

**The presence of the gift in the life of the residents of the popular neighborhood George Américo de Feira de Santana - BA: from the formation of the neighborhood to the present day**

**A presença da dádiva na vida dos(as) moradores(as) do bairro popular George Américo de Feira de Santana – BA: da formação do bairro aos dias atuais**

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**ABSTRACT**

After a brief memory of the gift rank, we seek of reflecting on its presence in the formation and daily life of the residents at the popular neighborhood George Américo in Feira de Santana - BA. Based on reports collected by interviews carried out with residents and religious leaders of five religious denominations, located since the beginning in that geographic space and in which they settled in later on, we seek to identify ways in which the gift was made and is still present in the daily life of the relationships experienced there.

**Keywords:** gift, occupation, current days.

**RESUMO**

Busca-se refletir sobre a presença da dádiva na formação e no cotidiano dos(as) moradores (as) do bairro popular George Américo de Feira de Santana - BA. Com base em relatos colhidos em entrevistas realizadas com moradores (as) e líderes religiosos(as) de cinco denominações religiosas, presentes desde o início deste espaço geográfico e que nele se fixaram em momento posterior, procura-se identificar formas mediante as quais a dádiva se fez e ainda hoje se faz presente no cotidiano das relações ali vivenciadas.

**Palavras-chave:** dádiva, ocupação, dias atuais.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The neighborhood George Américo de Feira de Santana - BA, is the result of an urban occupation that happened in the year 1987, when thousands of people and families occupied the old and deactivated aviation field of the city (CALDAS, 1998). In the midst of the precarious daily conditions, often accompanied by a confrontation with the municipal authorities, donation was made present, either contributing to the living among the inhabitants, or making it difficult to live among them. Similarly, it is happening today. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the presence of donation in the neighborhood, focusing on two moments: the occupation and the current days.

The reflection presented in the context of this work, constitutes a cutout of actions of a larger research, carried out for the construction of the dissertation of a master's degree *Religion and Gift in the effectiveness of a housing project in the neighborhood George Américo - Feira de Santana - BA*, defended in the program of Post-graduate Family in the Contemporary Society of the Catholic University of Salvador - BA, in the year 2014<sup>1</sup>.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

One of the tools used for data collection was the participant observation, carried out during six months, between the periods September to November 2013, and March to May 2014. This made possible an approximation of the five religious denominations participating in the research: Baptist Manance, Catholic, Candomblé, Assembly of God, International Grace of God; an insertion and participation in their community religious moments, such as, masses, cults, meetings, confraternizations, done in order to explain the reasons for the research and to have adherence to it. Participant observation also made it possible to know its members and establish trust links with them, in order to later select them for interviews (BRANDÃO, 2017; HAGUETTE, 1992).

Participants were selected on the basis of the following criteria: to be a participant in one of the religious denominations: Baptist Manance, Catholic, Candomblé, Assembly of God, International of the Grace of God; and, to be a resident of the neighborhood since the occupation or have settled there afterwards. Twenty-five people, five from each of these religious denominations, participated in the research, including the religious leader.

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<sup>1</sup>The reflection presented in the context of this work, was partially presented as Oral Communication, at the 20th SEMOC/WEEK OF SCIENTIFIC MOBILIZATION - Health, Technologies and Human Development, promoted by UCSAL - Catholic University of Salvador, in 2017.

Another instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview script, drawn up with questions that aimed to identify the presence of donation in the formation of the neighborhood and in the present day. The semi-structured script provided flexibility for other questions to be included during the interview (MINAYO, 1996). According to Bourdieu (2001), the interview is constituted as a moment in which needy people can have their voices heard and experiences communicated, a space of construction from the point of view about themselves and about the world, characterizing a movement of consciousness from themselves, which in our case, involved the theme of gift.

The interviews were conducted in the religious spaces or in the residences of the participants, according to their choice. They followed the presentation of the Free and Informed Consent Term, being recorded and later transcribed in full, preserving the styles of language proper to each interviewee. To protect the identities of the participants, except for Sister Marcella, who authorized the use of her name, they were given fictitious names, guaranteeing secrecy and confidentiality<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted that the research project was previously submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee of UCSAL - Catholic University of Salvador - BA.

After the full transcript of the interviews, we group the interviewees' lines into two blocks: experiences in the occupation and experiences in the present day. This grouping made it possible to identify, based on the reports, ways in which donation was experienced at the beginning of the formation of the neighborhood, that is, in the occupation, and, as in the present day, is present in the lives of the inhabitants of this geographical space.

