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## **A FESTIVAL IN THE RIO SUBURBS: PERSONS AND THINGS SURROUNDING COSMAS AND DAMIAN**

### **ON CANDIES AND SAINTS**

Every year on September 27th, since at least the first half of the twentieth century, a lively religious festival invades the streets of Rio de Janeiro. Groups of children wander through the city in search of Cosmas and Damian sweet bags. Today these movements are concentrated primarily in the city's suburbs – the space covered by this photo-ethnographic essay. On their journeys, children encounter candy givers at the doors of houses, apartment blocks, garages, and cul-de-sacs. They also discover more sweet bags as they walk by the roadsides, offered to them by drivers and passengers from their car windows. Sometimes they come across birthday party analogs, with infantile decorations featuring characters made famous by TV programs.

In addition to the street festivals, places like Catholic Churches and Umbanda and Candomblé Centers also distribute little bags filled with candies and toys, in addition to holding special rites. Recently, even Evangelical churches have begun handing out candies – sometimes not on the precise day of the traditional festival, but on a nearby date – in a clear attempt to counter the Catholic and Afro-Brazilian forms of worship, without neglecting the offering of candies to the group privileged on this date: children.

The images contained in this essay were the outcome of three days of photography in September 2015, which were part of the project “Holy candies, sweet saints: reciprocity, inter-religious relations and urban flows surrounding the worship of Cosmas and Damian in Rio de Janeiro”. The *Holy candies, sweet saints* project united the “collective, intergenerational and multi-sited work” (Menezes 2016) of diverse researchers. I was part of the project team on two occasions: the first in September 2015, documenting the festival and the different tasks surrounding Cosmas and Damian Day, which are the topics of this essay; and the second in February 2016, when I was able to document the adaptation of Cosmas, Damian, and the Ibejis (deities from the Yoruba tradition, associated with these Catholic saints) as the chosen theme of the parade by the *Renascer de Jacarepaguá* Samba School, a topic that I intend to explore at a later date. The material presented here benefited, then, from the knowledge accumulated by the project team over its previous years of development and could not have been elaborated ethnographically outside of the laboratorial context of this collective research.<sup>1</sup>

figure 1



<sup>1</sup> The research studies of the “Holy Candies, Sweet Saints” project began in 2013 and were funded by the Rio de Janeiro State Young Scientist Program and the Carlos Chagas Research Support Foundation in Rio de Janeiro (Faperj). The project is coordinated by Renata Menezes, Associate Professor at PPGAS-MN-UFRJ and counts with the more direct partnership of two of her supervisees, Morena Freitas and Lucas Bártolo, PhD and MA students, respectively, from this same institution. Other researchers with varying levels of educational training also participate in the project. I would like to thank Luís, Taís, Deise, Tatiane, Ana Lúcia, Luciana and the other people that helped the achievement of this research.

## THE FESTIVAL BACKGROUND

To document the Cosmas and Damian festival in September 2015, I met the project team on two occasions. The proposal presented to me during these meetings involved documenting two moments related to the commemorative date: behind the scenes of the festival in the Rio de Janeiro suburbs, and the events that took place on September 27th in the districts of Olaria and Penha, and nearby areas.

We began on the September 24th in the Madureira neighbourhood, accompanying the purchases of candies at its famous “Mercadão” (Big Market). An important commercial hub in Rio de Janeiro’s Northern Zone, the “Mercadão de Madureira” contains dozens of shops selling diverse goods – from presents to candies, uniforms, and religious items. The influx of merchandise supplied by the stores is adapted to the seasonality of the main commemorative dates of Brazil’s religious and secular calendars: Mother’s Day, Children’s Day, Christmas, Saint George’s Day, Iemanjá (Yemoja) Day – to cite just some of the most important.

figure 2



Around Cosmas and Damian Day, the stores selling religious articles offer three-dimensional images and effigies printed on paper, depicting the saints and other entities related to them, which are sold to Catholics and to Umbanda and Candomblé followers. Cosmas and Damian are associated in these traditions with Ibeji, a pair of Orisha twins, and many images of Cosmas and Damian also contain a third entity, Doum, in a clear association with the Yoruba Idowu<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1).

