

*Intermedial references in 'Ponciá Vicêncio' and
'Um defeito de cor' /*
Referências intermediáticas em *Ponciá Vicêncio* e
Um defeito de cor

Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira*

Ph.D in Letters of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil, an Associate of the London University Institute of Education, former Fulbright and British Council Scholar, researcher of CNPq (National Research Center, 1B) and vice-president of the Center of Shakespearean Studies (Cesh), is professor emerita and of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. She has published extensively in the field of Literary Studies, especially in the areas of Comparative Literature, Cultural Criticism, Interart Studies and Studies in Intermediality.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6755-7936>

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ABSTRACT

In the light of the concepts of "reference" proposed by Irina Rajewsky and of "ekphrasis" formulated by Claus Clüver, the text analyses the intermedial references in two Brazilian novels, Ponciá Vicêncio (2002) by Conceição Evaristo and Um defeito de cor (2017) by Ana Maria Gonçalves. The two novels are linked by their exploration of the themes freedom and cultural memory of black people and by their reference to the visual arts: pottery, explored in Ponciá Vicêncio, and the making of African masks (geledes) in Um defeito de cor. In the course of their experience, two black young women, the protagonists of the two novels, in their own practice or in their appreciation of another artist's work, end up by finding in art a vehicle for the preservation of the history of their people. In this context, the narrative finally leads to the consideration not only of the influence of African creations on contemporary art but also about the possibility of their preservation in the work of Brazilian artists in our own time.

KEYWORDS: Intermedial references; Literature and the visual arts; Art and memorial culture.

RESUMO

À luz dos conceitos de "referência", propostos por Irina Rajewsky, e de "écfrase", na conceituação de Claus Clüver, o texto analisa as referências intermediáticas em dois romances brasileiros, *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003), de Conceição Evaristo, e *Um defeito de cor* (2017), de Ana Maria Gonçalves. Em ambos os romances se destaca o tema da liberdade e da memória cultural dos povos de cor em sua relação com as artes visuais: a arte do barro, explorada em *Ponciá Vicêncio* e a criação de máscaras africanas (*gélédes*), em *Um defeito de cor*. No decorrer de sua experiência, duas jovens negras, protagonistas dos dois romances, em sua própria prática ou no encontro com a obra de um artista africano, acabam por encontrar na arte um veículo para a preservação da história de seu povo. Nesse contexto, a narrativa finalmente conduz a considerações não só sobre a influência da arte africana na criação

*  Solanger1@uol.com.br

contemporânea como também sobre a possibilidade de sua continuidade na produção de artistas brasileiros em nossos dias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Referências intermediáticas; Literatura e as artes visuais; Arte e memória cultural.

...memory, the most generous of portraitists...

Ana Maria Gonçalves

1 Introduction

In order to represent Blacks in contemporary fiction, two novels by black Brazilian writers, Conceição Evaristo and Ana Maria Gonçalves, prove especially representative, respectively *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003)¹ and *Um defeito de cor* (2017)². The two novels are intertwined with the themes of cultural memory and freedom, which were so late and so incompletely given back to blacks in Brazil. Without freedom, in spite of the existence of few exceptions, the artistic practice seems scant, another crucial theme also explored in both novels. In both, the representation of black people is largely brought about through references to the visual arts, clay art in *Ponciá Vicêncio* and the creation of Gelede masks³ in *Um defeito de cor*. In these texts, authorial voices that choose to be and to present themselves as black speak about their own history, replacing traditional characters, which are the object of alien writing and perspectives. In *Ponciá Vicêncio*, all the narrative moves around the theme of art and artists, which in turn refer to the history of their people. In *Um defeito de cor*, even though equally important and playing the same function, the representation of the artist and his creation is condensed in a few passages. In any way, the analysis I propose both for *Ponciá Vicêncio* and for *Um defeito de cor* is supported by intermedial references, defined by Irina Rajewsky as

strategies for the construction of meaning which contribute to the global signification of the product [which], resorts to its own means, be it to refer to a

¹ EVARISTO, Conceição. *Ponciá Vicêncio*. Belo Horizonte: Editora Mazza, 2003.

² GONÇALVES, Ana Maria. *Um defeito de cor*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record Ltda., 6th edition, 2017.

