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CHAPTER 6

Objects, Bodies and Gods

A Cognitive Ethnography of an Ontological Dynamic in the Xangô Cult (Recife, Brazil)

Arnaud Halloy

Introduction

Over the last three decades, objects have forced their way into the spotlight of the social and cognitive sciences.¹ Until that happened, they remained largely concealed, off-stage, in the analysis of social life. This situation started to change with the (late) recognition of the tacit influence which these *acteurs de l'ombre* wield in everyday life. Quite recently, objects have been playing a leading part in a number of scientific theories, especially in the social and cognitive sciences. In the latter, it is mainly through the emergent fields of distributed and situated cognition that objects have entered the limelight. They might appear as the necessary means of coordinating complex cognitive tasks (Hutchins 1995), as external support for cognition, action and memory (Norman 1988, 1993) or, in more specific cases, as 'cognitive technologies', indispensable to the processes of cooperation and transmission (Conein 2005). In sociology, they are sometimes considered as equal partners for 'social actors', able to mediate social interaction by linking material and social trajectories (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Sansi-Roca 2005), by connecting the global and the local (Latour 1994, 2006) or by binding the social, cognitive and sensory dimensions of experience (Blandin 2002; Keane 2008). Anthropologists are also fascinated by objects because they help to rethink classical topics such as fetishism, identity, power relations, art, or magic

practices (Augé 1988; Moisseeff 1994, 1995; Warnier 1999; Bonhomme 2005; Gell 1998). Closer to the present research, scholars such as Daniel Miller (2005) and Webb Keane (2006, 2008) emphasise the constitutive but paradoxical role of materiality for expressing the immaterial: ‘The greater the emphasis upon immateriality, the more finessed becomes the exploitation of the specificities of the form of materiality by which the immateriality is expressed’ (Miller 2005: 25).

As suggested by this brief overview, objects carry out a wide range of social and cognitive tasks, leading to a real renewal in approaches to culture and human interaction. In this chapter I will discuss what might be considered an extreme case of the ‘empowering process’ of material things. I will try to understand *why* and *how* some natural objects such as stones, or mere artefacts such as pieces of iron, become such powerful and intimate mediators between gods and worshippers in an Afro-Brazilian cult. To say it differently, my main aim is to describe how social practices involving ‘things’ are able to *produce* distinct and dynamic ontologies between, in this particular case, persons, objects and gods.

My analytical approach is in line with work of Maurice Bloch (1998, 2005), Alfred Gell (1998) and Pierre Liénard (2003, 2006) on the cognitive underpinnings and consequences of ritual treatments of artefacts. I also endorse part of the ontological approach as defined in the introduction of this volume by recognising the embedded, generative and performative dimensions of artefacts. But I depart from both cognitive and ontological frameworks in at least two ways. I go beyond a strictly cognitivist approach by trying to identify not only the cognitive, but also the emotional and perceptual processes potentially at work in producing the relational quality between persons, gods and objects. And I move aside from the ontological approach when it recommends ‘a suspension of an inquiry into the mental states of the devotee under whose beliefs “things” are expected exclusively to take shape and behave’ (Espírito Santo and Tassi, this volume) or when it presupposes the ‘emergence of new actors that are *not just* the result of the work, imagination, agency or creativity of humans’ (Sansi, this volume). Ontologies, even if dynamic and context-dependent, are not *just* a matter of cultural shaping of the world: they are *also* deeply rooted in cognitive, emotional and perceptual processes proper to humankind. Of course, cultural practices, as the ones involving artefacts, are able to strengthen, weaken or ‘hijack’ (Boyer 2008) natural distinctions between, for example, living and non-living entities in one or other direction, but ontological distinctions are not built up upon a cognitive *tabula rasa*, and mental constrains (cognitive, emotional and perceptual) should be taken

into account for describing the processes through which new ontologies are produced.²

Methodologically, the present research might be situated at the intersection of ethnography and of cognitive approaches in anthropology. Neither purely speculative nor strictly descriptive, the analytical perspective lies between these two poles, suggesting what we might call ‘a cognitively informed ethnography’. I will adopt a cognitive approach to the ‘why’ question, suggesting that some objects might become so powerful because they are part of an *ontological dynamic* generated by ritual activity and characterised by ontological ‘twists’ between objects, bodies and gods. My central claim is that ritual activity generates ontological hybrids that are cognitively and emotionally salient entities, capable of marking religious imagination. I will try to show, in addressing the ‘how’ question, that the making of powerful ontological hybrids takes place thanks to *formal features* of ritual action, involving objects and body treatments able to mobilise, to capitalise on but also to ‘hijack’³ intuitive cognitive, emotional and perceptual processes.

In order to develop this theoretical claim, two ethnographic tracks will be privileged. First, I will focus on the introductory process of two categories of objects into the cult: stones and pieces of iron. Then I will describe their ritual manipulation through the initiation process. Because, as I will try to show, their ‘empowering’ process relies primarily on the sensory and cognitive properties of ritual action, my analysis will focus on ethnographic description of ritual actions involving objects and bodies.

But before diving into the intimacy of ritual action, I will briefly present the cult where the observations have been made.

The Xangô cult

The Xangô cult, an Afro-Brazilian possession cult of Yoruba origin, is located in Recife, the capital of Pernambuco state, in north-eastern Brazil. According to Roger Bastide (1960), its name derives from the popularity of the African deity *Xangô* in the city. Its genesis in Recife took place in the late nineteenth century. From being quite restrained during the first half of the following century, the cult expanded rapidly through the city from the 1940s and the 1970s, thanks to the influence of charismatic cult chiefs (de Carvalho 1987).⁴

The social organisation of the Xangô cult is based on ‘saint families’ (*familias-de-santo*). These collective entities rely on initiatory links between their members, elaborated on the model of the biological family. The initiators are called ‘saint-father’ and ‘saint-mother’, initiates ‘saint-son’

or ‘saint-daughter’, and those co-initiates subject to the same initiator ‘saint-brothers’ or ‘saint-sisters’. The temple (*casa-de-santo* or *terreiro*) is conducted by a saint-father and/or a saint-mother. Every initiate is potentially a future cult chief, which is why initiatory parenthood is at the core of social networks linking various temples through space and time, allowing the spread of knowledge and a constant negotiation of power and leadership (Capone 1999). Xangô members worship two categories of ‘spiritual entities’:⁵ the *eguns*, or family ancestors, and the *orixás* (pronounced ‘orishas’), the Yoruba deities associated with natural elements like river, sea, thunder ... or with human activities like hunting and metalworks. Due to syncretism with popular Catholicism, the word *santo* (‘saint’) is frequently used as a synonym of *orixá*. At least two *orixás* are ascribed to every initiate in the Xangô cult. The first one is called *orixá-de-cabeça*, lit. ‘*orixá*-of-the-head’, and the second one *juntó* or *adjuntó*, meaning ‘joined together’. Every initiate has to worship his *orixás* by offering them an annual sacrifice and receiving them by possession. Every initiate might be possessed by his/her *orixás*, but possession is not a condition for initiation, nor its necessary outcome. In this analysis, I will mainly focus on the ritual episodes involving object and body manipulation – which also often involve possession, as we will see. The principal reason for that choice is that it is during such occasions that objects acquire their specific ‘power’ over their human counterpart, as I will try to show.

