

# Ex-votos from the Church of São Lázaro and the Votive Healing Process

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**ABSTRACT:** Votive objects or actions, which are widely referred to as ex-votos, are made in thanksgiving to deities or miraculous beings for graces received. In an ex-voto, the completion of the vow constitutes a votive offering. The process of promising and completing a votive acts as a coping mechanism utilized both by individuals and by their communities. This article explores the votive traditions and related coping mechanisms found in the church of São Lázaro, in Salvador, Bahia through field work conducted in 2009.

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## INTRODUCTION

Votive offerings, or *ex-votos*, originated in ancient traditions in which believers petitioned miraculous beings for divine intervention. Believers deposited humble gifts at sacred shrines, performed votive sacrifices to specific deities, and erected lavish buildings in gratitude for wishes and miracles received. The *ex-votos* tradition is still practiced today and is particularly vibrant in the church of São Lázaro (Saint Lazarus) in Salvador, Bahia, in the northeastern region of Brazil. The church there accommodates practitioners from multiple faiths, offers local residents a place to deposit their offerings, and contributes to the continuation of the tradition. The majority of offerings in the church's votive room are sculptures of body parts, suggesting that the primary issues for which intervention is sought in São Lázaro are matters of physical health. In May of 2009, I assessed these medical offerings, as well as the literature on *ex-votos*, to determine the effectiveness of this tradition from a psychological standpoint. During field work, I received assistance from my sister, Marília Gabriela R. M. da Silva, and from Professor Cláudio Oliveira, an expert on Brazilian votives. These individuals offered extensive support during my examinations.

When we arrived at São Lázaro, an aroma of rain and burned wood fused with the hot air of the Brazilian coast. Apparently, a few nights before our arrival, an unattended candle had caused a small fire inside the church, and by the time a priest woke to the smell of smoke, blackness rose from the ground to the ceiling. Near a small, burned statue of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of the Apparition, a typed sign read: "*We thank God, São Lázaro, and São Roque because the worst did not happen!*"

Built in the eighteenth century, this church stands at a crossroads in the southern shoreline of Salvador, Bahia's capital. Its walls are adorned with soft details lingering from the Brazilian Baroque, and except for a heavily decorated altar, the nave and remaining architecture are rather modest. It is primarily frequented by Catholics, but church attendants also include both followers of Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religion combining aspects of Catholicism with the religion of the Yoruba people and other West

African groups (Sansi-Roca 2005), and followers of Umbanda (Oliveira 2007), another Afro-Brazilian religion derived from a blend of French Kardecist spiritualism with African, Catholic, and Indigenous elements (Thompson 1994).

The intricate syncretism between African religions and Catholicism is not unique to Brazil. These mixed faiths are practiced in Haiti, Cuba, and other African Diaspora nations. In Brazil, this syncretism occurred against the will of slaves during colonialism, when, in the face of religious persecution by the Catholic elite, a number of slaves adapted their customs to Catholic traditions (Nascimento 1978; Crowley & Doran 1981). The displaced Africans began to associate their deities, known as *orixás* in Portuguese, with Catholic saints by identifying similar iconography and stories among certain pairs. This syncretism produced several outcomes: first, it masked the slaves as converts, thus appeasing their religious persecutors. Second, it gave the slaves a house of worship where they could secretly access their own deities. Despite the initial intentions of this phenomenon, today many practitioners accept aspects of both religions as a part of their faith (Verger 1999; Walker 1991).

São Lázaro, to whom the church is dedicated, is the patron saint of those affected by contagious diseases and physical handicaps. He is portrayed as a lonesome beggar whose body is filled with wounds, and he is said to have spent his life begging at the doorsteps of a ruthless, rich man. Upon his death, São Lázaro found himself in heaven, free of his miseries (Fundação Gregório de Mattos). São Lázaro's African counterpart in the vast pantheon of *orixás* is Omolu, also known as Obaluaîê and Xapanã. Omolu's body bears innumerable wounds, and like São Lázaro, he assists those with illnesses and bodily injuries (Silva 2005; Verger 1999). During Brazil's colonial era, infectious diseases were a widespread problem affecting both the slaves and the elite (Silva), and the church, which was built in an area that necessitates the quarantine of persons with contagious diseases, helped the community overcome the diseases with faith (Coutinho & Santos 2009). In a time period when the population largely turned to religion to solve their problems (Abreu 2005), the church became an appropriate site for the development of an *ex-votos* following.

