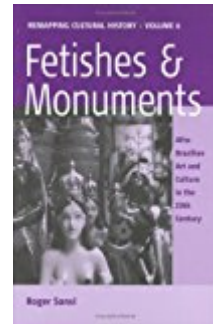


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Roger Sansi.** *Fetishes and Monuments: Afro-Brazilian Art and Culture in the 20th Century.* Remapping Cultural History Series. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 213 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-363-3.

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## Questioning Issues of Importance to Afro-Brazilian Art and Culture

In his book, *Fetishes and Monuments: Afro-Brazilian Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Roger Sansi focuses on the transformation over the years of previous conceptions of “fetishes” and “idols” into sacred objects, artwork and public monuments. In reassessing scholarship on Afro-Brazilian cultural production, Sansi centers specifically on Candomblé in Bahia. Opening with a brief history of African cultural developments in Brazil (including a concise discussion of the Black Atlantic slave trade), Sansi acknowledges Salvador da Bahia as the earliest Portuguese center in Brazil and highlights its position as key port in international trade, especially in regard to sugar and slaves.

While the ideal audience for this text would be the sociologist or anthropologist (or students of either discipline), non-specialists will also find the book appealing. Since Sansi (a lecturer in anthropology at Goldsmith’s College, London) translates and defines all Portuguese terms, the text is fairly accessible to the uninitiated, allowing for a wider audience that could very well include the art historian.

The introduction contains a concise historiography of research on the subject of Candomblé, introducing a range from early racist or paternalist scholarship to the emergence of the intellectuals/scholars in Brazil who became participants in Candomblé, including the

French sociologist Roger Bastide, the French photographer/historian Pierre Verger, and the Italian/Argentine painter Carybé (Hector Paride Bernabó). Sansi traces the development of Candomblé as Afro-Brazilian culture as a result of the “dialectical process of exchange between the leaders of Candomblé and a cultural elite of writers, artists, and anthropologists in Bahia” (p. 2).

In chapter 1, Sansi addresses specific aspects considered central to the house (place of worship or temple) of Candomblé, emphasizing the importance of the “gift” of embodying the saint (*santo*) or spirit of Orixás. In turning to specifics, he questions the validity of past studies which center on Candomblé as an unchanging entity. In the case of artwork, such as a shrine or altar, features are frequently borrowed (from sources varying from legendary characters to street figures) and altered to create the images of saints. This transformation reflects the dynamic nature of Candomblé and calls into question the claims that it is a fixed system.

In contrasting the assumed “purity” of African culture in Candomblé with the syncretism apparent in other Afro-Brazilian religions (integrating Catholicism, Spiritualism, or indigenous elements), Sansi leaves some fundamental issues unresolved. For example, if Candomblé were already the product of many African traditions that were transformed before and after arrival in Brazil, is it

possible for the members of the Candomblé temple who reject syncretism (and sever the attachment to Catholicism and the related saints) to return to a “pure” African tradition? Since Candomblé, according to Sansi, seems to be open to change, would it not be valuable to clarify the similarities (or differences) in other Afro-Brazilian developments such as Umbanda or Macumba? Without this comparison, how can one be sure that Sansi is presenting an accurate portrayal of Afro-Brazilian art and culture?

Concerning the narrow focus of the book, the title—*Fetishes and Monuments: Afro-Brazilian Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century*—is misleading. Sansi does not investigate Afro-Brazilian art and culture as a whole but only the art and culture of Candomblé in Bahia. By limiting his study to Bahia, the author loses an opportunity to inform his reader about Candomblé in a larger Brazilian context.

In chapters 4-7, Sansi addresses important issues related to museum exhibits and ethics. In spite of the contemporary scholarly recognition of the power of the museum as a system of control, Sansi proposes that museum exhibitions are valuable because they offer an opportunity to reassess objects and affect public perceptions in beneficial ways. Regarding the comprehensiveness of Afro-Brazilian exhibitions, Sansi asks important questions: “Is Afro-Brazilian art produced by Black people or is it art that has an Afro-Brazilian style? Is it about race or is it about Culture?” (p. 153). That is to say, should works that focus on Afro-Brazilian subjects be included even when the artists themselves are not of African descent (if not, this would leave out essential artists of European origin, such as Carybé or Verger, as well as noted Brazilian artists such as Tarsila do Amaral or Hélio Oiticica)? Finally, as Candomblé practitioners begin to value museum representation, more objects have been donated and displayed. If museums “belong more to the elites than to the masses,” as Sansi states, which works are in fact shown (p. 102)?

Our current notions of Afro-Brazilian art, according to Sansi, have been “constructed not only through texts but also through exhibitions and the trajectories of artists and art works” (p. 145). Having said that, Sansi limits his own discussion to artists who have been accepted into similar exhibitions and, therefore, would be part of an existing “canon” of Afro-Brazilian art. Since Sansi does not suggest names of other artists who could (or should) be incorporated, he leaves the “canon” unchanged—reinforcing the official opinion by not offering an alternative one.

One of the problems of the book is that it fails to provide a close examination of the specific objects or artwork of importance to Afro-Brazilian culture (not to mention the works omitted from Afro-Brazilian religions outside of Candomblé). Be that as it may, an extensive description of the artifacts would not only have allowed for a more far-reaching analysis of the initial purpose of the sacred objects in Candomblé but would also have emphasized the cultural context both prior to and following appropriation by the museum. In other words, an in-depth analysis of the individual works would give the reader a much better sense of the effects of museum appropriation (and suggest whether an object may or may not lose meaning).

The strength of this book becomes apparent when Sansi steps out of the narrative that he has created in order to suggest a new approach or another possibility. For instance, he begins to indicate ways in which we may be able to interpret Afro-Brazilian art as high culture instead of simply lumping these works in the category of popular or folk art (one way that this could be accomplished would be through a change in museum display; that is, by presenting Candomblé objects as sacred art, perceptions of these artifacts could conceivably be elevated). Ultimately, Sansi’s questioning of issues throughout the text could be valuable in extending scholarly awareness and promoting change. While he may not always offer solutions, Roger Sansi does introduce critical issues that could open discussions of value for future studies.

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