Objects in the Xangô cult

Two categories of objects will interest us in the first place: stones (*otás*) and pieces of iron pieces (*ferramentas*), both being the central element of the *assentamento* (or *assento*), the altar of the *orixá*.⁶ Every initiate has his own *assentamento*, whose constitutive elements (*otás* or *ferramentas*) are assembled and consecrated during the *assentamento* ceremony, an important step in the initiating process.⁷ *Assentamentos* are of a central importance in the religious practice of the Xangô, for at least two reasons: the pragmatic one is that they are the material receptacle for offerings and sacrifices: ritual practice is unconceivable without them. The conceptual one is that *otás* and *ferramentas* are not considered as mere representations of the *orixás*, but as ‘being’ the *orixá* himself.⁸ This idea is repeatedly made explicit in the way Xangô members refer to their *assentamento*, designating their altar – and more specifically their *otás* or *ferramentas* – as ‘my *orixá*’, or the altar of other initiates by expressions such as ‘the *Oxum*⁹ of Zite’, ‘the *Xangô*¹⁰ of Tiago’, and so on. As key materials and conceptual elements in the Xangô cult, *otás* and *ferramentas* also play a central role in liturgy as intimate and

powerful mediators between the initiate, his *orixá* and the initiators, as I will show in the next section.

The power of objects: ethnographic 'evidence'

We may start with an apparently anecdotal episode I personally encountered in January 2003.¹¹

The third day after an important sacrifice, I was invited to lend a hand in a 'cleaning up' (*limpeza*) session for the altars of many *orixás*, replete with offerings. The activity consists in throwing away the rotten food and cleaning up the *assentamento* and its permanent objects (*otãs*, *ferramentas*, *gigatas*,¹² bracelets, old coins, skulls, etc.). While cleaning up a *Yemanjá*'s¹³ *assentamento*, I realised that I had inadvertently thrown away the small *otã* of the *orixá* with the rest of the offerings,¹⁴ notwithstanding a warning from the saint-father who had teased me before I started to work: 'Careful not to throw away the *otã* with the *ebo*!'¹⁵ (*Cuidado para não dispatchar os otãs com o ebo!*)

The reaction was prompt and collective. The relaxed, good-humoured atmosphere of the cleaning-up session stopped instantly, and was replaced by an emotional and dramatic treasure hunt. As an initiate told me afterwards, losing the *otã* of an initiate is a 'real spiritual drama' (*um verdadeiro drama espiritual*). According to cult leaders, it might entail misfortune, craziness or even the death of the disgraced 'son' or 'daughter'. This episode marked the start of my questioning of the 'power' contained in cultic objects. During the following months of field research, additional ethnographic observations would come to confirm the vital role played by *otãs* and *ferramentas* between the initiate and his *orixás*. Dramatic stories about the reconversion of cult members to Pentecostalism emphasise this. Some of these reconverted initiates, following their pastor's advice, decide to throw away their *assentamento*, usually getting rid of it in a river or even in an open sewer. What is especially striking in these stories is the insistence on the tragic consequences of such acts: mutilation in car crashes, severe burns or illness, craziness, troubles with police and justice, or even precipitate or inexplicable death – in brief, profound misfortune. These stories feed the imagination about the 'power' of *otãs* and *ferramentas*. This vital role could explain why many converted worshippers¹⁶ prefer to abandon their *assentamento* in their initiator's temple rather than destroying it. This attitude is generally interpreted by cult leaders as a temporary 'distancing' (*afastamento*) of their saint-son or saint-daughter. 'She will come back', as a self-confident young saint-father told me about one of his saint-daughters recently converted to Pentecostalism. Pointing to her *assentamento* with his head, he concluded: 'Her *orixá* will take her back!'

The changing of initiator also highlights the central place of *otás* and *ferramentas* in the *orixá*-initiate tandem: the first action any unsatisfied initiate will perform consists in taking away their *assentamento* from their initiator's temple.¹⁷ They will then install it in their new initiator's *terreiro*, or keep it in their own house. Indeed, *candomblé* requires initiates to have total trust in their initiator. First, the latter must be a competent ritualist able to act efficiently on his initiates' *orixás* through ritual practice. Secondly, he must not be ill-intentioned: Xangô members know that a wrong manipulation of the *assentamento* – intentional or otherwise – will attack them directly in their own body and mind.

What these observations emphasise is the close and powerful bond between some cultic objects (*otás*, *ferramentas*), spiritual entities (*orixás*) and their human counterparts (initiate and initiator). It is now time to go a step further in defining the *type* of bond we are talking about, but also *why* and *how* some peculiar objects become such 'powerful' mediators. As a first step in that direction, let us see how Xangô members conceptualise such an intimate connection between objects, human beings and gods.

Xangô members' conceptual background about otás and ferramentas

According to worshippers, there is an 'obvious' causal link between ritual manipulation of *otás* and *ferramentas* and their effects on the initiate (health, well-being, 'peace of mind', social equilibrium, etc.). Two 'core' ideas support this 'obviousness'. The first is that, as we have already seen, 'the *otã* is the *orixá*', not a mere representation or symbol of it. The second is that *orixás* can act upon the material world, and especially upon the body, mind and social life of their own 'children'. We would thus have a ritual causal chain, intuiting that by manipulating *otás* and *ferramentas* during ritual activity, we are acting upon *orixás* that might in their turn act (positively or negatively) upon their 'children'.

Xangô members' tacit theory about the 'power' of objects is an important step towards a better understanding of the cultural conceptual background that supports it. Punishment stories, in our case, provide worshippers with a powerful cognitive tool able to organise their experience by developing *mental models* (Herman 2002), cultural schemes for making sense of dramatic events involving cultic objects but also for guiding worshippers' behaviour towards them. Notwithstanding this, narratives underscore the existence of a tight link between the worshipper and his *orixá* and altar, but they fail to tell us how and why such a connection is actually woven; as a 'spiritual' or 'religious' explanation, this is precisely what we should try to understand.

