

VAI- VAI – PROTECTED AND BLESSED BY OGUM – A PRIVILEGE THAT DOES NOT HAPPEN TO JUST ANYONE

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a brief overview of the religious influence that *Escola de Samba Vai-Vai* has in its daily life and transmits to its members. Such references range from the European Catholic ones to the Afro-Diasporic ones, especially the devotion that the samba school has in relation to Ogum, Vai-Vai's *orixá*. This profane way of expressing faith is part of *Vai-Vai*'s routine, and votive parties are part of the institution's annual calendar. However, that is not all. In the carnival parades—the moment of greatest visibility that *Escolas de Samba* have throughout the year—this religiosity is also evident, with representations of yorubás deities appearing in the parades, especially representations of Ogum, which have appeared more frequently in recent years.

KEYWORDS

Afro-religiosity;
Candomblé; *Escolas de samba*, Carnival,
Ogum

INTRODUCTION

Vai-Vai¹, a samba school founded in 1930, is one of the most traditional carnival associations in São Paulo and in Brazil. With a trajectory marked by the religious influence of different origins, the school located in Bixiga—a traditional neighborhood in the central region of São Paulo— switches from saints to *orixás*.

Once established in an area with a strong presence of Italian— and Catholic—immigrants, black people who settled in there needed to blend into the reality of the same place, so they ended up approaching European and Christian religiosity, even though they still continued to worship the deities of their homelands or their ancestors. Thus, as a way to resist, survive and keep their faith, religious syncretism set the tone for the establishment of black groups in Brazil.

For black people, faith and party were never dissociated, therefore carnival and samba schools find in Brazil a lively and vibrant way to link these two important elements of human condition.

The links between the sacred and the profane can be observed, in a denser perspective, in social practices such as carnival, whose origins, articulated in different ways in distinct cultures, accentuate the polymorphic meaning that characterizes it. Carnival, because of its ritual dimension, inaugurates a specific time for its manifestation. It is a cycle time that breaks historical linear time and makes possible the reconstitution—even if temporary—of the social universe through new rules. These rules invert and transgress those that are in force in everyday life and are responsible for establishing a heterogeneous web of achievements and meanings. This means that, beforehand, it is necessary to think of carnival in terms of its plurality, a fact that opens up space for conflicts and negotiations between the values of the sacred and the profane. (Pereira 2004, 44)

In Vai-Vai, people say “Amen” and also celebrate Catholic saints such as *São Benedito*, *Cosme e Damião* and have a straight relationship with the Parish *Nossa Senhora Achirópita*, who is the patroness of Bixiga—with its nationally famous church. However, there is also a lot of “*axé*” going through this samba school. *Axé*, in general terms, could be translated as “vital energy”. Nevertheless, in *Candomblé* philosophy, it is much more than that.

Axé is constituted from an interactive, interdependent and intercrossed movement from the contraction of two coexistent places: *Orun*—metaphysical world without limits between spiritual and ancestral universe—and *Ayê*—physical

1. In its official site, the association is designated as “O Vai Vai”, taking the male gender article “o”, despite the fact that the Portuguese word for samba school (*escola de samba*) takes a female gender article “a”. The explanation for this is that before becoming a school, it started as a small group (*cordão*- male gender word in Portuguese), then a recreational club (*grêmio recreativo* - male gender) and just afterwards a school (female gender word). Available at: <https://www.vaivai.com.br/sobre/>. Accessed on: 04/29/2021.

world with limits between human and natural universe. *Axé* is shared between worlds, between forms and between worlds and forms. *Axé* is interchanged, shared and restituted in a continuous circular movement. *Orun* cohabits in *Ayê*, and *Axé*, as vital energy, is “an ancestral blood”. (Faislon, L. L.; Benedicto, R. M. 2020, 19).

With this cosmogonic view, it is understandable that all beings that inhabit *ayê* have their own *axé*, which interacts, connects and integrates with the *axé* of all living forms around: human or non-human, animals, plants, inert or animate. They all collaborate so that the balance between *orun* and *ayê* is maintained, through the movement of *axé*. Besides the religious aspect, in Brazil, *axé* has also become an identity marker. “Being from *axé*”, “*axé* house” and “made in *axé*”, among others, are expressions commonly used by African Brazilian religion practitioners and they refer to them as to a place of pride and resistance, over other religious denominations, mostly of dominant European origin in social culture.