³ The masks consist in in a headdress representing a human being or an animal, sometimes with an upper structure, which either amplifies a theme present in a lower segment, or, more frequently, develops a different theme. Masculine masks communicate images of physical and spiritual power, of status and sacred leadership. Not so obvious, but always present, are oblique references to the all-powerful mothers.

specific individual work created in another medium (...) or to refer to a specific medium subsystem (...) or to another medium as a system. (...). Instead of combining different forms of the articulation of media, this product, evokes, imitates or uses as a theme elements of structures of another medium, which is perceived as distinct, through the use of its own specific means. (RAJEVSKY, 2012, p. 25-26).⁴

In Literature, intermedial references related to pottery and to the creation of masks come through ekphrasis, a specific form of description, defined by Claus Clüver as “the verbalization of a spectator’s encounter with visual non-kinetic figurations” (2017, p. 30).⁵ As we will see, intermedial references, in the form of ekphrasis, refer to the characters’ attitude toward their artistic creations. Therefore, I shall analyze the ekphrastic configurations found in the two novels. In each one of them freedom, just as intermedial reference, emerges in a different way.

2 The conquest of freedom for enslaved people in Brazil

In the legal sense, we can affirm that the protagonist Ponciá Vicêncio was born free. Her freedom as a contemporary black woman, a descendant of slaves, however, reminds one of several laws which, hampered by many restrictions, were continuously enacted up to the Abolition, and affected Ponciá’s ancestors. First to be enacted was the Law n. 3040, approved in 1875, the so-called The Freedom of Wombs Law, according to which enslaved women’s children were born free. The law, however, included heavy restrictive clauses. The minors remained under the authority of the mother’s master. When the child was eight, the master could choose between an indemnity by the State or the use of the minor’s work until he or she was 21, creating a kind of “free slave”. Some of Ponciá Vicêncio’s ancestors certainly suffered the effects of this bill, or of the one that came after it, the Sexagenarians’ Bill of 1885. .

⁴ Translated from Irina Rajewsky’s essay, *Intermedialidade, Intertextualidade e “remediação”*. Uma perspectiva literária sobre a intermedialidade. In: *Intermedialidade e estudos interartes*. Desafios das artes contemporâneas DINIZ, Thais Flores Nogueira (org.). Belo Horizonte, Editora, p.15-45, UFMG.

⁵ “the dominant view of seeing ekphrasis as a prime example of intermedial transposition is questionable and should be replaced by the recognition that it primarily verbalizes a viewer’s encounter with (a) non-kinetic visual configuration(s)”. CLÜVER, Claus A new look at an old topic: ekphrasis revisited. São Paulo *Todas as letras*, v. 19, n. 1, p. 30-44, jan./abr. 2017, p. 30.

Another judicial statute allowed slaves to buy their enfranchisement at market-price. The owner could agree or disagree with the proposal or stipulate such high prices that the slave was not able to save the necessary sum, however hard he worked on the streets as a “money-making slave”. He could protest against the master’s refusal and appeal to the courts. But in order to do so he would need a tutor, who would be appointed by the same courts, for slaves did not enjoy legal rights. Even after being granted, the enfranchisement could be cancelled by means of the master’s allegations, which were always subjective. (Only after 1865 were such annulments no longer legally accepted.) Countless problems restricted the enfranchisement: it could not be granted when the slave had been bought on the condition of never being set free, or when it was detrimental to the master’s creditor, or when the price of the slave was above a third of the master’s assets or also when the slave had been given as security or mortgage. Another impediment to the enjoyment of freedom was the obligation, often imposed on the slave, that, even after being set free, he had to go on serving the master so long as he, or a member of his family, was alive. Any of these reasons made the transaction difficult or impossible. There would be a glimpse of hope if none of these obstacles existed and if, to begin with, the slave was able to save the required sum, which would demand at least four years of labor, or the help of relatives. Besides, enfranchisement would be only an individual, not a collective solution.