## TYPES OF EX-VOTOS

Several popular terms in Brazil describe ex-votos, including *milagres* (miracles) and *promessas* (promises). The term *miracle* illustrates the popular belief that the outcome of votive practices is indebted to the interception of the supernatural (Lepovitz 1990), and the term *promise* refers to the devotee's vow to repay a deity for a received request, which must be honored at all costs (Gross 1971).

The themes expressed in votive offerings range from common necessities such as health, happiness, and protection to needs attributed to extraordinary events that decrease once the event is over, such as those that occur with a plague or earthquake. In Brazil, ex-votos housed in churches are normally placed in rooms called *Salas dos Milagres* (Rooms of Miracles). Bigger rooms or rooms located outside the church may be called *Casas dos Milagres* (Houses of Miracles). These alternative buildings function on their own as communal institutions or as local museums, demonstrating the integration of the votive practice and the community.

São Lázaro's cramped ex-voto room is lit by two small ceiling lamps and tiny spotlights that surround a medium-sized statue of São Lázaro housed in the back of the room. The statue is protected in an off-white cabinet with gold lining and a glass door. The niche also features small columns adorned with the colorful ribbons of Bomfim, the patron saint of the most famous church in Salvador. By the room's entrance, a record book keeps count of visitors, who sometimes leave messages describing their affairs. Adorning the walls are sculptures of body parts, photographs, letters, dresses, medical objects and other offerings, many decorated with brightly colored ribbons.

Although ex-votos are offered in anticipation of a miracle in some cultures, in Brazil, offerings tend to be dropped off after a wish has been granted. Letters and inscriptions accompanying Brazilian ex-votos tend to refer to miracles in the past tense, using variations of phrases such as *Pela Graça Alcançada* (For the Grace Received). Dropping off an offering is the final part of the vow, to which the faithful—or their relatives, in the event of death—are indebted to honor (Bercht 1985). If the location of the deity's shrine is distant, the completion of the ex-voto becomes a pilgrimage. Pilgrimages often become spiritual experiences that may be shared with others during yearly processions or national celebrations to famous churches and shrines. Famous sites receive overwhelming numbers of ex-votos during pilgrimage months, which can raise a

church's "miracle credibility," determined by the sheer volume of successful miracles attained by the fulfillment of vows (Greenfield & Cavalcante 2006). Sites with significant miracle credibility attract increasing numbers of pilgrims, whereas ones with fewer ex-votos may become obsolete. In her survey of European votive paintings, Lepovitz (1990) demonstrates that priests from financially successful shrines could "draw from the stock of approved miracles recorded" (761) to enhance their sermons and promote the shrine's saint. On a typical day, St. Lázaro may receive a handful of offerings, but the number substantially increases during important calendar dates and festivities.

### Body Parts

In São Lázaro, the most abundant type of ex-votos are hollow wax sculptures of body parts once affected by illness, disease, or pain—problems that São Lázaro and Omolu are believed to cure. At the time of our visit, the majority of wax figures were of legs and feet, alluding to the astonishing number of leg injuries and birth defects in the local region. Other wax figures were adults' and children's heads of various sizes, bodies of children both large and small, and arms, hands, hearts, lungs, and other organs. The specific details of each illness are virtually impossible to distinguish in mass-produced votives, which are generalized and bland (Rugiero 2009). For this reason, those who wish to explain their situation sometimes attach a piece of paper, letter, or photograph to their offering with an explanation of the miracle. Others use red markers to pinpoint the exact placement of an injury on the wax sculpture, sometimes even drawing the blood from the wound.

In Salvador, wax body parts can be bought at a store called Casa do Senhor Bonfim (House of the Lord of the Good End), located across from the well-known church of Nosso Senhor Bom Jesus do Bonfim. A few of the pieces displayed in São Lázaro retained the original plastic wrapping from the store, and some were hung in plastic bags. The store's selection includes hands, arms, legs, feet, heads of various sizes, small bodies of children and adults, breasts, penises, vaginas, and other organs. According to the owner of the store, wax figures are a popular product and are sold daily. The two items bought during the research trip, a small wax hand and a wax figure of a child, totaled the equivalent of \$5.00. Aside from the low price, wax ex-votos are also appealing to the public because they can be recycled into candles or other offerings to make room for new ex-votos (Oliveira 2007; Moore & Didi-Huberman 2007).

