

Stony Brook University



OFFICIAL COPY

The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.

© All Rights Reserved by Author.

The Empowerment of Women in Candomblé through the Lens of Pierre Verger

A Thesis Presented

by

Luiza Teixeira-Vesey

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History and Criticism

Stony Brook University

May 2015

Copyright by
Luiza Teixeira-Vesey
2015

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Luiza Teixeira-Vesey

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this thesis.

Dr. Barbara E. Frank

Associate Professor, Art History and Criticism

Dr. Shoki Goodarzi

Lecturer, Art History and Criticism

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber

Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

The Empowerment of Women in Candomblé through the Lens of Pierre Verger

by

Luiza Teixeira-Vesey

Master of Arts

in

Art History and Criticism

Stony Brook University

2015

This thesis will address matters of gender and race in Pierre Verger's photographs of Brazilian *Candomblé*. *Candomblé* religion subverts not only race oppression, but gender oppression as well. It is one of the few social spaces where Afro-Brazilians, especially women, assume positions of power. In analyzing Verger's pictures, I will define the extent to which he is successful in translating this subversion to an exterior audience not familiar with the traditions of the religion.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 The Man behind the Lens	1
Chapter 2 Humanist Photographs: The Artistic Dimension of Verger's Ethno-Photography	7
Chapter 3 "Othermothers": Understanding Female Blackness	15
Chapter 4 Pictorial Power: Verger and Black Femininity	24
Chapter 5 Conclusion: What do Photographs Really Reveal?	34

List of Figures/Tables/Illustrations

Figure 1. Pierre Verger, Mercado Modelo, Salvador, Brasil, 1948-1951. Source: Fundação Pierre Verger.	24
Figure 2. Pierre Verger, Candomblé Joãozinho Da Gomea, Salvador, Brasil, 1946. Source: Fundação Pierre Verger.	24
Figure 3. Pierre Verger, Mercadores de Bagdad, Carnaval, Salvador, Brasil, 1959. Source: Fundação Pierre Verger.	25
Figure 4. Pierre Verger, Candomblé Opô Afonjá, Salvador, Brasil, 1946-1950. Source: Fundação Pierre Verger.	27
Figure 5. Pierre Verger, Candomblé Cosme, Salvador, Brasil, 1948 - 1952. Source: Fundação Pierre Verger.....	31
Figure 6. Pierre Verger, Initiation, Candomblé Opo Aganju, Salvador, Brasil, 1972 - 1973. Source: Fundação Pierre Verger.	32
Figure 7. Pierre Verger, Sophia de Exu, Salvador, Brasil, 1946-1950. Source: Fundação Pierre Verger.	32
Figure 8. Pierre Verger, Candomblé Joãozinho Da Gomea, Salvador, Brasil, 1946. Source: Fundação Pierre Verger.	32

Chapter 1

The Man behind the Lens

In 1932, Pierre Boucher introduced Pierre Verger to photography. In the same year, Verger decided to completely change his life, making the transition from a middle class Parisian white man to a curious citizen of the world and adventurer. Life in Paris did not please him anymore, so he embarked on a quest for *the other*. His inseparable Rolleiflex camera worked as extension of himself, as a fresh new pair of eyes. This nomadic lifestyle might also have been a quest for self-knowledge. Having passed away on February 11th of 1996, I cannot ask him if, in the end, he found himself, but his pictures show us that he found and saw *the other*.

Alberto Manguel states that a portrait is an “open mirror,” implying that the spectator reads his own experience when looking at the representation of the other.¹ He also goes further and claims that when an artist portrays the other, he is inevitably portraying himself.² He uses the example of the toxic relationship between Picasso and Dora Maar, in which she gradually gives up her own personality in order to absorb his, making her portrait as the *Weeping woman* (1937), in fact, a self-portrait of Picasso. In the light of Manguel’s anecdote, I ask: How much of Verger himself is revealed in his portraiture of *the other*? The camera, as a mechanical object, gives us the illusion of neutrality, but is such a thing possible? Was Verger completely detached from his subjects and able to show them as they really are?

¹ Alberto Manguel, “Reading Pictures,” *TVO Channel*, published on 03/07/2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jkOr40P4cU>.

² Ibid.

These questions are especially pertinent when discussing the narrowing of Verger's focus from the broad category of *the other*, to a particular part of it: the Afro-Brazilian woman. When the photographer chose to aim his lens at the particularities of a religion that empowers two categories historically known to be oppressed (that of people of color and that of women), he also offered new alternatives for the portrayal of these people. His work as an ethnographer gives even more weight to the belief that Verger is utterly qualified to tell *the truth* about the subjects he portrays. Sontag, as I will develop in chapter four, reminds us that not even documentary photography can be completely detached.³ Based on this inevitability of personal interpretation in the production of a work of art, the main question that this paper intends to answer is: how much *truth* is there in Verger's portraiture of the black women of *Candomblé*?

To answer this question, first it is necessary to understand the man behind the camera and the path that led him to such subjects. His encounter with photography happens under the photographic zeitgeist of the 1930s denominated as *La Photographie Humaniste* by Marie de Thézy. As the name implies, at that point, photographers were interested in analyzing men, in "the hidden beauty of *reality*."⁴ There was also a concern about documenting modernity in its materiality, where abstractions and artifices were deeply unwelcome. It is in this context that Boucher, who co-founded the Alliance Photo Agency in 1933, recruits Verger to the world of photography and to be part of the agency as well.

Photo agencies then focused primarily on cultural documentation. Pierre Verger's enthusiasm for *the other*, in that sense, might have been fueled by market demand. The

³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 88.

⁴ Marie de Thézy, *La photographie humaniste: 1930-1960, histoire d'un mouvement en France* (Paris: Contrejour, 1992), 11 (free translation, emphasis added).

photographer would go where ever work and luck took him, not giving preference for any particular culture at the beginning of his career. Already influenced by the Parisian art world of the 1920s' fascination with African art, Verger would make his first contact with Black Africa and Yoruba culture in 1934.⁵ An identification with black culture was already present as well: the photographer was a regular at the *Bal nègre* in Paris, a bar dedicated to jazz and frequented by people of color.⁶ However, it is only in 1946, more than ten years after going to Russia and beginning his break with the Parisian bourgeoisie, which would be followed by a definitive rupture with it in a great travel to French Polynesia, that the subject of blackness would grasp his full attention. It is his encounter with French sociologist Roger Bastide in São Paulo, Brazil that opens Verger's eyes to the black world of that country, at least photographically speaking.

It is interesting to notice that his first destinations were mostly towards the mysterious East, the land responsible for the big ruptures in the art world of the XIX century. One of his first stops, at the age of 30, in 1933, was the "primitive" Tahiti of Gauguin, followed by, in 1934, China and Japan, which proved to be very important to Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and Nabis aesthetic revolutions. Even though it is unknown if he was consciously inspired by those movements, such choices were not a coincidence, as so recognized by Jérôme Souty.⁷

⁵ Lula Buarque de Hollanda, Marcos Bernstein, Flora Gil, Leonardo Monteiro de Barros, Pedro Buarque de Hollanda, Gilberto Gil, and Pierre Verger, 2006, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger mensageiro entre dois mundos*, Brazil: Europa Filmes, DVD.