<sup>2</sup> *Idowu* in the Yoruba tradition is the child born after the birth of the twins so that the mother does not go mad (Freitas 2015: 29). He is the third, who comes to unbalance the strange twinning.

Also sold in the Mercadão are clothing and adornments for Erês – child entities of mediums from Afro-Brazilian religions – which will be used in the festivals in which they are invited to descend to the *terreiros* (temples), dance and offer consultations to the visitors of the centers.

figure 3



The windows of the festival stores display sweet bags as well as table and wall adornments depicting the saints. Families usually buy these items with their children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews (Figure 2). This is a way of passing on the tradition of worship, as some of the research interlocutors stated. The sale of candies to fill the traditional Cosmas and Damian bags leads to a bustle of activity in the Mercadão de Madureira in the week running up to September 27th<sup>3</sup>. By focusing on the candies and images, we noted that a long trajectory of “things” began in these stores, a cultural biography (Kopytoff 1986) whose culminating point is the handing of sweet bags to the children, in the house doorways or from inside cars, first passing through the process of fetching, unwrapping, and repackaging the candies (see Menezes 2016), as well as the displaying of images.

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<sup>3</sup> The region’s main sweet shops are found in the external area of the Mercadão, at street level. The Mercadão is part of a broader geography of candy shops that serve as reference points to the worshippers of Cosmas and Damian on this date. Next to Madureira’s main commercial hub there are the stores belonging to the *UFA Doces* chain, with wholesale salespoints in the northern and western Zones of Rio, and the stores of the *Casas do Biscoito* chain, whose prices are higher than those of the former, but which, dispersed throughout the city, are more conveniently located for some buyers. Finally, there are also some important stores of this circuit in Bonsucesso, also in the suburb of the northern Zone.

From the Mercado we proceeded the following day to accompany the filling of the traditional bags and the making of other foods connected to the worship of the saints in the houses of some selected interlocutors. In this context, we were able to observe a ritualistic complexity. The most common offerings are the famous Cosmas and Damian sweet bags. Producing them means having to bag the candies systematically – and here an equal distribution between the bags is deemed essential by the worshippers – removing them from their original packaging and placing them in wrappers printed with the images of the saints.

Like the purchase of the candies, preparing the little bags is a job undertaken by the family. And each family has its own form of thinking, preparing, and storing the offerings before their distribution. In Estácio we followed a family consisting of a father, a mother and a two-year-old son bagging their candies. These bags only contained candies deemed “traditional” (Figure 3). Among the worshippers, two definitions of traditional candies exist, definitions that interweave worship of the sacred and family tradition (see Menezes 2016 and Duarte 2006). On one hand, interlocutors refer to specific candies as *traditional to the date* and/or *traditional for a large number of believers*. These are *maria mole* (a kind of marshmallow), *doce de abóbora* (pumpkin jam), *suspiro* (meringue), and *pé de moleque* (peanut brittle), for example. On the other hand, there are candies that are *traditional to a specific family*, that is, traditional in the memory and practices of a particular family. These are candies “that must be included” because they refer to intergenerational relations described through comments like: “my grandfather/grandmother always offered that candy / that chocolate, as well as the traditional candies, which is why I continue to hand out these candies...”

