

The danger of the sea in Southern Brazil and the ex-votos in The Church of Good Lord in Iguape- São Paulo

By Antonio Carlos Diegues

Anthropologist, Professor at the University of São Paulo

adiegues@usp.br

2000

Introduction

The votive offerings are an important part of the traditional religious symbols and practices in many Brazilian Atlantic coastal regions and frequently are exposed publicly in those churches that are holy places for pilgrimages.

The ex-votos can be defined as objects or religious practices dedicated to a saint in fulfilment of a vow or in retribution of a received favour.

Although the ex-votos are object of study in the folklore since the Thirties in Brazil, the maritime ex-votos have been only marginally studied in our country. Most of the first references on maritime votive offerings appeared only in the Seventies in the books of folklore researches such as Câmara Cascudo (1971) who indicates the presence of maritime ex-votos in the famous procession of Holy Mother of Nazaré, in Belém. Jorge Amado , in his book *The Todos os Santos Bay* (1970) describes the work of those artisans who paint the marine votive offerings (riscadores de milagres) that are exposed in popular churches such as *Nosso Senhor do Bonfim* and *Nossa Senhora das Candeias*, in Salvador, Bahia.

This paper aims at studying the maritime ex-votos found in the Church of Bom Jesus de Iguape, a small coastal town of southern São Paulo as symbols of religiosity of the coastal communities of southern Brazil . Iguape is an catholic worship center that attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, particularly during the first week of August, when the feast of Our Lord is celebrated.. These pilgrimers come mainly from the States of Santa Catarina, Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul and some of them lay in front of the holy image their votive offerings.

The dangers of the sea and the religious feelings of coastal communities in Brazil.



Picture 1 - Yemanjá boat in a condomblé religious centre in Ilheus - Bahia

The main religion of the Brazil coastal communities is Catholic, although in many regions that is a mixture with Afro-Brazilian beliefs to which different spirits (orixas) are related to the sea and its danger.

Yemanjá is the most known goddess of the sea to whom the worshippers offer flowers and perfumes, throwing these gifts in the sea during the festival of February 2. Yemanjá is the goddess that protect fishermen from storms and dangers at the sea .

Most of the communities in southern Brazil are Catholics as result of the Portuguese colonization, and particularly by the influence of the migrants from Azores that are zealous Catholic.

Important manifestations of the religious feelings and behaviours in that regions are linked to the sea, as for many centuries, since the discovery of the

country in the XVI century this area was very isolated from the capital sharing borders with the countries colonized by the Spanish. The only means of communication until the beginning of the XX century were maritime. It should also be said the Southern Atlantic is particularly changeable and dangerous for navigation during the winter months.

The Atlantic Sea was feared by seamen at the age of the Great Navigation as the dwelling of monsters and an ocean known for its storms that caused frequent shipwrecks.

The French traveller, Jean de Lery (1543) that visited Brazil in the middle of the XVI Century was impressed by the violence of the storms that threatened his ship. The Catholic seamen of his boat used to ask for the protection of Saint Nicolas and to throw overboard images of this saint to calm storms.

The Portuguese caravels were blessed by the priests before leaving Lisbon to Brazil and saints were invoked by seamen to protect them against frequent shipwreck.

During the first three centuries of the Brazilian colonization , the Portuguese were afraid not only of storms but also of pirates and buccaneers that attacked their ships along the Brazilian coast and hid their boats in the isolated islands along the coast.

Piracy was an important and profitable activity from the late XVI to the beginning of the XIX century. In the middle of the XVII century when the image of Lord Jesus of Iguape was found on the beach of Iguape, there are many references to the presence of English and French pirates along the São Paulo coast . In 1655, for instance, the King of Portugal sent a letter the Governor of Sao Paulo, giving orders to reinforce the defences of the harbour of Santos , assuring the safety of the ships. Em 1722, the authorities of the

coastal city of Iguape asked the Governor for military reinforcement as pirates were seen nearby. The assaults of the pirates were so frequent that the King of Portugal ordered that the merchant ships could only travel to Portugal in convoys, protected by military ships.(Almeida, P, 1946)

Maritime ex-votos in Brazil.