⁶ Jérôme Souty, "Comme un seul homme: Pierre Fátumbi Verger," *L'Homme*, no. 147 (1998): 225, accessed 09/25/2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23211048>.

⁷ Jérôme Souty, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: du regard détaché à la connaissance initiatique* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2007), 30.

Souty points out that Verger was “visually educated,” frequenting the society of painters of the 1920s.⁸ It was a moment when artists were on the look for a primitive dimension in painting, therefore it is not unreasonable to believe that names like Derain, Matisse, Picasso, among others, somewhat permeated Verger’s quest. Like them, the photographer was looking for the “original/native, immediate, (...) inimitable,” something beyond his own culture.⁹ We have a clue about his disregard for white civilization (at least as a photographic subject) in his notes about his visit to the United States, in 1934, where he shows a profound disappointment when noticing that the native-Americans and cowboys of his childhood movies were substituted by real life modernity with oil fields and automobiles.¹⁰

The photographer showed a certain indifference to art (an aspect very common to the participants of *La Photographie Humaniste*) and did not like to look at other people’s photographs in order not to ruin his own spontaneity.¹¹ However, aspects prominent to Russian photography and cinematography are almost always present in Verger’s work and, as Souty points out, those are the aspects that set him apart from the other humanist photographers and ethnographers. His dynamic unposed images, his praise of realism and instantaneity, his new and multiple angles (especially the use of *plongée* and *contre-plongée*, that means, from top to bottom and from bottom to top angles) are reminiscent of Alexander Rodchenko and Dziga Vertov.¹²

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Pierre Verger, *Pierre Verger: 50 anos de fotografia: 1932-1982* (Salvador, BA: Fundação Pierre Verger, 2011), 36.

¹¹ Souty, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: du regard détaché à la connaissance initiatique*, 30.

¹² Ibid., 151.

In interviews and in his memoir, Verger constantly refers to the carefree nature of his travels and photographs, as if life, for him, just *happened*. He traveled from one place to another based on work contracts or by chance and little serendipities. He took whatever assignments were given to him. But the encounter with Bastide would give a more precise goal to Pierre Verger's work. It was Bastide who encouraged Verger to go to Bahia and investigate its African presence. At a time when Rio de Janeiro was on its way to glory and Brazil was in the spotlight as a promising economic powerhouse, the photographer chose to take the turn away from all this glamour and shed a light on the poor black Brazil. He was not the first. A few years earlier, in 1939, American anthropologist Ruth Landes chose the same less obvious path that would also promote a paradigmatic shift in the way poor black Brazilians, especially women, were seen.

Both Landes and Verger, then, “treat themes that had formerly remained outside of the official versions of history, especially in relation to African and Afro-Brazilian cultures, thus giving them a voice.”¹³ This concern in letting them speak for themselves can be seen in the photographer's dislike for posed pictures. Verger's distance is kept to such an extent that despite all the years he spent studying *Candomblé* to the point of being honored with the title of *Babalaô*¹⁴ (that means, a priest of Ifá, a system of divination used in *Candomblé* and other Dahomeyan religions), he defines himself as an atheist.¹⁵

¹³ Angela Lühning, “Pierre Fatumbi Verger: a view from Bahia,” *Cahiers du Brésil Contemporain*, no. 38/39, 1999: 83, accessed on 09/25/2014, <http://www.revues.msh-paris.fr/vernumpub/05-Luhning.pdf>.

¹⁴ Verger's title as a priest of Ifá caused him to adopt the name of Fatumbi, which means “he who was reborn through the Ifá,” as explained in the documentary *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: mensageiro entre dois mundos*, directed by Lula Buarque de Hollanda.

¹⁵ Buarque de Hollanda, Marcos Bernstein, Flora Gil, Leonardo Monteiro de Barros, Pedro Buarque de Hollanda, Gilberto Gil, and Pierre Verger, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger mensageiro entre dois mundos*.

His curiosity towards the points of contact between Western Africa and Northeastern Brazil earned him several scholarships from *L'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire*, IFAN (The French Institute of Black Africa), which drew him into anthropology, causing him to favor writing over photographing. This is the most well-known phase of Pierre Verger's work and his texts, like *Flux et reflux de la traite des nègres entre le Golfe de Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* or *Os Libertos*, have been very important in the demystification of the African diaspora in Brazil. Perhaps this is why Verger is seen in academia mostly as an ethnographer, having his pictures relegated to a secondary role of supporting evidence to his scholar research. But Verger never ceased to be a photographer. Ethnography is nothing but a consequence of his work as a photographer. If his writings contributed to a better understanding of the black world in Brazil and Africa, it is his photographs that will portray the role of women in this world.

Chapter 2

Humanist Photographs: The Artistic Dimension of Verger's Ethno-Photography

In the context of humanist photography and modernity, there was a deep concern with explaining and understanding humankind in their totality. A great example of this is *The Family of Man* exhibition of 1955 at MoMA, which showed photographs from multiple countries and cultures, taken by photographers from several nationalities in an attempt to expose humankind as a plural unity. In this exhibition, anthropology and photography became deeply intertwined.

Humanist photographers often worked as illustrators for stories about different cultures in variety magazines, therefore, their condition as voyeurs is key to grasp the most out of what they see. We can notice this influence in Verger's work, in his policy of not getting involved and not interfering. Verger wanted to get involved with the *people*, he made himself part of the community, but the click of the shutter was almost left to chance. His involvement with the *scenes* he photographed was limited to framing them, which does not take away his active part as a member of the community being portrayed.

That explained, it is easy to understand Verger's discomfort with artifice. As illustrations, their pictures must, at the same time, be self-explanatory and engaging, accessible and aesthetically pleasing. Their audience was popular and curious, most times ignorant of the cultures being portrayed and, even more ignorant of theories of art. Being objective, however, does not annul the artistic quality of these pictures. At the peak of humanist photography in the Paris of 1930s, a similar movement in German painting was coming to an end, *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New

Objectivity, which intended to part from the unintelligibility of expressionism. Both movements, then, contemplated social engagement and accessibility.

Souty mentions *Cinéma Vérité* and its improvisation and concern about ultimate reality as another point of contact between Verger's humanism and other movements.¹⁶ In addition, Thézy points out the influence of the *Réalisme Poétique* into Humanist Photography, with its objective journalistic approach. One could also see Surrealism as an influence in Verger's work, since, as Sontag points out, "photography is the only art that is natively surreal," but his understanding of surrealism is quite different from hers.¹⁷ For her, "surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but *more dramatic* than the one perceived by natural vision."¹⁸ Verger, on the other hand, perceives surrealism (and art, in general) as an intellectual abstraction.¹⁹

However, his style of photographing has many similarities with the automatist branch of Surrealism. Verger liked to point his lens at subjects not quite knowing what was going to come out of it, looking for what Souty calls the "*inconscient de la vue*" ("the unconscious of sight"), a photographic primitivism that is focused on revealing a subconscious image, detaching the photographer from his own cultural conditionings.²⁰ The interesting part here is that if the materiality of the photograph must appear impartial to Verger, the *atmosphere* of the photograph

¹⁶ Souty, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: du regard détaché à la connaissance*, 68.