Let us add to that the fact that manumission in rural zones was practically unfeasible. Only urban slaves were able to work on the streets, making a daily payment to their masters and keeping the remainder for themselves, envisaging their enfranchisement. In rural areas there was no such chance. As such was the situation of the ancestors of Ponciá Vicêncio, Conceição Evaristo, author of the novel, has serious doubts if any of them had won enfranchisement. What set them free_ at least nominally, was the *Lei Áurea*, (the Golden Law) of 1888, which finally freed all slaves. However, even after the Abolition the freedom they had so much dreamt of was largely an illusion. Legally, slavery no longer existed, but in practice such was not the case, for the new law made no provision for the economic and social insertion of those who had been freed. At the same time, only those who had been born in Brazil immediately became citizens of the country. Those born in Africa had to submit themselves to a process of naturalization.

Other restrictions followed the precarious freedom. Black people could only vote in primary elections, which elected only municipal counsellors, and even then if they proved to have a yearly income of 100.000 “reis” (around R\$ 12,300), something rather hard to achieve. If they

joined the Army, the Navy, or the National Guard, they were denied promotions, and their treatment was differentiated, according to the State they lived. For instance, formerly enslaved people who lived in the South, region where inhabitants were mostly white, had to struggle much more than those who lived in Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and the northeast region to be freed. In São Paulo, the capital, they still owed obedience to their former masters. They were not allowed to dress the way white people did, they had to keep certain body postures established to them, and they were only allowed to call Mr.” or “Mrs.” people who had never been slaves_ and those were almost exclusively white.

In Salvador, society was much mixed and behaved accordingly. There, due to the lack of competition by white entrepreneurs, free blacks and blacks who were manumitted had better chances of social mobility. Such was the case of Kehinde, the protagonist of *Um defeito de cor*. As an urban slave, selling her goods on the street, she did not need the Abolition to buy her freedom and get rich. However, especially in rural areas, the freedom ex-slaves were granted was the freedom to be poor, to become “free starving people”⁶. Because they lacked financial resources, rural workers were not able to explore the land they had perhaps been given. They were eventually forced to sell it and move to the city to find a job, which was always precarious and dependent on the privileged classes. Poor, lacking formal education and health services, they faced new forms of slavery, an “iron fist (...) a sovereign hand which made eternal an ancient condition”. (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 48).

3 The precarious freedom of Ponciá Vicêncio’s family

In the lines that follow, I describe the “freedom” conquered by Ponciá Vicêncio, the protagonist of Evaristo’s novel, and her family. They had scarcely any belongings of their own, besides their body worn out by work in the fields. As in the old days, even their surname was that of their former master. The land where they worked had allegedly been granted them at the time of the Abolition, on the condition that they kept working for their master, Coronel Vicêncio. In fact, while everything was kept in white people’s hands, they “who had appropriated things since the old times (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 62), black people owned poverty, hunger, suffering, and a

⁶ All information about the situation of slaves and former slaves can be found in MATTOSO, Katia M. *Ser escravo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1982, p. 173-192 e 198-218.

suicidal revolt. (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 82). In the past, many of their children who had been born after the “Freedom of Wombs Law”, had been sold. (EVARISTO, 2002, p. 50). As the fruit of the brutalizing work, the family, nominally free, had only a thatch hut, rags to cover their nakedness, rudimentary implements, and hardly satiated hunger.

The only thing they did not lack was bitter memories of the past. As the son of a former slave, the protagonist’s father talks about an experience he had suffered in his childhood. The episode evokes a similar scene narrated by Machado de Assis in his novel *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (*The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*, 1888) when Bras, the young master, rides Prudêncio, the slave boy, as if he were a horse. Ponciá Vicêncio’s father tells the story of an even more shocking experience. The old man says that

[h]e had grown up in the farm living as his ancestors had, leading the same life as his forefathers. He was the young master’s pageboy and his duty was to play with him. As they played the black boy pretended to be a horse and was ridden by the young master, who wanted to ride him and get to know all of his father’s lands. The young master and his pageboy were the same age. One day the young master demanded his pageboy to open his mouth for he wanted to urinate in it. The page boy did as he was told. The other boy’s urine ran down hotly down his throat and by the side of his mouth. The young master couldn’t stop laughing. The slave wept and wondered what tasted saltier, the taste of urine or the flavor of his tears. (...) The men made a living working on their masters’ lands and then [saw] the largest part of the harvest being handed over to the Coronels. (p. 32).” If they were free, why did they remain there? Why, then, so many black women in the slaves’ quarters? Why didn’t they all leave the place and look for other places and other kinds of work? (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 14)

Like all the men in the novel *Father Vicente*, worn out by the rough work, kept dumb in the mutism of the desperate. The mother, Maria Vicêncio, did her best with the housework and the care of her two of children, Ponciá and Luandi, who, in their condition of children, hardly noticed their misery. The girl docilely accepted her condition as a woman. She was glad to see that even having crossed a river which reflected the rainbow she had not changed sex, as she would, if the legends she was told were true. She only wished she were a man to get rid of the housework. As to everything else, she took her mother as a model, a strong woman, the counselor and guide of her family.

