

## Sara Kali: Black representativeness in the Xigano Devlesa Avilan temple



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### ABSTRACT

Each people of humanity has its own history and different ways of feeling the world, which at some point connect with other peoples. Among the wanderings that refer to the gypsy people and the encounter with different cultures is the presence of Santa Sara Kali, in Romani a language of gypsy origin means black, it is worshipped in some gypsy ethnicities. The objective of the research in question is to reflect the black representation in the gypsy temple Devlesa Avilan through the symbology of Sara Kali. Thus, we resorted to the use of participant observation and the aid of the recording of the field diary. In addition, bibliographic and documentary materials were used, as well as the use of semi-structured interviews. Among the elements that constitute the expressions of black representation are the following issues: faith, tolerance and representation.

**Keywords:** Gypsies, (In)tolerance, Cosmology.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of humanity, we have been made up of a set of multiple and complex plural beings of collective and individual order that form different peoples, cultures and symbols. Each people of humanity has its own crossing and multiplicity of relations of complementarity, hierarchy and



power, as well as different ways of feeling the world, which at some point connect with other peoples of different temporalities and dimensions (Le Goff, 1990).

Between East and West we have the nomadic peoples: The Gypsies. Of uncertain origin, some contemporary research points to a supposed origin of Northwest India, in which their pilgrimage was associated with non-submission to the caste system (Acton, 1974; Liégeois, 1987). On the other hand, other studies suggest that the Indian territory served only as a passage for the gypsy walk (Moonen, 2013; Fraser, 1992; Hancock, 1987).

Hancock (1987) describes that the Gypsies are descended from a warrior caste, the *Rajputs*, who were brought to Europe against their will. Due to the scarcity of documents, we do not know what actually motivated the immigration of gypsies, however, research states that it was a heterogeneous process, since, at the end of the fifteenth century, gypsies were part of European daily life (Karpowicz, 2018; Fraser, 1992; Moonen, 1999). The lack of information about the origin of the pilgrims was essential to feed and temper the imagination of European society (Moonen, 2013).

In modernity, the term gypsy is related to a set of ethnicities and each group or subgroup that constitutes the gypsy universe between differences, in the way of being, and acting that escape a definitive and absolute imagery pattern (Karpowicz, 2018). Despite the resignification, over time, concepts that tend to eternal prejudices are still evidenced in everyday life in the collective imagination of society, generally predominating a superficial and ethnocentric view (Rezende, 2000; Moonen, 2013).

The supremacy of the gaze of the "other" is perceptible through the creation and perpetuation of gypsy stereotypes from their clothing, in an exotic and colorful way, to the nomadic way of life. In addition to the dissemination of sinful legends and plagues that, from the Middle Ages to the present day, are fixed as absolute truth, especially in Western society, silencing gypsy gazes (Moonen, 2011; Cressy, 2018).

In the search to create mechanisms that strengthen the places of speech and spaces for dialogues between different perspectives, the studies of Spivak (2010) stand out, who, among contemporary postcolonial theories, defines the term subaltern as that person who has no place of speech, silenced in the face of political representations, and who are constantly molded from a standardized model. Westernized and imperialistized, the unassimilated, of the dominant system. For Spivak (2010), it is essential to advance the voices of subaltern subjects as protagonists, in order to create spaces for dialogue, as a tool for the decolonization of knowledge and powers.

Thus, the objective of the present study is to reflect the black representation in the gypsy temple Devlesa Avilan through the symbology of Sara Kali and seek to strengthen the multiple perspectives on the theme in question Portuguese.", located in the city of Teresina-Piauí, which actively works with elements of gypsy philosophy, highlighting the cult of Sara Kali, woman, slave, fugitive, midwife,



miraculous, saint and black (Gomes, 2020).

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The gypsy temple Devlesa Avilan, was created in December 2015, with guidance from the Tsaras Children of the Sun and the Moon; Rojó and Tsara Barranom Kali Romani Esoteric Society, led by Mestre Ratói Osvaldo Amarante, and Father Willian de Ogum, who work with spiritual elevations through the knowledge of universal magics and doctrines, developing gypsy philosophy (Santos, 2021). Tsara Devlesa Avilan has a physical structure in the city of Teresina – Piauí precisely has latitude: 5.037178°S and longitude: 42.792717°.