¹⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ Emanuel Garrigues, "Entrevista con Pierre Verger," trans. Eva Montero and Hasán López, *Revista Valenciana d'Etnologia*, no. 4 (2008): 32, 36.

²⁰ Souty, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: du regard détaché à la connaissance initiatique*, 31.

must be personal. In an interview with Emanuel Garrigues, the photographer claims to be necessary to develop a relationship of trust between the photographer and the photographed, which can only blossom after a certain amount of time living together with the people being portrayed.²¹

Verger “disliked artificial poses and photographing celebrities, preferring to photograph simple people in the context of their daily lives.”²² His appreciation for the casual also translates into his way of carrying himself with the camera. Verger did not hide himself as a photographer, but always kept his distance. When in his presence, a person might know that at some point she would be photographed, but she never knew exactly when that would happen. He could click the shutter at any minute, without any major preparations, in a discrete, almost imperceptible way. His camera was obvious, but not menacing. He allowed life to happen until the perfect moment presented itself.

Despite its troubled anthropological past that contributed to the fetishization of the so-called savage around the world, photography’s ability to tell a story quickly shifted its role to an instrument of empowerment of these same societies. Instead of picturing people in the ethnocentric point of view one might have of them, the current tendency of photography is actually to give them a voice. Verger and the Humanist Photographers can be considered the early precursors of this change. Humanist Photography, then, is the ideal movement to address this tension between the anthropological and the artistic dimension of photography, proving they are not mutually exclusive.

²¹ Garrigues, “Entrevista con Pierre Verger,” 23.

²² Lühning, “Pierre Fatumbi Verger: a View from Bahia,” 83.

Both Thézy and Souty constantly address such photographs in poetic language. *Ut pictura poesis*, or “as is painting so is poetry,” has been a claim that dates all the way back from ancient Rome. But if painters are poets, illustrators, according to Thézy, are writers.²³ In that sense, photographs will, then, be a “phonetics of the eyes,” a new language.²⁴ This parallel with poetry is evidence that, despite themselves, humanist photographers may refuse art, but cannot escape the plastic quality of their work.

One might ask what makes photography so revolutionary if it is not the only means of expression that allows the empowerment of minorities and political statements. Painting, poetry, sculpture... all had (and still do) fulfilled their duties in denouncing the inequalities of the world. But there is something about the modernity of photography that fits the modernity of independent blackness. They are both young and overlooked, constantly struggling for affirmation. It makes sense that a young art becomes so perfectly suitable to translate the young sense of independence in black culture.

Photography also validates actions. The photographer is a non-interventionist witness with the power of multiplying the reach of a gesture. His ability to spread the documentation of such gesture, of translating it into the materiality of photographs, has the capacity of making it arrive at places where the gesture itself would not be able to go. He is the media, not the message. Susan Sontag goes further and considers photographing as an act of encouragement to

²³ Thézy, *La Photographie Humaniste: 1930-1960, histoire d'un mouvement en France*, 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54 (free translation).

have “whatever is going on to keep on happening.”²⁵ It is a statement that emphasizes the importance of the artist and a somewhat narcissistic element to the subject.

David Byrne reminds us that “the Afro-Atlantic religion is oral, visual and musical, rather than written.”²⁶ The ritual itself is, then, a work of art. As pointed out by Souty, the symbolic value of the ritual echoes the symbolic value in art.²⁷ In that sense, the recording and representation of this value through photography cannot escape aesthetics. When a person in a picture is supposed to represent a certain *orixá*, Verger makes it clear that such a person *is* the *orixá*, both for the purpose of the religion and the photograph. The ritual and the artwork/ethno-recording become deeply intertwined. On the rare occasions when Verger explains his pictures with verbal texts, he refers to the people in them as the *orixás* themselves. Their power is such that they are capable of *becoming* an entity that is larger than life. The difference between the *Mãe-de-Santo* and the *orixá* she carries with herself becomes minimal for the purpose of the ritual and, therefore, for the purpose of the picture.

Even if the ritual is aesthetically pleasing in itself, Verger also makes aesthetic choices of his own. For example, as Souty points out, Verger’s choice of the Rolleiflex camera brings some particularities into his depictions.²⁸ One of them is the square format of the frame, but the most crucial aspect of it is the way Rolleiflex cameras are angled towards the subject. Unlike most cameras (of then and now), the Rolleiflex was not positioned over the eye of the photographer,

²⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, 12.

²⁶ David Byrne, foreword to *Divine Inspiration: from Benin to Bahia*, ed. Phyllis Galembo (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), viii.

²⁷ Souty, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: du regard détaché à la connaissance initiatique*, 146.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

but over his chest. That means that the lens of the camera was naturally never in *plongée* perspective towards the photographed, never oppressing the subject. On the contrary, oftentimes Verger's individuals were pictured slightly from a bottom to top angle that monumentalizes them. Also, during the act of photographing, the position of the lens allowed a relationship of equality towards the subject. The fact that the face and the gaze of the photographer were completely visible did not allow him to hide behind the shield of the camera. He was just as exposed as his subject.

Color (or the absence of) is another important aspect. 98% of Verger's pictures are in black and white, a choice that may have started as practical – such films were cheaper and more suitable for development in the field –, but became aesthetic, according to Souty, since it better captured tropical light in an interesting chiaroscuro effect.²⁹ If Verger's only intention with his photographs was ethnographical, color photography would have been more suitable for such task since it gathers information the way we would have seen it with our own eyes.

In fact, Verger claims that while his work “could be called ethnography, it could also be called *human interest*.”³⁰ He goes on: “I have never made ethnographic investigations strictly speaking; I have never asked them [the subjects] questions, taking notes on pieces of paper about things they said that I liked.”³¹ In summary, even if he did not see himself as an artist, he considered himself more of a photographer than an anthropologist or a scholar. He was interested in the subjectivities of his photographic subjects. To him, they were not data, but narratives.

²⁹ Ibid., 147.

³⁰ Garrigues, “Entrevista con Pierre Verger,” 29 (free translation, emphasis added).

³¹ Ibid. (free translation).

Verger's approach, inspired by the humanist movement, is also not suitable for gathering details. He avoids getting too close or being invasive.³² He was also as neutral as possible during the development of the film, not interfering in the revelation process or using avant-garde techniques.³³ Verger is more concerned about the relationship with the photographed subject than with the composition or the aesthetics. The irony is that this approach is an aesthetic element in itself, one that is almost metaphysical, that intends to capture much more than the materiality of a culture. It is no surprise, then, that his pictures could capture religious elements so well. He was so successful in this enterprise that local men in Haiti when seeing his pictures identified the deities that possessed the people with no hesitation.³⁴

For Verger, "a good photographer is a sublimated *voyeur*."³⁵ In that sense, a good photographer should not interfere with his subject. In fact, he believes in the fluidity of the process to an extent where he argues for the ultimate importance of the unconscious.³⁶ It is a matter of observation rather than interpretation. Verger was not interested in drawing conclusions, his goal was to observe ways of life that were different from his own.³⁷ It is this crucial aspect of his *modus operandi*, I argue, that allows the women of *Candomblé* to be revealed in their essence in his pictures. When he points and shoots the camera almost

³² Ibid., 66.

