship between the social context of religious culture and the subject that participates in it. In this sense, to understand the existence of a logic of meaning of the sacred symbol, it is necessary to go a

little deeper into the basic foundations that conceive them, as well as their methodological use, in order to guide coherently the analyzes and supporting arguments of the proposal thesis.

Final Considerations

After the discussions so far, it is brought back the epigraph that inaugurates this article, understanding that, to go further in the analysis of the meaning of the *ilequês*, it is essential to recognize the theoretical “threads” that immolate themselves and become anonymous, but always present in the design of these necklaces. Because, if on the one hand, the “beads” and “materials” that make up such necklaces, do not form them alone, either, the theoretical threads that surround them and turn them into unique pieces, they do not make them alone too. Therefore, it is necessary to understand this interdependence between “the threads” and “the beads”, also, between the subjects and the context of formation of their social groups, so that the necklaces are, “made”, analyzed and, finally, reveal the secrets that are hidden in their meaning. From this perspective, the identification of the subject with the *candomblé* of African Yoruba matrix is built on the basis of the recognition of a common origin, an ancestry, some characteristics shared among the members of the group, making them belong to a certain tradition. Thus, this social group is composed of symbols that underlie the constitution of a given cultural identity, as occurs with the *ilequês* in the *candomblé* of Yoruba matrix.

This dynamic consists in keeping the group linked to its origins, while looking to the future, showing that *candomblé* also responds to the processes of transformation in modern life. The colonization of the African continent eliminated traditional religious belief from its elite, but slavery preserved that same millenary belief in the New World, obviously establishing the adaptations, amalgams and mixtures necessary for its preservation and continuity. A process of dynamism and vitality in the perpetuation of the religious traditions of *Candomblé* is emphasized, because, although they seek to maintain their traditions of origin, they nevertheless consider the social contexts imposed by the present and their expectations of continuity for the future. Under these conditions, *candomblé* of African Yoruba matrix responds to these processes of transformation in modern life with the necessary adaptations, without losing their foundations of origin. In this sense, *ilequês* carry multiple meanings because they share a system in which each symbol has function, purpose and representation in relation to what the social group considers sacred.

The sacred-symbolic greatness of these sacred necklaces represents and imposes a profound connection between the subjects and their social group, but also between the social group and their subjects, thus marking in their significance the interconnections that the religion of African Yoruba matrix establishes with memory, tradition, magic and identity. The *ilequês* are the only sacred symbols that accompany the social subjects from their insertion to the *Candomblé* of African Yoruba matrix to their death, marking the dynamic of connection between *Ayê* (Earth) and *Orum* (Heaven), between human and divine, between life and death.

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