Figure 01: Geographic location- Tsara Cigana Devlesa Avilan, Teresina, Piauí.



Source: Elayne Figueredo.

In the early years, all activities were carried out at the Spiritualist Center of Umbanda Pai Joaquim de Angola (C.E.U.), located in the residential neighborhood Paulo de Tarso, north of Teresina, block Q, house 31. In the year 2016, in the month of April, the first gypsy festival took place. In eight years of existence, there have been several challenges, among them the construction of its own headquarters, which was started in 2018, located in the Aroeiras neighborhood, 171 street, in the city of Teresina, Piauí (Figure 01).

The first contact with the gypsy temple Devlesa Avilan took place in 2016 in a camp (event outside Tsara/temple) near my residence located in the south zone of the city of Teresina. I received



the invitation through a friend. After this first contact, I spent two years attending the house monthly, without mediumistic commitment, only on August 5, 2018, I definitively joined the current. I am currently a medium, sister and daughter of the gypsy Pablo (Barô da casa).

Observations and records were collected during the months of August to November of 2023, in which field records, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. In order to achieve the objective of this research, which consists of analyzing the black representation in the gypsy temple Devlesa Avila through the symbology of Sara Kali, a single interview was conducted, in which the interviewee recognizes herself as a black woman. In the context of studies on everyday racism, three studies were selected: Beatriz Nascimento (2021), Gonzalez (2020) and Kilomba (2019).

Semi-structured interviews, in which there is a mix between closed and open questions, giving rise to the possibility of enhancing the dynamics of themes. The research is of a qualitative nature organized in organized stages that give rise to a research cycle that enables the investigative process (Gil, 2008). Minayo (2009) suggests that it is a stage of initiation from the exploration in which the object to be studied is limited in order to have a theoretical and methodological development, building hypotheses or assumptions that help in the definition of instruments for the operationalization of the work in the field.

It is worth mentioning that the semi-structured interviews were conducted after the approval of the opinion of the Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Piauí through number 6,221,875 and were applied in stages where all interviewees signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (ICF), respecting the cycle of the house, on days without spiritualist or sociocultural activities, following a hierarchical order within the temple.

### 3 SARA KALI, A BLACK SAINT

Gypsies, as we mentioned earlier, have their nomadic origin and their essence spread through the orality of the Romani language. According to the first reports on religion and faith, the gypsies were described as intimately interconnected with their way of life, in which the connection with the sacred was not initially written in books but passed from generation to generation through orality evidencing the elements of nature along with the belief in God (Asavei; Bushnell, 2023).

Grellmann (1783) and Pabanó (1915) point out that in the non-gypsy imagination the fact that they did not have a specific religion, and had the habit of absorbing the religiosity of a certain region, mixed with the practices of daily life interconnected with elements of nature, caused distrust and strangeness. Through a narrow lens, European society looked at Gypsy women, replete with concepts absorbed from legends and myths, in which they instantly attributed titles of witches and sorceresses, mainly with the practice of palmistry or palm reading in public squares.

In this way, the belief in God was questioned and to this day, in the popular imagination, the



question is common: is gypsies a religion? Currently, most authors defend the fact that there is no single specific religion among the gypsy peoples (Jimenez, 1975; Ramirez, 1972). However, this does not mean that they do not believe in God, on the contrary, the word *Devles* in Romani origin, dialect of the gypsy peoples, means God, it is one of the most widespread words in everyday life, regardless of their ethnic group or country, it prevails as a term of common unity, carrying various forms of religions in the plural sense of the word. Gypsies are often devoted to God, and they understand religion in a broader sense of the word than Christians (Asavei; Bushnell, 2023).

Among the elements that express faith we have the black and gypsy representation of Sara Kali, despite her numerous legends of gypsy cosmology. In some regions she is also popularly known as the Black Madonna or Saint Sara Kali, there are reports that she was canonized between the years 1700 and 1705, being not made official by the Catholic Church despite being a popular saint among Catholics (Gomes, 2020; Asavei and Bushnell, 2023).