³³ Ibid., 73.

³⁴ Alfred Metraux, *Le pied a l'etrier: Correspondance, 12 mars 1946-5 avril 1963* (Paris: J.-M. Place, 1994), 62, quoted in Lorelle D. Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 140.

³⁵ Garrigues, "Entrevista con Pierre Verger," 23 (free translation).

³⁶ Ibid., 28 (free translation).

³⁷ Ibid.

automatically, not allowing an over-rationalization of the format and content of the scene, he allows the scene to speak for itself.

Chapter 3

“Othermothers”: Understanding Female Blackness

Nigerian sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi presents the main shift between what it is to be a woman in Africa and in western cultures. She states, “The woman at the heart of (western) feminism is a wife,” but in Africa she is a mother.³⁸ Furthermore, she is a public mother, which means that the expansion of her power shifts from the home to the public space, her authority shifts from the family to the community. It is not by chance, then, that the chief priestesses in *Candomblé* are called “mothers in saint” (*Mães-de-Santo*, in Portuguese). In the African sense, then, the mother figure is not necessarily biological. They may be other relatives, friends, lovers, spiritual leaders, or any other woman that assumes the role of “caretaker”, in what Lorelle D. Semley defines as “othermothers.”³⁹

The importance of the mother figure is accentuated by the common absence of the father. Semley, Bastide, and Landes explain how common it is for African and Afro-Brazilian children to grow up without a father. The independence of women is, then, not only cultural, but a necessity. However, it is important to emphasize that, a lot of times, especially in slave life, fathers were shut off by the choice of women themselves. Bastide exposes the tendency of female slaves to practice a sexual freedom which translated in a multiplicity of partners and, as

³⁸ Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Family bonds/Conceptual binds: African Notes on Feminist Epistemologies,” *Signs* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1094, accessed 01/21/2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175493>.

³⁹ Lorelle D. Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: gender and colonialism in a Yoruba town* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 11.

consequence, in the fact that those mothers usually did not know who the fathers of their children were.⁴⁰ In Yoruba and Dahomean religion that presented a problem, since the *orixás* and *voduns* were inherited through the male line. Therefore, if a mother does not know who is the father of her child, which often happened, it caused a rupture in “the chain of transmission of the orisha through the male line.”⁴¹ This may be one of the reasons why women became so important in Afro-Brazilian religious life, proving that their religious authority is a new world adjustment.

Yoruba influence in the feminist tendencies in *Candomblé* is undeniable, but it is necessary to analyze the religion as product of globalization and commercial and cultural trades between Africa and Brazil. Roger Bastide states that the modern African-Brazilian religions “are not survivals of ancient sects reaching back into the Brazilian past, but recent organizations dating back no further than the eighteenth or early nineteenth century.”⁴² This claim, reinforced by James Lorand Matory, reminds us that African culture in the diaspora is additive, not purist.⁴³ Bastide states that Afro-Brazilian religions are traditions “that were broken and resumed,” but, of course, they were never completely reinvented: some aspects were retained.⁴⁴

To recognize Verger’s role in portraying *Candomblé*, it is necessary to understand the religion itself and its idiosyncrasies. As defined by Matory, *Candomblé* and similar creeds are

⁴⁰ Roger Bastide, *The African religions of Brazil: toward a sociology of the interpenetration of civilizations*, trans. Helen Sebba (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 61.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 47.

⁴³ James Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic religion: tradition, transnationalism, and matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 13-14.

⁴⁴ Bastide, *The African religions of Brazil: toward a sociology of the interpenetration of civilizations*, 48.

“religions of spirit possession, divination, and healing that also define peoplehoods called ‘nations’, which link them with specific places in Africa.”⁴⁵ Matory’s conception of *Candomblé*, then, which is the same as Verger’s, is that of a transnational manifestation, a multilateral dialogue between multiple African Diasporas (especially Brazil and other places in Latin America) and Western Africa. This dynamism underlined by both men will prove itself very important in the understanding of the religion as a plural product of modernity, not only a rigidly followed tradition from the homeland. This aspect is also important to understand why Verger might have been drawn to this particular aspect of the diaspora.

The points of contact where marginalized communities have their traditions clashing with Eurocentric manners are particularly interesting. In the context of black Brazil, the conservativeness of a Catholic country meets the gender affirmation of *Candomblé*. In a time when organized feminist movements were still incipient in the Global West, there was an Afro-Brazilian space where women had the power, “a country where women like men, feel secure and at ease with them, and do not fear them.”⁴⁶ But there are restrictions on this power, which almost never escapes the space of the religion.

One important aspect of *Candomblé* is its syncretism with Catholicism. Christianity is always present and is not regarded as a western contamination of *Candomblé*’s purity. This peculiarity is even more interesting when analyzed on matters of gender. Catholicism often requires a position of submission from women, which is the exact opposite of the role of *Candomblé*’s⁴⁷ priestesses. In fact, in Catholicism, women are not even allowed such a prominent

⁴⁵ Matory, *Black Atlantic religion: tradition, transnationalism, and matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, 5.

⁴⁶ Ruth Landes, *The City of Women* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 248.

⁴⁷

position in the church. And yet, as we can see in David Byrne's documentary, *Ilê Aiyê*, *Candomblé* women often wear the beads that represent the *orixá* they are consecrated and Christian crosses at the same time.

Bastide shows us that there were cases of female subservience towards their male counterparts in African history, going as far as considering such women as domestic slaves.⁴⁸ Where did the *Candomblé* concept of female superiority come from, then? Eric Hobsbawm explains that, since traditions are fragile, new traditions are invented as “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.”⁴⁹ In that sense, the reference point for female agency in *Candomblé* can be traced back to the Yoruba concept of “Iya Oba” (that means, “Mother of the King”), who was the closest woman to the king, but not his biological mother.⁵⁰ Another important female figure is the “Iyalode”, who were the female leaders of the market association in Yorubaland. They were respected by political authorities and their figure was very important in the community.⁵¹

In bringing those two characters to light, Semley and Annie Lebeuf show us that Yoruba culture does not put women in absolute positions of power. Lebeuf, like Oyewumi, argues that gender roles in Africa are seen in a different way than in the Global West. Her conclusion is that the role of men and women in Africa is complementary, instead of the submission dynamics of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, “Inventing Tradition,” in *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2.

⁵⁰ Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: gender and colonialism in a Yoruba town*, 34.