4 Art in the lives of child Ponciá and her mother

The affinity of mother and daughter goes beyond the family relationship; it includes the practice of art, an important reference for the global interpretation of the novel.

The mother made pans, pots and little animals using clay. The girl brought the clay from the river banks. After they were dry, the mother put everything to bake in a clay oven. The little things were hard and difficult to break. Ponciá Vicente could also work very well (p. 18) She had clever fingers, which could make pretty things, prettier than the mother's. (p.73) Even as a little girl she knew about the clay and went to the river to fetch it. She knew which was the best, the softest and most obedient clay. (EVARISTO, 2003, p.77).

Unaware of the fact, the two women belonged to the world of primitive artists, who usually, without leaving any traces, have always existed, for the need to express oneself is innate to every human being. In the wake of Roberto Pontual, Araújo (1998, p. 59) defines the primitive artist as "the one who has the innate gift and the capacity to create objects and situations substantially revealing of his individuality and the circumstances of the world around him." Creating, almost instinctively, from a spontaneous force and a language invented *ad hoc*, such artists stay at the margin of the languages of classical art. In the words of Carlos Drummond de Andrade: "There are artists who are born artists; they do not need to go to the academy."⁷

In order to make domestic utensils and little clay animals, Maria Vicêncio resorts to the material used from the most remote times to make objects of daily use or decoration. The first pottery objects known to us date as far back as Pre-History, clay objects in their natural color or blackened by iron oxides. In a way, Maria Vicêncio continues this art, which belongs to all mankind. At any time, with a little practice in working with one's hands, similar objects can be made: jars, mugs, pots, cups, casks, plates and bowls, culturally defined as feminine. Advanced techniques would require aluminum or iron spatulas, electric ovens or more sophisticated

⁷ ANDRADE, Carlos Drummond de. Jacket of COIMBRA, Sílvia Rodrigues, MARTINS, Flávia e DUARTE, Maria Leticia. *O reinado da lua*. Escultores populares do nordeste. 2nd edition. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Salamandra, 1980.

implements, such as the lathe or the wheel of the potter, which has a revolving plate to adjust or shape objects.

For Maria Vicêncio, in her poverty, the skill of her hands and her little clay oven quite sufficed. She found an escape valve for the sufferings of daily life in the tranquil engagement with art. In small sculptures, which remind one of the work of Master Vitalino⁸ (1909-1963), an exponent of the history of clay art in Brazil, the girl and her mother forgot the sorrows of their life without expectations and found a form of freedom from the hardship of the daily routine..

5 Ponciá's Experiences as a young woman

As a young woman Ponciá does what is expected of her. She marries a farm laborer. For her husband, as for other men, “women resembled stars. They were beautiful, they lighted up the night in the bosom of men. They lived in other lands, they had other dreams.” (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 91). Therefore Ponciá does not endure the fate of mulatto women of colonial times, she is neither raped by her master nor used as a “Black Mother”, the carer of white people’s children. As a matter of fact, she could not be a mother, since hers are all stillborn. Neither is she made happy by her married life. She soon gives up the pleasures of sex, for she and her husband “never went beyond the body, beyond the flesh.” (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 67) She does not even regret the loss of the children she had had. “Is there any good in bringing children into this world?” (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 82), she wonders. And she herself answers. “I was fortunate that my children had been stillborn for thus they were spared to live the same kind of life”. (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 83).