As well as preparing the bags, followers of candomblé – and sometimes umbanda – prepare “saint foods”, made with ingredients specific to the day, such as *caruru* (a meal made from okra, shrimp and other ingredients). On the eve of the 27th, we met the daughter of a late mother-of-saint, preparing the offerings in a large table to be placed at the door of her house, on which the children would find bags of candies, cakes, pop, and even savoury foods. In her house, situated in Vaz Lobo, she alternated packing the sweet bags with making *omolokun de Oxum* (Figure 4), a dish associated with fertility – and, therefore, with pregnant women, like her daughter at that moment<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Through the notion of fertility, *omolokun* is also associated with Cosmas and Damian, since the saints are closely linked to children, the receivers of many promises linked to the desire for a child/grandchild or for the good health of the latter (Morena Freitas, personal communication).

figure 4



#### COSMAS AND DAMIAN DAY

On the awaited day of September 27th, as well as documenting the offering of candy bags around an altar-square devoted to the saints in Penha, called Cosmas and Damian Square (*Praça de Cosme e Damião*), we also registered the circulation of people and the distribution of candies and toys at the Church of Saint George and Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian (in the same district), as well as the Erês festivals held at an umbanda *terreiro*, the Boiadeiro Temple, located in Olaria. Complementing these *modalities of worship*, we sought to document the handing and receiving of candies in a semi-closed district in Vista Alegre called Bairrinho.

figure 5



figure 6



Cosmas and Damian Square, located in the Penha district, is one of the busiest points for distributing and receiving candies in the Rio suburbs. The offerings in this square revolve around a small altar with images of the saints – the trio, with Doum in the middle – around which spaces managed by the local people are arranged concentrically: inside the central circle we see the area of the altar and its surroundings. Fenced off for offering and taking candies, this area is separated by the cement pavement, which in turn is separated from the grass of the square and the road itself. The elements of urbanization used here enable diverse forms of control over the flow of people and things in the square, carried out by its “administrators” – a group of neighbours who live nearby and maintain the space independently of the public authorities.

On the altar, the promises for Cosmas and Damian frequently focus on children and their health. The offerings of candies made to the images are accompanied by prayers and requests. At this moment, the worshipper generally stays alone with the images, even if they have come with their family (Figure 5). Many of those frequenting the altar have been known to the administrators for a long time, meaning that the offering is also a moment for interaction between people from different backgrounds.

Early in the morning, before the public arrive, the administrators change the flowers on the altar and renew the offerings of candies. Placed in front of each image on the altar in 2015 was a miniature cart and a small cup of *guaraná* – “the typical drink of the festival, prescribed in various songs that mention Cosmas and Damian” (Menezes 2016: 2). These elements condensed, in a precise way, the offerings of toys and candies over the course of the day (Figure 6).

From time to time, children – and some adults – are allowed to enter the space of the offerings/gifts to collect the candies left by the worshippers (Figure 7). The administrators control the flow of people – reducing it to two or three at a time – so that this moment is not spoilt by fights or fierce dispute, which can sometimes happen. Those who take the candies have a limited time to do so, while the time for praying and for donating candies is not controlled. Mothers with young infants visit throughout the day (Figure 8), also groups of children led by adults or adolescents. The presence of adults enabled us to note a characteristic feature of the Cosmas and Damian festival, namely the broadening of the notion of childhood, which, in some contexts, extends to encompass people from the neediest sectors of the surrounding society.

**figure 7**



**figure 8**



As mentioned above, disputes are a constitutive element of the festival. On the receivers' side, the competition is to obtain more and better sweet bags – the children wander around with rucksacks to carry lots of offerings. On the givers' side, people compete over or compare the types and quantity of bags donated – offering “many bags” and/or “good bags”, with good quality candies and in a large quantity, is considered the ideal for this group. Disputes may also occur between givers and receivers: children and adults very often “lunge” – as commonly occurs with the offerings made from the cars driving around the square and other points with large numbers of receivers – and may forcibly snatch the bags precisely from those who wanted to offer them the candies (Figure 9).

figure 9



A few blocks from Cosmas and Damian Square, the frequenters of one *umbanda terreiro* were offering candies and toys to the children and adults who were passing through the center's doors. Here, the organisation of the flow of people and things does not involve the urban layout of a square, but the architecture of the residential building in which the *terreiro* is located. In the year we documented the festival, as the children entered the space via the garage, they completed a specific circuit: they first headed to the rear of the space where they received toys; on the way back, they received bags of candies on the left and lollipops on the right (Figure 10). As in Cosmas and Damian Square, the givers always seek to maintain order and friendly interactions among the children. There is also a strong didactic dimension – the transmission and teaching of “good customs” – that permeates the offering of candies and toys on the day in question.