Next, we present to the reader the concept of donation. Concept studied in the area of Social Sciences, present on the basis of the motivations that guide the experience of human relations in different areas: family, neighborhood, professionals, etc.

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<sup>2</sup>Sister Marcela, at the time of the occupation, was a member of a religious congregation. Although she is no longer a nun, she is still recognized as a sister or nun by residents of the George Américo neighborhood. It is one of the living memories of the neighborhood's history. For many years, he followed the daily occupation and currently coordinates with a team, the ESPA (Association House of the Renaissance: Health education), where activities in the area of alternative medicine and popular education are carried out. The ESPA is located in the neighborhood Campo Limpo, which in the past was surrounded by the old aviation field of the city, today neighborhood George Américo. Sister Marcela's name is presented with her consent, because according to her, she participated in other research about the history of the neighborhood and would not be recognized in the reports if she was given a fictional name. A copy of the dissertation was delivered to her and makes up the ESPA library.

### 3 THE DEBT

The study of gift or gift was introduced into the Social Sciences by the classical study by Marcel Mauss (2001), *Essay on Gift* (2001)<sup>3</sup>. In this, the author deals with the exchanges that take place in the form of gifts, obligatorily given and reciprocated.

Marcel Mauss (2001), in his *essay on the Gift*, investigated the exchange of goods by means of the gift, between ancient tribes from the most diverse regions of the planet. In the conclusions, he reveals his interest in this theme, revealing his concern with individualism and with the utilitarianism that he observed as dominant in France at the beginning of the last century. Social coexistence and, in a special way, the trade union movement, were hampered by this modern mentality. He stated, "It wasn't long ago that he (the human being) became a machine, a complicated calculating machine". And, later on, he adds: "The brutal pursuit of the objectives of the individual is detrimental to the aims and peace of the whole, to the rhythm of his work and his joys and - by the effect of return - to the individual himself" (MAUSS, 2001, p. 189).

Donation arises from the interest in establishing bonds of coexistence in peace and of making goods circulate, considered useful for those who receive them. Marcel Mauss was looking for signs of a sociability that did not reject cooperation and solidarity because of the calculation of utility.

The gifts observed by Mauss constitute a covenant of life, a covenant of friendship, confirmed and consolidated over time by means of gifts, accepted and reciprocated. The bond built through gifts of objects, in reality, is a connection of souls, because the thing itself has a soul, it is soul. Accepting an offering means being "inclined to enter into play or at least to remain in it" (MAUSS, 2001, p. 94).

The goods that circulate in the universe of giving are not only material goods, but essentially relational goods, that is, goods that depend on the relationships of friendship, the hospitality that people live, spiritual goods, in ritual contexts, or magic, goods made up of people, such as, for example, women given and received in marriage between clans and tribes living the alliance, visits, parties, names, words, etc.

These are human and social relations that differ from mercantile relations. A relation presents the mercantile character when it dominates the calculation of the utility immediately pursued by means of exchange. The attention then focuses on the exchanged

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<sup>3</sup>Also known as *Essay on the Gift: Form and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Original publication: *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, in the magazine *L'Année Sociologique* in the years 1923-24.

object and not on the very relationship that happens in the exchange. In the case of the gift, what matters is the relationship that the gift calls for existence, the object being exchanged (donated) just the pretext for this. In this context, the theme of the alliance runs through the work of Mauss, as a thread that links the various forms of donation: "Well, the central argument of the Essay is that the donation produces the alliance, both matrimonial alliances, and political, [...] religious, [...] economic, legal and diplomatic (including personal and hospitality relationships here)." (LANNA, 2000, p. 175).

According to Sigaud (1999), Marcel Mauss's research relates to a wider field of study on the regime of contract law and the systems of economic benefits between groups of so-called primitive and archaic societies. When studying the exchanges, the author, according to Sigaud (1999), is guided by two questions: What rule of law and of interest makes, in the so-called archaic societies, the gift received be obligatorily retributed? What force is there in the given thing that causes the recipient to repay it?

Based on studies guided by the comparative method between certain geographical areas - Polynesia, Melanesia, American Northwest - Mauss (2001), it explains that in the economies and rights that preceded the current systems, it is the collectivities that establish exchanges. On the exchanges between tribes and clans, the author stresses:

What they exchange is not just property and wealth, furniture and real estate, economically useful things. They are, above all, friendships, festivities, rites, military services, women, children, dances, parties, fairs, whose market is only one of the moments, in which the circulation of riches is only one of the terms of a more general and much more permanent contract (ibid., p. 55).