The most popular legend refers to the fact that Sarah was a slave of one of the three Marys, Magdalene, Jacobé or Salome, being converted to Christianity they were persecuted, put in a boat without oars and thrown into the Mediterranean Sea. In spite of her despair, Sarah did not lose her faith, and removed the *diklô from her head*, and promised that if everyone was saved, she would be a slave of Jesus and that she would never walk with her head uncovered. All were saved, rescued and welcomed by the residents of *Saintes Maries de La Mer*, all the white ones were welcomed. Sara, who was black, was excluded and rescued by the gypsies who maintained a bond of mutual protection, even after her death (Gomes, 2020; Grossmann Cairus, 2022; Lanzarini, 2018).

The gypsies then began to appeal with requests to the one for whom they interceded; and she interceded for them in return. Sarah, well-liked by the gypsies in life, attended them by performing miracles after her death. Sarah thus became Mother and Queen of the Gypsies. And, according to those who believe in the assumption of these functions, he cared for his people, protecting them from the many challenges and persecutions they faced – and still face – in their wanderings around the world. Saint Sarah received, in payment for the miracles and care intended for gypsies, the prayers and practices of devotional thanksgiving from her beloved people (Gomes, p.07, 2020).

Saint Sarah, also known as Sara-la-Kali ("Sara the Black") according to Grossmann Cairus (2022), her origin goes back to ancient Egypt, as a Queen who, in a vision, would have identified the evangelizers who were later welcomed by her and her clan, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The depiction of Sara Kali makes her first appearance in Vincent Philippon's book, *The Legend of Saintes-Maries* (1521), where she is portrayed as a charitable woman who helped people by collecting alms, which led to the popular belief that she was a gypsy (Gomes, 2020; Grossmann Cairus, 2022). Among the legends, the *Sinti gypsies*, gypsy ethnicity, related Sara Kali, was a gypsy priestess initiated into the four elements (fire, water, earth and air) who carried out the reception of the three Marys. From the meeting, it absorbed Christian religious elements and spread the faith among the gypsies,





being a sacred place of devotion and magic (Grossmann Cairus, 2022). There is another legend that points out that Sara Kali is the daughter of Jesus and Mary Magdalene who was thrown into the sea on the French coast.

In Brazil, devotion to Saint Sara Kali is based on religious practices according to ethnic groups (Roma, Sinti or Calons) and their local cultural influences. The devotion to Sara Kali was spread through European legends, and could be worshipped between individual communities or with syncretism through a local saint, for example, Our Lady of Aparecida, through Catholic churches, or in new spaces, mainly through Umbanda and later with the foundation of Tsaras or temples (Lanzarini, 2018).

The term Tsara in Romani can be translated as tent, by extension house and in religion it is associated with the word temple, which comes from the Latin *templum*, spaces of manifestation of faith. According to Silva (2018), a temple can be understood as a sacred religious territory, forming, over time and space, a process of transmaterial cultural resistance. Eliade (1992) describes that since in the great Eastern civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and India, temples carried with them a kind of opening upwards in a kind of communication between the Gods, functioning as a bridge between earth and heaven in a transcendent sacred model. Objects, caves, rivers, trees, seas, can also be considered spaces of sacred values that function in the same sense as the temple, so the space of a temple cannot be physically delimited.

The gypsy temple Devlesa Avilan, was created in December 2015, with guidance from the Tsaras Children of the Sun and the Moon; Rojó and Tsara Barranom Kali Romani Esoteric Society having as directors the Master Ratói Osvaldo Amarante, and Father Willian de Ogum who work through the knowledge of physical, mental, spiritual and medicinal healing magics accompanied by universal doctrines, developing through spiritual elevations with the gypsy philosophy. In addition, they also work with elements of gypsy culture, with dances, music, and oracles, in order to actively contribute to the search for new perspectives, which escape prejudice, intolerance, and fanaticism of a spiritual, material, or cultural order (Santos, 2021).

In the gypsy temple Devlesa Avilan, as well as in several regions of the world, between the 24th and 25th of May, annually, Slava ritualistic festival in honor of Saint Sara Kali takes place. The preparations take place two months before involving the local community, mediums and friends of the house. Through the sacred feminine, rituals and magic are performed in praise and adoration, the black saint, recognizing her struggle and resistance representing the gypsy people to this day.



Figure 02: Santa Sara Kali.



Source: Luana Sousa (Personal archive).