⁵¹ Annie M.D. Lebeuf, “The role of women in the political organization of African societies,” in *Women of Tropical Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 113.

women under men in the west. She explains, “Although it is usually men who are called upon to rule, the norms which regulate the position of individuals within a community often permit a woman, *under special circumstances*, to take the place of a man.”⁵² In addition to that, there is Oyewumi’s understanding of Yoruba culture as gender-free in essence which shows us that gender roles in Africa must be understood in their context, instead of ours.⁵³ The key difference from *Candomblé* to Yorubaland is that in the former, female rule is preferred, instead of conditional.

Just like the case of the “Iyalode” back in Nigeria, Brazilian black women’s source of power and independence is also in informal commerce. Therefore, commercial exchange is mostly what guaranteed their religious power and freedom. Landes explains that in *Candomblé* “stability is provided by the black women.”⁵⁴ They “have everything: they have the temples, the religion, the priestly offices, the bearing and rearing of children, and opportunities for self-support through domestic work and related fields,” while men relied on them for personal, emotional and financial security.⁵⁵ This is an important break with western culture’s concept of men as the ultimate provider.

It is important to open a parenthesis here to the fact that what it means to be black in Brazil is different than what it means in the United States, for example. In Brazil, race is directly

⁵² Ibid., 114 (emphasis added).

⁵³ Matory, *Black Atlantic religion: tradition, transnationalism, and matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, 217.

⁵⁴ Landes, *The City of Women*, 147.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

connected to social class, more than to the color of one's skin.⁵⁶ An educated black person of means not only is not recognized as black in their social context, but also does not recognize herself as black. Color, in Brazil, is political.⁵⁷

This may explain why black women's work options did not include high-paying jobs or why formal education is never mentioned by Landes. This brings us back to the space of black women in the bigger picture, emphasizing that once they faced the realities outside of the *terreiro* (sacred space where *Candomblé* ceremonies take place), they were still financially disadvantaged in comparison to white women. On the other hand, they enjoyed a kind of public life unimaginable by white women, which does not translate into black affirmation. Through the course of Landes's book, the Afro-Brazilians constantly refer to white blood as one "of quality." Lighter skinned women consider themselves of better "quality" than dark skinned ones. As a consequence, dark skinned women are self-conscious about their looks, considering themselves of less "quality" for not having enough white blood. The ghost of white superiority still haunts black people in everyday secular life.

But in the *terreiros* everything changes and only black women are empowered. Cheryl Sterling states the importance of this new relationship of power: "Afro-Brazilian women, I specifically contend, use the practice of *Candomblé* as a site from which to gain personal power and agency in a social and political climate that continues to treat them as sub-citizens."⁵⁸ It

⁵⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁸ Cheryl Sterling, "Women-Space, Power, and the Sacred in Afro-Brazilian Culture," *The Global South*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (2010): 73, accessed on 04/24/2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/GSO.2010.4.1.71>.

might be shameful for someone to consider himself black in a public space, but in the context of *Candomblé* there is pride in these dynamics.

Sterling is emphatic in the importance of such shift, since in such spaces, white people need to be subservient not only to women, but to *black women*. Also in *Candomblé*, power moves from black women to black women, since the *Mães-de-Santo* tend to pass the control of the *terreiro* to their daughters.⁵⁹ She goes on:

It is at this point of manifestation that we see an interruption of the social discourse of the Brazilian state. For in the dominant ideologies, power exists only amongst the political elite and wealthy, white strata. In these alternate spaces where blackness prevails, power is reconfigured as the interrelation and interplay between the human vehicle and the spiritual world.⁶⁰

In addition to that, the *Filhas-de-Santo* (biological daughters of the *Mães-de-Santo* or just practitioners of the religion) shift their roles from being subjected to the objectification of male gaze to the one of powerful individuals with agency. This is a substantial paradigmatic change, since women of color are commonly over sexualized in the almost mythical figure of the *mulata* (a dark skin woman with Caucasian facial features and voluptuous body) in popular culture.

Even if *Candomblé* empowers women on a social and political level, it stills castrates her sexuality. Bastide states that the religion “directs the eroticism of its members,” not only women.⁶¹ It is at least a step ahead from the everyday historical objectification of the black female body outside of the *terreiro*. For Bastide, in the space of *Candomblé*, female sex is

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

controlled by the religion, but the female body is not sexualized. Landes seems to disagree, though. She suggests that men silently objectified women during ceremonies, as if one of the main reasons for the success of *Candomblé* was female exhibitionism. “It was a duty of the men to look on and admire,” Zezé, one of her informants, says.⁶² That, of course, would provoke a jealousy backlash from the *Candomblé* husbands, as exemplified by the relationship between Zezé and Amor, her common-law husband. The tension in the power negotiations in the household is tangible and men do not resignedly accept the political superiority of their female partners. Amor deeply resents his wife’s career.⁶³ It is interesting here Landes’s choice of words: she does not use “vocation” or “calling,” as one would say about religious matters, but “career,” which implies a professionalization of female religious duties.

In summary, a lot of changes in female perception occurred in the translation of Yoruba culture from Africa to Brazil, which lead to a demand for new traditions. Traditions, says Hobsbawm, are invented when big and fast changes arise, because the old ways are deliberately unwanted, not because they are not available anymore.⁶⁴ In that sense, we may argue that the abolition of slavery provided the historical rupture necessary for the implementation of a philosophy of black affirmation. It is true that the slaves in Brazil, unlike the ones in the United States, for example, had a relative freedom of worship and culture. But during slavery they could only try to gather the pieces of their homeland. With abolition, they could formulate their whole identity as an independent being. The homeland customs did not fit this new reality. The former slaves were not merchandise from multiple nationalities anymore, they were people again, in a

⁶² Landes, *The City of Women*, 144.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁶⁴ Hobsbawm, “Inventing Tradition,” 5-8.

different land and united by what Bastide calls a “common misery.”⁶⁵ *Candomblé*, according to him, is important for freed slaves because it works as “a reconstituted African village, with the same laws of religious fraternity and models of mutual assistance linking its members in warm, mutual affection, it became the refuge and support of a population suddenly thrown upon its own resources.”⁶⁶

With abolition black people went from being products to active traders. On the subject of women, this proves even more important. Black women that mothered illegitimate children of white men or that were abandoned by their temporary partners, got used to having to earn a living through informal commerce, allowing them financial independence and, consequently, the ability to raise those children as single mothers. On the same note, Bastide states that women are keener on maintaining traditions and therefore are more effective in passing their African heritage. Financial independence, he states, makes matriarchal families possible, which ensures the perpetuation of African tradition. The survival of *Candomblé* lies, then, in matriarchy.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Bastide, *The African religions of Brazil: toward a sociology of the interpenetration of civilizations*, 44.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

Chapter 4

Pictorial Power: Verger and Black Femininity

Souty claims that in Verger's pictures we have "*photographed* subjects and not *photographic* subjects," which makes them dynamic and does not deny their humanity.⁶⁸ It is the photographer that moves around them, not them stopping and posing for the photographer. Verger has no authority over them, they carry on with whatever they are doing, sometimes acknowledging him, sometimes not (see figures 1 and 2). But when they do stop and look at him/the camera, there is no rigidity or apprehension in their body language. They are comfortable and relaxed.

