



Mestre Didi

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MESTRE DIDI A COSMIC VISION OF A MYTHICAL REALITY

To acknowledge the work of Mestre Didi, whose oeuvre travels between visual arts and the rituals of his Black African ancestors, it is necessary to dive into the roots of Brazilian and Bahian culture, in its past relations and throughout time. His sculptures, which, though contemporary in the sense of Western art traditions, bear the bonds that connect Africa and Brazil. Thus, to think of Mestre's works solely as objects of art would be a mistaken simplification.

In society in general and throughout the ages, it is neither possible to think of an absolutely pure culture, nor to imagine that one nation could hold any legitimacy over another. Mestre Didi and his production of sacred objects/sculptures delivers precisely this anthropophagical blend so strongly defended in Brazilian culture: I would say that the work of Mestre Didi is one of the most authentic results of this kind of process in Brazil. Didi feeds the soul and seeks intrinsic sources in his Nagô universe, which reveals the forces of nature in the direct relationship of candomblé and its orixás with the peoples on both sides of the Atlantic.

Before going any further, it is necessary to deconstruct some concepts rooted by common sense. The starting point is to get rid of the misplaced idea of Africa as a continent with a single identity, irrespective of region, tribes, ethnicity or peoples. We must understand Africa in its multiplicity and diversity, a continent formed by several cultures, thousands of tribes, dialects and habits. But this is not all; one should remember that these units, considered jointly or individually, are cultural powers that continue to mold the way the most varied people in the western culture see, feel and express themselves, since the most distant times. Another unbridgeable point is the impossibility of understanding African art as aesthetic and conceptual references that are not their own, from a perspective and vision of the world based on European standards.

Paradoxically, it is the European culture that is the historical substrate of different world cultures, including the African.

Deoscóredes Maximiliano dos Santos – Mestre Didi – was born in Salvador, in 1917, the biological son of Mãe Senhora, third ialorixá of the Terreiro Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá. He was a member of this terreiro until he traveled to West Africa to visit the kingdom of Ketú, which spreads over Nigeria, Benin and Tongo. After this trip, the Ilê Asipá emerges. This is a terreiro founded by him, on December 2, 1980, when he was granted and accepted the title of Alapini, high-priest of the Egungun cult. Most of the terreiros of candomblé have as their reason for existing the worship of the orixás: Ilê Asipá worships the eguns, in other words, mainly worshipping their ancestors and the Afro-descendant culture. On this same trip, Didi confirms his lineage from the traditional Asipá family, one of the seven most important families that founded the kingdom of Ketú.

The largest contingent of Africans to arrive in Bahia was from the region of Benin, and their religion took root in spite of prohibitions and persecutions. Cultural expressions of African origin were consolidated, especially in Salvador, through centuries of survival strategies, becoming active in daily life through religion, cooking, and music, etc. Slavery displaced the Black African, but was unable to extinguish his values and vision of the world that survived in captivity, being transformed into a legacy, cultural identity and incentive for artistic production.

Taking into account the context in which they occur, as an example of this rare phenomenon of the continuity of the Black culture that exists in the city of Salvador, rituals and emblematic manifestations, such as the afoxés, capoeira, samba sessions, etc. From this group of manifestations, Candomblé deserves special attention as a religious event, a social-cultural practice with daily rituals: on Mondays for Omolu, Tuesdays for Ogum, the Carurus of Saint Cosme and Damião, the feasts of Iemanjá, the worshipping of Oxalá, the padês for Exu, and the gifts for Oxum. These and other rituals form a cycle of social life ceremonies of praise and thanks to their ancestors.

It is important to remember that Candomblé is a Brazilian creation and that despite the influence of African culture, the worship of the orixás in this format only occurs in Brazil. The Terreiros are an emblematic re-creation of a whole African nation and are complex societies with their own codes of conduct, hierarchies and policies. In Africa, each region worships only one orixá, while in Brazil each house worships several orixás at the same time.