### Photographs and Letters

Votive photographs are a relatively new form of offering that has gained popularity due to the increasing accessibility and affordability of cameras and photographs (Oliveira 2007). Such photographs are scattered throughout the Styrofoam boards on the walls of the votive room and are reminiscent of an old tradition of votive paintings. Traditional votive paintings consist of a visual representation of the miracle with text description at the bottom, but not all votive photographs are this descriptive. During my research, the majority of photographic offerings in São Lázaro were candid shots or documentary photos of people. Most of the images appeared to have come from photo albums and picture frames, and it was difficult to distinguish which photos, if any, were taken specifically for the completion of an offering. Few examples stand out in my mind as exceptions to this statement. One, and certainly the most uncomfortable piece to analyze, was of a nude boy. Standing on top of a bed in an aqua-colored bedroom, the nude child had an awkward but elegant stance. Usually, depictions of a body indicate medical miracles, so it is safe to assume the image included some sort of medical connection. But the lack of supporting documentation makes it difficult to determine the exact issue the child was facing. Another striking image was of a man inside a kitchen. The man was looking away from the camera, seemingly unaware of the photographer. A closer look revealed severe burns along the right side of his face and possibly his torso. How did these burns happen? What did he request from the saint in regards to the burns? Also, although there was plenty of free space on the surrounding walls, a passport photo of a woman was pinned on the bottom of his image. Is there a relationship between these two individuals, or was someone just trying to re-use the pin?

These particular photographs lacked documentation, which made them ambiguous and impossible to fully decipher, but many other offerings had letters attached to them. Letters can also be seen on their own, pinned to an empty section of the wall. Those who provided details such as names, dates, personal narratives, and locations on their letters contribute to the research on this community's belief system and the types of problems its inhabitants face. Some typed their messages directly onto photographs, while others handwrote them on scraps of paper. A number of letters were long and included popular poems or famous quotations, and one letter even quoted the famous American inventor Charles F. Kettering. These letters communicate the

gratitude felt by those who believe that São Lázaro solved their problems, in which Jesus is often thanked as well. One particularly heartfelt letter wrote: "I thank São Lázaro, for each minute, hours, days and years, that he can give to Tissy . . . Thank God and Jesus Christ." This letter was inside a small plastic bag, which also included a red plush heart.

Shorter letters were also common, and sometimes they had bullet points listing particular events or items that the devout felt thankful for, or were composed of a terse sentence. "To the glorious St. Lázaro I thank [for] the received grace," read one message written on top of the image of a cat. When read by members of the community, these letters and messages may cross multiple barriers of faith, culture, and economic status. Also, these letters provide significant information on the details of miracles and the human power to overcome traumatic situations. Robert A. Orsi (1998), in his study of letters written by American women to St. Jude in mid-twentieth century America, discusses the empowerment felt by the devout through devotional healing. In situations when one would otherwise feel powerless, petitioning for divine assistance instills a sense of hope and security.

### Adapted Objects

Adapted objects are items that played an important role in the event for which a miracle is requested. Once the miracle is received, the objects are then offered, losing their utilitarian function and becoming symbols of faith. The adapted objects in São Lázaro in May included a single red rose, a plush heart, a white dress, a pair of crutches, a cane, metal leg braces, and other aids for leg irregularities. The stories behind these objects were sometimes included in textual descriptions, while others were transmitted orally throughout the community. I learned the story of the pair of crutches, for example, from a woman who sold knickknacks in front of the church. She said that a man who could not walk properly went to church regularly and promised São Lázaro that if he were to walk again, he would give away bread in front of the church. Once cured, the man fulfilled his promise, gave away bread, and left his crutches as a second offering to the Saint. The woman added that miracles are granted depending on a person's faith, and whether they regularly pray and attend mass.

If the story accompanying an ex-voto is socially interesting or unusual, it may continue to be told until it attains the status of a folk legend. In 1996, for example, Lindsey King recorded the story of a plastic female doll

during field work in the Northeastern city of Canindé, in Ceará. In the story, a girl went missing in the jungle for several days, but remarkably reappeared, claiming that a man had helped her find her way back. The parents offered a doll to St. Francis in thanksgiving for the safe return of their daughter, and it was later moved into the town's local museum due to its increasing popularity (King 1999, 54-55).

While offerings with monetary value or popularity may be relocated to a local museum, others are cycled back into society by being donated to someone else, regaining their utilitarian function (King 1999). Those offerings that are not discarded, donated, or relocated may have other endings; they can be melted, burned, buried, or stolen (Bercht 1985). Some may even be sold to gallery owners by *catadores*, persons who scout ex-voto sites to supply other collectors (Rugiero 2009). Whatever the means, removing ex-votos from an ex-voto room is essential to the continuation of the tradition because it clears space for new offerings.