The main *axé* that supports Vai-Vai comes from Ogum *orixá*, the great civilizing hero of Yoruba people, the lord of metals, war and technological advances, who comes to the school—along with Exu—in the 1970’s, through the hands of a priestess (*yalorixá*) who ritually consecrates the school’s court² so it could also become a place of worshi

In the 2010’s, when Neguitão became the school’s president, Ogum gained even more prominence and was formally considered the patron of the association and this *orixá*’s presence became a constant in Vai-Vai’s parties, rituals and parades.

Vai-Vai follows its path, with parties and faith. And as the school is “the black soul of Bixiga”, a place of resistance of African descendant identity and culture, in its fans, members and components’ vision and faith, it is Ogum who comes forward, guiding their steps, and filling them with *axé*.

VAI-VAI: AMONG SAINTS AND ORIXÁS

At the beginning of the 20th century, when urban centres in Brazil were still developing, new freed blacks—who were gradually replaced by immigrant labor on large farms in rural centres, in a movement to whiten the country—were considered cheap labor, did not have any institutional support for their establishment and ended up with a few options to work (Souza, 2005).

Most blacks and mixed-race people were kept in the most disadvantaged segments of the population, not only by the precariousness of the opportunities offered for their education and professional improvement, but also because of the

2. The samba school’s court is the headquarters where the school has its rehearsals and social events take place. In Portuguese, it is called *quadra*.

general preference for whiter people to occupy the best jobs in the labor market. (Souza 2005, 142-143).

Thus, blacks—from both urban and rural areas—began to occupy the central area of São Paulo, the industrial and commercial region of the city, where they could find, in addition to small job opportunities, housing options at low cost. Among these districts were Barra Funda, Baixada do Glicério and, one in particular, Bixiga, or as it came to be known later, Bela Vista.

Bixiga became a district from 1879 on, with the arrival and establishment of Italian immigrants—and it was precisely there that, for more than 90 years, the headquarters of *Grêmio Recreativo, Cultural and Social Escola de Samba Vai- Vai*, or, simply, Vai-Vai, one of the most important carnival associations in Brazil, are. Founded in 1930 by young blacks and poor people—with great influence from the *samba de bumbo* (also known as rural samba), a very present element in Catholic festivities in the countryside of the state, especially played in celebrations in honor of Bom Jesus, in Pirapora³—and until today it represents an African culture resistance place.

Even with the arrival and permanence of blacks in Bela Vista, the Italians were the ones who determined much of the neighborhood's characteristics, including its religiosity. Among the sacred festivities that took place in the neighborhood was the Feast of *Nossa Senhora Achirópita*, which until today fills the streets with aromas and faith directly from Italy.

In a stereotyped view of the neighborhood, people may think that Bixiga was a reference for coexistence and racial integration, with Italians and blacks living harmoniously, but the reality was not quite that.

The poor Italians accepted to live in the tenements with the blacks only in case of necessity. Despite maintaining friendly relationships, Italians and blacks very rarely defined marriage relationships. The relationships were much more of 'master and servant'; more permeated by paternalism than truly by ethnic and social integration (...) (Sccarlato 1988, 71)

Thus, with the imminent tension among the residents in the area, the division was physical and spatial, too. The Italians inhabited the more noble parts of the neighborhood, while the blacks stayed in the steep areas or at the bottom of the Saracura river valley, areas that usually experienced floods during rainy seasons.

3. Pirapora is a small city in São Paulo state. Because of its festivities to *Nossa Senhora das Dores* and *Bom Jesus*, it became a famous original samba place. At that time, the various black "battalions" coming from different locations "challenged" each other through improvised chants, marked by the presence of the bass drum and other percussion instruments, typical from rural samba.

This small, less noble area of the neighborhood became a reference for black people in the region and surrounding areas. Bixiga has become a “new *quilombo*”.

(...) To “become a new *quilombo*”, that is, to organize against any oppressive attitude or system, becomes, therefore, nowadays the rekindled flame to, in the contemporary condition, give meaning, stimulate, strengthen the fight against discrimination and its effects. Now, it throws light on a part of the past, one that stands out for the emphatic reference contained in statistics where blacks are the majority of socially excluded. It now comes to illuminate a part of the past; *quilombo* is, therefore, the main motto to discuss a denied citizenship (Leite 2000, 349)

It is within this “new *quilombo*” understanding that Vai-Vai has sought throughout its history to keep its importance as a place of resistance for a citizenship that was denied. In a way, it takes place through the cultural, artistic and even religious point of view since samba schools represent an environment of relationship between the sacred and the profane, between party and faith.

[...] the complexity of the sacred compels us to analyze the resulting implications of the way it is lived and the multiple functions it assumes in society. In other words, the sacred is present in social circles linked to religious experience. Nevertheless, it transcends these circles to establish itself in other spheres, in which it dialogues, in a complex way, with the profane (Pereira 2004, 44).