According to Mollat (1983), due to a great fear, at the end of the first millennium many Christians walked on the roads of Europe carrying ex-votos to sanctuaries. From the XIV onwards the votive offerings increased in number in Europe and during the period of the great navigation, in the XVI century the number of ex-votos increased in number due to the fears of the unknown continents and the dangers of the Atlantic Ocean.

In fact, there are references of ex-votos in Portugal from the XV onwards and in the convent of Santa Maria das Virtudes, there is a description of marine votive offerings in 1453 (Museu da Marinha, 1983: 584)

It is difficult to assess when the first ex-voto was offered in Brazil, but one can guess that due to the fact that the country was under Portuguese influence, the votive offerings due to navigation events in Brazil were taken to the mother churches in the metropolis.

The religious centers of pilgrimage born from the waters

It is surprising that most of the important sanctuaries for religious pilgrimages were born from events related to the waters. The image of Our Lady of Aparecida, protectrix of Brazil was taken from the river by local fishermen. Our Lady of Nazaré, now in Belém, is also an important religious

center of pilgrimage linked to the sea as the statue was found by a fishermen close coastal fishing village, Vigia, in the XVII Century. The procession dedicated to Our Lady of Nazaré, in October, is the greatest in Brazil, congregating more than 1 million people in the streets of Belem. During the procession there many ex-votos being carried by pilgrims, particularly miniatures of boats.

The image of Our Lord Iguape, the most important pilgrimage of Southern Brazil was also taken from the sea in 1647. Its discovery by three Indians in the beach of Jureia is marked by miraculous event, described in the historical document of 1785 (Livro do Tombo) from Iguape: a Portuguese ship was carrying the image of Our Lord from Portugal to Pernambuco when was attacked by protestant pirates. To avoid the capture of the religious statue by the pirates the seamen slid it into the sea water in a raft lightened by six candles. The



Picture 2

marine currents have taken the raft from the north to the south, and the legend says that when the floating raft passed near Ilha Bela, the bells of the church rang miraculously during the night. Some two hundred miles the raft reached the coast of Jureia, where the statue was found by Indians and taken to the city of Iguape, one of the oldest centers of Brazil. (Picture 2)

In the middle of the XVIII century there are indications that the miraculous statue attracted pilgrims from southern Brazil, and a new large church was built in the beginning of the XIX century to receive the growing number of pilgrims that arrived in Iguape to thank Our Lord for a favour or a miracle.

The linkages between the city and the sea and river are important to explain the whole history of the town. Iguape is located at the mouth of one of the most important rivers of southern Brazil: the Ribeira de Iguape, through which the first gold exploring expeditions started in the first years of colonization in the XVI century. The city became an important center for gold export till the XVIII century, when larger amounts of gold were found in Minas Gerais. Iguape itself was one of the most important harbour of southern Brazil, exporting different goods, such as rice until the end of the XIX century. Many ships left from Iguape to Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo and Portugal and the sea was maritime navigation was essential.

In the beginning of the XIX century a canal was built linking the river harbour to the estuary where the harbour was located. Subsequently, the sediment transported by the river filled up the main sea bar (entrance), hindering the entrance of larger ships. The decreasing important of the navigation was one of the causes of the impoverishment of the town in the beginning of the XX Century.

The veneration of Our Lord of Iguape, initially of local importance, was strengthened by the pilgrimage of the Azorean migrants that settled in the southern provinces of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul in the XVIII century.

França (1972) notes that the devotion to Our Lord was strong among the fishermen of Azores. She also says that the veneration of Our Lord existed in southern Brazil even before the massive migration of Azorian to Santa Catarina State in the middle of XVIII Century, although it is also known that small groups of Azorians have participated in the colonization of the southern region before the State organized migration One reason might be the fact that people from Iguape have participated in the colonization of the

southern part of Brazil in the XVII Century, when priest and missionaries might have expanded the religious devotion among settlers in Santa Catarina.

