

Documentary exposes struggle to decriminalize African religions in Brazil

by [Camila da Silva](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue



After 30 years with the Free Our Sacred campaign, leaders of Candomblé and Umbanda religions in Brazil recovered a collection of more than 500 confiscated items. (Elisângela Leite/Quiproco Filmes)

For a century, more than 519 sacred objects from the Umbanda and Candomblé—two religions with African origins—were in the possession of Brazil police.

This possession and the fight to return these relics to their rightful owners is the subject of the new documentary *Respect Our Sacred*, produced by [Quiproco Filmes](#). The film captures a landmark of emotion, faith, and antiracist struggle on September 21, 2020, in devotion to the ancestors of the Candomblé and Umbanda.

“They were all arrested by the police as if they had committed some crime,” said Maria do Nascimento, a religious leader. “Is it a crime for us to be Candomblé? Is it a crime for us to worship an *orixá*?”

Nascimento, 84, is known as Mother Meninazinha de Oxum. She is a representative of the Free Our Sacred campaign.

Both the Candomblé and Um-banda religions have their roots in Africa. In Candomblé, there is the belief in and worship of the *orixás*, gods that are usually revered through dances, songs, and offerings, which represent the energy and power of nature.

Umbanda also has its *orixás*. Worship services are guided by a saint mother or father. Believers emphasize the immortality of the soul, reincarnation, and the existence of and interaction with spiritual entities.

The criminalization imposed on Umbanda and Candomblé religions had its peak between 1889 and 1945. The New State political government in Brazil prioritized “improvement of the Brazilian race” with the construction of a national identity that was based in ethnic cleansing.

In the New State, these religions were persecuted and criminalized on the grounds that they were “highly dangerous against public order.” This was in part because of events in the 19th century, like the Malê revolt, which demanded the end of slavery and complete religious freedom.

It was only in 1946 that freedom of religious worship was decreed in Brazil. However, the roots of this history still impact the present and the future of those who believe in and worship these religions.

The Free Our Sacred campaign had a long journey with the Brazilian judiciary to get access to the items in order to preserve them and study them so that the religious history would not be forgotten.

As soon as activists were granted access and documents were signed, the relics traveled from police headquarters to the National Museum of the Republic.

In the documentary, campaign member Babá Adailton Moreira de Ogum said, “It was an ancestry. It was my mother who was signing it. We were there physically, but I

believe she was there as an ancestor, holding my hand and seeing the result so good for all of us.”

Filmmakers say the documentary is fulfilling because it features such a celebratory event.

“The transfer of the Nosso Sagrado Collection is a fundamental achievement for the *terreiro* communities and of enormous public interest,” Fernando Sousa, executive director of Quiprocó Filmes, said. “It is a process forged as an act of historical reparation, insofar as the transfer enables shared management with the *terreiro* communities, proper treatment, and the carrying out of studies and research in the different fields of knowledge of the social sciences and humanities.”

This process that Sousa referred to was also followed earlier in the film [The Sacred within Us](#), which shows the first attempts to recover the collection. A new film is in production now that will continue the record about the collection.

“In particular, it allows us to realize an old desire, which consists of a film production that contributes to the memory and history of the Afro religions of Rio de Janeiro from the rich set of 519 sacred objects of Candomblé and Umbanda, considering the historical and museological research already underway at the Museum of the Republic,” Sousa said. —[Religion Unplugged](#)