When one goes into Vai-Vai court, a sacred environment is noticed. Sharing space with costumes, musical instruments and trophies—this association is the biggest champion of São Paulo carnival, with 15 titles in *Grupo Especial* and one in *Grupo de Acesso*⁵—, there are altars, ostensibly maintained, with their lit candles, flowers and other offerings, where images of Catholic saints and *orixás* of African cults coexist. There are representations of *Nossa Senhora Aparecida*, *São Cosme and Damião*, *Oxum*, *Obaluayê*, *Iansã*, *Santa Bárbara*, among others. In addition to several images of *São Jorge*, which within the structure of religious syncretism, is associated with *Ogum* (Valente 1955), the school’s patron *orixá*.

In addition to the deities that occupy the various altars, in another part of the court, there is a non-religious element, which has great importance and receives its own honors and reverences as if it were also a deity.

On the other side, facing all the altars, a small stage was built on top of the bar, where the imposing school flag (*pa-*

4. In Brazil, during slavery time, “*quilombo*” was the name given to hinterland settlements of runaway slaves.

5. Inside the annual championship that takes place on Carnival, samba schools are divided in groups. The best and most traditional schools are in *Grupo Especial* (Special Group) and compete among each other; when a school gets bad grades during a parade, it may be downgraded to *Grupo de Acesso* (Access Group) where other associations compete in order to be in *Grupo Especial*.

vilhão) is located, its largest symbol, which cannot be removed, giving the impression that it is a religious settlement. For samba dancers, the flag is like a deity (Alexandre 2017).

The religious experience within Vai-Vai also includes more specific attention to the symbology of the deities represented on its altars, the school has a reserved space, where the settlement of some *orixás* (*orixás* sites), guardians of the association, are kept.

Settlements are physical representations of the *orixás*, formed by elements that refer to their mythology and domain, where devotees believe that the divinity's vital energy is set and in which offerings and sacrifices are made. They represent the direct relationship between the devotee and the *orixá*. The settlement is also a connecting portal between the visible and the non-visible world. It is from it that the circulation, transformation and replacement of *axé* takes place, the exchange of information between the worlds happens. Thus, the presence of these elements inside Vai-Vai court, guarantees the connection of the school—and its members—with the deities set there, as well as with other *orixás*, and the protection of the spiritual and energetic integrity of the association.

The presence of the settlements in a room intended for them within the court makes Vai-Vai space not only festive, but also religious. The deities set there need specific care, which is carried out by specialized hands far from the eyes of most of the community, in private moments, having just a few people involved.

The routine for taking care of the sacred space involves the *babalorixá* coming and going to the court, cleaning the room and the settlements, cleaning (*ebós*) all internal and external spaces with leaves, baths and smoking, and sacrificial offerings. On days of festivals and services, the *babalorixá* says he does not hesitate to comply with all the precepts, before and after, justifying the holding of services, in which drums are played, people sing in Yoruba and dance properly dressed to praise the *orixás* (Alexandre 2017, 128).

Some of this part of Vai-Vai's religious experience is restricted, while others are open to the public, with the participation of the community, curious people, school fans and members of other associations. Contrary to what people who do not have a closer relationship with Carnival may think, samba schools are active throughout the year, with an intense calendar of festivities and activities that directly involve—or not—the Carnival parade. In the case of Vai-Vai, in addition to the common activities to almost all samba schools— such as rehearsals, samba contests, plot announcement, costume presentation, among others—, there is also a series of events in honor of the saints and *orixás*, showing even more the vocation of linking the sacred and the profane that the association has.

In Vai-Vai's sacred-festive calendar, the one who starts the year, opening the way, taking the first step on a journey to Carnival, is Ogum. With a big party that includes a procession and a *feijoada*, the patron deity of the school is celebrated.

OGUM - 4 FACES OF A WARRIOR

a) OGUM: LORD OF IRÊ

Ogum is a commonly worshiped deity until today in Yoruba territory, having a river and a state named after him in Nigeria. However, its importance for African peoples who worship him goes beyond the religious aspect:

Ogum is seen as a warrior *orixá*, bloodthirsty, cruel, unstable, dominating and impatient. On the other hand, he is the one who opens the way, shows new opportunities, and provides the necessary strength in everyday disputes and difficulties. He is the one who gives us enough material instruments for our survival, who guarantees our security, who wins battles for us. Finally, Ogum is also the protagonist of myths that speak of carnal love and passion, and even goes to war for love.