What I suggest is that the way objects are introduced into the cult, as well as the way bodies and objects are manipulated during ritual activity, provide the conditions for triggering specific cognitive, emotional and perceptual processes that stand at the core of the ‘empowering’ process of cultural objects. I will proceed by two ethnographic steps; in the first, I will describe how cultic objects are actually introduced into the cult (stage 1), then how they are manipulated during ritual activity (stage 2). The second part of this paper is a theoretical elaboration and discussion of this hypothesis.

Connecting objects to gods: from presumption to conviction (stage 1)

In an enlightening analysis devoted to the question of the ‘historicity, materiality and valour of objects in the *candomblé* of Bahia’, Roger Sansi-Roca (2005) underlines the importance of the finding of the *otã* as a foundational event in the relation between this object and the person who has discovered it. Such importance would largely rely on the recognition of the active part played by the stone in this singular event: the *orixá* would present himself through the stone, effectively seeking to be found. To account for this agency displacement, Sansi-Roca suggests the useful notions of ‘driven chance’ or ‘hazard objective’.¹⁸

If such an event as the finding of the stone in the Xangô cult is conceivable, its ‘foundational’ character is questionable. A first reason is an important distinction Xangô members make between what they call a *cheche* stone, meaning a common stone which is *not* a ‘saint’, and an *otã*, ‘which is an *orixá*’. When I asked them how to discriminate between a *cheche* stone and an *otã*, they all pointed to oracle consultation as a necessary recourse – that is, as the only authority capable of ruling on the divine nature of the stone. They also mentioned several clues linked to the finding. Such indices, as we will see, would act upstream of the oracle consultation giving birth to a first *presumption* about the singular ontological status of the stone, but also about the *orixá*’s identity.

A first category of indices comes from the stone aspect. Most of the *otãs* encountered in the Xangô present similar physical traits: they are naturally polished stones with a plane surface. Their shape, from that of a walnut to the size of a small pineapple, is usually regular, and generally spherical or oval.¹⁹ Shape, on first perception catching the eye, may attract the person’s attention and orientate his/her thoughts in the direction of an early presumption – that this stone might be an *orixá*. But additional clues will be necessary for identifying it with more certainty.

Another important physical index for identifying the *orixá* is the stone's colour. A white stone, for example, will be more easily associated with *Orixalá*, whose colour is white, and a yellow stone with *Oxum*, whose colour is yellow-gold. But visual salience is not the only process involved in the identification process. A second category of clues is linked to the *circumstances* of the finding. First of all, environmental circumstances may play a central role: from time to time, Xangô members bring back to the temple stones they have found in the street, on a river bank or a beach, or at the foot of a tree. The place of the finding might orientate the finder's thoughts in identifying the *orixá*. For example, a stone found on the beach will be easily associated with *Yemanjá*, the *orixá* of salt water, and a stone found near a river with *Oxum*, the *orixá* of sweet water, and so on. Secondly, another set of circumstances might predispose the individual to the finding of an *orixá*: his/her state of mind. The participation in an offering in the forest or the expectation of an initiation, for example, might enhance the individual's 'receptivity' to events associated with the 'spiritual'²⁰ dimension of life, such as uncanny feelings stemming from the *orixá*'s 'approximation' (*aproximação*) – communication with the *orixá* through dreams or visions, as well as the finding of an *otã*.

However, in all cases the finding of a stone gives birth to a first *presumption* about the divine nature and/or identity of the *orixá*. The degree of certainty might fluctuate by reference to the *co-presence of concomitant clues*, as for example the finding of a yellow stone in the surroundings of a river during an offering of a future initiate of *Oxum*. The force of the presumption might also vary with the religious status of the finder; if the latter is a saint-father or saint-mother, or an old member of the community, the finding is in itself the result of legitimate and expert judgment. But for the presumption to become a *conviction*, the oracle must invariably be consulted.²¹

Most of the time, the oracle will confirm the first presumption. But sometimes it might unexpectedly reorientate that first interpretation, or at other times might falter – it will give a verdict on the divine nature of the stone but fail to identify the *orixá* with any certainty. Such an outcome might be due to contradictions inherent in the oracular process, but also to a cognitive tension between the oracle's verdict and the physical and circumstantial clues associated with the finding of the stone (for example, a black stone identified by the oracle as an *Orixalá*, which colour is white).

But every stone does not need to go through the oracular process in order to be confirmed in its status of *otã*. *Coriscos* ('fire stones') are systematically associated with *Xangô*, the *orixá* of thunder. And every *corisco* is a

Xangô. Three categories of factors contribute to this automatic identification. First, their presumed origin – a direct product of thunder. Secondly, their physical features: *coriscos* are oblong, black stones with a satin-like quality that give them a unique and mysterious appearance. Thirdly, they are comparatively rare.

Because of their singular status and rarity, *coriscos* are very much sought-after by *Xangô* members, and above all by the ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’ of the *orixá Xangô*. A saint-father told me of one of his initiates who bought his *corisco* in a market for the equivalent of almost two months’ wages. This example, as well as the case of the introduction of semi-precious stones in *assentamentos*, puts in perspective Sansi-Roca’s affirmation: quoting a saint-mother of the *candomblé*, he says that ‘the *orixá* is not bought, but found’. More importantly, the identification of stones inside the *Xangô* cult nuances the ‘foundational’ character of the finding event, suggesting a more diachronic process starting from a first *presumption* and leading to a strong *conviction* through a necessary ritual (oracular) practice. Another important point is that, for many *Xangô* members (I would say most of them in the *Xangô* of Recife), the finding event will never happen at all. I have already mentioned that *Xangô* members regularly bring back stones to the temple. Once identified, the *otã* is placed in the *assentamento* of its respective *orixá* waiting for an initiate to whom it will be given. There is a third reason for treating the ‘foundational’ character of the finding event in a relativist fashion – and amplifying, as I suggest, the ritual process through which stones are introduced into the cult: stones are not the only category of objects that are considered as *being* the *orixá*. Various *orixás*, for mythological reasons, are made of pieces of iron called *ferramentas*.²² They are called ‘iron *orixás*’ (*orixás de ferro*). The introduction of these objects into the cult corresponds only partly to the introductory process for stones as described above. They might be found by chance, corresponding to what Sansi-Roca calls a ‘driven chance’ or ‘hazard objective’. But contrary to *otãs*, every *ferramenta* is efficacious, because it is essentially its materiality – that is, it is made of iron – that justifies its place in the *assentamento*.²³ For the same reason, oracle consultation is not necessary. Pieces of iron might also be actively prospected by a future initiate who needs to compose his/her altar rapidly. And, for *orixás* such as *Ode*, the *orixá* hunter, and *Ossain*, the *orixá* of leaves, *ferramentas* are pieces of art made by a specialised blacksmith. Like many religious artefacts, these objects are imbued with an explicit symbolic dimension that others such pieces of iron, or even stones, do not have. But like any other such objects, they will need to be ritually ‘consecrated’ (Gell 1998) in order to become ‘sacred’. As a specialised

blacksmith once told me: ‘You make a “saint” in one instant ... But to give food to Him and maintain Him: this is another story!’