figure 10



Turning left, at the end of the street where the umbanda centre is located, we arrive at a square where the Orthodox Church of Saint George and Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian was built (Figure 11).

figure 11



The church, a simple building whose interior is partly covered in blue tiles, displays pictures of saints and Biblical scenes on its walls, painted in Orthodox style, accompanied by neo-classical style statues. Throughout the morning, the temple welcomes the worshippers of the saints. They interact with the diverse images located inside the church – found on the side altar at the entrance (to the right), on the central altar, and in the vestry. The worshippers gather around images of Cosmas and Damian – here without Doum, in a clear disassociation from Afro-Brazilian traditions. Some offer candy bags to the images (Figure 12). In the afternoon, the Orthodox Church of Saint George and Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian becomes the destination for hundreds of people looking for the offerings of toys and candies made by the worshippers in the morning. In this case, the flow of persons and things is controlled by the church architecture: the recipients are organised in queues and must follow a specific circuit, passing through the exterior righthand corridor of the building, where they receive the presents and which they leave by entering into the church, as though being invited to come into the space of the church by the mediation of the candies and toys offering (Figure 13).

**figure 12**



figure 13



While the festivals unfold in Cosmas and Damian Square, the Umbanda Center, and the Orthodox Church; in Vista Alegre – a district bordering Penha –, an area originally built as a village for factory workers, today called “Bairrinho”, holds its own Cosmas and Damian festival. Some of the events documented in the district are paradigmatic of what occurs on Cosmas and Damian Day throughout Rio as a whole. In one garage, for instance, we found two dimensions of the saints’ worship. Children are invited to sing happy birthday to Cosmas and Damian before reciting the Lord’s Prayer, a traditional Christian verse (Figure 14), in honour of the saints. After these ritualistic actions, they receive bags of candies and slices of cake from the hostess.

figure 14



At the end of the day, returning to the umbanda temple, we also encountered the last action of the *multi-sited* festival of Cosmas and Damian that we accompanied. At the centre, diverse elements glimpsed in this photographic essay – candies, toys, children, birthday decorations, and children’s clothing – converged in the realization of the “Erês festival”.

In a *terreiro* partially transformed into a children’s party hall, the *gira festiva* (“festive circling”) began with all the mediums dressed in white, wearing necklaces with scarves on their heads. After a few songs, the temple’s main entity-guides descended and prepared for the arrival of the Erês. After the first part of the *gira*, by now already nightfall, the Erês descended. The festival was preceded by an important change of clothing – which ranges from a complete change of clothes to the simply adding of caps, pacifiers, bows and other infantile decorations to the traditional white clothing. In this sense, the clothes and decorations are wrappings, layers of materials (see Gell 1998) that help the mediums to compose their child entities. The things here – images, clothing and adornments – thus permit different connections with the invisible world: either they point to a pair of referents, Cosmas and Damian, or they help create the conditions for particular entities to approach the mediums (Figure 15). The festival is festive, joyful, and marked by small transgressions, associated with childhood, in the interaction between the entities and the public.

figure 15



## FINAL NOTE

This documentation had the broader aim of demonstrating through texts and images how “a festival is made”, along with the discursive and practical operations – spatial, interactive etc. – that converge on a specific religious event. Through the selection of images shown in this essay, I have sought to illustrate how the Cosmas and Damian festival rearticulates “the dynamics [...] of a region” (Menezes 2016: 4), as well as the discursive categories and bodily performances linked to childhood (Freitas 2015), class relations, and to worship. From these interactions, I have highlighted *the spatial control and management of the flow of people and things*, characteristic of the exchanges and interactions that occur annually on Cosmas and Damian Day in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.

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