Ogum is above all a civilizing hero: in the memory of his people, he is at the forefront of shaping culture and history, personifying the different moments in the evolution of humanity itself. (Prandi 2019, 23)

In addition to being a deity, Ogum is also known as a historical figure, a great community leader, who has in his biography great deeds and achievements. He would even have won a title of nobility.

Ogum, as a historical character, would have been the eldest son of Odùduà, the founder of Ifé. He was a fearsome warrior who fought incessantly against the kingdoms nearby. From these expeditions, he always brought a rich booty and numerous slaves. He made war against the city of Arah and destroyed it. He sacked and devastated many other states and seized upon the city of Ire, killed the king, put his own son on the throne and returned in glory, using the title himself: "Oniùré" (King of Ire) (Verger 1981, 40)

Due to the great importance that family and ancestry relationships have in the cosmogony and philosophy of this ethnic group, a tradition among Yorubás is to elevate people who stood out during their lives, with remarkable achievements, whether for the community or the family, or in any other circumstances, to deity status. It was not different with Ogum.

The myths say that when he returned to Irê, after spending a period in Ifé, kingdom of his father, Odùduà, Ogum realized that his subjects did not recognize him. He was hungry and thirsty, and as much as he asked for food and drink to Irê people, no one answered his requests. As he felt despised by the inhabitants of his own kingdom, Ogum was seized by

revolt and wrath, and started to destroy the whole city. Still not happy, he started to cut off the head of anyone who crossed his path, promoting a great massacre, bathing the streets of Irê with the blood of its residents.

After a while, Ogum's son came to meet him, bringing his favorite food and drink, and paying all the honors a king deserves. The young man then explained to his father that, because of an ongoing ritual in honor of the ancestors, everyone had to be completely silent, and that was why people were not speaking to him.

Ogum then, ashamed and regretting his moment of anger and intolerance, decides that he should no longer live, takes refuge in the forest due to his torment, and starts to martyrize himself. No longer able to forgive himself, as his last act, Ogum stuck his machete in the ground, which opened and swallowed him inside. At that moment, Ogum ceases to be human and becomes an *orixá* (Prandi, 2001). He becomes the lord of war, paths and technology. Ogum becomes then the civilizing hero of Yorubá people.

b) OGUM ARRIVES IN BRAZIL

As a divinity, Ogum crosses the Atlantic Ocean and lands in Brazil in the company of black men and women who came to the new world enslaved. As well as other *orixás*, worshiped in present day Nigeria, Togo and part of Benin, Ogum is part of a pantheon and organizational system which, in Brazil, was institutionalized as *Candomblé da Nação Ketu*, based on practices and devotions of Yoruba origin (other Nations originate from the devotion of other deities, worshiped by other peoples, such as the Nkisses, from *Candomblé of Angola*, and *Voduns*, celebrated in the *Candomblé Jeje*).

Among the main domains attributed to Ogum in his homeland, some were either suppressed or even destined to other deities. An example of this is agriculture, which in Brazil ended up without a protective *orixá*; or hunting, which has been conferred on Oxossi, a deity originally worshiped in the kingdom of Ketu, Nigeria and, in Brazil, is mythically related to Ogum, as if they were brothers (Verger 1981).

Thus, in *Candomblé* born in Brazilian lands, Ogum is the deity related to work, technological advances, iron, steel, and especially war. His representation in Brazil assumes elements with military references, resembling warriors of European origin, such as the Templars. The helmet replaces the kufi⁶ traditionally used by this *orixá* in Nigeria, as well as a sword and a shield replace the machete that opens paths.

6. The kufi is a kind of rounded cap, without a brim, widely used by men in different regions of Africa and southern Asia. Priests and devotees of Ogum often use an elongated model, which falls to one side. Many representations of the deity appear using the same model.

c) OGUM MEETS *JORGE*

São Jorge is a Catholic saint, who would have lived around the end of the third century, in the region of Cappadocia, which is today in the region of Turkey. Popular tradition says that

As a child, he lost his father, and his mother took him to Palestine, where he was educated for a military career. His dedication and skill led the Emperor Diocletian to bestow on him the title of Tribune. *Jorge* becomes a Christian, but at the age of twenty-three, he started to live in the Roman imperial court, exercising high functions (Marques, Morais 2011, 4)

When Diocletian decided to kill all Christians who, he believed, could threaten the power of his empire, he made a public decree against which *Jorge* spoke out. Diocletian, angry at the knight's posture, demanded for his arrest and torture, so that he would renounce his faith. Periodically, the prisoner was taken to the Emperor, so that he could check if *Jorge* had already abandoned Christianity, which he denied to do. Given the situation, the Emperor condemned the soldier to death, and he is beheaded on April 23, 303 AD, date chosen for the celebration of the now martyr (*Jorge*, 1958).