The next section is dedicated to the description and interpretation of this ritual ‘story’. But pending this it is worth mentioning a third category of artefacts that plays a central role in the Xangô cult.

Contas finas (‘fine necklaces’) are the coloured pearl necklaces initiates wear under their clothes in everyday life. All initiates receive their *conta fina* after an oracular consultation, or after their first bath of leaves. For many, this ceremony also corresponds to that of the *assentamento* where the whole altar is ‘washed’ with *folhas* – fresh leaves corresponding to their *orixá* – and installed in the temple (*peji*). *Contas* are important objects for Xangô members because they can be considered as the material continuity, outside the ritual sphere, of a spiritual relation established through ritual action between the initiate, his/her *orixás* and the initiators.

We might describe this first stage of the ontological dynamic of objects in the Xangô cult as the transformation/hybridation of a natural object or artefact into an *object-god* – that is, a material object which *is* a deity, and part of its material actualisation. Some stones, called *otás*, are imbued with a ‘divine nature’²⁴ that might be directly perceived, as in the case of *coriscos*, or gradually revealed through an interpretative process relying on physical and circumstantial features, and confirmed by an oracular consultation. Every piece of iron, on the other hand, is a potential candidate for becoming part of the *orixá* of iron’s altar (*Ogun*), with the exception of two iron *orixás’ assentamentos* (*Oxossí* and *Ossain*) containing specific pieces of art with a symbolic content, as we have seen. But this first stage, even if necessary, is not sufficient for creating powerful artefacts. In order to understand the *pouvoir agissant* (Moisseef 1994) of objects over their human counterparts, they will have to go through a second ritual stage: the transformation of an *object-god* into an *object-body*. The second part of this paper is dedicated to the description of this second ritual stage.

Connecting objects to bodies (stage 2)

The main rituals where stones and *ferramentas* (and necklaces) are manipulated are the *amasílassentamento* ceremony or bath of leaves,²⁵ the *obrigação* or animal sacrifice and the *feitura*, which is the initiation ritual par excellence. The *amasílassentamento* ceremony is a prophylactic and purificatory ritual that precedes the animal sacrifice. The novice’s body and head as well as his/her *assentamentos* are washed in a decoction of fresh leaves. The *assentamento* ceremony establishes a first connection between the initiates, their initiators, and their altar and *orixás*. This is why Xangô members often

refer to it as the very first stage of initiation. A Yoruba formula underlines the importance of leaves in the cult: *ko si ewe, ko si orixá*, meaning literally, ‘no leaves, no *orixá*’. The ceremony is repeated every year for every initiate, known as the *amasí* ceremony.

During the *amasí* ceremony, *otás* or *ferramentas* and *contas* are cautiously manipulated and brought into contact with the initiate’s head while the initiator is washing it, and calling upon and singing for his/her *orixá*. Possession is frequent during this ritual sequence.

Obrigaçáo is the sacrifice ceremony. It takes place during initiation and subsequently every year for the initiate’s *orixás*. The main animals sacrificed are quadruped animals (pigs, sheep, rabbits) and/or gallinacean (chickens, cockerels, ducks). During such ceremonies, blood and feathers are first poured inside the altar on the *otás* or *ferramentas* and necklaces and then on the initiate’s shoulders and head. Blood is also swallowed by the initiate directly from the cut throat of the animals. These actions are accompanied with songs and invocations to the initiate’s *orixá*. Again, possession is frequent during these ritual episodes.

Feitura is the initiation ritual par excellence. It is performed only once in an initiate’s life.²⁶ The initiate’s head is shaved and his/her body and head are scarified (*catulagem*). The *otá* or *ferramentas* and necklaces are brought into contact with every cut of the scarified parts of the body, the most important one being the one performed on the top of the shaven head. Once again, possession is also frequent during this ritual episode.²⁷

As we can see in the short descriptions above, the main initiatic rituals involving *orixás* (*amasí*, *obrigaçáo* and *feitura*²⁸) also involve the ritual treatment of cultic objects (*otás*, *ferramentas* and *contas*). Such treatment is closely associated with the manipulation of substances (such blood or the decoction of leaves), as well with the initiator and initiate’s bodies; a frequent result is possession of the initiate. If we try to systematise our observations of religious rituals directed to *orixás*, three remarkable and recurrent features of ritual treatments of cultic objects are to be found.

First, they are *concomitant* with the ritual treatment of the initiate’s body – it might even be said that ritual treatment of cultic objects during the initiation process *implies* ritual treatment of his/her body and head: initiation and further annual rituals are simply inconceivable without the co-presence of both objects and initiate. Secondly, they are *contiguous*: cultic objects and bodies are systematically brought into physical contact during *amasí* and *feitura*. Thirdly, they are, in a certain way, *isomorphic*: to be more precise, I would say that ritual treatments of cultic objects and the initiate’s body correspond to a ‘symmetrical’ or ‘inverted’ isomorphism.

Indeed, stones and *ferramentas* are manipulated cautiously,²⁹ as if they were living and/or fragile entities, and bodies are treated like mere ritual artefacts, the initiate being largely passive while his/her body is treated as mere 'material' (*matéria*, the term Xangô members explicitly use for it).

I suggest that this second stage of ritual action contributes directly to a second ontological hybridisation process of cultic objects. While the process of introducing such objects into the cult (stage 1) gives birth to a generic 'hybrid' I call an 'object-god', the initiation process (stage 2) gives birth to an 'object-body' – that is, a personal object that corresponds to the binding of the object-god to a specific body, a decisive step in the empowering process of cultic objects.

How does the transformation of 'object-god' into 'object-body' actually work? In the introduction of this chapter, I suggested that features of ritual action involving cultural objects and the body of the initiate would play a central role by activating, but also hijacking, cognitive, emotional and perceptual resources. In the next section, I will try to identify such features as well as the potential mental tools they are able to co-opt.

Empowering objects: ritual features and mental processes

Contiguity

As I have already mentioned, objects and body are systematically brought into physical contact during rituals of *amasí* and *feitura*. Why is that so? What might contiguity do to the hybridisation process of cultural objects?