One pleasure, however, remains as Ponciá finds out that she is an artist like her mother. The novel is full of references to this art, which is in the heart of the text, with a very special function: it gives meaning to the characters’ lives, expresses their experiences, and, above all, refers to the history of her people. However, before resigning herself to be content with her art, as her mother had done, the young woman tries to find a rewarding job in the city, “Why didn’t they all try to find other places and other kinds of work?(EVARISTO, 2003, p. 14), she thinks, repeating the question vaguely asked in the minds of her relatives and friends. Once in the city, the only position she manages to get is as a housemaid, living with her mistress. With her

⁸ Available at [emhttps://www.google.com/search?q=esculturas+de+mestre+vitalino&rlz=1C1CHBD_pt-](https://www.google.com/search?q=esculturas+de+mestre+vitalino&rlz=1C1CHBD_pt-)
Accessed on 01/21/2020.

savings, she would be able to buy a small house in the outskirts of the city and bring her family to live with her. Not even that can satisfy her. Ponciá reflects, reflects and hesitates.

Little by little, disenchanted of her urban life, she gives up her former plans. Depressed, almost insane, she lets herself be taken back to the shanty she had left, or rather, to the art in which she had been initiated. It is art that calls her back to the village, to the river, to the “imaginary act of creation.”

6 The return to the village: the rediscovery of art

Her first work had been a sculpture, a miniature representing her grandfather, whose history she knew. Maddened by suffering, the old man had killed his wife and, with no right to take his life away, he had managed to mutilate himself, cutting off one of his hands. Among the things she kept from her childhood, Ponciá finds a small piece, “the clay man”. “The eyes, the mouth, the bent back, the thin body, the little mutilated arm, everything was the same, just the same. The mouth tried to smile, but the expression on the face was of sorrow” (EVARISTO, 2003, p.19). The first work of the mini artist, briefly described in this short ekphrasis, the statuette was to follow her, like a talisman. That is her true inheritance, not the piece of land which, according to the grandfather, would be hers, and, if sold, would save them from extreme poverty.

According to Ponciá, the family legacy was quite different: the gift of art, which “translating the desire of the creator ‘(EVARISTO, 2003, p. 77) keeps her on her birth place. Her solitude makes the girl and later the young woman, “to get away from herself” (2003, p. 49), but also makes her the “lady of dreams” , who seemed to live somewhere else (2003, p. 65), some other place, where, transcending her bitter memories, she hopes to find peace. Or will she really transcend them? The mutilation of the clay man, described in the text, brings afloat the sorrows, the losses, the restrictions to which slaves had been submitted in the past. Symbolically, now the miniature sculpture looks like a man who, having lost one of his arms, all t he has left is the other limb, for the rough work, or to receive, marked with a hot iron, the initials of the master.

7 Mother and daughter’s success as artists

Little by little Maria and Ponciá Vicêncio's statuettes receive some recognition. They begin to be sold to the neighbors and exhibited in the city. Artists as they are, mother and daughter have distinct styles. "As she wandered among the villages, the mother finds works by herself and by her daughter". (...) Calmly, away from everything, she could admire what she had done. In every house, in every farm, there was something created by herself or by her daughter. She perfectly recognized which was hers and which was Ponciá's" (2003, p. 85). In town, Ponciá's brother, led by a friend, finds their work in another exhibition, "objects of his past-present", the slavery just a little attenuated. The young man looks at his mother's and his sister's works as if he had never seen them, as represented in the ekphrasis:

Objects of use, pans, pots, pitchers, jars and other objects of ornament, but smaller, really tiny. People, animals, domestic utensils, everything, artists' make believe, objects to ornament, to play with. Creations which had been made as if the artists had intended to miniaturize life so that it could fit and become eternal under everybody's gaze, everywhere, (2003, p. 106) ...works that told parts of a story. The story of black people, perhaps. (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 130).