### **Candomblé Offerings**

At the time of our visit, the only offering we could clearly distinguish as being from Candomblé practitioners was a bag of popcorn presented in the votive room. Pipoca, or popcorn, is believed to be a sacred food in Candomblé. The white of the popcorn represents purity, and the brown signifies that which has not been cleansed (Fajans 2004). It is important to note that food is a common offering in Candomblé, and thus there is no proof whether the offering was part of a vow or of a daily ritual in which food is given to Omolu.

Besides being offered at certain shrines, pipoca is also a cleansing tool. On August 16th of each year, a Catholic mass is held to honor São Lázaro. In addition to the traditional ceremony, Candomblé practitioners celebrate the day by showering themselves in popcorn in front of the church. As Sheila S. Walker (1991) describes, popcorn is associated with a flower that is favored by Omolu, and therefore the popcorn showers, are "believed to wash away illnesses and misfortune and literally shower blessings upon the believer" (46). The shower might be accompanied with singing, drumming, and perhaps the manifestation of Omolu through the "possession" of a believer. At the time of our visit, a few pieces of popcorn remained around a small statue of São Roque in the front of the church.

### **THE VOTIVE HEALING PROCESS AND THE COMMUNITY**

Ex-votos and other religious petitionary practices have existed for centuries (Cassar 1964; Talbot, 2002; Plante & Sherman 2001). Systematic studies on their effectiveness have been complicated because proving whether spiritual beings exist and are capable of miraculous cures is not easily measured scientifically. Other difficulties in the study of religious practices include emotional barriers, conflicts of interest, and lack of funding that individual researchers might experience (Swyers, McCullough, & Larson 1998). If closely studied, however, these practices may offer unique sets of data, leading to a greater understanding of collective coping mechanisms, communal relationships in regards to religion, and the physical and mental outcomes of practitioners.

Nearly all religions or spiritual paths offer hope from pain and distress (Pargament 2001). Studies have shown that those who adhere to a religious belief system tend to have higher coping mechanisms than those who do not identify with religious or spiritual practices (Koenig 1997). Individuals in distress who place their expectations on spiritual beings rather than on themselves, their family, or their health care providers, for example, have been noted to exhibit improved mental wellbeing and lower levels of stress (Oktavec & Fontana 1995). This form of self-healing may not change the outcome of one's situation (terminal illness will still be terminal), but the faith in a deity's capability of intervention can influence confidence, positive attitudes, and healthy behaviors. For some individuals, religious practices also offer explanations for negative situations, as well as a coping structure that enables believers to process circumstances that they do not feel could not be handled without religious salvation (Pargament). To some, believing that something is protecting or curing them may cause placebo effects, in which the thought that a supernatural being is at work--regardless of whether this is actually the case--may lift the heavy personal burdens of insecurity, fear, depression, and perhaps physical disability in those who engage in such practices.

From a scientific point of view, the physical power of religious deities and the question of their existence cannot be determined. Therefore, to maximize positive outcomes in health-related situations, it is important that believers participate in active self-healing, which necessitates that they use everything in their power to help themselves in addition to petitioning a deity. The

available literature suggests that the process of petitioning a deity is most commonly sought out in conjunction with other forms of self-help. Furthermore, all the offerings I encountered in São Lázaro were of successful events, and thus, as is the case with many shrines, little to no evidence is available about votive requests that went unanswered by a particular deity. This particular predicament limits the interpretation of coping mechanisms to that of votive art objects that display successful events and positive outcomes. There is, however, the possibility that some people might have had negative outcomes from votive practices. Could there be a segment of people who stopped helping themselves after petitioning a deity, who died in the process after making it their only alternative, or who had negative or unhealthy outcomes from unanswered prayers? In a process called “deferral-to-God,” which can have unhealthy and negative outcomes, one places illness or distress in the hands of a deity and awaits resolution to the problem (Pargament 2001; Seybold and Hill 2001; Gall, Charbonneau, Clarke, Grant, Joseph, & Shouldice 2005).