Recent experimental research on magical thinking suggests an interesting answer. Very sketchily, what we learn from these studies is that the laws of contagion and similarity described by Tylor, Frazer and Mauss more than a century ago are not a singular feature of 'primitive' thought, but should rather be conceptualised as deeply rooted cognitive processes of the human mind (Rozin et al 1989). For the present analysis, what interests us in the first place is the law of contagion and how it actually works. A formula grasps it elegantly: 'Once in contact, always in contact.' Magical contagion, in other words, operates as if one entity, through a physical contact with another, would permanently transfer some of its fundamental properties to the other (Rozin and Nemeroff 1990). Of course, people can react and use rationality to overcome this emotional impression, but in most cases without being able totally to suppress it.

The idea of a transfer of 'fundamental properties' from one material entity to another by physical contact fits very well with Xangô members' notions of ritual efficiency. Blood and its ritual use, for instance, exemplify the idea.

For Xangô members, blood is not imbued with a precise religious meaning, but is highly evocative and is frequently associated with 'life'. This is why, when combined with ritual activity, Xangô members associate blood with the concept of *axé* (pronounced 'ashé'), the vital force present in living things but also in many objects and substances. Ritual acts are, in their view, conceptualised as the necessary means for transferring *axé* from one body or object to the other, like some kind of 'spiritual' transfusion:

Why the blood, the animal? What is blood? Isn't blood life itself?
 Nobody lives without blood! Don't we need blood to stay alive?
 So what does it mean? That if we stop doing these things [sacrifices], something will die as a result! (Junior, a cult chief)

People and objects involved in ritual action are thus at the centre of a kind of incremental process of *axé*, through the spiritual transfer of fundamental properties from one entity to the other. *Otás* and *ferramentas*, in such a process, would accumulate their power from the many substances (blood, red palm-oil, feathers, African pepper, powders, leaves, water and so on) with which they are 'fed' or 'washed up', but also from the persons who manipulate them (initiators and their ritual assistants). Systematic contiguity between *otás* or *ferramentas* and the body of the initiate during ritual activity would thus be able to activate the kind of inferences associated with magical thinking, and more specifically with the law of contagion.

A second feature of ritual action might also directly participate in the empowering process of cultural objects by enhancing – but also and at the same time 'blurring' – their profoundly plurivocal meaning.

Heterogeneity of liturgical elements

A common feature of many material elements involved in ritual action is their high evocative potential. Blood, as we saw, has no precise or univocal meaning, but it is associated with 'life' and *axé*, which are highly evocative concepts. The same is also true for 'leaves', the plants used in ritual washing, powders made from animal skulls, fruit or chalk, as well as water, red palm-oil, honey, etc.

In an inspiring analysis of aborigine cultural objects, Marika Moisseff convincingly defends a provocative idea closely related to our own discussion: 'Everything happens as if the aptitude of cultic objects to produce meaning relied profoundly on their impossibility to give them a univocal meaning' (1994: 15).

In other words, the profoundly polysemic nature of cultic objects directly contributes to the foundation of their exceptional nature (ibid). In the case of *otás* and *ferramentas*, I have tried to show that, on the one hand, their physical aspect, and the ecological and mental circumstances of their finding, as well as the oracular procedure for their identification are propitious for increasing their evocative potential. On the other hand, heterogeneity of material elements not only boosts religious imagination about them, but also seems to make cultic objects hard to grasp conceptually. Ritual activity would play a crucial role in this process in two distinct ways.

First, by temporarily assembling a multitude of highly evocative material elements, it activates an intense symbolic process which enhances their ‘profound polysemy’ or ‘unrepresentable’ character (ibid: 25–6). Secondly, ritual songs and invocations contribute to activating, but also to short-circuiting the inferential process associated with the manipulation of objects during ritual activity. Two features of the liturgical repertoire might induce this paradoxical process. The first one is that songs and invocations are mostly in Yoruba, an African language Xangô members do not understand, or only very partially. However, as the Brazilian ethnomusicologist José Jorge de Carvalho notes, the capacity of Xangô members to project ascribed meaning to songs for the *orixás* is very great (1993: 205). Even if they have no access to the literal meaning of these songs, ‘they make their own translation, based principally on certain associations and phonetic concordances with the Portuguese language’ (ibid: 205). A second relevant feature of ritual songs is not semantic but performative: songs for the *orixás* are ‘much more emotional, dynamic and energetic, especially during trance occasions when the presence of the gods is celebrated with joy’ (ibid: 205).³⁰ The performative dimension of songs for *orixás* draws our attention to a central aspect of object and body manipulation: they can elicit intense emotional responses. As I have already noted, objects and body treatments are largely concomitant, and they take place during ritual sequences where a possession trance is expected.

How might such concomitance affect the empowering process of cultic objects?

Concomitance

I have defended elsewhere the notion that systematic association between body treatments and songs for the *orixás* during ritual activity might lead to a powerful coupling process between what I called ‘sensory’ and ‘symbolic captures’ (Halloy 2009). Sensory capture could be defined as

the attentional focus of the initiate on the sensations provoked by ritual treatments and/or the ‘approximation’ (*aproximação*) of his/her *orixá* as, for example, tactile and olfactory information given by hot blood or a decoction of leaves poured over his/her shoulders and head, or intense emotional responses such as ‘goose bumps’ and shivering provoked by the *orixá*’s acting (*atuação*) upon his body. Symbolic capture refers to the evocative process described above, which infuses sensory capture with meaning. ‘Meaning’, however, as I have tried to show in the case of *otás* and *ferramentas*, is far from being clear and univocal. During ritual action, concomitant manipulation of objects, substances and bodies, as well as gestures, songs and invocations not only stimulate the religious imagination but also tend to blur it by a kind of cognitive and ‘sensory overload’ (Cox 1969: 110, cited in Gell 1980: 233).

A central outcome of such a coupling process between sensory and symbolic captures is what I call the ‘somatic signature’ of the *orixá* – that is, a singular and ‘uncanny’ sensory and emotional configuration recognisable by initiates as marking the action of their *orixá* upon their own body (Halloy 2009). Cultic objects such as *otás*, *ferramentas* and *contas*, in this specific context, are part and parcel of the intense emotional process, acquiring – through the process of coupling sensations, emotions and imagination – not only a boosted evocative power but also intense ‘somatic markers’ associated with them (Damasio 1995).

If this analysis is correct, ritual features such as the heterogeneity of liturgical elements, the concomitance of treatments and the contiguity between the body of the initiate and *otás* or *ferramentas*, are propitious for eliciting, intensifying but also blurring the ‘evocatory’ and ‘emotional potential’ (Liénard 2003) of cultic objects. In the last section, I will try to show that isomorphism of body and object treatments, another important ritual feature, operates primarily at the perceptual level by hijacking intuitive expectations about the objects’ potential for action.