On the window where the statuettes were displayed a little card identified the authors, Maria Vicêncio and her daughter, Ponciá Vicêncio, from the village Vicêncio. As the owner, the name of Dr. Aristeu Pena Forte Soares Vicêncio, "one of the authorities of the village", was cited. (2003, p. 107). The Abolition, as it were, had not yet landed there. The Coronel still felt he owned the land, the work and even the arts of the former slaves. He had already mutilated their history, as is the case with illiterate people. But he had not quite managed to steal it. Part of the history survives in the mother and daughter's art, in images like that of the mutilated man. It resists, elsewhere, unknown to Ponciá, in dances and performances, like the samba, "capoeira" in "congados", in the peripheral arts, in the ancestral values, in the literature of testimony, created by afro-descendants. This is the great theme of Conceição Evaristo, which she also explores in her prize-winning short story, "Olhos d'água" (Water eyes).⁹

8 The formation of the artist in *Um defeito de cor*

⁹ About this theme cf. OLIVEIRA, Natalino da Silva. Escrever é sangrar: reflexões sobre ancestralidade, racismo e dor em Olhos d'água de Conceição Evaristo. *Aletria*, Belo Horizonte, v. 29, n. 1, p. 179-195, 2019.

The artist, the references to the visual arts and their relation with the history of black people reappear in Ana Maria Gonçalves' book, *Um defeito de cor*,¹⁰ which also explores themes such as freedom and artistic creation. The slave Kehinde, a female slave christened as Luisa, wins her freedom by buying it with her savings as an urban slave. She is gifted with a commercial talent, which, from enterprise to enterprise, comes to make her rich. After years of intense activities, she gets involved in a rebellion against the slave masters. The authorities react violently and stimulate the suspects of participation in the movement to return to Africa, which contributes to the former slave's decision to sail back to her mother land, with the name Luísa Gama.

As she reaches Africa, Luísa soon finds out how much her stay in Brazil had changed her. No matter where she is, in Uidá, near the Guinea Gulf, where there is a strong Brazilian presence, or the kingdom of Daomé, a former state, now the Republic of Benin, she feels as if she were in another Africa. She does not recognize the land of her childhood, where her mother's grave and the house where she had lived with her grandmother can no longer be found – "wild weeds had covered everything" (GONÇALVES, 2017, p. 844). [As the other people who had travelled to Africa and are now called "Brazilians", she had assimilated many of the whites' values. She considers "savages" the African who, never having known "civilization" preserve their old habits and "do not want to work". She misses Bahia, its fairs, streets, and mansions she had known. She keeps her faith, both the Catholicism she had learnt as a captive and the cult of African deities, the "orixás" she had also venerated in Bahia. She knows Yoruba, but, among the other "Brazilians" she speaks Portuguese, and, to her English acquaintances, she speaks English, which, still as a slave, she had learned when she had been hired to an English family. In short, she is placed in a multiple "space-between", between customs, religions and languages_ a situation alike that of those who had come back to Africa, or even, in some aspects, that of afro-Brazilians nowadays.

Luísa bravely faces the unavoidable problems of adaptation. She attends both rich businessmen and tribal chiefs, and, sometimes in dangerous situations, the local courts, like that of King Guezo or King Kosoko, and the palaces of the influential *chachás*, commanders of forts. She keeps multiplying her fortune with the commerce of Brazilian goods, tobacco, palm oil,

¹⁰ GONÇALVES, Ana Maria. *Um defeito de cor*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record Ltda., 2017.

clothes and adornments. She finally becomes a builder of luxury housing, built by workers from Brazil and ornamented with precious imported Brazilian materials. She took her inspiration from the rich mansions in Bahia. The houses built in Africa were ornamented with carvings, vases, furniture and other works by Abimbola, the artist whom she had met in this new level of wealth and influence.

9 The discovery of African art

Abimbola's expertise was the creation of masks, something that, regardless its geographic location, belongs to human history since prehistory. In cave art there can be found representations of hunters who, possibly invoking the help of superior entities, wear masks with animal heads. In Africa, masks can be found in the vast area from Senegal to Angola as artistically elaborated objects, tending either to realism or to abstraction. As a matter of fact, only in black art did masks act as "as living things, always update, whose multiple usages involve all of man's activities, from birth to death (...) The constancy of emotions and their universality are heightened to the utmost and reach an absolute ideal in their plastic transposition." (MONTI, 1992, p. 9).