Mauss (2001) recognizes that *cod*, the spirit of the donor, is central to Polynesian Māori law, providing conditions for the legal link created by the transmission of something to become a bond of souls. Based on the jurist Tamati Ranaipiri, the author writes:

The *taonga* and all strictly said personal properties have a *hau*, a spiritual power. You give me one, I give it to a third party; this gives me another, because it is forced by the *cod* of my present; and I am obliged to give you this thing, because I need to give back what is, in reality, the product of the *cod* of your *present*.

For the author, "What, in the present received, exchanged, obliges, is the fact that the received thing is not inert. Even if abandoned by the donor, it is still something of him" (MAUSS, 2001, p.64). What is given, received or reciprocated, articulates aspects

of the donor and the donator: "If we give things and if we repay them, it is because we give and we repay" (p.115).

In this perspective, accepting a gift from someone is accepting something of its essence, being necessary to repay what constitutes part of its nature and substance. Unlike the mercantile point of view, whose link is exhausted in the act of payment, the bonds contracted in the exchange of gifts establish a link between donor and donatory that extends over time. On the other hand, refusing to give and refusing to receive, "amounts to declaring war, is refusing to accept covenant and communion" (ibid., p. 68).

Jacques Godbout, in collaboration with Alain Caillé (1999), wondered if the gift still exists and reaches the conclusion that it is everywhere, but it is not observed, for lack of tools of analysis or for lack of interest in aspects of reality considered marginal and without social significance, by the mastery of mentality that considers the gift impossible or, in the case in which it exists, it would be false (DERRIDÁ, 1991).

Godbout (2002) points out that the modern gift can present characteristics that differentiate it from the archaic. While in the manifestations of the archaic gift, giving, receiving and repaying are constituent moments of a given relationship, in the modern gift only one of these instants can be seen, which enables it to volunteer character, without obligation of return, as happens in what is experienced in the relationship with strangers. Such experiences include, among others, the donation of blood and organs; the articulated donations in the face of natural disasters; the dimensions that cross the groups of self-help (Alcoholics Anonymous, Pastoral of the Child, Solidarity Economy); the voluntary ones; the donations of time: listening, visits to those who cannot repay them (patients, elderly...).

The relevance of personal relationships and the commitment of personality are the common point between the archaic and modern gifts. What passes through the gift is the bond that exists between people. "This relationship between "donor" and "recipient" has the consequence that they address the person in a different way, in the context of relations regulated by the bond itself and not by rules external to the relationship" (GODBOUT, 1999, p. 104). In the view of gift, society is "a network made up of the sum of the unique relations that each member has with others" (ibid., p. 105).

It should be noted that the basis of donation is motivations that are present in established relationships. In this sense, Machado (2004), brings an important contribution, when presenting the meanings attributed to him by different languages:

In English, the corresponding word is *gift*, which means gift. In German, *gift* means poison. In Dutch, the same word (*gift*) means both present and poison. In Swedish, *gift* also means poison, or else venomous snake, or even marriage. In Norwegian, *gift* means poison, while *gifte* is a verb that means to marry. In Greek, the word corresponding to the gift is *dosis*, which also means part, portion (p.38).

This time, donation can have a beneficial as not beneficial dimension. We must take into account, the intentions and meanings that permeate relations, the motivations that guide the positions taken by people involved in the relational contexts, "it is precisely a detail - the dose - that distinguishes the medicine from the poison" (ibid.). Machado (2004) identifies bribery and the purchase of votes as corrupt gifts, since they are constituted in exchanges undertaken exclusively for the benefit of personal profits. In a similar perspective, Lanna (1995), in his investigation into trade and patronage in the northeast of Brazil, presents the concession of public jobs in exchange for political support, sale by spinning with the purpose of obtaining votes and the manipulation of exchanges by the boss, often indistinct from violence and arbitrariness, resulting in low wages and accumulation of capital.

In addition to other considerations, it is important to note that the gift conveys a symbolic meaning of a polysemic character, which exceeds its commercial value. Gift offering can communicate donor esteem to the donee, appreciation for their qualities, interest in cultivating the relationship. In other cases, the gift offered may contain the intention of winning support from the donee, conditioning his freedom. Thus, the gift can launch a bridge to another person, in that, who donates, expects, at the appropriate moment, to receive, in turn, a gift that reaffirms and consolidates a certain alliance. In the event that the gift is "poisoned", containing an evil intention, it can be rejected.