The faith in *Jorge* expanded throughout Europe and he became the official Patron Saint of Portugal, and with the arrival of the Portuguese Royal Family—who fled from the Napoleonic invasions in Europe—the first image of the saint, with its iconography built around of the knight who rides a horse and defeats a dragon, came to Brazil.

In Brazilian lands, a religious phenomenon was established since blacks began to express their faith: the syncretism.

As conceptualized by the Dutch researcher Andre Droogers, the term syncretism has two meanings, the first one being a quite objective meaning “mixture of religions”, and the other, more subjective, meaning the social evaluation of this mixture (Droogers 1989). The author also recalls how much the meaning of the word has changed over time, and that this transformation from objective to subjective meaning has historical roots.

In Brazil, several authors have studied the phenomenon of syncretism—especially the religious one—at different times. From the pioneer of Afro-Diasporic religiosity studies in Brazil, Nina Rodrigues (although the author does not use that term) to the current discussions on the re-Africanization of *Candomblé*, promoted by activist groups and priests throughout the country.

For this article, we will take as reference the perspective⁷ provided by Reginaldo Prandi (1998), considering that some of the aspects this author presents are in agreement with the devotional and syncretic universe of the samba school.

According to Prandi (1998), one of the biggest obstacles for Africans and their descendants to faithfully revive their religiosity was a great contradiction: “originally, Bantu, Yoruba and Fon religions were ancestral worship cults, which are based on families and their lineages, but the social and family structures to which religion gave meaning were never reproduced here” (Prandi 1998, 153).

As the reality of black people in Brazil had very little (or nothing) to do with family, since from the slave trade, families, tribes and ethnic groups had been separated, one of the main aspects of the daily religiosity experienced in Africa could not be rebuilt in the New World. Thus, the deified ancestors and family members (known as *egungun* in Yoruba tradition), who were extremely important in their homelands, end up losing space in the cults which were reconstructed in a fragmented way. In this way, the *orixás*, deities with a broader and more generic cult, as they represented elements of nature and conditions of human experience and not necessarily family relationships, gained more prominence in the rites and cults recreated in Brazil.

An important point made by Prandi for the connection between enslaved blacks and Catholicism is in the identity:

If a black religion, even in its fragmented reconstruction, was able to endow black people with a black identity, African originated, which ritually recovered the family, tribe and city lost forever in the diaspora, it was through Catholicism, however, that he could find himself and move in the real, day-to-day world, in a society of the dominant white, who was responsible for ensuring the existence of the black, even in conditions of deprivation and suffering, and that controlled their lives completely. Any attempt to overcome the slave condition, as a reality or as a historical heritage, first implied the necessary inclusion in the white world. Soon it came to mean the imperative of being, feeling and appearing Brazilian. Blacks could not be Brazilians without being Catholics at the same time (Prandi 1998, 154).

Socially, blacks found their place based on Catholic practices and rituals. On the other hand, Catholic religion assumed an inclusive character at the time, as it was practically hegemonic in the country and wanted to keep its *status quo*, so it did not oppose to the presence of blacks, and ignored the practices still promoted by blacks, who also adopted the saints, relating them to African deities.

7. For other interpretations and aspects of syncretism in Afro-Diasporic religions, see Valente (1977); S. Ferretti (1995); Sanchis (1995).

Also according to Prandi (2001b), syncretism is not just an association between a Catholic saint and an African *orixá*. The process is more complex.

Syncretism represents the capture of the religion of the *orixás* within a model that presupposes, above all, the existence of two antagonistic poles that preside over all human actions: good and evil; virtue on one hand, sin on the other. This conception, which is Judeo-Christian, did not exist in Africa (Prandi 2001b, 51).

With African-based religions still in process of development, their concerns were different. These new religious practices were

released, since birth, from matters related to the administration of justice, which presuppose universalist principles and collective agreements above individual desires, since this was the exclusive domain of the general religion of the general society, Catholicism; disinterested in the person's formative contents for the profane world, because the model here is white (Prandi 1998, 155)

Devotees of *orixás* could then find new ways to worship their gods, finding correspondences in a hierarchical—and manicheistic—system similar to those of Catholic saints. While on the good side of Catholicism there is the Holy Trinity (one God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) as well as, below them, all the possibilities of angels and saints, on the opposite side there is the Devil and all his denominations; the same logic was followed with the deities of African origin.