Isomorphism

A curious and, at first sight, insignificant ethnographic detail characterises the way stones and pieces of iron are ritually manipulated: once introduced into the ritual sphere, they are handled with caution and attention; they must not be tossed about or knocked together, and Xangô members take care not to let them fall. In more technical terms, we can say that the object’s ‘affordances’ are hijacked during ritual activity. Very schematically, an affordance could be defined as the potential for action which an object could offer because of its pure materiality (Gibson 1979:

127). In other words, an affordance is an intuitive or direct perception of an object's potential for action. Another central characteristic of an affordance is that its perception varies according to the organism interacting with the object (Gibson 1979).³¹ In the case of (small) stones, their 'hardness' and regular shape make them 'graspable' and good candidates for being thrown, interlocked, knocked together and banged more or less violently against other objects. Depending on the context of where they are encountered, they might thus be used as a tool, as a toy or as a weapon.

But if objects have affordances, their use is also constrained by cultural expectations. This is why some authors have suggested differentiating 'natural' affordances, which would correspond to some 'sensori-motor disponibility' of objects, from their 'cultural affordances' (Nisbett and Miyamoto 2005), from their *affordance dérivée* (Liénard 2005) or from their 'intentional disponibility' (Tomasello 2004).

In the case of *otás* and *ferramentas*, we have seen that, as opposed to the ordinary use of stones and pieces of iron, they are treated with elevated levels of attention and, to a certain extent, with sensitivity; they are not used as a tool or weapon.³² What I suggest here is that the 'hijacking' of natural affordances might be considered a specific feature of many cultic objects. Michael Tomasello describes this new quality of objects as their 'intentional disponibility', which would be learned through imitation and which implies taking into consideration the intentional relation of the learner towards the world, through the bias of the artefact (2004: 83).

But even closer to our theme is Pierre Liénard's notion of *affordance dérivée*. He defines it as 'a new potential for action obtained by a process of ritualising ordinary behaviour' (2003: 295). Going a step further in his analysis,³³ Liénard tries to identify the cognitive processes at work in ritual manipulation of objects, suggesting that ritual action

activates specific assumptions about the difference between living things and artifacts, and gives them a twist. Living kinds are used as tools, henceforth acquiring a function, an important feature of our understanding of artifacts. And artifacts are manipulated as if endowed with a powerful inherent quality, an essence, a central feature of our understanding of living things (2006: 343–4).

Liénard also describes the cognitive and emotional consequences of such hybridisation processes between ontological categories. He concludes that symbolic material such as an '*artifactual* living kind' or an '*essentialized*

artifact' is 'somewhat attention-grabbing (at least for a majority in the course of its successive instantiations) and should attain great success in a cultural tradition' (ibid: 370).

I think this is also what happens with *otás*, *ferramentas*, *contas* and the initiate himself. On the one hand, sacrificial animals are manipulated as mere artefacts, being categorised as members of a functional class (ibid: 352). What is of interest about them is their very materiality: their blood as the main vehicle of *axé*, and their organs as the main ingredients in offerings to *orixás*. Such a process of 'artefactualisation' is also true of the initiate himself, who is enclosed in the same ontological dynamic. As a matter of fact, it is as if the initiate were reduced to pure corporeity during ritual activity, and even more radically during episodes of possession. As Xangô members say,³⁴ he becomes mere 'material' (*matéria*) for the *orixá* to 'incorporate'. On the other hand, some objects (*otás*, *ferramentas* and *contas*) are manipulated with caution, not because they are breakable, but as if they had embedded within them an 'essential quality', which is the constitutive quality of living kinds (ibid).

In my view, such 'essentialisation' is a fundamental step in the empowering process of cultic objects. Because they are endowed with a new 'essence', a divine nature, their status changes from 'passive' to 'potentially active'. In other words, from being objects to be manipulated they become objects themselves capable of manipulation. In the present case, a specific ritual feature I described as 'invert isomorphism' – where living kinds are manipulated as tools and artefacts as living kinds – would play a central role in the ontological hybridisation of ritual artefacts. The initiates who see many objects and substances (heterogeneity) systematically associated with the manipulation of their head and body (concomitance and contiguity), who see – and feel – their treatment responding to very similar gestures and attitudes (isomorphism), are led to perceive these objects as their 'external organs' (Sansi-Roca 2005: 144), or as a 'composite body' (Losonczy, personal communication), or more generally as their person 'distributed' in the material environment (Strathern 1988; Gell 1998). The frequency of association between object/body manipulations and possession trance (concomitance) also strengthens the intimate connectivity between the stone, the *orixá* and the initiate's body by blurring ontological frontiers between the three categories of entities.

Does blurring ontological frontiers between objects, bodies and gods imply that Xangô members consider cultic objects as 'living kinds' or 'psychological beings' (Gell 1998)? Most certainly, *candomblé* people do not talk about cultic objects as having a mind, but they do say they have

a life: they need to be ‘fed’ and their essential force or *axé* might ‘grow’ or ‘decrease’ according to ritual treatments and contact with powerful beings, objects and substances.³⁵ And what makes such ontological hybridisation possible is a *cognitive, affective* and *perceptual mode* proper, in my view, to ritual activity, characterised in this particular case by a deeply rooted belief in magical contagion, by an exacerbated and blurry evocatory process, by an intense and ‘uncanny’ emotional quality and by a potential for action which is largely hijacked.

Concluding remarks

How do some cultic objects become powerful mediators between participants in an Afro-Brazilian cult and their personal deities? And what do we mean by ‘empowering objects’?

Defining objects as ‘powerful and intimate mediators’ between humans and deities consists in describing them as material entities able to make their human counterparts think, feel, perceive and act in a way that presupposes a tight connection between them, gods and bodies. In the Xangô cult, this ‘power’ of cultic objects would be elaborated through the interweaving – and mutual reinforcement – of at least two categories of factors. The first is the cultural transmission of interpretative models through narratives, such as dramatic stories of punishment, or cultural schemes such as the ‘transference of *axé*’ during ritual action, which are able to ‘organise experience’ by making sense of dramatic episodes or by framing the ritual interpretation of cultic objects. But neither narratives nor cultural schemes tell us how and why the intimate binding between objects, deities and humans is actually woven; and this is precisely what we should be able to explain. I suggested that the answer could be found in the second category of factors: the formal features of the body’s and objects’ treatments during ritual action.