It is in this scenario of ebullition of black culture, in this city that is the cradle of Candomblé and of African traditions and in this unique religious context that Mestre Didi appears with his cosmic vision, which gives birth to the dialogue with this day and age. It is in the entrails of time that this visual artist with Afro-Brazilian assertions and values grows up and is formed as an educator concerned with the permanence of the Iorubá culture. In the words of Jaime Sodré in his book *A Influência da Religião Afro-Brasileira na Obra Escultórica de Mestre Didi* (The Influence of Afro-Brazilian Religion in the Sculptural Work of Mestre Didi):

Candomblé is, then, the possible vehicle for survival, reference and resistance of an ethnic culture produced by the presence of slaves in Brazil, and also, the possibility of maintaining an identity and solidarity that the violent slavery process was unable to extinguish. It is, therefore, the mythological repertoire of symbolic codifications of the Orixá, inspirers, on several levels, of the artistic production of many, though in gradual progression with fundamentally basic knowledge, which go from the complete depth and domination of this universe, as is the case of Mestre Didi, to those who are restricted to commonplace, sometimes unfounded, information.

As in the work of Mario Cravo Jr, Mario Cravo Neto, Rubem Valentim or Tarsila do Amaral, in the works of Mestre Didi this is no different: he also does not romanticize, he simply swallows Brazilian culture, in its matrix, and presents it as a transfigured reality of the ritualistic objects of his cult to a contemporary and universal language. Without neglecting the tough poetry of the Black people in Bahia, his starting point is the four Orixás from the Panteão da Terra that make up a group of orixás that are related to the Earth element and, thus, intimately connected to the ancestry and to the worship of the Eguns.

These orixás are: Obaluaíê, who represents the male principle of the Panteão da Terra, a son abandoned by Nanã and adopted by Iemanjá, god of smallpox, contagious diseases and of cure. Thus, it holds the secret of life and death; Nanã Buruku, is the female principle, an ancient divinity of rains, swamps, mud, lady of death, and responsible for the entry (reincarnation) and exit (disembodiment) portals; Oxumaré, that is the rainbow-serpent, is movement, mobility and activity, its work consisting of collecting all the fallen rainwater and taking it back to the clouds. It represents the complete cycle of existence; and Ossain, orixá, the patron of vegetation, the righteous high-priest of leaves; its importance is fundamental since no ceremony can be celebrated without its presence, as it is the bearer of axé, mandatory even for the gods themselves.

For Didi, as for other African sculptors, these works are a mythical reality, representing a place of exaltation and bonding with the sacred. The importance of verticality and symmetry show the values of aesthetic nature, totem forms climbing to the infinite, in a constant search to connect with the sacred, with the spiritual world, which confirms the impossibility of separating the artist from the high-priest and from his religion. This connectivity is part of the African vision of the world and, thus, of their ancestors. For them everything is connected: man, life, death, forces of nature. Everything is related to the workings of the cosmos and one doesn't act without the other.

The artist uses as a reference traditional symbols of the Nagô universe, transmitting customs, hierarchies, languages, aesthetic conceptions, dramatizations, literature and mythology of the African nations, above all of their religion, and uses in-depth symbolic knowledge to choose the materials for his sculptures. Material taken from nature, such as straw and palm tree ribs, leather, beads and seashells, and uses the colors that refer to sacred principles, based on the rainbow.

As in all creative processes, the artist's personal imagery re-creates forms and new possibilities for his sculptures. While Didi is, at the same time, inspired by and transfigures emblems and symbols of his traditions, he is also free to multiply colors and materials that have no religious intent, but are only evidence of a specific culture. The works emerge from the artist's singular manner of seeing, living and associating, thus creating his own specific contemporary sculptural vocabulary.

The importance and uniqueness of Mestre Didi's work is triggered by the anthropophagy of African culture in order to create a singularly Brazilian oeuvre. Just as Tarsila do Amaral did in relation to Indigenous culture, Didi later came to remind us of the Brazilian plurality and the different possibilities of inspiring models for the creation and re-creation of something authentic, unique and original, supported by one of the cultures that gave origin to Brazil. Oswald de Andrade, in his manifest, stated that: "only anthropophagy unites us".

THAIS DARZÉ