Figure 1. Pierre Verger, Mercado Modelo, Salvador, Brasil, 1948-1951. Figure 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows a black saleswoman from bottom to top angle pointing her finger at something outside of the frame. Original source: Fundação Pierre Verger

Figure 2. Pierre Verger, Candomblé Joãozinho Da Gomea, Salvador, Brasil, 1946. Courtesy of Fundação Pierre Verger. Figure 2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows two black women in *Candomblé* attire. They are looking down at the camera with a half-smile. Original source: Fundação Pierre Verger

⁶⁸ Souty, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: du regard détaché à la connaissance initiatique*, 149 (emphasis added).

Such observations may seem mundane, but a lot of stereotypes regarding the portrayal of the black woman's body are shattered here. The main one to fall is the over-sexualization of the black female body. Even in his shootings of the *carnaval* festivities, famous for such sexualized approach, Verger opts for photographing the everyday black woman (see figure 3). She is in costume, but it does not sexualize her body, her gaze is low, but not self-conscious. Her physical features do not seem to be Verger's focus, but her body language as a whole. It is the look on her face, that somewhat out of place melancholy among such a lively context, rather than her looks that are the focus of the picture. She is more than a beautiful woman, she is an individual in an introverted moment, lost in herself even if only for the brief time of the click of the shutter. She is the figure that stands out not just because of her body, but because of her attitude. And even if we do not know her name, as it usually happens with Verger's pictures, we can sense she is not a generalization of blackness or femininity. Her individualization comes through the picture.

Figure 3. Pierre Verger, Mercadores de Bagdad, Carnaval, Salvador, Brasil, 1959. Figure 3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows a black woman in *carnaval* costume. She looks distracted and her gaze is towards the ground. Original source: Fundação Pierre Verger

In the context of the *terreiro* this paradigmatic shift is even more striking. The ceremonies and even the portraits are never treated as an exhibition of the exotic. Verger does not zoom on details. He is not carefully trying to reproduce peculiar aspects of their visual culture, but an almost metaphysical ambience. Even when the women are dressed as their *orixás* or are in trance, there is

a care in humanizing them. They rarely stare at the camera, never making the effort to be seen, to be noticed. It is them and only them that attract our gaze (see figures 5, 6 and 7).

Souty goes further and implies that, actually, Verger puts himself in an inferior position towards his photographed subjects. Because of the way the Rolleiflex is positioned, the photographer bows to his subject in a perhaps unconscious indication of humility and courtesy.⁶⁹ In the portrait of Mãe Senhora (see figure 4), this symbology is even stronger due to his personal relationship with her. It is a reversal of the average relationship of power between different races and genders.

Mãe Senhora consecrated Verger's head to Xangô, becoming his *Mãe-de-Santo* and putting him under the *orixá's* protection.⁷⁰ But the photographer implies in his memoir, that Mãe Senhora's protection was a machination of power as well. He states that another *Mãe-de-Santo*, Tia Massi, wanted him to follow her *orixá*, Oxaguian, because she believed it was also his *orixá*, but Mãe Senhora found out and in a "wise maneuver" (his words), had Xangô make him dance, and so he became her protégé.⁷¹ Of course, this does not mean he never cared for Mãe Senhora or that he was not pleased in having her as his *Mãe-de-Santo*. On the contrary, despite her withdrawn behavior in the beginning of their relationship, with time, they became great friends and he showed a profound respect towards her.⁷² However, this anecdote, told half in jest, shows that even if these women are powerful for themselves, having a white man under their care was still important for

⁶⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁰ Pierre Verger, *Pierre Verger: 50 anos de fotografia: 1932-1982*, 276.

⁷¹ Ibid., 302.

⁷² Buarque de Hollanda, Marcos Bernstein, Flora Gil, Leonardo Monteiro de Barros, Pedro Buarque de Hollanda, Gilberto Gil, and Pierre Verger, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger mensageiro entre dois mundos*.

their validation in the community, even in one such as *Candomblé*. No matter how much empowerment they have in a black community, it is still the white endorsement that has more weight. Mãe Stella, though, who was initiated by Mãe Senhora, claims that Verger's charisma was not a matter of race, but of the power of his *orixá*, dismissing any hypotheses that the photographer might have been a favorite due to the color of his skin.⁷³

Figure 4. Pierre Verger, *Candomblé Opô Afonjá*, Salvador, Brasil, 1946-1950. Figure 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows Mãe Senhora sitting on a chair outdoors. Her attire is luxurious and she is looking down at the camera. Original source: Fundação Pierre Verger

It is also important to notice what is happening outside the frame. What is not in the pictures is just as important as its subject. What Verger does not show us may tell more about these women than the way they carry themselves in front of the camera. In that sense, the metonymy of the bow gives us an important clue about their importance. The photographer, as a white man, is submissive towards female blackness. The symbolical bow happens in photographing Mãe Senhora in *contre-plongée*, which means from bottom to top. Even if this is a common practice in Verger's modus operandi, with Mãe Senhora the angle is much sharper than in most of his other photographs. This reflects her position as an almost *Mãe-de-Santo* superstar of her time. Even if there is no such thing as a centralized power in *Candomblé*, there sure are political and traditional implications that make certain *terreiros* more powerful than others. In the

⁷³ Ibid.

case of Senhora's, the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá is one of the oldest ones in Bahia, being officially listed as a national historical landmark in the year 2000 by the *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional*, IPHAN (Institute of Historical and Artistic Nacional Heritage).

But what really shows us that she is aware of her power is the way she chose to be portrayed. Unlike most of Verger's pictures, this one is posed, which means she put some thought into how her self-image would be preserved. I say *she* did, because, as we have seen before, Verger did not direct his subjects and his photographs were never staged. As argued by Sontag, "the less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naive – the more *authoritative* the photograph was likely to be."⁷⁴ That said, we can come to the conclusion that the self-assertive look on the priestess face proves the point that she is aware of her power and position of superiority towards him. Her luxurious clothes, pose and facial expression have an almost authoritarian quality that demands respect and submission. The chair placed in a rather empty outdoor space works as a sort of throne, being Mãe Senhora, then, not only the sovereign of her *Candomblé* house, but also of nature. She makes eye contact with us and the camera, exposing her position of agency towards the picture. She is in control.

Raél Jero Salley invokes American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois and his enthusiasm for photography as an instrument to reconstruct images and unmake stereotypes.⁷⁵ He elaborates, explaining that photography "operates by offering alternative views, and its force often comes through nuanced presentation of one's self and community. Contemporary photographs may also

⁷⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, 52 (emphasis added).