In contrast to individuals who engage in deferral mechanisms, others engage in collaborative coping styles. In a collaborative coping style, individuals call upon divine intervention but still search for other ways to solve their problem because “responsibility for the problem-solving process is held jointly by the individual and God” or another deity (Pargament, Kennell, et al, 1988, 92). When collaboration between a deity and a believer is positive and guilt-free, it can “enhance pain management, improve surgical outcomes, protect against depression, and reduce risk of substance abuse and suicide” (Larson & Larson 2003, 48-49). In this regard, votive offerings become one of many types of therapeutic religious practices that are used in addition to religiosity. Analyses of texts and illustrations show that other people, such as doctors, firefighters, family members, and friends, play active roles in the outcome of successful situations (Lepovitz 1990; Gross 1971). In one interview, for example, a Brazilian woman told me that while she was receiving excellent medical assistance to overcome an illness, her family insisted on making an offering to their patron saint. The family saw the offering as a way to secure help from the spiritual realm, which they used in conjunction with modern medical practices. A study by Greenfield and Cavalcante (2006) concluded that, in addition to combining secular and religious forms of help, most Brazilians explore multiple faith traditions when solutions to their problems are left unresolved by spiritual entities.

In some circumstances, making an offering is a last resort. As Paul Cassar (1964) has noted, ex-votos “satisfy the natural craving for security” and assist in keeping order in a community by providing “the will to live when failure of medical skills tend to disorganize and destroy them” (28). On an individual level, making an offering can also fill one’s “intense emotional need to do something” when doctors and specialists have run out of options (Oktavec & Fontana, 1995, 188).

The coping mechanisms within the votive tradition can also involve the community. In short, votive rooms provide visitors with an abundance of ex-votos, first-person narratives, and oral traditions that accentuate and exaggerate miraculous occasions. These elements create a support group among people who have encountered similar challenges, without either group meeting face to face (King, 1999). This type of interaction is essential to the continuity of the tradition in local areas, and the tradition is dependent on testimonials of success. Churches and shrines like São Lázaro build miracle credibility to attract new practitioners, which directly affects the tradition. They also influence the creation and continuation of pilgrimages. Pilgrimages can occur on individual journeys, or during yearly group processions when large numbers of people collectively visit a site to honor a saint. These events can be either negative or positive to the devotees. In areas like Bahia, devotees are sometimes exposed to rough conditions such as poor sanitation and small amounts of food. Many view these conditions as reasonable in comparison to the miracle they received, and some complete their vows with physically demanding activities in which higher levels of pain magnify their feeling of gratuity (Gross, 1971). Pilgrimages also have positive outcomes. They provide many with travel opportunities in which individuals meet other members of their faith, engage in religious activities held by the church, and complete their votive offering (Greenfield & Cavalcante, 2006; Gross).

## CONCLUSIONS

Judging from the ex-votos in São Lázaro’s miracle room during May 2009, the majority of practitioners appeared to engage in collaborative coping mechanisms. This conclusion is supported by the overwhelming number of medical offerings, many of which concerned surgeries and health-care access. By pursuing medical assistance in addition to spiritual help, these individuals engaged in positive self-healing practices, a coping mechanism that contributes to recovery by instilling positive attitude and

healthy behaviors. These positive actions may then influence others members of the community through votive letters. In São Lázaro, the predominant theme in votive letters was gratitude. Whether devotees write short notes or lengthy letters, the votive room provides them with a safe environment in which their appreciation and faith may be expressed. Although not all devotees articulate these feelings publically, any devotee is welcome to drop off their votive and complete the vow.

Other aspects of such experiences, however, still need to be researched. Does depositing an ex-voto increase or decrease a devotee's religiosity? How is a devotee's religiosity affected if a second prayer is not answered in future? These questions suggest that although there are many scholars researching votive offerings, the field is still expanding. Potential limitations that studies of this nature may face include unaccounted variables, unanswered prayers, and the need some practitioners may feel to prove their faith. Interviews, collectable data, longitudinal studies, and further field work may provide the necessary foundations and data to study the perceived health outcomes of votive practitioners. Meanwhile, the documentation of ex-votos can be used for historical analysis. With significant documentation, many factors may be determined: changes in aesthetics (by comparing ex-votos from different time periods), economic classes (by comparing regions), gender roles (by examining letters and gender involvement), community involvement (by examining pilgrimages), health care access (by analyzing different regions and types of medical offerings), and types of challenges that individuals face. The importance of votive practices in local regions can also be determined through the numbers of offerings deposited in certain lengths of time, visitor attendance, and the content of votive letters. As votive practices change and develop through time, the continuation of such research and documentation is helpful to both academia and popular culture. It allows for the expansion of fields such as religious studies, psychology, sociology, and history, while preserving the artifacts of the tradition through scholarship, photography, and documentation. After all, this tradition encompasses many important facets of humanity: faith, devotion, health, community, expression, and hope.

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