My central claim is that the fundamental cognitive, emotional and perceptual processes that sustain the empowering of some cultic objects consist in an *ontological hybridisation process* realised through their introduction into the ritual sphere. A first step in this process starts with the ontological transformation of mere objects and artefacts into ‘object-gods’, where physical cues such as the stones’ shape, texture and colour, as well as the circumstances in which they were found, play an important role in guiding first presumptions of ‘object-god’ identification. But some exceptions apart, as we have seen, for *presumption* to become *conviction*, oracular consultation remains essential. A second step in the hybridisation process of cultic objects consists in transforming an ‘object-god’ into an ‘object-body’.

I suggested that such a radical change in apprehension is elicited by the *formal features* of ritual action (contiguity, heterogeneity, concomitance and invert isomorphism) involving objects and the body of individuals for whom they are being manipulated. Many other factors might be added to the list, such as the breaking of any standard connection between means and end in ritual (Liénard and Boyer 2006), the length and complexity of entanglement between objects, bodies and substances (Liénard 2006) and, in some cases, strategies of simulation and dissimulation (Houseman 2002 ; Sansi-Roca 2005). In my analysis, I tried to identify ritual features directly at work in the Xangô cult and able to elicit, but also hijack, evocatory, emotional and perceptual resources.

If such an analysis is correct, it raises a central question about the ‘empowering process’ of objects: is ritual action the only means of creating such powerful hybrids? A parallel with Ara Norenzayan and Scott Atran’s considerations about the nature and impact of some religious concepts on memory will help us to formulate a response to this difficult question.

Relying on experiments he conducted with Atran, Faulkner and Schaller, Norenzayan (2006) contests Pascal Boyer’s thesis, which posits that minimally counter-intuitive concepts (MCI)³⁶ are cognitively salient concepts easily remembered. Instead of sticking to concepts *per se*, the authors draw our attention to the importance of contextual expectations, concerns and goals of individuals dealing with MCI. More precisely, they insist on taking into account a ‘set of beliefs’ instead of simply ‘beliefs’: the impact of MCI is better when embedded in narratives where they are combined with intuitive concepts. What I suggest is that the same might be true for the cognitive and emotional impact of objects on their human counterpart. The cognitive impact or ‘ascendancy’ of cultic objects will depend, on the one hand, on individual *motivations* and cultural *expectations* relative to why and for whom these objects are mobilised and manipulated, and, on the other hand, on the very *form* of the practices in which they are embedded. On the ‘motivational’ and ‘cultural’ side, in our case study, ritual practices involving cultic objects are perceived as vital by Xangô members: what is at stake in purifying cleansing and sacrifice is their own life and health, but also, as mentioned by Xangô members themselves, the continuity of life in a broader sense. On the ‘formal’ side, I emphasise the importance of ritual features such as concomitance, contiguity, heterogeneity of ritual elements, and isomorphism of body/objects treatments, engaging the body in its most intimate (sensory and emotional) dimensions. As Atran points out elsewhere: ‘The meaning of an act of faith (like communion)

is not an inference to a specific proposition or set of propositions, but to an emotionally charged network of partial and changeable descriptions of counterfactual and counterintuitive worlds' (2004: 725). I have attempted to show in this paper that what Atran calls 'counterintuitive worlds' can be described in our case study by four categories of cognitive treatments of cultic objects: a deeply rooted belief in magical contagion, paradoxically enhanced and blurred evocatory process, hijacking of objects' intuitive potential for action, and intense and 'uncanny' emotional responses to their manipulation.

Is ritual action the only means of creating such powerful hybrids? Religious rituals are perhaps the best cultural devices for producing 'powerful objects' because of their ability to mobilise 'distinct belief networks that contribute to making religious claims quite natural to many people' (Boyer 2008: 1039). But many cultural practices can potentially produce 'powerful object' as soon as they are able, at least to some degree, to generate the same kind of cognitively, emotionally and perceptually charged networks of intuitive and counterintuitive material and immaterial worlds.

Notes

- 1 Objects are, obviously, at the core of materiality-based disciplines such as archaeology, architecture, history of art, ergonomics and engineering.
- 2 A question social and cognitive sciences should pay close attention to is not just how our cognitive architecture constrains cultural practice, but also how cultural practice may (deeply) transform intuitive ways of thinking, perceiving and feeling.
- 3 I borrow this term from Pascal Boyer (2008: 1039) who uses it to describe how religious concepts and rituals capitalise on our 'cognitive resources', and in many cases 'give them a twist' (Liénard 2006).
- 4 Close to the Bahian Candomblé Ketu in its mythology (based on African deities' stories) and liturgy (exclusive use of Yoruba in songs and invocations, complex and long initiatic process, ritual focus on African deities and family ancestors), the Xangô cult was classified by Brazilianist scholars (Bastide 1989; de Carvalho 1987; Segato 1995) as a 'traditional' cult – that is, a religious practice still very close to its African roots. The reference to a 'mystical' Africa but also Xangô members' emphasis on 'blood inheritance' and initiation as the unique models of transmission tends to legitimate and reinforce the idea of a preservation of such a 'traditional' knowledge. (Halloy 2010).
- 5 The vernacular expression 'spiritual entities' designates all the spiritual beings present in Afro-Brazilian religions.
- 6 Every altar is composed of a small earthenware bottle containing water and a large earthenware, wooden or ceramic plate containing the *otã* or *ferramentas*, as well as other objects associated with the *orixá*.

- 7 I will also mention *contas*, the coloured pearl necklaces that Xangô members wear in everyday life. *Contas* are not permanent objects on the altar, but, as we will see, they ‘extend’ the ritually built connection between the initiate, his initiator and *orixás* outside the ritual scene.
- 8 Nina Rodrigues made the same observation at the beginning of the twentieth century, asserting: ‘The *orixá* is the stone itself’ (1900: 29). Monique Augras (1992: 71) and José Jorge de Carvalho (1984: 101), nearly a century later, confirmed the persistence of this belief for Afro-Brazilians from Recife and Rio de Janeiro.
- 9 *Orixá* of sweet water, *Oxum* is frequently associated with femininity and fecundity.
- 10 *Orixá* of thunder, *Xangô* is the most popular *orixá* of the Afro-Brazilian pantheon in Recife.
- 11 I spent a total of some 17 months with the Xangô cult. The episode happened during my main period of fieldwork, between September 2002 and September 2003.
- 12 A *gigata* is a cross made of two small bones extracted from the lower part of a ‘four-legged’ animal’s jaw; it is a material relic of past sacrifices to the deity.
- 13 *Orixá* of the salted waters, *Yemanjá* is also considered the mother of *orixás*.
- 14 My repulsion in digging my hands into the rotten food and blood was perhaps the main cause of my unforgivable clumsiness.
- 15 *Ebo* means ‘offerings, sacrifice’ in Yoruba (Sachnine 1997 : 104). The priest’s words evoke the saying in English: ‘Throwing out the baby with the bath water’!
- 16 Conversion to Pentecostalism is, for many Xangô worshippers, the only way of leaving the *candomblé*. As Xangô members put it: ‘You know when you enter the *candomblé*, but you never get out of it!’ According to Xangô members, the ritually and socially constructed relations between the initiate, his *orixás* and his religious community (saint-family) cannot be erased. It is as if such relations could only be replaced by another strong spiritual, emotional and social link, one they may find in Pentecostalism, though such a hypothesis would of course need to be tested by more systematic ethnographic data.
- 17 As Roger Sansi-Roca rightly points out (this volume) : ‘it is often only through violence and ‘theft’ that the umbilical cord linking ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ through their *assentos* can be severed.’
- 18 In the present volume, Sansi-Roca nicely refines his theory by identifying two potential and mutually constitutive ontological dynamics at work in *encounter events* between a person and an object in *candomblé*. Following Marcio Goldman’s fetishist ontology (2009), such events can be described as the actualisation of ‘existing virtualities’ already present in persons and things, just waiting to be revealed and transformed through ritual practice and/or specific *encounter* situations. Taking a step aside from this point of view – which would correspond to the initiation process in orthodox *candomblé* – Sansi-Roca also underlines the ‘revelation’ potential of person/object encounters – that is, the possibility of producing a *new*, ‘unprecedented and unrepeatable’ emergent outcome. I am very much in phase with Sansi-Roca’s fine-grained ontological approach. However, I think that both ontologies are even more intimately