The physical representation of the image of Sara Kali, as a black saint, can cause some astonishment or strangeness, especially among the first glances. Such questions are common: Is she a brunette? Is she a black saint? Is she Indian? Was she burned? (Santos, 2021). Despite the doubts and concerns, there are also feelings of connections and immediate representation:

And if you think that she is a black saint and the amount of humiliation we go through every day, regardless of our color, imagine when you are black? Yes, it was inevitable for me to connect with her, to feel, in a way, represented by her, I'm black, and in the Catholic Church you only have one black saint, the churches go more to Our Lady, a white woman and other saints who are white than to her, right? And then, when I arrived I saw it, I remember that the first time I saw her, I kind of got scared precisely because she was black (Lopes, 2023).

It is interesting to note that in the above description it is noticeable that most of the images represent white women sanctified in an eternal European Christian whitening. Thus, we assimilate Western values in subjective acts in our daily lives, with racism being an elementary white supremacy of colonialism (Kilomba, 2019). Saint Sara Kali can be represented by the difference of not being white: such differences are intertwined with values of hierarchies throughout history, politics, society, and economy (Nascimento, 2021; Gonzalez, 2020; Kilomba, 2019).

Among the reports of some mediums in the house, Sara Kali can be a life inspiration "She is not only a Saint that I worship to make requests, but a Saint that I worship because she is an inspiration for my life" (Lopes, 2023). The gypsy faith is considered a saint although not canonized, she is also a protector of pregnant women and associated with devotion to gypsy peoples, being worshipped, in spiritual orders, as well as in political activism. Political in the sense of representing a black woman,



providing a moral vision through the mediation of spirituality and non-institutional religion (Asavei; Bushnell, 2023).

However, the outside gaze is not always tolerant. In everyday situations, perceptions of camouflaged racism are common, generating doubts as to the intention of offending or not, in which defensive strategies are perceptible.

First of all, when we leave the temple or come to the temple dressed in white or in gypsy clothes, people look at us... The ubers, for example, they look. Like last week I took an Uber, I was all in white, he asked if I was at what level of capoeira. I said, "In the beginner rite (so I don't have a problem). I didn't know if he wanted to play something or if he was really asking about capoeira. Another time at the bus stop I told her about St. Sara Kali and the lady spent hours trying to convert me to the correct Christian religion (Lopes, 2023).

Beatriz Nascimento (2021), Gonzalez (2020) and Kilomba (2019) summarize that interracial relations in Brazil are mild, since the manifestations of racial prejudice manifest themselves in a subtle way through camouflaged tolerance. Racial prejudice against blacks is violent and at the same time subtle and has a certain tolerance, and it is not always possible to perceive the extent to which the intolerance of the other occurs. In this sense, Kilomba (2019) everyday racism refers to all vocabulary, discourse, images, gestures, and actions that place the black subject and people of color not only as another but also as otherness, that is, as the embodiment of the repressed aspects of white society.

Gonzalez (2020) justifies that in Brazil, overt racism or disguised racism are strengthened through two ideological conceptions in the formation of black representation: racial democracy and whitening. The racial democracy that was disseminated in the social imaginary, based on the analysis of Gilberto Freyre's studies, constituted a unique and official perspective, in which he defends the idea that racism does not exist in Brazil. As for the issue of whitening, we have miscegenation as a tool that strengthens the supposed white superiority. Latin American racism is sophisticated enough to keep blacks and Indians in the condition of subordinate subjects: white Western values are unique, true, and universal.

#### 4 FINAL THOUGHTS

You, who are the only gypsy saint in the world, this is how the main prayer to Saint Sara Kali begins, who has the title of saint, although not official in the Catholic Church, but is universally present from the consecrated European Christian cathedrals to the terreiros of Umbanda and Tsaras. You who suffered all forms of humiliation and prejudice, the second verse, represents Kali, with her black essence, marked by the difference of color, walking between: exclusion, racism and intolerance that is still present in daily life in an explicit, violent or camouflaged way. How to visualize such camouflage? Through the black light itself, since they have tried and still try to enlighten us with the white, standardized, westernized and imperialist light.





Thus, the image of Sara Kali can represent a black woman as protagonists walking between spiritual and political territories, serving as a tool to fight against intolerance and racism, in order to contribute to the decolonization of knowledge and powers.



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