In this sense, the gift requires discernment to overcome appearances and to capture the surplus and embodied meaning beyond commercial value. (PETRINI and NOVAES CAVALCANTI, 2020)

The game of liberties between the donor and the donee can converge towards the delineation of a shared meaning, consolidating a relationship that can extend over time, with multiple consequences, or can be reduced to the formal limits determined by the function of each, or can define its termination. Family relationships, as well as neighborhood relationships, are environments in which there is a lot of exchange of a kind of diversity that can have different meanings over time and that, in most cases, constitute



availability for cooperation and gratuitousness relevant to the quality of human coexistence in these environments.

Once the concept of donation has been addressed, let us turn our gaze to the neighborhood George Américo, in order to identify the gifts present in the occupation of this geographical space, and those that manifest themselves among the residents in the present day.

## **4 THE DONATIONS PRESENT IN THE GEORGE AMERICA NEIGHBORHOOD**

### **4.1 GIFTS IN OCCUPATION**

The occupation of the former lands of the aviation field of the city of Feira de Santana - BA, brought together thousands of people and families in search of a piece of ground to fix housing and provide better living conditions for those with whom they lived. According to the interviewees' reports, many people were really needy and were looking for a home for themselves and/or their family; others, however, took advantage of the situation, occupied one or more plots of land, sold it for personal profit, which caused quarrels, disagreements and even deaths among the inhabitants:

People sometimes came from another neighborhood by car, and they hid the car nearby. And then they came on foot with a sandal of color on one foot and the other on the other foot, just to say that they were poor (Deborah, 60 years old, Catholic witness, on 23/05/2014).

When it began, each one demarcated his ground. There were people who took a very large lot and shared it with their family, other people who sold a lot of land. There are people that I think got rich from this business of selling land, who would take it and move it on and get it. And many people fought, one killed the other and that thing was overland, each wanted to defend his own (Mark, 38 years old, Baptist witness, on 20/06/2014).

In the above reports, one can identify reasons that generated exchanges, donations, not constructive among the occupiers, provided disagreements, disunity and enmity between them.

In the context of the occupation, there were also exchanges, donations, which made possible mutual help between the people who were there. Significant in this context were the construction of the houses, carried out after the registration of the most deprived of financial resources, as illustrated by the following report:

She would gather a number of people and go to make Mary's house, then Mary would join with another number of people and make a big crowd in John's house and so on... We had to work in a community so we could get the house,



we'd kind of get in line, you know? Gradually each person was getting their own, and by the time it came my turn I had already worked a lot for other people. We had a meeting in the Catholic Church to define who next month would receive the house, who would be responsible for the food, responsible for going to get the building material, in short, these things (Ruth, 48 years old, the speaker of the Assembly of God, on 28/06/2014).

The crowds were an initiative of the commission (made up of ten people from AMBACLA - Association of the Residents of the Clean Field - and CEBs - Basic Ecclesial Communities - and ten people from the occupation, who constantly met to discuss and accompany the daily life of the occupation) and made possible exchanges in order to bring the occupants together, promote coexistence, share food, experience the community spirit:

Usually we cooked like this: we chose a specific house, in Mary's house, Sunday... Everybody would take something, for example, if I became responsible for the rice, I would take my rice and there we would cook together, the other would take the beans, the other would take the meat, the other would take the seasoning and it was all organized (Ruth, speaker of the Assembly of God, 48 years old, on 28/06/2014).

Based on the reports of the witnesses, it is identified that different motivations went through the exchanges established between the occupants, gifts that now brought them closer together and made possible a coexistence of mutual help, gifts that sometimes kept them apart and brought about differences between them

#### 4.2 GIFTS TODAY

According to the reports of the participants in the survey, the residents of the neighborhood, nowadays, exchange, donate among themselves, in different relational contexts:

You don't just exchange material things, but your time, give from you to another, stop to listen to the other and that's beyond money, buying, material. The people of the neighborhood have this and I think it is much more in the sense of the immaterial than of the material itself (Rebeca, 53 years old, Baptist witness, on 24/06/2014).