intermingled than Sansi-Roca presupposes in *candomblé*. As I suggest it elsewhere (Servais and Halloy, in press), first possessions could be described as a ‘promise of surprise’ for most initiates. In the Xangô cult, for example, possession is neither a condition, nor the necessary outcome of initiation, and it might happen at any time in the initiate’s religious career. Because possession is a personal and social highly gratifying experience, able to instill an intimate feeling of self-confidence and protection to the initiate and to enhance his reputation in his religious community, first possession can be described as some kind of an ‘ordinary revelation’ or, as suggested before, as a cultivated ‘promise of surprise’ which correspond to both actualisation and revelation ontologies.

- 19 The importance of shape and texture as criteria is clearly present in the recent introduction of (recomposed) semi-precious stones into the cult. Recomposed stones are not ‘natural’, being made of powdered stone.
- 20 The vernacular term frequently used by Xangô members to designate the dimension of existence marked by the intervention of *spiritual entities*.
- 21 As we will see later on, there is one exception to this rule in the Xangô cult. Let’s also mention that other modalities of cult such as Umbanda, or even more syncretic Afro-Brazilian cults where deities are used to deliver messages orally, oracle consultation can be ‘bypassed’ by possession. In the Xangô cult, however, *orixá* hardly speak to people, and even when they do it, their desiderata has to be confirmed by consulting the oracle.
- 22 *Orunmila*, a demiurge *orixá*, and *Exu*, the messenger *orixá* between men and gods (and a trickster), represent two specific cases in the Xangô cult. Indeed, the permanent material elements of *Orunmila* are organic rather than mineral, while the main material element of *Exu*’s *assentamento* is a roughly carved stone. I will not develop the singular introductory process – and the concomitant ontological dynamic – of these material elements in this paper.
- 23 The *assentamento* of *Ogum*, the *orixá* of war and vehicular locomotion – most weapons and vehicles being made of iron.
- 24 Marcio Goldman (2009) would say its divine ‘virtuality’ ...
- 25 The term ‘leaves’ designates metonymically the plants that are used in the cult. Every *orixá* has his own ‘leaves’ that are preferentially used for preparing his altar and washing his children’s body and head. For an excellent study of the selection and categorisation processes at work in the choice of leaves in the *candomblé*, see Ming (2001).
- 26 While the *feitura* ceremony only occurs once in the initiate’s life, its ritual syntax is repeated almost point by point during the *deká*, the ‘confirmation’ ritual that takes place after at least seven years of initiation, where initiates acquire *ebomi* status and will be authorised to open their own *terreiro* and have their own initiates.
- 27 Contrary to *obrigação* and *amasi*, possession during *feitura* is not valued by every cult chief. Some of them do not allow their initiates to be possessed during *feitura*, because, as one of them told me: ‘If they are manifested, they will remember nothing!’
- 28 To be exhaustive, the initiation process starts with the *bale* ceremony, the sacrifice to ancestors (*eguns*). It also includes the *obori* ceremony, or ‘sacrifice for the head’, a ceremony that precedes the *amasi*. The *saída de iaô*, the public

ceremony where the novice emerges from seclusion and is shown to his/her community, is also an important step. Finally, I could also mention the *ebo* ceremony, which takes place the third day after every sacrifice and corresponds to the transport of offerings outside the cult. But apart from the *ebo* ceremony, the *bale* and the *obori* do not involve the *orixá* altar nor the *orixás* themselves, but other spiritual entities such as the *eguns* (*bale*) and the *ori*, the ‘head’ of the initiate (*obori*). The *saída de iaô* ceremony involves *orixás*, but not the manipulation of their altar.

- 29 This particular feature is also clearly observable during the cleaning of the altars, on the third day after the sacrifice.
- 30 As de Carvalho (1993) has shown, musical repertoire of the Xangô cult can be divided into two distinct groups of songs, which differ in their semantic and performative dimensions. The first repertoire, he called ‘functional’ repertoire, is associated to precise acts or sequences of acts as, for example, the preparation of leaves decoction during the first part of the *amasí* or the preparation of the animal and the killing act during *obrigação*. The second repertoire is composed by songs for the *orixás*, and, in our case, corresponds to the second stage of rituals, when objects and body treatments are associated and possession expected.
- 31 Two distinct animal species might perceive different affordances in the same object (if they perceive any affordance at all).
- 32 There is one exception to this rule – *coriscos* might be used to render unconscious the ram offered to a Xangô. But even in this case, the gesture of doing this with three blows on the animal’s head is most often ‘symbolic’ rather than real.
- 33 His analysis is of a sacrificial rite among the Turkana (Kenya).
- 34 During possession, initiates are no longer in command; their *orixá* assumes their own motility, character and desiderata. Do ordinary people need to be, as a preliminary stage, transformed into a mere artefact in order to become endowed with a divine essence during possession?
- 35 I am particularly grateful to Roger Sansi-Roca who drew my attention to this important distinction between ‘having a life’ and ‘having a mind’ for objects in the *candomblé*.
- 36 A MCI concept has been defined by Justin Barrett as ‘a special group of concepts – concepts that largely match intuitive assumptions about their own group of things [e.g. persons, animals, tools, plants] but have a small number of tweaks that make them particularly interesting and memorable’ (2004: 23).

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