The good side, let's say, was thus filled by the *orixás*, except Exu, being Oxalá, the creator *orixá* of humanity, compared to the role of Jesus Christ, the Son god, remaining at the top of the hierarchy, a position he already occupied in Africa, where his name was Orixanlá or Orixá Nlá, meaning Great *Orixá*. The remote and unattainable supreme god Olorum of Yoruba was adapted to the conception of the Judeo-Christian Father god, while the other deities gained the identity of saints. However, by forcing a model that presupposes Catholic virtues, the syncretized *orixás* lost much of their original attributes, especially those that, as in the case of sexuality were seen as a source of sin that could harm the field of good. (Prandi 2011b, 51)

In this way, devotional practices to certain *orixás* were abandoned in the name of a religious system that had a Manichaeian worldview. In this way, the *orixás* were approaching saints (and vice versa) and had their mythologies, cults and devotions increasingly shared. It is in this context that in some regions of Brazil—such as the Southeast—Ogum and *São Jorge* come closer. Furthermore, the main characteristic that unites them is their relationship to war.

São Jorge, it is said, was born in Cappadocia (currently Turkish territory), and comes close to Ogum due to his quality of a soldier mounted on his white horse (symbol of purity), fighting a dragon (evil, Satan), commonly represented by the images sold in *Umbanda* houses. (Marques, Morais 2011, 10)

Jorge-Ogum partnership finds a special place in Brazilian imagination, one of devotion and affection, going beyond the limits of religiosity, with deities celebrated even by non-religious people.

d) OGUM DANCES SAMBA

According to *Candomblé* doctrine, there is a deity within each person. Every human being is a child of a certain *orixá*.

Whether among traditional *Yorubás*, or among Brazilians and other American peoples who were influenced by Africans, *orixás* are primordial deities who received from Olodumare (the supreme god) the mission to create and maintain the world, being then responsible each one for an element of nature, or even aspects of life in society or human nature (Prandi 2001, 20). In such a way, for example, Xango controls fire and lightning, as well as justice; Oxum rules the fresh waters and the emotions; Oxumaré is the rainbow itself and the symbol of transformation, and so on. As well as life, the worship of *orixás* is dynamic:

In Africa, most *orixás* have worship limited to a specific city or region, while a few have worship spread over all or almost all Yoruba lands. Many *orixás* are forgotten, others appear in new cults. The Yoruban pantheon in America contains about twenty *orixás* and, in Brazil and Cuba, each *orixá*, with few exceptions, is celebrated throughout the country. (Prandi 2001, 20)

In the religious field, a person dedicated to a certain *orixá* owes him/her devotions, rituals, offerings and other practices in search of a better life. This *orixá* will even determine this person's characteristics and behavior, according to what the archetype of the deity says.

For those who have faith, institutions (just like people) also have their patrons or even ruling *orixás*. Following this thought, the relationship between Vai-Vai and Ogum was established: the association is "protected and blessed by Ogum".⁸

The school's relationship with *Candomblé* deities begins with the administration of president Chiclé, an assumed practitioner of African cults, son of Oxóssi, and who set the sacred deities in a profane space for the first time, by the hands of Dona Nenê, *yalorixá* who took care of the *terreiro*⁹ Chiclé used to attend. In 1972 (the year Vai-Vai became a samba school), Exu and Ogum arrived there (Alexandre 2017).

8. Verse of the samba song "*Quilombo do Futuro*", played in 2019 Vai-Vai parade. Composers: Edegar Cirillo, Marcelo Casa Nossa, André Ricardo, Dema, Gui Cruz, Rodolfo Minuetto, Rodrigo Minuetto and Kz.

9. In African Brazilian cults, *terreiro* is the place where ceremonial cults are held and offerings to the *orixás* are made.



Ogum, in addition to being always present in Vai-Vai's religious life from the moment it started in 1972, was elevated to the position of patron of the school from 2010 on, when president Neguitão started to rule it. A Candomblé practitioner, Neguitão is a devotee of *São Jorge* and Ogum's son, what explains his decision. With this *orixá* officially taking over the regency of the school, another religious feast became part of the official Vai-Vai calendar: Ogum's *feijoada*.