Until today a significant part of pilgrims that come to the religious feast of Our Lord of Iguape in early August is formed by Azorian descendants that until the beginning of the XX Century came by sailing and later on on steam boats taking with them the votive offerings. The maritime travel was hard and used to take several weeks to reach Iguape. It should be said that the Azorian descendants became skilful seafarers and fishermen by the end of the XIX Century when they gradually abandoned complementary activities such as subsistence agriculture and became full time fishermen.

Votive paintings were frequent until the 70's when they were totally replaced by photos and other forms of ex-votos. At the same time, travelling by sea almost disappeared, and good roads were built linking Santa Catarina to São Paulo and the sea entrances in the Iguape-Cananéia estuary became too dangerous for coastal navigation.

The pilgrimages also occurred in August, after the fisheries of mullets that was an important economic activity in Santa Catarina from which the pilgrims got cash to spend in the travelling and also in the market that is organized during the August festival.

The maritime ex-votos in the Church of Iguape

The ex-votos of the Church of Iguape are placed in a large room, in which all the large walls are covered with paintings, photos, miniatures and representations of parts of human bodies in wax, indicating the various situations in which the divine intervention was asked for, the danger was removed and difficulties were smoothed. The majority of the votive offerings

refers to healing of illness .Among the maritime ex-votos, there are eight votive paintings and a dozen of miniatures of boats displayed in a wall cabinets. Some of them are damaged by termites and humidity. All the painted votive offerings are from the 30's to the 70's and it is cleared that they represent a small proportion of maritime ex-votos offered by pilgrims during the last three centuries, as from time to time, the Church authorities would discard some of them to be replaced by new offerings. In recent years, these authorities have mentioned that some old marine painted ex-votos were stolen by robbers.

Shipwreck and dangers of the sea are the main topics of the painted votive offerings. The intervention of Our Lord of Iguape was urged when there was a danger in the sea, usually storms and fires that were threatening the ship and the lives of the sailors and passengers .

According to different historical narratives and accounts shipwrecks and



Picture 3

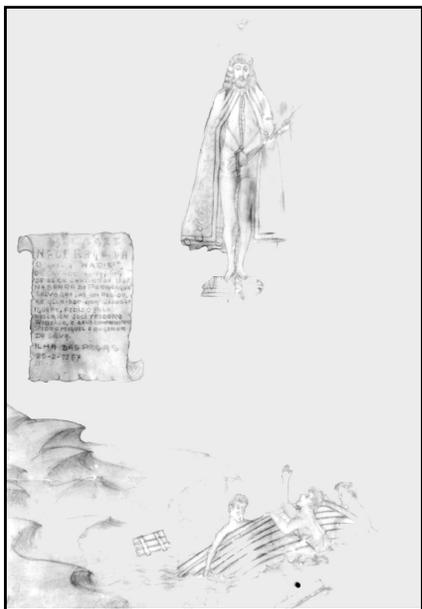
losses of vessels and crews were frequent in the southern region in the early century of the Brazilian colonization. This coast was under dispute by Portuguese and Spanish until the early XIX Century and sea battles and skirmishes were not

uncommon. At the same time,

the sea bordering the southern coast is known to be unpredictable, with rapid changes of weather and storms. It was also mentioned that the Azorian migrants, in the beginning of the colonization were mainly small-scale farmers

that gradually moved into fishing, becoming the best deep sea fishermen in the whole country. In this process, Azorian descendants were forced to face the dangers of that unpredictable sea.

The first narrative known of a shipwreck and the urge for intervention of Our Lord of Iguape occurred in 1714, in front of the entrance of the estuary, one of the most dangerous part of that sea. (Paulino, A 1946)



Picture 4

Dangers of shipwreck in the various sea entrances of the area and the intervention of our Lord of Iguape are represented in various votive offerings. The first picture (picture n.3) represents the dangers that threaten a fishing boat at the entrance of Cananéia. One of the crewmember is kneeled in the center of the boat, asking for protection of the saint.