⁷⁵ Raél Jero Salley, "Zanele Muholi's elements of survival," *African Arts*, no. 45, vol. 4 (2012): 58, accessed 22/03/2014, <http://go.galegroup.com.libproxy.cc.stonybrook.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA312290699&v=2.1&u=sunysb&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=80b8ea566fca833a3a7868d37d5d332a>.

enable the viewer to imagine how people *connect* with, and *belong* to, their communities and nations.”⁷⁶ That said, it is not unreasonable to imply that photography’s greatest asset as an art form is precisely its documentary aspect. Deborah Willis states, “The photographers' vision allows us to see the self-image projected by the sitter, think critically about the history behind the photograph, and explore the transformation of the mythos projected on the black community both by its own members and by the dominant culture,” which can work as a definition of photography’s role in the empowerment of minorities in general, not only black communities.⁷⁷

Connection and belonging are key words here. It is Verger’s pictures capacity to create connections that puts them a step ahead of general ethno-photography.⁷⁸ Photography as means of empowerment differs from photography as anthropology because it allows the audience, the photographer and the subject to relate in a multilateral dimension. Mostly, it means that the subject ceases to be a literal object and becomes a person. The photographer, then, holds no absolute authority anymore. He is simply the messenger and his concern is to use his expertise to make this story translate to the audience in the best way possible. This aspect, by no means, denies him authorship. Even if *how* something is photographed is not controlled by the photographer, the choice of *what* is being photographed is always his. To see and to be seen assume here another perspective. Photography, then, becomes personal for people on both sides of the lenses.

⁷⁶ Ibid (emphasis added).

⁷⁷ Deborah Willis, “The Sociologist’s Eye: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Paris Exposition,” in *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. Du Bois and African-American portraits of progress*, ed. David L Lewis and Deborah Willis (New York: Amistad, 2003), 77.

⁷⁸ Ethno-photography meaning photographs as mere means of gathering visual anthropological data.

The contrast between Mãe Senhora's seriousness and the casual looks of other *Candomblé* women is striking (see figure 2), but this does not take away their agency. They may be inferior to Mãe Senhora, but they are still one step above Verger, never feeling intimidated by his lens. Perhaps he is the object of their curiosity and not the other way round. They know that this is their space and in it they do not need to be submissive to any white master. Sontag reminds us that "photographs cannot *create* a moral position, but they can *reinforce* one – and can help build a nascent one."⁷⁹ That means, Verger's recording of these women would not be sufficient to give them agency if such agency was not present in the first place, but his recording is still important in the sense that extrapolates the conception of black women as women of power from a restricted social space (the *terreiro*) to a general space (the audience exposed to the photographs).

It is when the *orixás* are present that we can really grasp Verger's concern about the transcendent quality of his photographs rather than what is scientific about them. Furthermore, it is the portrayal of the supernatural that brings out the most humane dimension of his subjects. In the 1955 *The Family of Man* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Edward Steichen curated several photographs of and by people of multiple nationalities, Verger included, intending to show the audience the humanity that gathers us all, independent of culture, religion, race etc. In its catalogue, Steichen defines the spiritual pictures as "photographs concerned with the *religious* rather than *religions*."⁸⁰ I would like to use this quote to summarize Verger's intentions in portraying *Candomblé*. To portray the *religious* is to portray what is human about

⁷⁹ Sontag, *On Photography*, 17 (emphasis added).

⁸⁰ Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man: the Greatest Photographic Exhibition of All Time* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 4 (emphasis added).

spiritual concerns; to portray *religions* is to portray an abstract political concept that segregates people of different cultural backgrounds rather than to consider them human as well. *The Family of Man* celebrated humanity in all its diversity. Those photographs were concerned with “basic human consciousness rather than social consciousness, (...) with man’s dreams and aspirations and (...) the flaming creative forces of love and truth.”⁸¹

To see these women fully devoted and even consumed by the deities they represent (see figures 5 and 6), to see them being the entities in which they believe, to the point of letting go their own identities (see figures 7 and 8) is to acknowledge their power to represent something larger than life to their community. It is not important to share their faith, but to recognize the authority they emanate to their peers. This power rectifies the lack of political support given to black Brazilian communities and this is why they are so important. We can note that when in trance they do not even acknowledge the camera, looking up or down. They are more important than that and they know it. Verger knows that, too, since despite being a *Filho-de-Santo* and an Ifá priest, he claimed himself to be an atheist. Their authority, either social or religious, is the real subject of his pictures.

Figure 5. Pierre Verger, Candomblé Cosme, Salvador, Brasil, 1948 - 1952. Figure 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows two black women dressed in *orixá* attire during a ceremony. They do not seem to acknowledge the camera. Original source: Fundação Pierre Verger

⁸¹ Ibid.

Figure 6. Pierre Verger, Initiation, Candomblé Opo Aganju, Salvador, Brasil, 1972 - 1973. Figure 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows a black woman during initiation. She does not seem to acknowledge the camera. Original source: Fundação Pierre Verger

Figure 7. Pierre Verger, Sophia de Exu, Salvador, Brasil, 1946-1950. Figure 7 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows a black woman gazing away while dressed as an *orixá*. Original source: Fundação Pierre Verger

Figure 8. Pierre Verger, Candomblé Joãozinho Da Gomea, Salvador, Brasil, 1946. Figure 8 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows a black woman dressed as an *orixá*. Her eyes are closed and she seems to be in trance. Original source: Fundação Pierre Verger

Perhaps when Verger began to photograph *Candomblé* he was not aware of the value of its gender aspects, but it must have been impossible for him to ignore these women's pride and importance in their communities. The photographer never dedicated his research solely to gender issues the way Matory or Landes did. He was aware of the role of the religion as an instrument of power and resistance for the Afro-Brazilian community in general, but his pictures let this female influence show.⁸² They transpire feminism in what Walter Benjamin calls an "optical unconscious,"⁸³ that means, the ability of photography to reveal what the photographer is not

⁸² Buarque de Hollanda, Marcos Bernstein, Flora Gil, Leonardo Monteiro de Barros, Pedro Buarque de Hollanda, Gilberto Gil, and Pierre Verger, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger mensageiro entre dois mundos*.

⁸³ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 512.

necessarily looking for yet, at least not consciously. This a constant in Pierre Verger's work as an artist and as a traveler. This is possibly the greatest asset of photography as an art form.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: What do Photographs Really Reveal?

The history of photography could be recapitulated as the struggle between two different imperatives: beautification, which comes from the fine arts, and truth-telling, which is measured not only by a notion of value-free truth, a legacy from the sciences, but by a moralized ideal of truth-telling, adapted from nineteenth-century literary models and from the (then) new profession of independent journalism.⁸⁴

It is, then, the duty of the photographer, especially the humanist photographer, to turn his gaze to the marginal parts of society. It is not sufficient to be an artist, it is necessary to be socially engaged. On that note, it is not difficult to understand why Verger's pictures were so popular to illustrate magazine stories. Perhaps, instead of focusing on the tension of his role as an artist and an ethnographer, we should really ask ourselves if he is, more than anything, a journalist. And if so, does this make him less of an artist?