In Luisa's eyes Abimbola's sculptures resemble a special kind of masks, called *geledes*, sculpted, modeled or woven objects, worn on the face or on the head, which are almost invariably associated with dances. When sculpted, they are made of a single block of wood. The artist starts from a cylindered trunk which s/he makes thinner with certain tools. The wood must be green and the mask is scorched with palm oil so that it does not get cracked. These masks are not homogenous, for each African ethnicity has its own cultural, aesthetic, and religious characteristics. The upper part of a *gelede* has a theme, inspired in any object (not necessarily men, women, or animals), and is developed/replaced by another one in the lower segment. The themes generally have to do with cosmological forces, social economic, political or religious roles, the memory of the dead or criticism of adversaries. *Geledes* have a strong spiritual and religious appeal, which illustrates the variety of beliefs and the traditional cult of supernatural entities called "orixás", their priests and priestesses, but also the Muslim and catholic clergy."¹¹ Some of these masks, expressions of matriarchy, have two typical structures. It is this kind of objects that the

¹¹ For the study of African masks, enriched by beautiful illustrations, cf. MONTI, Franco. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1992.

narrative of Luísa's life in Africa refers to. As an example, one can find images of geledes available on the internet.¹²

When Abimbola (whose name means “born rich”) meets Luisa, he is carrying a bag full of masks, which she thinks they resemble geledes. The artist tells her that he had learned his art with his father and his father with his own father and so on, in a long dynasty of ancestors. His masks certainly appeal to the supernatural, for his ancestors had been the artists preferred by the *onis*, religious chiefs of Ifé, the ancient Yoruba city in the state of Osun, in the region where nowadays Nigeria is located. Luísa shares these beliefs. In her words:

Ifé [was] a city from which the lands had spread on the waters, shaping Africa, Brazil, Europe and all places that exist... Ifé was founded by Oduduwa, or Oloduramé, the Great God Supreme, whom the Muslims, however, call Lamurudu, king of Meca, and other people thought to be Nimrod, who is in the Bible of the Catholics. (GONÇALVES, 2017, p. 838)

The narrative goes on with details about Ifé, the Yorubas' sacred city, also worshipped by Luísa:

It was in Ifé that lived the great *onis*, one after the other, the religious chiefs of the whole Yoruba kingdom, which had many other cities. One of the most important cities of the Oyó, kingdom, it was founded by Oduduwa's son and for a time governed by Xangô. In Oyó lived the *alafin*, the political head of the Yoruba cities. In fact, before the present Oyó there was another Ifé, in a place which had to be abandoned after a war. It was the wars, too, that finished many other empires, before and afterwards. (GONÇALVES, 2017, p. 839).

10 Art and history in Africa

As her new friend, Luisa was interested in the history of her people, for the masks often represent the face of a renowned character, an idealized and symbolic image, meant for the descendants' devotion. The masks are made of durable materials, even precious ones_ metal, stone, ivory_ and they present a richer and more refined style. Nostalgically, Abimbola remembers the consideration shown to artists of the past. They lived in the king's palace, enjoyed

¹² Available at https://www.google.com/search?q=m%C3%A1scaras+geled%C3%A9s&rlz=1C1CHBD_pt
Accessed on 01/21/2020.

all the comfort, all the space, all the apprentices, all the material, all the money and all the women they wanted. (GONÇALVES, 2017, p. 839). Abimbola regrets the loss of these privileges which, in his opinion, were indispensable to preserve the memory of his people.

That was the only way [the artists] could do their work well, which was to perpetuate, by means of the sculptures and the metal or clay masks, the images of the kings and the most important people of an era. Without them nobody would know what the Oranmyan, Xangô's father, or Obaloufon's, Eware's and Ogoulá's face had looked like. (GONÇALVES, 2017, p. 839).

In fact, the loss of the artists and, with them, of their masks has to do with the very history and traditions stolen by European colonization. The fictionalized history told in *Um defeito de cor* takes place in the 19th century, but their beliefs are alive and well in the 21st century. This can be shown by the enthusiasm with which, in July 2019, was received the visit of Ooni Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, the Ojaja II, king of Ifé in Nigeria, birthplace of the Yoruba people. The visit couldn't have happened at a more opportune time, for it occurred in the Decade of the Afro-descendants, programmed by the Unesco from 2015 to 2024.¹³

Conclusion

Some of the King of Ifé's pronouncements evoke themes explored in the gelede, especially representations of African history and worldview. Evidently the technical analysis of these masks is a matter for specialists. To those interested in the function of the references to art in literary themes, the most important thing is the reception of these artistic objects by the characters that see them as instruments for the preservation of memory. To the uninformed tourist they are no more than objects for decoration. In former times, as Abinbola affairs, such a view would not occur. The artist was immensely valued, s/he would not be doomed to wander around without a destiny, commercializing their art. In the text we read:

¹³ Some interesting information mentioned by the king, the self-proclaimed direct descendant of Oduduwa, can be found in the wikipedia.org. According to Pierre Verger, the city of *Ile Ifé*, called the birth of civilization divinized the founders of the dynasty of their reigns. The name Oduduá can be translated as "the calabash from which life sprang". Among the objectives of the King of Ifé's visit one can count the union and the strengthening of the Yoruba of Africa and of the African diaspora. Marcio D'Jagun, the President of the State Council of Defense and Promotion of freedom of religion observed that the visit of the Ooni of Ifé made visible the problems of religious intolerance and of the financial exclusion of negroes in Brazil. He also emphasized that the presence of Ooni had a special meaning on account of the strong spiritual presence of Yorubas in the life of Brazilians.

It had already happened for an artist to be captured and then exchanged for a whole army, or for his weight in gold, so important was the consideration that he deserved from his king. Since things had changed, and he had watched such barbaric things to happen, Abimbola lived without his reign and his king, without a house and a resting place, wandering through Africa, molding his masks, which he used to sell to anybody he met on the road, as if they were ordinary masks. (GONÇALVES, 2017, p. 839)

The character's words evoke the observations of ethnologists:

Among the Yorubas and the people of Benin, a few decades ago, the relation between client and artists was marked by a kind of patronage: the richest classes, hoping to be distinguished by manifestations of prestige, and wealth, attached a remarkable importance to the possession of works of art. Therefore, the artist was honoured by the noble or royal family at whose disposal he placed his capacities. (MONTI, 1962, p. 22).

Unfortunately, this art, which had been flourishing in an era before the European colonization, is about to disappear. This is what the ethnology realizes, with a tinge of melancholy:

Traditional African art now belongs to the past. The weakening of the animist religion, always more threatened by Islam and Christianity, caused the gradual disappearance of factors which had motivated the work of art, which was chiefly an object of ritual. Besides, the period of colonial administration sapped the social and political organization of the indigenous populations, increasing their decadence. New laws and customs, frequently contradicted the mentality and the customs consolidated by centuries (...)The younger generations lost a secure orientation and mostly forgot the heritage of the past, trying to fit strange ways of life, not always possible to assimilate. The themes of artistic traditions are no longer passed on; techniques are impoverished and fall down to the level of crafts. 1962, p. 110-111).

The conclusion, however, is not wholly pessimistic:

The future of a genuinely black African cannot yet be foreseen.. Starting from crafts which are conditioned by the demand of tourists cannot certainly flourish into a genuine artistic renaissance. But the undeniable artistic talent that the African sculptor proved to have along the centuries must surely be born again. But through new demands and motivations. (MONTI, 1962, p. 112).

Ironically, this hope in the continuity of African art is supported by the very European culture that sapped it. In fact, this has happened since the first steps of Cubism, a "Black-inspired" wave, the so-called negrophilia. Private collections, European institutions like the

Museum of Man in Paris, the British Museum and the Wallace collection in London display collections of African masks as treasures, admired by laymen and artists. In one of these exhibitions, which took place in the Museum of Man in 1905, Picasso was fascinated by the formal and technical freedom of the pieces displayed. In his words, he was contaminated by the virus of this art. So much so that he let it influence the new phasis of his creation, as in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Jovem Orelhão)* (1907), the inaugural mark of cubism and in *Dryad (Nymph of forests)* his 1908 oil. Survivor, African creation influenced Western art in the XX century, not only in Cubism, but also in Fauvism and Expressionism. In this connection, the Afro Brazil Museum of São Paulo shelters an important collection, which includes secular African works side by side with creations of our contemporaries, like Guimarães and José Adário dos Santos. Works by Santos, sculptures in wrought iron, transcreate works of their ancestors, sometimes related to slavery in Brazil. Thus, in the 21st century, in their mute language, African art keeps on telling the story of black people.

In so doing, African art offers the authors of the two novels analyzed the opportunity to interweave Art and Literature, using references to the visual arts as elements for the celebration of the history of black people.

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