One day I went to church and I left a pot in the fire, a bean. This burning bean that arrives smoked out to the neighbors' houses... And one thing that I found so interesting, that I was so delighted was that my neighbor she didn't even know that I was in church and didn't know where I was, but she left sending someone there and there to find out where I was so that the worst in my house wouldn't happen, it has to do with the exchange, right?... And I thought that this was a love that had to happen for this love to be born (Susana, 52 years old, dean of the Assembly of God, on 01/07/2014).

Gifts, in the words of the speakers, manifest themselves in the dimension of listening and care, dimensions that are forged through the most varied moments of daily living.

Religious leaders feel that neighborhood residents experience the spirit of gift in their daily relationships:

I feel good among them because they are a very hospitable people and this part of the gift we perceive among these people (James, 53 years old, religious leader of the Assembly of God, on 15/07/2014).

I think they had nowhere to live, even though some left, others arrived. Today they are welcomed, they are there with their ceiling. Then they learned that they should help other people too (Isabel, 60, religious leader of Candomblé, on 03/07/2014).

In the speeches of (the) religious leaders, manifestations of hospitality, one of the expressions of the gift found, according to Mauss (2001), in different cultures. Also, aspects related to learning: when supported in the past, such experience can be internalized as a desire to help when someone needs something or is in a similar situation to the one experienced.

It was also identified that in the exchanges that take place between the inhabitants, aspects of the modern gift are present: the absence of the desire for return (GODBOUT, 2002), as illustrated by the reports below:

When we have love, we do it, but, we want nothing in return, trust, we never think about doing good and want it back (Agar, 48 years old, Catholic witness, on 29/06/2014).

When I stop to listen to people or someone stops to listen to me or you stop to do anything that's for someone in the neighborhood or for someone else, you're not at first thinking about what that person can give you back. You're doing that because inside you there's this thing of giving, sharing, interacting, helping, this thing of gratuitousness and it doesn't bring a question first of what I get in return for it (Rebeca, 53 years old, Baptist witness, on 06/24/2014).

It should be noted that religion appears in the speech of some interviewees, as one of the elements that most contributes to the living of the gift:

The very Word [Bible] says that it is giving that is received, so we are always changing (Susana, 52 years old, dean of the Assembly of God, on 01/07/2014).

However, when religion does not promote respect for religious diversity, specifically in relation to Candomblé, it can itself create distances and weaken the daily coexistence between the inhabitants:

if i arrive at a person who is christian [evangelical] and i am from candomblé, i am not well accepted because they think that what i am doing is wrong. I don't think what they're doing is wrong, it's right. For me all religions are welcome, but they think that I am wrong because I am in candomblé, that I am on the wrong side, practicing wrong, that I do not go to heaven, because if Jesus returns will not take me because I am in candomblé and there is wrong, there is not right, one should not worship images (Raquel, 45 years old, witness of Candomblé, on 07/07/2014).

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the study carried out, we identified that the donation, was present in the formation of the George Américo neighborhood of Feira de Santana - BA and still today continues present in the relations established between the residents. Given that the gift is traversed by motivations, we identify that at the origin of this geographical space, relationships based on exclusively personal interests, such as occupying the space in favor of the sale of lots, corroborated to generate intrigues, disagreements and even deaths among the occupants; on the other hand, we identify exchanges governed by mutual aids, such as the big crowds, which contributed to bringing people together, provided coexistence and commitment in the building of houses, independent of religion.

As far as the present day is concerned, exchanges continue to take place in the daily life, among the inhabitants, and may strengthen and strengthen coexistence, as happens in situations of care and listening to others, as well as they can distance, exclude and promote relational conflicts, as when there is no respect for religious diversity, which in the context of our investigation, concerns Candomblé.

When the exchange in social coexistence is carried out, without any ulterior motives, social capital is generated that provides greater well-being for the families involved and prepares the favorable ground for the inhabitants to undertake initiatives aimed at social and economic development in the environment, as can be seen from the article that explores the debate of the World Bank about social capital and its connections with economic development. (Anthony Bebbington, Scott Guggenheim, Elizabeth Olson & Michael Woolcock (2004)).

The exchange of gifts tends to create relational goods that create and consolidate social bonds, and may develop cooperation and/or conflicts, depending on the interaction with the mentality driven by interests. The construction of relational goods, occasioned by the exchange of gifts, generates the experience of a surplus of satisfaction and meaning, in addition to the gestures performed. The donation relationship provides an experience of satisfaction that reaches, albeit in a differentiated manner, both the donor

and the donee. Therefore, Donati (2011) ponders that relational goods are goods of human sociability, crucial for the existence of the same society.

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