Ogum's *feijoada* is the first religious festival in the annual Vai-Vai calendar. According to Pai Francisco de Oxum—priest responsible for the religious activities of the association at that time—the creation and the inclusion of the festival in the school's official calendar was a direct request from Neguitão, as soon as he assumed the presidency, in 2010, and the community promptly accepted the event. (Alexandre, 2017). It is in the *feijoada* that the preparations for the next Carnival officially begins. According to Pierre Verger, Ogum's importance “is associated with the fact that without his permission and protection, none of the works or useful and profitable activities would be possible. He is then and always the first and opens the way for other *orixás*” (Verger 1981). For this reason, the year in Vai-Vai begins with Ogum.

Ogum's *feijoada* is divided into two moments, the religious and the festive. Starting in the morning, the court is prepared for the beginning of a procession. Carried on a stand, the real-size image of *São Jorge* goes through the streets of Bela Vista, accompanied by the school's drums, members, directors, members of partner samba schools and guest religious leaders. Along the way, the procession stops off at the church of *Nossa Senhora Achiropita*—the patroness of Bela Vista—where it receives the priest's blessings, before heading back to the court to continue the festivities.



PICTURE 1
Ogum's feijoada
in 2017. Photo by
Haroldo Nogueira/
SHEZ

On the way back to the court, *São Jorge* gives space to Ogum, who the community will revere. But not only him. Following the logic of *Candomblé* houses, several deities are greeted, as in a *xirê*. It starts with Exu, who receives his *padê*, followed by Ogum, Oxossi and other *orixás*. To each of them is offered a series of songs, which are accompanied by dancing, clapping and participant's great joy.

At the end of the ceremony, *feijoada*—food traditionally associated with Ogum—is served to all those present. Around 6pm, one of the most important moments for a samba school takes place: the plot or theme¹⁰ for the following year is officially announced. Then, the community goes on with the party, with samba taking up *Bixiga* streets until dawn. Now, with the blessings of Ogum (and *São Jorge*), the carnival (re)starts.

The last edition of *Feijoada e Procissão de Ogum* took place in 2018. In 2019, for internal reasons, the party that would have taken place in February was cancelled, and in 2020 and, so far 2021, the festivity has not occurred due to the pandemic of Covid-19.

PARADE AND RITE AT ANHEMBI: 4 TIMES OGUM

It is not only in everyday life, at parties, and events that Vai-Vai and its components express their syncretic faith. This experience also happens in the parades that it presents at carnivals.

Despite having its history and daily life closely related to blackness and black religiosity, few plots taken to the avenue explicitly presented this theme. In 90 years of stories, Vai-Vai presented *Orun Aiyê – O eterno amanhecer* (1982 - Champion), *Amado Jorge, A história de uma raça brasileira* (1988 - Champion) and *No Xirê do Anhembi, a Oxum mais bonita surgiu... Menininha, mãe da Bahia, Ialorixá do Brasil* (2017 - 3rd place). Other Afro-themed plots were presented by the school, such as *O Negro em Forma de Arte* (1991, 3rd place) and, more recently, *Sambar com fé* (about the singer and composer Gilberto Gil 2018 - 10th place), *Quilombo do Futuro* (2019, 14th place -downgraded to the Access Group) and, in next carnival—possibly 2022—Sankofa.

However, even in parades that were not explicitly religious or even afro-themed, the presence of representations of *orixás* is a constant in Vai-Vai parades, a fact that was accentuated when Neguitão took charge of the presidency of the school, in 2010.

It was in the coverage of 2011 carnival that the silence was broken, through the media. That year, the samba school paid homage to conductor João Carlos Martins, talking about the artist's trajectory of success and overcoming difficulties, with the plot "A Música Venceu". With a surprising show, the school was champion and had its religiosity assumed. The president, Darli Silva (Neguitão), while giving thanks on national television did not hide his gratitude: "First, I thank my father Ogum, my protector, the entire community and conductor João Carlos Martins, who is an angel." And continued: "He [Ogum] is my protector, who is with me in battles and does not leave me alone..." (Portal G1, 03/08/2011). Neguitão, in short, was revealing his devotion

10. The plot (theme) is the narrative that the school proposes to tell in its parade, through the wings, allegories and the theme song.

by thanking the deity, but not in an individual attitude. He revered the *orixá* Ogum on behalf of an entire community (Alexandre 2017, 20-21).

In the year before Neguitão's declaration, when Vai-Vai took to the avenue the plot *80 Years of Art and Euforia, É Bom no Samba, É Bom no Couro, Salve o Duplo Jubileu de Carvalho*, which celebrated the 80th anniversary of FIFA World Cup, as well as the 80th anniversary of the School, the devotion to the warrior *orixá* was explicit in the parade. Ogum opened the way and was present in the opening float. To represent the celebration of the school's Oak Jubilee, an immense Ogum sculpture, made of mirrors, carrying an anvil, was the main element of the last part of the float, which was divided into three parts. The Lord of Metals was at Anhembi, announcing himself as the patron and regent of the association.