The votive offering n. 4 represents a shipwreck that occurred in another sandbar in front of Paranaguá city. The painting is done with pencil

and is in damaged by the action of sunlight and humidity. It shows the desperate situation of fishermen after the ship suffered shipwreck. In the botton of the painting the seamen urge the intervention of the saint who is represented in the upper part of the votive offering. This ex-voto was offered in 1967



Picture 5

The picture n.5 shows a large ship in fire in front of a harbour that seems to be that of Paranaguá, in southern Brazil and was offered in 1961



Picture 6

The only painted votive offering that represents the danger of a river flooding shows a mother and the children being saved by a branch after the canoe went wrecked in the Ribeira River, the most important river of

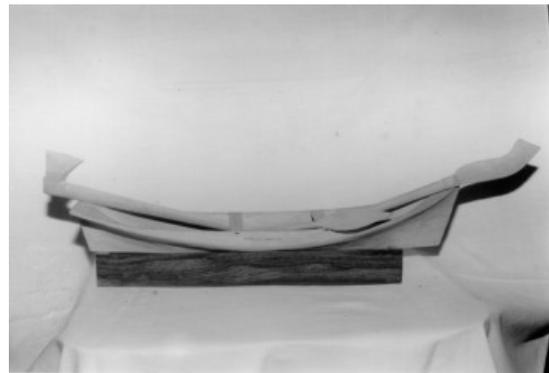
southern Brazil, where many dangerous flooding still occur. (picture n.6).



Picture 7

Among the various ship miniatures, it is worthwhile showing a sailing boat from Tijucas, Santa Catarina (picture n 7) that was released in sea as an ex-voto, in the hope that, taken by the sea marine current, it could reach Iguape, some 400 kilometres north.

And finally, an ex-voto a miniature of a local fisherman/farmer of the region of Iguape itself. The row and the axe represent the two most important labour tool of local inhabitant: land cultivation and fisheries.(picture n. 8)



Picture 8

Conclusions

The maritime votive offerings of the Church of Our Lord of Iguape are symbols of the religiosity of the coastal people of southern Brazil as well as

representations of the dangers of life in the unpredictable sea of the region. The maritime history of Southern Brazil is represented by the pilgrimage center of Iguape, one of the oldest towns of Brazil and its ex-votos. In the beginning of the colonization, the founding of a statue in a desert beach, representing the Ecce Homo is the result of the dangers represented by Protestant pirates in the XVII century attacking the Catholic Portuguese vessels in Southern Atlantic.

The maritime ex-votos represent also the dangers that coastal communities faced in their day to day life: in maritime transportation and fisheries. In this context, the arrival of Azorian migrants in the early XVIII reinforced the existing veneration of Our Lord of Iguape, whose statue was found in 1647. The descendent of Azorians became the most fervent pilgrims of the Iguape sanctuary and the majority of the maritime ex-votos was offered by them.

After the 70's, the votive paintings became rare, and frequently were replaced by photos. The construction of the main roads linking the southern regions and Iguape in the 60' has greatly reduced the importance of the pilgrimages by sea, as most pilgrims arrived by road in a shorter trip.

Bibliography

Almeida (Paulino) Da ação dos piratas e fortificações do litoral, *Revista do Arquivo Municipal* Ano XIII, volume CIX, 1946 pp 8-21

Amado, (Jorge) *Bahia de todos os Santos*, Edit. Martins, São Paulo, 1970

Cascudo (Luís Câmara) Carta a Luiz Beltrão sobre o ex-voto *Folk comunicação*, Série Comunicações ECA – USP 1971

França (Maria Cecília) *Pequenos centros paulistas de função religiosa*, *Thèse de Doctorat, Dep. Géographie, Univ. São Paulo, 1972*

Léry (Jean) *Viagem à terra do Brasil*. São Paulo, Edit. Martins, 1954

Mollat (Michel) *La vie quotidienne des gens de mer en Atlantique (IX-XVI)*, Paris , Hachette Literature, 1983

Museu da Marinha, *Ex-votos: painéis votivos do rio, do mar e do alem-mar*. Lisboa. 1983