I would like to argue that, in fact, this makes him a social conscious artist and such artists are inevitably partially journalists, since their job is also to investigate, record and broadcast different ways of living. On that note, Sontag seems to believe that photography has always been naturally aligned with the marginal. She states, "Gazing on other people's reality with curiosity, with detachment, with professionalism, the ubiquitous photographer operates as if that activity transcends class interests, as if its perspective is universal."⁸⁵ But Verger is never detached, he photographs to get closer to people, to show *different* perspectives and not *new* ones.

⁸⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, 86.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

When a story is told, it is inevitable that the subjectivity of the storyteller interferes with it. As seen before, the non-staged photographic approach of Verger gives liberty to his subjects to allow themselves to be seen the way they want to be seen. But still, the process of curating what must be photographed belongs to the photographer. He may not decide the portrait, but he still has the power to decide what is important to be recorded and what is not. He controls the framing, but not the people framed.

As Sontag states, “Nobody takes the same picture of the same thing.”⁸⁶ Photographs are just as personal as paintings, sculptures and other forms of art. Even documentary photography, like a lot of Verger’s, cannot be one hundred percent impartial. His gaze, his aesthetics, his humanity are still present. Sontag calls this a “photographic seeing,” which she defines as “an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects as too ordinary.”⁸⁷ There is, then, a genius quality to the photographer. The word “aptitude” implies an innate characteristic pertaining only to the photographer that sets him as a more qualified being for seeing. Verger is shining a light on other possibilities for the gaze. It is the gaze and only the gaze that he controls, never the subject.

Like anthropology, “the camera makes exotic things near, intimate; and familiar things small, abstract, strange, much farther away.”⁸⁸ Its job is to propagate stories, not to make up new ones. It is an amplifier rather than a creative instrument, at least when it is used without artifices that will not interfere in the message. Of course, there are still aesthetic decisions to be made.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 167.

Verger was a perfectionist when it came to the developing process, almost obsessed about achieving “the right shades of gray.”⁸⁹ While his concern about the use of light, which is key to photography, may enhance the drama in his pictures, it still does not completely alter their narrative.

The goal of Verger’s pictures is the real. He believes that the trance in the rituals is, in fact, “the true manifestation of our nature,” that single moment when we can show and know ourselves as we are in our essence, when we are caught off guard.⁹⁰ It is this surprise element of his modus operandi when behind the lens that makes it possible for him to capture truth. And the truth is that, even when inattentive, these women are autonomous and powerful.

Simone de Beauvoir, when visiting Brazil, acknowledged *Candomblé* as an instrument to restore humanity into people “who have been forced into the status of cattle.”⁹¹ Verger’s photographs not only spread this obvious truth, but also gender it and emphasize the Afro-Brazilian community’s right to modernity.

⁸⁹ Buarque de Hollanda, Marcos Bernstein, Flora Gil, Leonardo Monteiro de Barros, Pedro Buarque de Hollanda, Gilberto Gil, and Pierre Verger, *Pierre Fatumbi Verger mensageiro entre dois mundos*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Putnam, 1965), 518-519.

Bibliography

- Bastide, Roger. *The African religions of Brazil: toward a sociology of the interpenetration of civilizations*. Translated by Helen Sebba. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *Force of circumstance*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Putnam, 1965.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Little History of Photography." In *Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings. Translated by Rodney Livingstone, 507-530. Cambridge; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Byrne, David, and Kiki Miyake. 2004. *Ilé aiyé: The house of life*. New York City, NY: Plexifilm. DVD.
- Buarque de Hollanda, Lula, Marcos Bernstein, Flora Gil, Leonardo Monteiro de Barros, Pedro Buarque de Hollanda, Gilberto Gil, and Pierre Verger. 2006. *Pierre Fatumbi Verger mensageiro entre dois mundos*. Brazil : Europa Filmes. DVD.
- Carybé, Pierre Verger, and José de Jesus Barreto. *Carybé, Verger & Jorge: obás da Bahia*. Salvador, BA: Fundação Pierre Verger: Solisluna Design Editora, 2012.
- Freyre Gilberto. *Casa Grande & Senzala: Edição Comemorativa - 80 Anos*. São Paulo: Editora Global, 2013.
- Galembo, Phyllis and Robert Farris Thompson. *Divine Inspiration: from Benin to Bahia*, Edited by Phyllis Galembo, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993.
- Garrigues, Emanuel. "Entrevista con Pierre Verger." Translated by Eva Montero and Hasán López. *Revista Valenciana d'Etnologia*, no. 4, 2008.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. "Inventing Tradition." In *The Invention of Tradition*, 1-14. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Landes, Ruth. *The City of Women*. New York: Macmillan, 1947).
- Lebeuf, Annie M.D. "The role of women in the political organization of African societies." In *Women of Tropical Africa*, 93-120. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963.
- Lühning, Angela. "Pierre Fatumbi Verger: a view from Bahia." *Cahiers du Brésil Contemporain*, no. 38/39, 1999: 75-95. Accessed on 09/25/2014. <http://www.revues.msh-paris.fr/vernumpub/05-Luhning.pdf>.
- Matory, James Lorand. *Black Atlantic religion: tradition, transnationalism, and matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005.

- Oyewumi, Oyeronke. "Family bonds/Conceptual binds: African Notes on Feminist Epistemologies." *Signs* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1093-1098. Accessed 01/21/2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175493>
- Salley, Raél Jero. "Zanele Muholi's elements of survival." *African Arts*, no. 45, vol. 4 (2012): 58-69. Accessed 22/03/2014. <http://go.galegroup.com.libproxy.cc.stonybrook.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA312290699&v=2.1&u=sunysb&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=80b8ea566fca833a3a7868d37d5d332a>
- Semley, Lorelle D. *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Sontag Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador, 1973.
- Souty, Jérôme. "Comme un seul homme: Pierre Fátumbí Verger." *L'Homme*, no. 147 (1998): 221-236. Accessed 09/25/2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23211048>.
- . *Pierre Fatumbi Verger: du regard détaché à la connaissance initiatique*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2007.
- Steichen, Edward. *The Family of Man: the Greatest Photographic Exhibition of All Time*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1955.
- Sterling, Cheryl. "Women-Space, Power, and the Sacred in Afro-Brazilian Culture." *The Global South*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (2010): 71-93. Accessed on 04/24/2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/GSO.2010.4.1.71>.
- Thézy, Marie de. *La photographie humaniste: 1930-1960, histoire d'un mouvement en France*. Paris: Contrejour, 1992.
- Verger, Pierre. *Dieux d'Afrique; culte des Orishas et Vodouns à l'ancienne Côte des esclaves en Afrique et à Bahia, la baie de tous les saints au Brésil*. Paris: P. Hartmann, 1954.
- . *Os libertos: sete caminhos na liberdade de escravos da Bahia no século XIX*. Salvador, BA: Corrupio, 1992.
- . *Pierre Verger: 50 anos de fotografia: 1932-1982*. Salvador, BA: Fundação Pierre Verger, 2011.
- Willis Deborah. "The Sociologist's Eye: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Paris Exposition." In *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. Du Bois and African-American portraits of progress*, edited by vid L. Lewis and Deborah Willis, 51-78. New York: Amistad, 2003.