PICTURE 2
Vai-Vai opening float in 2010. "African Empire, 80 Years of Glory". Reproduced on Instagram

In the late 2010s, when Vai-Vai began to address issues related to blackness in the plots of 2017, 2018 and 2019 more clearly, Ogum's presence became constant, and he was represented in three parades.

The most explicitly Afro-religious plot that the school has ever brought to the avenue was the 2017 *No xirê do Anhembi, a Oxum mais bonita surgiu - Menininha, mãe da Bahia - Yalorixá do Brasil*. Among various

representations of *Candomblé* deities that formed the procession, in addition to a wing (*ala*)¹¹ devoted to Ogum, the association brought an allegorical element, with a very stylized representation of the divinity.



PICTURE 3
Wing “Ogum”,
part of 2017
parade. Photo by
Armando Bruck.
Reproduction:
SASP

Sambar com Fé was the 2018 plot and told the story of singer and composer *Gilberto Gil*. Among many moments and songs that marked this artist’s career, Vai-Vai brought to the avenue its last float—where the honoree was present—decorated by a series of representations of *orixás*, forming a veritable *xirê*. Right in front of the float there was Ogum, the patron of the school, next to Exu, other deity widely worshiped within the religious experience of the school.

Completing this “Afro trilogy”, in 2019, Vai-Vai presented its “*Quilombo do Futuro*”, the most overtly critical and social plot, with several references to racism, violence and oppression suffered by black people in different parts of the world and, in particular, in Brazil. Here, Ogum appeared at the back of the opening float, which was called “Africa’s Civilizing Legacy”, thus representing, not only his best-known archetype, the Lord of War, but also the great civilizing hero of Yoruba people.

11. The parades are organized into sectors and each sector is subdivided into wings (*alas*). Each wing has a certain number of components; all wearing the same costume, telling a part of the plot. Among the sectors there are the floats that usually close and summarize the idea presented in that sector. Some wings and allegories are special, such as the front committee—which presents the school to the judges and the public, and the opening float, which presents the plot and the following wings.



PICTURE 4
“Gil, son of Gandhi” float, 2018, with the image of Ogum next to the honoree Gilberto Gil. Photo by Carnival Lovers



PICTURE 5
2019 Opening Float “Africa’s Civilizing Legacy”. Reproduced on Instagram

CONCLUSION

Vai-Vai is one of the most traditional carnival institutions in the city of São Paulo. With its origins related to the celebrations of Bom Jesus, in Pirapora, it carries in its essence the religiosity, which is part of the daily life and experience of the association and its components.

Over the years, the arrival of new members as well as social and historical changes at Bixiga meant that different religious elements were included in the daily life of the school. The main one was the incorporation of Afro-Diasporic religiosity, in particular, with the arrival of *Candomblé* deities.

Vai-Vai visibly exhibits in its physical space its characteristic devotion, with altars decorating and protecting its court. In a small room, there are the settlements of *orixás*, which makes that environment sacred.

Above all, it is a place of parties where sacred rites and festivities are merged, and the festivals in homage to saints and *orixás* are part of the school's official calendar.

It is not only in daily life that Vai-Vai expresses its faith. It gets to the moment in which samba schools gain the greatest prominence: the carnival parades. As much as the school proudly carries its blackness, and is a space of resistance, few plots have addressed explicitly afro (religious) themes throughout its 90-year trajectory, the school always pays tribute to deities of afro origin, either in allegories, wing costumes or floats, though. Ogum, the association's patron *orixá*, stands out in these representations, especially in 2010, when he was officially made the school's protective entity. In other years Vai-Vai brought plots explicitly more related to issues of religious, artistic or social blackness to the avenue.

Thus, Vai-Vai clearly represents the expression of the religious syncretism. In its sacred space for the profane festival, saints and deities are celebrated in the same degree of importance, as well as the school itself, which, in the view of its samba dancer, is also a deity, worthy of praise.

By experiencing the daily religiosity within Vai-Vai environment, and revering the association itself as a divinity, the members already celebrate their afro heritage and ancestry, which guides the association's daily experience.

In this way, from a manifestation of the intrinsic relationship between sacred and profane, religious syncretism and party, which are part of the social conception of São Paulo carnival, Vai-Vai arises and resists with its hybrid, syncretic and unique religiosity.

Ògun yé, mo yé!¹²

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12. Greeting to Ogum that means, “If Ogum is alive, I am alive!” (free translation)



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